

# CRACKING DOWN ON TASERS

## Introduction

### Focus

This *News in Review* story examines the national debate that surfaced after a Taser was used on a Polish immigrant at Vancouver airport. The man died after the incident, leaving law enforcement agencies across Canada scrambling to defend their choice to use electric stun guns as part of their crime-fighting arsenal.

### Did you know . . .

Taser International is a company that makes electric stun guns. Since the firm is so dominant in the market, people often refer to stun guns as "Tasers."

Robert Dziekanski stepped off the plane after his long journey from Poland. Soon he would see his mother. All he had to do was clear Customs, pick up his luggage, and the reunion with his mother would take place. However, instead of a reunion, Dziekanski found himself wandering in the Customs area for 10 hours. He became more anxious and agitated before being approached and Tasered by the RCMP. By the time the paramedics arrived, Dziekanski was dead.

### National Debate

The death of Robert Dziekanski set off a national debate on the use of electric stun guns, called Tasers by police. Naturally, people concluded that the Taser had contributed to Dziekanski's death. But the police and the makers of the stun gun, Taser International, claimed that the man must have been suffering from "excited delirium," a forensic term used to describe a psychological condition wherein a person demonstrates overt psychotic symptoms and behaviours. The police and Taser International contended that the stun gun only brought Dziekanski down; it was the "excited delirium" that killed him.

Within days the spotlight was placed squarely on the appropriateness of using a Taser to bring suspects under control. On the one hand, police contended that the Taser was an essential non-lethal weapon designed to bring a person under control as quickly and humanely as possible. They claimed that the stun gun's ability to briefly disable an individual—via 50 000 volts of electricity—allowed police to bring situations under control in a hurry. Other non-lethal alternatives, like wrestling,

kicking or punching, or even pepper spray or a police baton, significantly increase the risk of injury to the suspect, the officers, and witnesses.

Meanwhile, human rights advocates argued that Tasers could be clearly linked to over 200 deaths in North America alone (*The Globe and Mail*, March 5, 2007). Amnesty International ([www.amnesty.ca](http://www.amnesty.ca)) has long contended that the electric stun gun is an instrument of torture and reiterated this point after Dziekanski's death. Amnesty International found support from the United Nations, which has called for an outright ban on the use of Tasers. At least 17 Canadians have died after being Tasered since police started using the weapon in 1999 (CBC News: "Taser-related deaths in Canada," [cbc.ca](http://cbc.ca)).

### Beyond the Stun Gun

While the debate over the appropriate use of Tasers gained momentum, details surrounding Dziekanski's case caused the debate to widen. According to the RCMP, Dziekanski was acting irrationally, even violently, when they arrived on the scene. They said that the four officers Tasered Dziekanski at least twice and then held him down before putting him in handcuffs. Eyewitnesses generally confirmed the RCMP's version of events (though some say the man was Tasered four times), describing an extremely agitated Dziekanski who had barricaded a door and tossed a computer before the RCMP arrived to subdue him.

In the days following Dziekanski's death, a number of new and disturbing details came to light. First, Dziekanski had arrived on time shortly before 3:30 p.m. but never cleared Customs. He wandered in the Customs area for

10 hours without anyone speaking to him or providing him with any kind of direction. Dziekanski spoke only Polish so he desperately needed a translator—in fact, a translator might have been able to defuse the entire situation. However, no one approached the distraught man and there was no translator available.

Second, Dziekanski's mother, Zofia Cisowski, waited for her son in the main terminal for over six hours. On three occasions, she asked airport staff if her son was on the other side of the Customs barrier. Eventually she was told that her son was not there and that he had probably never arrived so she should just head back to her home in Kamloops. She left around 10:00 p.m.

