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The Persistence of Fatal Police Taserings in 2017

By [Donald E. Wilkes, Jr.](#)

“Amnesty International is reiterating its call on federal, state and local authorities and law enforcement agencies to suspend all transfers and use of electroshock weapons, pending an urgent rigorous, independent and impartial inquiry into their use and effects.”

—Report, USA: Excessive and Lethal Force? Amnesty International’s Concerns about Deaths and Ill-Treatment Involving Police Use of Tasers (Mar. 26, 2011)

Fatal Police Taserings

The American people need to grasp the appalling truth about taser electroshock weapons: These monstrous contraptions are, indeed, examples of perverted science, and they most definitely could have been invented by Dr. Frankenstein.

A fatal police taserings occurs when a person dies suddenly, unexpectedly or suspiciously after being electroshocked one or more times with a taser by a police officer. As used here, the term “police” includes jailors who fatally taser a prisoner.

A taser is a dangerous electroshock weapon. When a taser is deployed, it inflicts jolting, painful, incapacitating electrical shocks on the victim. Although tasers were once deemed non-lethal weapons, they no longer are. They are deadly weapons. They kill.

Fatal police taserings are a persistent phenomenon in the United States. Every year dozens of Americans are fatally tasered by our police. This has been true since at least 2004, when there were 48 fatal police taserings. There were 66 fatal police taserings in 2005; 73 in 2006; 67 in 2007; 62 in 2008; 57 in 2009; 64 in 2010; 64 in 2011; 51 in 2012; 59 in 2013; 47 in 2014; 63 in 2015; 45 in 2016; and 44 in 2017.

There have already been at least four fatal police taserings in 2018: two in California on Jan. 1 and Jan. 16, respectively; one in New York on Jan. 22; and one here in Georgia, in Barrow County, on Jan. 27.

Video camera recordings (many on YouTube), as well as abundant eyewitness accounts, expose the cruelty of fatal police taserings.

The typical scenario of a fatal police taserings is horrible. The electroshocked victim suffers excruciating pain. The victim loses muscular control, collapses, writhes and has convulsions. The victim has a heart attack or undergoes cardiac arrest. The victim experiences respiratory distress and struggles agonizingly to breathe. The victim turns blue. Sometimes the victim lapses into a permanent brain-dead coma which lasts for days or weeks, until eventually the ventilator that has been keeping the victim alive in a vegetative state is switched off.

A few fatal police taserings involve a different sequence of events. Examples: The victim is tasered while standing on a highway overpass or near an open window on a building's upper floor and falls to his death. Or the victim is tasered while operating a motor vehicle, and dies when the vehicle crashes. Or a suicidal victim is tasered after he has doused himself with gasoline and dies in the fire ignited by the taser.

Ominously, our government does not compile statistics on police taserings of citizens—as if this form of police violence is too insignificant to be worthy of official documentation.

The only statistics we have regarding police taserings are those gathered by private individuals and organizations. These statistics are trustworthy but sometimes incomplete. These privately-gathered statistics cover only fatal police taserings. They do not include nonfatal police taserings—even those where the victim nearly dies, or is left with lingering or disfiguring physical injuries. Amazingly, therefore, there are no reliable statistics on nonfatal police taserings, which of course occur far more frequently than the fatal ones.

Insofar as fatal police taserings are concerned, the most important sources of available statistical information are:

Fatal Police Taserings, a website which documents 618 fatal police taserings that occurred between 2001 and Oct. 13, 2013.

Truth Not Tasers, a Canadian website which, as of Aug. 21, 2017, lists 1,041 fatal police taserings since 1983, less than 50 of which occurred before 2000.

Electronic Village, a website which lists 634 fatal police taserings occurring between 2001 and Oct. 13, 2014.

Deaths Involving Tasers, a study by the Reuters news organization released on Aug. 22, 2017, which concludes that in this century more than 1,005 people in the United States have died after being shocked with tasers by police.

Thus, the best research available demonstrates that there have been over 1,000 fatal police taserings in the United States since the year 2000. It is a horrific but inescapable fact that in this century American police using tasers have killed over a thousand human beings.

Fatal Police Taserings in the United States in 2017

At 44, the number of victims of fatal police taserings in 2017 is a slight improvement over 2016, when there were 45 victims.

The names of the 44 victims fatally tasered by police in 2017, together with the date when and the place where each victim was electroshocked, is set out in the List of the Dead at the end of this article. The oldest victim was 71, the youngest 15. Twenty-one of

the victims—nearly half—were minority group members (14 blacks, five Hispanics and two Native Americans). Only one victim was female.

