

Shock tactics

The police service should be careful not to alienate public opinion by allowing less lethal weapons to be used as instruments to gain compliance, argues Brian Rappert.

The appropriateness of the use of force by the police in democratic societies often generates significant debate. Deaths and injuries can lead to prolonged legal disputes that undermine public confidence and are often financially and emotionally shattering.

To help resolve conflict situations, almost all police forces around the world deploy less lethal weapons. The impetus for much of the renewed focus in Britain dates back to 2001 with the high profile police shootings of Derek Bennett who was pointing an imitation gun at officers in Brixton, south London and Andrew Kernan, a schizophrenia sufferer who was wielding a samurai sword in Liverpool.

As Colin Burrows suggests in the article opposite, there are a variety of less lethal weapons currently on the market, but there is good justification for remaining sceptical about all their advertised benefits. If you look beyond the broad promises about the potential to save lives and concentrate on how they are likely to be deployed, a number of pressing issues arise.

Although much of the discussion about less lethal weapons focuses on their potential to reduce deaths from police shootings, the most frequent uses of such options are likely to be as other forms of force that do not involve firearms. A good illustration of this is the M26 Taser. Although this device is only authorised for firearms officers in England and Wales, the ACPO operational guidelines explicitly state it is not a replacement for conventional firearms. While one might expect the Taser to have helped in the case of Andrew Kernan (although the CS spray used did not) it would have been unlikely to figure in the response to Derek Bennett.

As such, assessing the advantages and disadvantages of the Taser, as with many other less lethal weapons, requires comparing them to other options. There are difficult choices at stake here about how to

weigh the risks to officers, recipients, and bystanders. For instance, some US forces issue Tasers to all street officers and place it rather low on their 'force continuums', effectively making it available as a device to gain compliance. This is not an unexpected practice - the manufacturer advocates its early and aggressive use to prevent any escalation and in a 2002 European training session proposed the Taser is good against demonstrators such as "tree huggers" and those shouting "hell no, we won't go".

Although the Taser is only authorised for firearms officers in England and Wales, nothing stops its use as a compliance instrument here. While the early discharge of a five second 25-watt shock to gain obedience might reduce the potential for officer injury, it is not clear this represents exemplar police practice.

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Using another example, although the L104 Baton Gun has been largely employed in extreme situations in England and Wales as an option short of firearms, in Northern Ireland it has been used in a much wider range of public order situations and the necessity of its use has received significant opposition as a result.

While the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms call for the development and deployment of non-lethal weapons, it also requires them to be 'carefully controlled' and 'carefully evaluated'. Unfortunately, the history of practice in the UK on such matters is not reassuring. During their introduction and subsequent use in Northern Ireland, for instance, rubber bullets, baton rounds and tear gas were all said to be subject to strict

controls, statements that later proved to be of dubious worth. No doubt much of the antagonism in Northern Ireland directed at current attempts to modify the baton gun stems from such a history.

More recently, when CS spray was introduced in the UK in the late 1990s the product was said by the Home Office to be tested to the level required of a pharmaceutical drug. Although the basis for such statements has never been publicly set out, work carried out by myself and others to unearth the true level of testing has indicated that this claim is highly dubious. Since its introduction, highly selective evidence has been cited to suggest CS spray has reduced officer injuries while much stronger Home Office evidence to the contrary has been disregarded. Similarly, insufficient attention has been given to the institutional systems in place to monitor long-term health effects.

While the recent UK Steering Group research programme has improved on past standards of transparency and testing, it has made use of many of the previous questionable claims and its overall level is still insufficient. Key safety and effectiveness claims take the form of highly summarised conclusions without substantiating evidence.

Police forces searching for ways to reduce injuries to officers and the public with

limited resources at their disposal face difficult questions about which policies to pursue. It should always be kept in mind that at the centre of good policing are professional, well trained officers. One key in reducing injuries is establishing rigorous procedures to monitor police use of force and associated injuries so as identify the situations of risk and to adopt appropriate, evidence-based training, tactics and technology. New weapons might be a part of any such approach, but they can hardly be a substitute for it.

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