Third, Dziekanski's 10 hours of waiting and wandering eventually left him so agitated that he started to act out. Alone, with no one who could speak his language, he likely became overcome with fear. When the RCMP arrived, they encountered an extremely distraught man whom they thought needed to be brought under control. Within 25 seconds of confronting Dziekanski, the RCMP had Tasered him and put him in handcuffs. Moments later he was dead. The whole episode was captured on videotape and shared with the public several weeks

after the incident. The tape depicts a raw and frightening takedown of a deeply disturbed man.

The release of the amateur video of the final moments of the life of Robert Dziekanski stunned Canadians. The video showed that Dziekanski was in an extreme state of anxiety. Few questioned the fact that the RCMP needed to bring the situation to a conclusion quickly. However, the image of Dziekanski writhing in pain and screaming after being Tasered was horrifying to watch.

In the aftermath, the RCMP looked at the appropriateness of using Tasers and decided that they are an essential non-lethal weapon for their officers. Other forces reviewed their Taser policies, with several police units, like the Royal Newfoundland Constabulary ([www.justice.gov.nl.ca/rnc/index.htm](http://www.justice.gov.nl.ca/rnc/index.htm)), agreeing to suspend the use of Tasers. The Vancouver Airport Authority ([www.yvr.ca/authority](http://www.yvr.ca/authority)) reviewed its policies and agreed to bring in more translators, to improve the signage, and to provide ongoing patrols of the Customs area.

However, all the debate in the world would not comfort Zofia Cisowski, Robert Dziekanski's mother, who had come to Canada to create a new life and pave the way for her son to join her.



# CRACKING DOWN ON TASERS

## Video Review

### Further Research

To stay informed about policing issues at the RCMP, including the use of Tasers, go to [www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca](http://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca). To follow the progress of this case before the Commission for Public Complaints Against the RCMP, go to [www.cpc-cpp.gc.ca](http://www.cpc-cpp.gc.ca).

Answer the following questions by placing your answers in the spaces provided.

1. Why did the police Taser Robert Dziekanski at the Vancouver airport?

---

2. What are Tasers designed to do to their target?

---

3. How many Canadians have died after being Tasered? \_\_\_\_\_

4. Why do Canada's chiefs of police think that Tasers don't kill people?

---

5. a) According to Paul Pritchard, what course of action did the police decide to take even before they confronted Robert Dziekanski?

---

b) What did Pritchard have to do to get his videotape back from the RCMP?

---

6. Describe what was shown in the video taken by Paul Pritchard.

---

7. For Paul Pritchard, what was the most disturbing part of the takedown of Robert Dziekanski?

---

8. What did the RCMP claim before the video became public?

---

9. Describe the national and international reaction to the release of the video.

---

10. What use-of-force options are presented to police officers in training at the Ontario Police College?

---

11. What changes have been made to the RCMP's policy on the use of Tasers?

---

# CRACKING DOWN ON TASERS

## *The Tragedy of Robert Dziekanski*

Robert Dziekanski arrived at Vancouver airport at 3:20 p.m. on October 14. He deplaned and followed the crowd to the Customs area. What happened after that is a mystery. He wandered in and around the Customs hall for 10 hours before succumbing to the stress of being lost and alone. At that point, he started to get extremely agitated, so much so that airport staff called in the RCMP.

### **Dziekanski's Last Moments**

Dramatic video footage shows the final moments of Dziekanski's life. He is seen barricading a door with chairs and tossing a computer near the exit of the Customs hall. While he is doing this, a woman named Sima Ashrafinia, tries to calm him down. Recognizing that Dziekanski doesn't speak English, Ashrafinia uses hand gestures and a calm tone of voice to try to break through the man's anxiety. Her efforts fail and she reluctantly backs off.

Next, Dziekanski is approached by a number of airport staff and told to stop what he is doing. At this point Dziekanski appears to be in a world of his own and disregards the appeals of the staff. Frustrated by the lack of co-operation, a staff member calls the RCMP, who arrive on the scene shortly thereafter. The attending officers are told by the staff that the man only speaks "Russian."

