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Tasers Kill: Electroshock Injustice in Athens-Clarke County, Part 3

By Donald E. Wilkes, Jr.

The Athens-Clarke County Police Department's campaign to popularize its decision to begin using taser electroshock weapons on the local citizenry must be recognized for what it is—a public-relations crusade based on clever misrepresentations and shifty evasions, as well as outright denials of fact. The whole thing might have been scripted by Taser International, Inc.

It is difficult to decide which one of the ACCPD's weaselings is most worrisome.

Is it the ACCPD's sinister downplaying of the fact that tasers inflict jolting electrical shocks on the victim, who screams with unbearable pain, collapses, goes into convulsions and writhes on the ground while the officer watches?

Is it the ACCPD's obstinate refusal to acknowledge the nationwide problem of abusive use of tasers on citizens by American police officers?

Is it the ACCPD's stubborn denial of the stark reality that electroshocking citizens is a particularly dangerous form of police violence and that deployment of taser weapons increases the amount of police violence?

Is it the ACCPD's inexplicable refusal to promulgate, and make public, rules designed to prevent fatal or unreasonable taserings by, for example, strictly prohibiting officers from tasering pregnant women, children or the elderly?

Is it the ACCPD's suspicious unwillingness to promise that it will notify us every time it electroshocks someone or to pledge that it will not conceal from the public the video of the taser incident?

Tasers are Dangerous

What I find most disturbing about the ACCPD's propagandistic pro-electroshock pleadings is that the department won't concede that taser electroshocking has proven to be dangerous to human life and health. In recent years, hundreds of Americans have died suddenly, unexpectedly or shortly after being tasered by police. Even more victims of police taserings have been paralyzed or rendered comatose or stopped breathing and turned blue or suffered cardiac arrest or other life-threatening injuries.

You would never know this if you truly believed ACCPD press releases and PowerPoint presentations extolling the purported virtues of electroshocking people. The department has opted to dismiss the proven perils of subjecting people to massive electrical shocks by flatly denying the existence of these perils. Tasers, the ACCPD claims, are "less-than-lethal weapons,"

and that ends all further discussion of taser-related deaths. In the ACCPD's universe, taser-related deaths and injuries are due to improper use of the weapons by improperly trained officers. The department even makes the preposterous claim that the persons they intend to subject to powerful electrical shocks may be expected to fully recover within seconds!

Police Taserings Statistics

I turn now to statistical facts about police taserings that the ACCPD ignores. (I limit my discussion to fatal taserings; I will not examine incidents where the victim tasered by police suffers terrible, even catastrophic, injuries but survives.)

There are no government crime statistics on fatal police taserings. Traditionally, official crime statistics have excluded acts of violence committed by police against citizens, even where the citizen is killed. As a consequence, the only available statistics on police violence (including fatal taserings by police officers) are those compiled by academics or private researchers.

[Fatal Police Taserings](#), which attorney Lauren Farmer and I posted in 2013 and covers the period 2001 to Oct. 13, 2013, is one of several websites furnishing statistical information on taser-related deaths where a law enforcement officer did the electroshocking. Our website demonstrates that at least 618 Americans have been fatally electroshocked by police and that during the last three full years we examined (2010 through 2012) there were 179 fatal police taserings, an average of 60 per year. Because we did not locate every fatal taserings by police during the 13-year period covered, and because there must have been scores of fatal police taserings since Oct. 13, 2013, the total number of Americans fatally electroshocked with tasers by police almost certainly exceeds 700 and may be as high as 1,000.

What are the statistics on fatal taserings by Georgia police officers? Our website shows that at least 17 Georgians had been fatally tasered by police by October 2013, with nine of the deaths occurring after 2006. Since 2013, there have been at least two additional fatal police taserings in this state. On Jan. 1 of this year 21-year old college student Matthew Ajibade died after being tasered while strapped down in a restraint chair in an isolation cell in the Chatham county jail. Less than a year earlier, on Apr. 11, 2014, 24-year old Gregory Towns, Jr., who was already handcuffed, died after being electroshocked at least five and perhaps as many as 13 times by East Point police. At a minimum, therefore, nearly 20 Georgians have died after being electroshocked by Georgia police.