In 2017, there was at least one fatal police tasing in a total of 25 states—Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Louisiana, Maryland, Maine, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Texas, Virginia, Washington and Wisconsin.

There was more than one fatal police tasing in 11 of these 25 states. There were five fatal police tasings in California; four in Georgia; four in Missouri; and two each in these eight states: Alabama, Colorado, Florida, Indiana, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Washington.

On average, nearly four persons per month were fatally tased by police last year. Not a single month went by in 2017 without at least two fatal police tasings. The month with the largest number of fatal police tasings was May, when there were seven. There were two fatal police tasings on Friday, May 12, 2017, one in California and the other in Indiana. Six times in 2017 there were fatal police tasings on two consecutive days—Feb. 8–9, June 5–6, Aug. 25–26, Aug. 31–Sept. 1 and Oct. 13–14.

At least 12 (37 percent) of the 44 victims are known to have been electroshocked more than once. One of these victims is ambiguously reported to have received “multiple” shocks, while another was shocked either two or three times. Five of the victims were shocked twice. Two of the victims were shocked three times, while another received four shocks. One victim was shocked seven times, another victim an incredible 12 times.

It is extremely rare for a police officer to be criminally charged for having fatally tased a citizen, even where the tasing appears to have been wholly unnecessary or even sadistic. In 2017, however, four separate fatal police tasing incidents resulted in criminal charges against a total of seven police officers.

In Nevada, a Las Vegas police officer was charged with manslaughter in connection with the May 14 death of Tashii Brown, who was tased seven times (and also punched in the face and subjected to an unauthorized chokehold).

In Nebraska, two Omaha police officers were charged with assault in connection with the June 5 tasing death of Zachary Bearheels, a mentally ill man who received 12 electroshocks, each five seconds long.

In Michigan, a state trooper was charged with murder and manslaughter in connection with the Aug. 26 death of 15-year old Damon Grimes, who was tased while operating an ATV vehicle and then died when he lost control of the vehicle and it crashed.

Here in Georgia, three Washington County deputy sheriffs were charged with murder, false imprisonment, and aggravated assault in connection with the July 7 death of Euria Lee Martin, who was committing no crime when he was tased.

Fatal Police Taserings in Georgia in 2017

There were four fatal police taserings in our state last year: the first, on Jan. 31, in Troup County; the second, on Feb. 24, in Butts County; the third, on July 7, in Washington County; and the fourth, on Aug. 25, in Cobb County.

In 2017, Georgia had more fatal police taserings than any other state except California (which had five) and Missouri (which, like Georgia, had four).

Counting the four fatalities in 2017, and adding the fatality that occurred in Barrow County on Jan. 27, 2018, the total number of Georgians known to have been killed by police with tasers has climbed to 30.

The two Washington County deputies charged with killing Euria Lee Martin are not the first Georgia law enforcement officers to be criminally charged in a Georgia state court as a result of a fatal police tasing incident.

In December 2016, two East Point policemen were convicted, one of murder, the other of lesser crimes, in connection with the Apr. 11, 2014, fatal tasing of Gregory Lewis Towns, Jr.

In October 2015, two Chatham County deputy sheriffs were tried on criminal charges arising out of the Jan. 1, 2015, fatal tasing of Matthew Ajibade, a jail inmate who was tasered repeatedly while strapped down in a restraint chair. A jury acquitted the two deputies of involuntary manslaughter, but convicted them of lesser charges.

There also have been federal criminal prosecutions of Georgia law enforcement officers in connection with a tasing incident.

On Nov. 22, 2017, a DeKalb County Jail correctional officer pleaded guilty in federal court to federal criminal charges arising out of a nonfatal 2012 tasing incident in which without justification he electroshocked a female inmate, with the result that she not only defecated on herself but suffered permanent taser burns to her breast. The officer's supervisor at the DeKalb County Jail had previously pleaded guilty in federal court to attempting to obstruct the federal investigation of this tasing incident by making false statements to an FBI agent.

Ending the Madness

Permitting our police, on a regular basis, to kill citizens by electroshocking them to death with tasers is insane folly. This madness must end.