The four officers move Dziekanski's barricade aside and enter the Customs hall. Their arms raised in an appeal to get the distraught man to co-operate, the police issue a series of verbal commands to Dziekanski. When they do not receive the co-operation they are looking for, the RCMP use their Tasers, and Dziekanski drops to the ground, writhing in pain and screaming in anguish. The Tasers

were used at least twice, with some eyewitnesses saying they heard four loud cracks, suggesting that the devices were used four times. The four officers kneel on a screaming Dziekanski until the man eventually falls silent.

### **The Story Behind the Story**

Initial news reports suggested that an unco-operative man died after being Tasered at the airport, but soon details of the case began to come to the surface. Dziekanski's mother, Zofia Cisowski, who had brought her son over from Poland, said she made repeated requests to Vancouver airport staff to speak to her son on the other side of the Customs barrier. She said her son was likely confused and disoriented, which would explain why, after several hours, he had not come through the Customs doors into the main terminal. Eventually, Cisowski was told that her son had never arrived from Poland and she should go back to her home in Kamloops. The distraught mother returned home. At around 2:00 a.m., she phoned the airport's immigration line and was told that her son was there and that he was fine. She asked the immigration staff to take care of him because he didn't speak any English and she made her way back to the Vancouver airport. Little did she know that, less than an hour earlier, her son had died after an encounter with police.

### **The Video**

The case of Robert Dziekanski really grabbed the attention of the Canadian public after the release of an amateur video showing the final moments of his life. Robert Pritchard filmed the incident upon clearing Customs after a trip to China. When he saw Dziekanski acting irrationally, he pulled out his camera and

**Did you know . . .**

On the same day of the Dziekanski incident, another man was Tasered by police forces, in Montreal. Quilem Registre died of his injuries three days later. He was the 17<sup>th</sup> person to die after being Tasered in Canada.

started filming. The RCMP officers at the scene asked for Pritchard's camera and portable memory drive so they could make a copy of his video. Pritchard consented and was told he would get his equipment back within 48 hours. Each time Pritchard called to arrange to pick up his camera, he was stonewalled by the RCMP—for three weeks—until finally, after publicly threatening a lawsuit, he was given his camera and portable memory drive back. When Pritchard turned his video over to the media, the death of Robert Dziekanski became headline news across Canada and around the world.

**Preventing Similar Tragedies**

In the wake of the death of Robert Dziekanski, the Vancouver Airport Authority agreed to spend over a million dollars on the following changes:

- hiring new public safety officers to negotiate with people in crisis situations
- 24-hour staffing of customer-care kiosks

- improved translation services for arriving and departing passengers
- improved signage using up to 20 languages along with pictographs directing passengers to Customs, baggage, and exits
- hourly patrols of the Customs area
- emergency medical response personnel available 24 hours a day

Source: CBC News, December 7, 2007

The tragic death of Robert Dziekanski set off a storm of controversy. Police across Canada were forced to defend their use of Tasers. Airports from Victoria to St. John's were forced to review their procedures to see if a similar tragedy could happen in their terminals. The Canadian public was left wondering how so much could go so wrong so fast for a person moving from the airplane to the exit doors of the Customs area at a crowded international airport.

**Questions**

1. What do you think might have been done to prevent the events leading to the death of Robert Dziekanski?

---

---

2. What was "the story behind the story"?

---

---

3. Why do you think the RCMP wanted to hang on to Robert Pritchard's videotape?

---

---

4. Do you think the changes implemented by the Vancouver Airport Authority will prevent a future tragedy? Explain your answer.

---

---

# CRACKING DOWN ON TASERS

## *What's a Taser?*

### **Did you know . . .**

"Taser" is named after a series of children's stories written by Thomas Swift and stands for "Thomas A. Swift Electric Rifle."

### **Update**

As this story was being prepared on January 25, stock of Taser International rose eight per cent on the belief that the Metropolitan Toronto Police Service was about to announce a contract to equip more officers with Tasers. As well, on the same day, Governor General Michaëlle Jean witnessed the Tasering of a protestor at an official function in Vancouver.

