



April 29, 2008

**Schizophrenia Society of Ontario and Schizophrenia Society of New Brunswick  
Submission to the Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security  
TASER STUDY**

Thank you for this opportunity to comment on the use of tasers in Canada, particularly as it relates to persons with mental illness.

The Schizophrenia Society of Ontario and the Schizophrenia Society of New Brunswick are non-profit organizations with a mission is to improve the quality of life for individuals and families affected by schizophrenia through education, support, awareness raising, public policy & research. The Schizophrenia Society of Ontario has a network of twenty chapters, eight regional offices and more than 500 active volunteers across the province. Reaching over 30,000 people each year, SSO is the largest organization representing people affected by schizophrenia in Ontario.

In Canada, there have been twenty taser-associated deaths since 2003. The use of tasers by law enforcement officers across the country has been rising steadily over this time. Though the evidence linking taser use and subsequent death is not clear, we are nevertheless concerned about the consequences of their increased use. When tasers were first introduced in British Columbia in 1999, many mental health organizations endorsed their use as a safer alternative to lethal force. However, recent incidents such as the death of Robert Dziekanski and others, have demonstrated that tasers are not a non-lethal weapon. Like any other use of force, tasers do carry some risk. In addition, tasers are not always classified as an alternative to guns, contrary to how they were first introduced. Thus, the “tasers are better than guns” argument which was first used to support this device may no longer apply.

In your consideration of taser use in Canada, we request that the Committee consider the following:

**1. Place of Taser on the Use-of-Force Spectrum**

Currently, there are no nationwide standards regarding the contexts and situations in which tasers should be used. For example, when the RCMP introduced this device in 2001, it was described as a “less than lethal means for controlling suspects” only to be used to “subdue individual suspects who resist arrest, are combative, or suicidal”. According to Paul Kennedy, Chair of the Commission for Public Complaints Against the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, “There was no proper data analysis, and yet, in 2004, it changed and you could use the taser for all sorts of things”<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, current RCMP policy classifies the taser as an “intermediate” device. This classification permits the use of the weapon for those situations where an individual is exhibiting behaviours that are deemed “resistant”, and not just “combative”.

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<sup>1</sup> 39<sup>th</sup> Parliament, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session: Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security. Wednesday, March 5, 2008.

In addition to the inconsistency in classification of tasers on the use-of-force spectrum, different taser users apply different criteria to determine whether someone is “combative”, “assaultive”, or “resistant”<sup>2</sup>. As a result, tasers are being used in a variety of situations, including against those who are only passively resisting and those who are already restrained.

**Recommendations:** Independent, impartial research should be conducted to determine where tasers should be classified on the use of force spectrum. This research should inform an enforceable nationwide policy on tasers that specifies the situations in which tasers are appropriate to use and provides clear criteria to assess the threat posed in these situations. This policy should also specify:

1. Which of the two different modes (stun mode vs. Electro-Muscular Disruption (EMD) mode) should be used in which situations, with EMD mode being reserved for only the most threatening situations.
2. The distinction in usage policy when confronting an individual exhibiting signs of a mental illness, often referred to by police as “emotionally disturbed persons” or EDPs. Behaviour related to symptoms of mental illness, such as hallucinations, should be distinguished from other typical signs of aggression.

## **2. Limitations on Availability of Tasers**

There are marked differences in the availability of tasers to law enforcement officers across policing services. The recent taser incidents involving transit police in Metro Vancouver causes great concern about the liberalization of taser use among security and policing services. Greater availability of this tool increases its use as an alternative to other methods, thereby contributing to the taser “usage creep” phenomenon. At a time when more information on the harms associated with taser use is needed, expansion of taser availability is imprudent.

**Recommendations:** Due to the high-risk nature of this device, availability of tasers across and within policing services should be limited as much as possible. Only those law enforcement professionals with high levels of experience, or who have a high likelihood of coming in contact with an individual who is combative, should be allowed to carry a taser. We encourage other policing services to follow the lead of the Toronto Police Service, who used a pilot project model and have only made tasers available to their senior supervisors and high-risk units.

## **3. Extensive Training for Officers Who Carry Tasers**

Training for all front-line officers who carry tasers should be a key focus in policy development. Currently, taser training across the country is heterogeneous in terms of depth of training, evaluation, and re-certification policy. Taser training in isolation of broader crisis intervention and de-escalation training may not adequately prepare officers to be able to apply a range of approaches. When dealing with persons with mental illness in crisis, the most effective response is verbal de-escalation. The use of force, including tasers, on

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<sup>2</sup> 39<sup>th</sup> Parliament, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session: Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security. Wednesday, March 5, 2008.



persons experiencing psychotic symptoms can actually serve to further escalate the situation.

**Recommendations:** A standardized training curriculum on tasers should be developed and implemented across Canada. This curriculum should specify the length of training and emphasize policy, procedure and judgment. A portion of this training should be devoted to interventions involving persons with mental illness, or EDPs, which would include a broader range of non-violent de-escalation techniques as an alternative to tasers. Re-certification should be enforced on a yearly basis.

#### 4. **Reporting on Taser Use**

At this point in time, there is no clear standard for reporting when a taser is used. Public reporting on taser use is important not only for internal purposes, but to inform the public about this highly contested tool as well. The RCMP's recent censorship of its taser incident reports was against public interest and has only fuelled the controversy surrounding this device. It is only with a high standard of reporting that we will be able to collect and analyze information on tasers, and thereby more accurately assess the risks and benefits of their use.

**Recommendations:** All policing services should abide by the same standard of strict reporting on use of tasers, with regular monitoring and data made public. This should include reporting on when a taser is drawn, even if it is not deployed. Public reports should include information on complaints and investigations related to taser use, availability of tasers to front-line officers, incidents of taser deployment (including circumstances and number of persons involved), and injuries or death following the application of a taser. When an EDP or individual with a suspected mental illness is involved, these details should be clearly presented in the report to allow for further analysis of taser use on this particularly high-risk group.

The main concern of our Societies is that tasers are becoming more widely used, yet there is a lack of clear information regarding their risks. Individual policing services have, until now, had the liberty to create their own training and usage policies. In order to prevent future tragedies related to taser use, more research into this device should be a priority, with the goal of developing comprehensive national guidelines on training, availability, usage, and reporting.

Thank you for your consideration of this submission. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact Vani Jain at [vjain@schizophrenia.on.ca](mailto:vjain@schizophrenia.on.ca) or 1-800-449-6367.

Sincerely,

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