

# Electronic control in corrections essay sample



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'Stun' is a relatively interesting word. In most situations, it's a verb that means 'to shock or surprise.' At the worst of times, to stun somebody could mean to confound or bewilder that person. Now look at this word – stun gun. Not so interesting when placed beside gun. It is very lethal, as a matter of fact.

Stun guns, stun belts and every distant relative in the stun family are beginning to come of age. Stun technology began a long time ago in the world of animals and was used in prods and fences that would electrify cattle if they tried, well stunts. Ideally, the form of discipline should have stayed there. But man had to give the weapon a face lift. What emerged was the stun gun also known as a taser, stun belts and electrolasers. The list is bound to have several additions in the years to come.

Taser is actually an acronym for Thomas A. Swift's Electric Rifle. The inventor of the stun gun, Jack Cover, designed it in 1969[1] and named it for the science fiction character Tom Swift. The use of this toy has moved beyond fiction. Military and police forces in various countries are seeing the effects of the taser. Entirely battery operated, the air taser (currently the most popular) looks like a pistol and when in danger zones, functions a lot like its fatal counterpart. The taser uses compressed air and the suspect in this case, definitely knows what has hit him – 50, 000 V of electric charge. No minor shock that. The Taser waves/T-waves go right through a person's skin, and sometimes even penetrate the superficial muscle. The electric signals in the human body immediately go haywire and the nervous system is extremely confused. The body is in a state of shock, literally, muscles are twitching uncontrollably and will look like spasms to passers by. Research has shown

that half a second of shock will result in extreme pain and contraction of muscles, two seconds and the person will be completely immobile, five seconds and the shock could result in extreme conditions, disorienting the person completely, and even leading to death.

The high voltage – low current combination of a taser, ensures that a victim loses complete control of his body. Imagine this – “ If taser darts are shot into a standing person’s thigh at ten inches apart and from a distance of six feet away, the leg will be locked into a flexed position and the person will be unable to continue to stand.”[2] Being locked in an uncomfortable position, having electricity run through your body and facing the danger of death, all at the same time – why should anybody be subject to this torture. The answer is simple – because it is ‘ less-lethal’. That’s how most countries justify their use of a taser, in a correctional facility. When compared to a hand gun that could mean bullets aimed wrongly at some one causing death, the stun gun is a safer option. Or is it? The stun belt is another form of the stun gun that is used on prisoners and operates on similar technology. What differs is the way in which a stun belt is used. It is usually strapped around a prisoner’s leg, waist or arm. It consists of a remote control and a battery pack and will set off signals if the prisoner tries to remove or meddle with the strap. If the prisoner tries to escape or even attempts to, all the officer needs to do, is work his controls. It’s shock treatment at the press of a button. The only marks that are left behind are seen where the charge has penetrated into the body.

Given what the taser or a stun belt can do, the police force often use it while on a high-profile chase, “ when a dangerous prisoner has to make his

appearance in court or venture outside for reasons such as a medical check up, and also in high security prisons that house dangerous inmates.”[3] Of late, officers who are seen doing the rounds in schools are also carrying tasers. It is a different story that parents are known to sue the force if a taser is used on their child.

Self-defense, law enforcement, unruly prisoners – whatever the reasons may be, a stun gun or a taser could be dangerous enough to cause cardiac arrest, loss of eye sight, a battered central nervous system, respiratory failure and of course, death. Given these side-effects, governments must have reason enough to be developing and using more of these guns. What are they?

The case for stun guns, tasers and other electric shock prods begins simply. Authorities would like to nab prisoners and control their behavior, in a way that does not involve too much physical damage. No having to take a shot at a prisoner or hit him with a club, no hassles, just zap him for a few minutes, thus preventing any long-term injury. It’s interesting to note that before a member of the police force is given permission to use a taser, there are several training programs he undergoes. As part of these programs, officers will have to be ‘stunned’ or ‘shocked’ also, just so that they have a fair idea of what it feels like to be at the other end. Another significant advantage that comes to mind in the case of a stun belt is that it is as person specific as it gets. Since police-operated controls when activated, will affect only the person wearing the stun belt, the possibility of innocent onlookers or passers by getting harmed, accidentally is impossible. And this is certainly morally significant: anything that protects the innocent is morally preferable to

something which puts them at risk. So when a prisoner makes his way to a courtroom or is in need of medical care, the use of a stun belt is justified.

Psychologically, a prisoner begins to be ‘conditioned’ in a positive way, to this form of punishment. Just like children terrified of the whip may not resort to mischief, a prisoner who is petrified of the excruciating pain that he will experience when shot at by a taser, is less likely to do something that may trigger the shot. Prisons are bound to become less dangerous and violent places to be in. “The result would be a prison in which all the inmates obey the rules and serve out their time in orderly coexistence.”[4] One group of people that will surely be thankful for this invention is that of prison staff. Not thought of too often, the group is regularly forced into being an integral part of prison fights and brawls, abusive prisoners and other violent conditions. The stun belt or taser is the prison guard’s weapon against all of this. Currently, prisons are seen to draw people who are bolder, and most probably like the excitement and violence that are part of their job. On the other hand, if a safer prison environment is guaranteed, a different set of people will be able to take up the responsibility of prison guards.