"Don't tase' me, bro!" shouted the University of Florida student as campus security tried to subdue him after he caused a disturbance at a speech by U.S. presidential hopeful John Kerry in 2004. In saying "don't tase' me" he was hoping the campus cops would avoid resorting to their stun guns to bring him under their control. The word *Taser* is actually the brand name for an electric stun gun made by Taser International of Scottsdale, Arizona. However, Taser has become such a dominant force in the stun-gun industry—with a virtual monopoly on the market—that the word *Taser* has made its way into the vernacular. In other words, when people hear that someone was Tasered, they know that the person was zapped with an electric stun gun. The technical term for the Taser is conductive energy device (CED).

So what is a Taser? A Taser is a hand-held electric stun gun that delivers 50 000 volts of electricity via two probes that propel out of the gun when fired. Wires extend from the gun to the target with the two probes completing an electrical circuit that causes uncontrollable contractions of the muscles of the body of the target. In essence, the electrical system of the body is invaded by outside electricity, temporarily immobilizing (some would say paralyzing) the target. The Taser has a range of 10.5 metres and can send its charge through up to 5 cm of clothing.

According to Taser International, over 260 000 stun guns have been sold to more than 11 000 law-enforcement and military organizations. Over 3 500 police forces in 44 different countries issue Tasers to all of their officers. The most common Tasers are the M26 and the newer X26, which function in the manner described above.

In the fall of 2007, Taser International began aggressively promoting a new stun gun designed for personal use. The C2 is a one-shot unit that includes a prod that can be used to zap a person via direct contact if the initial firing of the probes misses the target. The device is designed to be used and then abandoned at the scene as the victim flees the perpetrator of an assault. Taser has targeted women in their marketing of the C2. The unit is "lipstick" shaped and includes an MP3 player. Since introducing the personal line of stun guns, Taser's stock has risen by 114 per cent (*Maclean's*, October 29, 2007). The C2, and any other stun gun for that matter, is considered an illegal weapon in Canada. Nonetheless, Taser reports that over 170 000 of the personal devices have been sold, mostly in the United States.

To say the least, Tasers are a very controversial weapon. Over 200 people in North America have died shortly after being Tasered. However, Taser maintains that the stun guns are safe, citing the fact that over 100 000 law enforcement officers have been voluntarily Tasered with no deaths following the demonstrations (CBC News In Depth: Tasers, cbc.ca). They also point out that, despite numerous attempts to link Tasers to deaths in court, Taser has successfully won 52 wrongful death suits (*The Globe and Mail*, July 20, 2007). Some members of the medical establishment support Taser's safety claims. According to some doctors, if a Taser was to directly cause a person's death, the person would die immediately after the 50 000 volts of electricity transferred through their body—and not a minute, an hour, or a few days later.

Meanwhile, opponents of the device point out that officers taking

**Further Research**

To keep informed about the products and claims of Taser International, consider a visit to the company's official Web site at [www.Tasers.com](http://www.Tasers.com).

part in demonstrations are not likely to die after being Tasered because the demonstrations lack the intensity and stress of real-life situations. In other words, the officers know the electrical jolt is coming and they do not exhibit any of the signs of “excited delirium” shown by the majority of Taser victims who have subsequently died. *Excited delirium* is a forensic term that describes an individual who shows signs of temporary psychosis,

with symptoms including combative and violent behaviour, profuse sweating, incomprehensible speech, and super-human strength.

The RCMP has issued over 2 000 Tasers to its officers. They consider the device to be a vital, non-lethal weapon used to defend public safety. Canadian police credit the Tasers with saving over 4 000 lives since being introduced in 1999.

Source: CBC News In Depth: Tasers, [cbc.ca](http://cbc.ca)

**Questions**

1. What is meant by the phrase “the word *Taser* has become part of the vernacular”?

---

2. How do the M26 and the X26 Tasers work?

- 
3. What is the C2 Taser? Who is Taser International's target market for the C2?