Fatal Police Taserings Continue to Occur

Fatal police taserings are a continuing phenomenon. In my [May 14 Flagpole article](#), I noted that almost weekly there are news stories from all over the country about citizens dying or being severely injured after a police taserings.

Internet news stories about lethal police taserings that occurred just last month confirm this. During the month of May, the very month the ACCPD was repeatedly and publicly swearing that tasers are "less-than-lethal," at least three Americans—one in Florida, one in Kansas, one in New York—died after a police taserings. On May 6, Joseph P. Kaafi, 33, was fatally tasered by

Sarasota, FL police. On May 27, Randall C. Torrence, 34, a mentally ill man in need of medical care who resisted being loaded into an ambulance, was fatally tasered by Kansas City, KS police. Finally, on May 31, Richard Gregory Davis, a 50-year old ex-Marine with post-traumatic stress disorder, was fatally tasered by Rochester, NY police. This list is not necessarily complete. There may have been other fatal police taserings last month which I have not located.

Tasers Are Lethal

Fatal police taserings are so prevalent that, like fatal police shootings, they have become one of the most scandalous features of the nation's current system of policing. There are even movie documentaries on the alarming lethality of American police taser practices. I recommend *Tasered: The Israel Hernandez Story*, [available without charge on YouTube](#). It puts in nationwide context the tragic story of a talented, unarmed 18-year old graffiti artist electroshocked to death by armed Miami Beach, FL police, who claimed that they feared for their life. It reminds us of the heartbreaking human tragedies concealed within the cold statistics on fatal police taserings.

Except in some technical sense, it is no longer accurate to categorize tasers as nonlethal weapons. It may be that originally their purpose was to inflict nonfatal injuries only. It may be that usually they are not deployed with intent to kill. But nonetheless tasers do kill. Decades of police taser use proves that tasers are killing instruments. Their use by police has led to the electroshocking deaths of at least 700 American citizens, including at least 19 Georgians. This is horrible and unacceptable. If, in recent years, police had clubbed 700 persons to death, would we not conclude that something was wrong with police clubbing practices? With 700 taser fatalities, we must conclude that something is wrong with police taser practices.

Conclusion

The Athens-Clarke County Police Department's publicity campaign to induce us to buy into its pro-electroshocking agenda is based on misrepresentations designed to deceive us. Perhaps the most dishonest of these deceptions is the Department's counterfactual claim that taser electroshock weapons are nonlethal. If the ACCPD is brazen enough to make this misleading claim in a bid to win support for its decision to give itself power to administer painful, incapacitating electrical shocks on citizens, do you suppose that the Department can be trusted not to abuse that power?

Update: Three More Recent Fatal Police Taserings

Since completing the article, I have discovered on the Internet that there have been at least three more recent fatal police taser incidents in this country.

On Friday, May 29, Billy J. Collins, 56, was fatally tasered by Louisa, KY, police. (Collins had reportedly suffered a heart attack two weeks prior to his arrest and taser, which led to his having heart surgery and stints put into his heart, but the police who tasered him were not aware of his health problems.)

Last Monday, June 8, Mario Ocasio, 51, was fatally tasered by New York City police. (Ocasio's girlfriend, who was present, says that after she handed over her cellphone video of the tasing, police erased it.)

Also on June 8, Ross Anthony, 25, was fatally tasered by Dallas, TX, police.

This new information means that the number of Americans fatally tasered by police last month (May) was at least four, not three, and that at least two persons have already been fatally tasered by police this month (June). It also means, with ghastly irony, that during the past few weeks, while the Athens-Clarke County Police Department has been soothingly assuring us that tasers are nonlethal weapons, at least six citizens have been tasered to death by police.

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