

Stun guns

Tasers are not perfect but a good option

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JAY SOWERS • The Lima News

When an early morning traffic stop turned violent in Fort Shawnee earlier this month, police officers tried to end the conflict with a Taser stun weapon, according to police reports.

That didn't work. Police say 20-year-old John T. Sowders then struggled with officers and stabbed one of them in the hand. At that point, Sowders was shot once in the chest and died.

The Taser was designed to offer a "less-lethal" way to stop a conflict. Its failure in this case contributed to Sowders' death.

Local police officials say Tasers and similar stun weapons may not be perfect, but they are generally a useful step before lethal force is used.

Waynesfield Police Chief and Taser trainer Nathan Motter said any

Area law enforcement officers, including members of the Fort Shawnee Police Department, now carry Tasers like this one when on patrol.

weapon has limits, but he likes the options a Taser presents.

"A lot of times, just the mere presence of the Taser will diffuse the incident," Motter said.

A Taser is a projectile stun gun that fires two probes connected to wires on the weapon. When both probes make contact with the target, the weapon sends an electric pulse capable of affecting the sensory and motor functions of the peripheral nervous system.

Taser is a brand name of Taser International, the leading maker of such devices. Similar devices are made by other companies, including Stinger Systems, but Taser devices are the most common in the Lima region.

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TWO PART SERIES ON POLICE EQUIPMENT EFFECTIVENESS

PART 1: TASERS, Today
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ON THE WEB

See the Info Center on LimaOhio.com to find how many tasers area departments have.

A look at the type of Tasers the Fort Shawnee Police Department carries

TASER X26

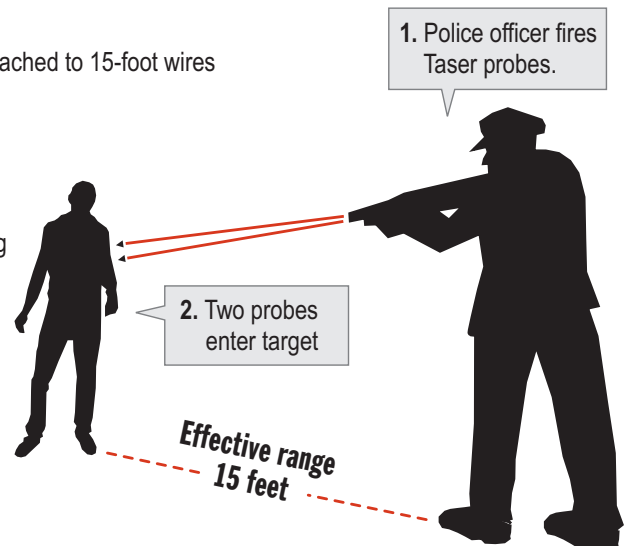


TASER M26



What does a Taser do? Delivers an incapacitating electric pulse that overrides the sensory and motor functions of the nervous system.

- ◆ **Pulse delivery method:** Two small probes attached to 15-foot wires
- ◆ **Penetration:** Up to two inches of clothing
- ◆ **Alternative use:** Direct contact stun mode
- ◆ **Cost:** \$999 (X26) • \$499 (M26)
- ◆ **Propellant:** Replaceable cartridges containing compressed nitrogen to fire probes
- ◆ **Targeting:** Red laser beam aids in aiming
- ◆ **Body:** Taser is effective in delivering electric pulse to any area of the body



TASER • from A1

Taser projectile stun guns also have the option of being used at point-blank range like a traditional stun gun.

Pros and cons

Officers like the projectile stun gun because it offers the chance to control an aggressive person while staying several feet away.

Critics contend it is often used too quickly and can cause serious harm to those more susceptible to its effects.

Even supporters of the weapon say it isn't perfect. The fact that both projectiles must connect with the target, compounded by the fact they spread apart in flight, means it won't always work. The most commonly used Tasers can only fire once before being reloaded.

Heavy winter clothing can limit or block the amount of charge reaching the target.

"Certainly, several layers of clothing can limit the effectiveness," Motter said.