- 
4. Why does Taser International maintain that Tasers are safe? What evidence do they cite?

- 
5. What is excited delirium? Why would police feel that the Taser is the best option for dealing with people showing signs of excited delirium?

- 
6. Why does the Taser continue to be a source of controversy?
- 

**Extension Activity**

What do you think? Are Tasers an essential non-lethal weapon that the police need as part of their crime-fighting arsenal? Explain your answer in an eight- to 10-sentence paragraph to be presented orally in an all-class discussion.

# CRACKING DOWN ON TASERS

## *The National Use of Force Framework*

### Quote

"You don't take a Taser to a gunfight." — Tom Smith, Chair of Taser International, in *Toronto Star*, January 18, 2008

In 2000, the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police ([www.cacp.ca](http://www.cacp.ca)) put together a national agenda outlining the conditions that constituted legitimate use of force by police officers. Drawing on decades of research and debate, the chiefs summarized their findings in a document called "The National Use of Force Framework." The national framework recommended that police officers follow certain procedures when determining the appropriateness of using force to subdue someone who poses a threat to public safety. While not official police policy, the framework has been endorsed by the overwhelming majority of police forces in Canada.

The national framework recognizes the difficult position that police officers find themselves in when they approach volatile individuals. Charged with the responsibility of preserving and protecting life, police officers have to determine, sometimes immediately, whether certain situations pose a significant threat to public safety. Police training is vital in providing officers with an action plan when they encounter potentially dangerous individuals. They need to know how to assess problems and implement action plans calmly and quickly, using whatever means are deemed appropriate to defuse volatile situations.

The graphic included in this section illustrates the chiefs' determination of appropriate use of force. The first two rings inside the graphic show how, when an officer encounters a situation, they must immediately use their training and reasoning skills to determine the potential dangers present. Is the subject of the situation resistant to police instructions either passively through a simple refusal to co-operate or actively

in the form of overt movements like gesturing toward the officer or fleeing the scene? Or, has the subject assumed a violent attitude, assaulting the officer, or have they resorted to using a weapon against the officer? In other words, are they using brute force that could bring harm to the police officer or people witnessing the situation? The attending officers will need to use their powers of perception to determine what tactical decisions need to be made.

Communication—both verbal and non-verbal—is vital in any situation involving a potential threat to public safety. Sometimes a situation can be resolved simply by the presence of a police officer and the subsequent cooperation from the subject. However, if the subject becomes unco-operative, the measures available for the police officer to use escalate as the threat escalates. For a subject who is verbally unco-operative, the officer may elect to use physical control to bring the conflict to an end. This could involve soft techniques like restraining moves, joint locks, or handcuffing. If deemed appropriate, the officer could use hard techniques such as punching or kicking to bring the subject under control. If the officer perceives that there is a greater risk to public safety, they may decide to use non-lethal weapons like Tasers or pepper spray to bring the subject under their control. Finally, if an officer determines that public safety—and, by extension, their own safety—is at risk, they may use lethal force to bring the conflict to a close. Lethal force is likely to result in the serious injury or the death of the subject.

What needs to be understood is that, once the police are called to the scene, their job is to resolve the conflict as quickly and reasonably as possible. By virtue of their being dispatched to the scene, they will assume the role of problem-solver and, in the event of a

potentially violent situation, will use the tools at their disposal to bring the conflict to the end.

Source: The Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police ([www.cacp.ca/english/committees/details.asp?id=15](http://www.cacp.ca/english/committees/details.asp?id=15)). Click on the National Use of Force Framework link)



Reprinted from *The Police Chief*, October 2004 issue. Copyright held by the International Association of Chiefs of Police, 515 North Washington Street, Alexandria, VA 22314 USA. Further reproduction without express written permission from IACP is strictly prohibited.

## Reflection

Do you think this use of force framework is reasonable or does it give the police too much power to use force? Answer the question in a six- to 10-sentence paragraph.