Think about it. Suppose that, instead of shocking 1,000 citizens to death with tasers since the turn of the century, American police had used their batons to kill 1,000 people. Assume, that is, police had clubbed to death 1,000 people since 2000. Wouldn't we reclassify batons as lethal weapons? Wouldn't we agree that there was something fundamentally wrong with the way police were using their batons? Wouldn't we

conclude that, at least until the problem was corrected, police should no longer be permitted to bludgeon any of our citizenry?

If we wouldn't allow police to club 40 or 50 or 60 citizens to death each year, why should we permit them to fatally electroshock that many people per year?

In what meaningful way is permitting police to fatally electroshock large numbers of citizens any different or any less unacceptable than permitting them to fatally club large numbers of citizens?

The only way to end the madness of persistent fatal police taserings is to prohibit further police use of tasers until huge reforms are made which guarantee that fatal taserings by police will stop.

There must be a moratorium on police taserings. The sickening incidents of lethal electroshockings committed by police must halt. There must be no more additions to the lengthy list of victims shocked to death at the hands of police.

A List of the Dead

The 44 Victims of Fatal Police Taserings in 2017:

Jan. 4, Joshua G. Dove, 35, St. Petersburg, FL
Jan. 8, Jason Schmidt, 34, Craigville, IN
Jan. 19, Barry Hairston, 55, Philadelphia, PA
Jan. 20, Sabin Marcus Jones, 44, Richmond, VA (died 1/24/17)
Jan. 23, Tereance Klein, 57, Oakville, MO
Jan. 31, James Thompson, 44, Troup County, GA
Feb. 8, Michael Anthony Barrera, 30, Woodland, CA
Feb. 9, Derek Smith, 27, Tunica County, MS (died 2/11/17)
Feb. 15, Jordan Stevens, 29, Yuma County, AZ
Feb. 24, Douglas Tanner, 53, Butts County, GA
Mar. 17, Alejandro Gutierrez, 44, Thornton, CO
Mar. 21, Alexander Dold, 29, Snohomish County, WA
Apr. 12, Kenneth Johnson, 25, Reading, PA
Apr. 15, Roderick Ronall Taylor, 42, Houston, TX (died 4/18/17)
May 5, Tory Sanders, 28, Mississippi County, MO
May 12, Douglas Wiggington, 48, Greenfield, IN
May 12, Branch Wroth, 41, Rohnert Park, CA
May 14, Tashii Brown, 40, Las Vegas, NV
May 20, Mark Roshawn Adkins, 54, Lemon Grove, CA
May 25, Adam Trammell, 22, West Milwaukee, WI
June 2, Raul Gallegos, 45, Albuquerque, NM
June 5, Zachary Bearheels, 29, Omaha, NE
June 6, Rance Devlin Neil, 45, Pittsburg, MO
June 15, Joshua Crawford, 25, Northport, AL (died 6/16/17)
July 7, Euria Lee Martin, 58, Washington County, GA

July 10, Gabriel Olivas, 39, Arlington, TX (died 7/14/17)
Aug. 25, Devin Howell, 30, Cobb County, GA
Aug. 26, Damon Grimes, 15, Detroit, MI
Aug. 31, Marcus Edward Manning, 35, Snohomish County, WA
Sept. 1, Anthony Jones, 36, Akron, OH (died 9/2/17)
Sept. 4, Byron Keith Tunnell, 28, Ocean City, MD (died 9/5/17)
Sept. 14, Devan Rewis, 31, Collier County, FL (died 9/15/17)
Sept. 23, Walter Perez, 36, Nassau County, NY
Sept. 28, Marcellus Toney, 45, Oakland, CA
Oct. 7, Scott Anello, 61, St. Louis, MO
Oct. 8, Regina Twist, 36, Conway County, AR
Oct. 13, Armando Frank, 42, Avoyelles Parish, LA
Oct. 14, Kristopher Birtcher, 34, San Marcos, CA
Nov. 7, Dana Dean Carrothers, 52, Lindsay, OK
Nov. 29, Jonathan Maldonado, 21, Greenburgh, NY
Dec. 10, Emanuel Miera, 26, Pueblo, CO
Dec. 29, Terrance Michael Balo, 43, Hebron, OH

Sources: truthnottasers.blogspot.com/2017, fatalencounters.org,
mappingpoliceviolence.org, killedbypolice.net/kbp2017, Deaths Involving Tasers

Donald E. Wilkes, Jr. is a Professor of Law Emeritus at the University of Georgia School of Law, where he taught for 40 years. This is his 10th Flagpole article on police taser practices. In 2013, with attorney Lauren Farmer, he established the website Fatal Police Taserings.