Keep in mind these advantages and take a look at what the public has to say about correctional staff using these allegedly ‘less-lethal’ weapons.

In a survey conducted a few years ago, 84% of the public approved the use of non-lethal weapons for correctional staff to control riot behavior, as well as in crimes where excessive force was required. A policy, as well as an accompanying budget, was introduced two years later, which gave California

Corrections \$3.2 million to purchase an array of non-lethal weapons, and implement training programs across the state.

More than 7,000 of the nation's 18,000 law enforcement agencies have armed officers with Tasers. The California Department of Corrections suggests that the policy has had effects immeasurable by statistics. Both Prison and Jail Corrections staff have reported a lower incidence of inmate deaths, as the weapons allowed them to control fighting in the prison much faster than with traditional methods. In previous cases they have occasionally been forced to shoot offenders to end the chaos, particularly during riots. In addition, the recovery time from pepper spray in the face is 45 minutes, as opposed to an average two week stint in the medical facility if officers are forced to use a baton on a criminal to subdue him. They claim that the once declining rate of new candidates in the corrections system is on the rise again. Police credit Tasers with reducing injuries to officers and suspects, lowering the number of police shootings and shrinking the number of liability claims. [5]

Blown over by the advantages of the taser? Think again. There may be several attractions people see in this effective piece of technology but the taser is still greatly defective in one area – morally. Along with the way stun guns are used, it is important to take into consideration how they are abused. The taser pendulum, like any other power toy, swings both ways. One doesn't need to watch too many movies to understand the relationship between prisoner and correctional officer, a euphemism for what an inmate would call a hard-hearted cop. Prisoners aren't left alone and inevitably share a relationship with fellow prisoners and the officers – good, bad or

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ugly. This will mean that transactions and deals of varying kind are agreed upon.

Bribes are not uncommon. Favor and hatred go hand in hand. Power relationships are abused severely and a less-liked prisoner may find himself getting ‘corrected’ with a taser once too often. Sadism after all, does abound in prison. Prisoners that were initially at the beck and call of officers could resort to begging for mercy at their hands. It is appalling to even imagine what would happen if these tasers were to become easily available, and go beyond prisons and other correctional settings. Out in the big, bad world, every small time gangster would end up having his own taser, stubborn youngsters will begin to dread it and it could find its way into institutions for the mentally ill. Just like the use of hand guns are currently out of control, tasers could also get uncontrollable. It is only appropriate that buyers and users of stun technology are registered at this stage, even while the number of tasers in use is less. It would be safe to ensure that these stun guns are sold only to correctional facilities.

Another disadvantage of such electroshock weapons is that they need “continuous and uninterrupted contact time with one’s intended target than usually advertised”[6], which would translate into more than five seconds. The taser could just end up irritating the victim, who is bound to try and grab it away, break it or even worse, injure the police officer with it.

Tasers are also sometimes fired at emotionally unwell victims, those with pacemakers, perhaps even drug addicts. If the police are unaware of

prevailing conditions, a taser means death for the victim. On the downside, most taser deaths are easily dismissed by stating pre-existing conditions.

Over time, operators of stun belts and tasers will certainly begin to detach themselves from the effect of the stun gun. Press-the-button drill for them, could mean death for some one else. The pain that he or she is inflicting with the taser in hand may not be an immediate concern. It is likely that this “detachment effect” [7] would then mean abuse.

No doubt, a stun gun when used within a prison has proved to very effective. But the question here is – is that the purpose of prison? To guarantee that prisoners are forced into living a submissive life, at least as long as they’re there? What happens to the process of reformation? Once the source of the fear (the stun belt) has been removed, will former prisoners have any motivation to obey the law except the threat of once again being in the belt? [8] Citizens are beginning to view the taser as an acceptable form of torture. In the name of discipline and control, stun belts are being used – to inflict pain, presumably without injury.

Knowing the pros and cons, what are the checks that exist on the use of the Taser?

The Association of Chief Police Officers (Acpo) refers all incidents in which Tasers are discharged to the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC), which investigates police complaints. The IPCC says it is conscious Tasers could be misused and it will scrutinize any misuse. Every time the Taser is fired it also releases up to 40 confetti-like ID tags which identify which officer used the weapon. The weapons also have a microchip which



allows data about when they were used and for how long to be downloaded onto a computer.[9]

Somehow, this post mortem of taser usage is not good enough. Will determining the reasons for taser use be of any value to a victim of a heart attack and a nervous break down? Will it determine if the taser was used or abused? Can it prevent illegal tasers from being sold to chain gangs? The questions are many. The answers are few. A taser is 'less-lethal', humane and efficient in purpose. So was the guillotine. I rest my case.

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