# CRACKING DOWN ON TASERS

## *Crime-fighting Technology*

The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department (LASD) ([www.lasd.org](http://www.lasd.org)) has long been considered a leader in the testing and acquisition of the latest crime-fighting technologies. The LASD was among the first police forces to adopt non-lethal weapons like Tasers and pepper spray. Over the years they have adopted an aggressive approach to investigating new crime-fighting technologies—so much so that many jurisdictions throughout North America keep a close eye on the devices the LASD is considering. Here are a few of the technologies the LASD has considered taking on:

- a strobe light that can be pointed at a person, causing temporary blindness
- a grill-mounted launcher that can shoot a Global Positioning Satellite (GPS) tag onto a suspect's car, giving police a precise location of the vehicle
- a flashlight that can send out a steam of pepper spray at a suspect
- a non-lethal automatic machine gun that fires pepper spray pellets up to 70 metres

- an egg-shaped camera that can transmit a 360-degree video image; officers could toss the camera into a room and get an image of what is happening inside from a distance of up to 300 metres away
- a magnetic bullhorn that transmits sound with laser-like precision over a distance of up to five kilometres; the sound is so clear that the subjects think the transmission is happening right beside them; people outside the beam's transmission zone are not disturbed because they hear nothing
- a portable radar device that can see through walls

While these devices are being investigated by the LASD, only a few of them will actually be adopted by the force. According to the LASD Technology Exploration Unit, only two per cent of the devices will be brought into use.

Source: "Officer Gadget," *Popular Science*, February 2007

### Question

Which devices, if any, do you think police forces should or should not adopt? Explain your answer.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

# CRACKING DOWN ON TASERS

## *Activity: Case Study*

Use all of the information provided in this issue of *News in Review* to complete this activity.

### **Step One: Analyzing the Case of Robert Dziekanski**

With a partner, use the National Use of Force Framework to analyze the Dziekanski case. Was the police use of a Taser to bring Dziekanski under their control warranted?

### **Step Two: Alternatives**

Using the National Use of Force Framework, determine what alternatives the RCMP could have used to bring Dziekanski under their control. Be specific.

### **Step Three: Solutions**

Review the final day of Dziekanski's life, including the activities leading up to his death. What steps could have been taken to prevent his tragic death?

### **Step Four: Conclusion**

Prepare a 300- to 500-word report outlining your conclusions in steps One to Three.

### **Step Five: Follow-up**

Research Taser use on the Internet. Find three stories where you think the police needed to use a Taser and three stories where you think the police did not need to use a Taser. Share these stories with your classmates in a class discussion.

Here's an example of a story where the police didn't need to use a Taser.

An Iranian-American student at the University of California in Los Angeles was Tasered three times in a confrontation with campus police at the school's library. The student felt he was being ethnically targeted by library staff who asked him to show his student card. He wondered why other students were not being asked to produce their cards, so he refused to comply. Library staff called the campus police to have him removed from the premises. When the police arrived and asked him to leave the library, an angry verbal exchange ensued.

The incident was captured on a cell phone video camera and posted on YouTube. While the student was verbally demonstrative in his anger, witnesses say he was preparing to leave the library and angrily told police not to touch him. When the police moved close to him, he got angrier, and then he was Tasered—three times. The university called the incident "unnecessary, avoidable, and excessive."

Source: *Library Journal*, September 1, 2007

Here's an example of a story where the police needed to use a Taser.

Police confronted a 39-year-old man at a motel in Edmonton. The man provided the police with a false name, which happened to be the subject of a number of outstanding warrants, so the police prepared to take the man into custody. Realizing his mistake, the man took off, running across a busy highway with the police in pursuit. The man was tackled by a bystander who was trying to help the police but, when he got up, he pulled out a knife. Next, he ran into a crowded Toys "R" Us store where the police cornered him, Tasered him, and arrested him.

Source: CBC News, "Edmonton police chief defends Taser use," December 28, 2007