Details about what Sowers was wearing the night of the shooting have not been released, but it was 22 degrees at the Allen County Airport around the time of the shooting.

"If it's not able to make good contact, then it's not useful," Fort Shawnee Police Chief Benjamin Kehres said. Taser makes a longer probe most departments use in winter situations, he said.

Taser International's website says the devices can transmit a pulse through up to two inches of clothing. If tension is put on the connecting wires after the probes connect, the wires can detach or pull the probe out of the target.

Even when the device functions properly, it may not work.

There have been reported incidents of people "fighting through" a Taser shot.

"There are still people out there who can work through it," Lima Police Department Lt. Chip Protsman said.

There's no clear research on how often Tasers fail to stop a subject, but Uniopolis Police Chief Randy Trayer said he's not seen it fail since he became an officer in 1975.

"I've not had a problem with a Taser any time I've deployed it," he said. "I don't know any of my partners who've had issues



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Area law enforcement officers now carry Tasers like this one when on patrol.

How many Tasers do local departments own?

Department	Officers	Tasers	Model M26	Model X26
Fort Shawnee	9	3	2	1
Lima PD	83	32	2	30
Allen County Sheriff	37	8	0	8
Putnam Sheriff	12	12	0	12
Auglaize Sheriff	16	8	0	8
Van Wert Sheriff	18	0	0	0
Hardin Sheriff	20	9	0	9
Celina PD	16	4	0	4
Wapak PD	12	8	0	8

Source: Police and Sheriff departments

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with a Taser not doing the job it's supposed to do."

Proper training

To make the weapon more effective, Taser International requires users to complete initial and annual training. Motter is a certified trainer. Officers must take the six-hour-minimum course each year, he said.

There are no state regulations for Taser use, Motter said.

Taser offers courses for trainers. Motter said he took a 20-hour course to become an instructor and must repeat a 16-hour course every two years.

Two of the officers involved in the Fort Shawnee shooting had Taser training in December. A third was last trained in May 2008, according to department records. Kehres is a certified trainer.

"We try to look at all the possible situations," he said of the training. "Obviously, you can't address every single situation that is out there."

Trayer said one solution in winter is to aim low.

"If you use the tool above the waist, you're going to take a chance on the tool not working the way it's supposed to work in the

winter," he said.

In addition to being Uniopolis' chief, Trayer is also a Putnam County sheriff's deputy and co-owner of the Cop Shop, a Lima store that sells police equipment.

Popular, but not everywhere

There are two similar Tasers used by most local officers: the M26 and the X26. Both have the same power level, but the X26 is smaller and lighter. The X26 also uses a "shaped pulse" of electricity to provide similar effect with lower total voltage delivered.

Taser also makes the X3, capable of firing up to three times before being reloaded, and the XREP, a self-contained Taser cartridge that can be fired from a shotgun, as well as a modified shotgun designed to shoot it. The X3 and XREP are larger and not usually carried by patrol officers, Trayer said.

A survey of 10 local agencies showed most officers carry the X26. Of the departments contacted by The Lima News, most had enough Tasers for each officer on duty. The weapons are generally assigned per shift, then passed on to the next shift. The Lima Police

Department has 32 Tasers, including two M26s. The Putnam County Sheriff's Office has 12 Tasers. The Allen County Sheriff's Office has eight.

Van Wert County Sheriff Stan Owens' department does not have any Tasers. He said there's not much budget or need for them.

"I've never been sold on Tasers," he said. "I haven't really seen the need here."

Lt. Raymond Haas of the Van Wert Post of the Ohio State Highway Patrol agrees. He said he can only recall Tasers being used twice in the last 16 years. "The people we encounter tend to be less aggressive," he said.

Owens said the type of offenders his deputies encounter respond well to other approaches and they have a nonlethal option. "We have our pepper spray, and that seems to be effective to us."

He said pepper spray costs about \$30 a canister. The X26 costs around \$800 and single-use cartridges for it cost around \$30 each.

In addition, Owens said he has concerns about the safety of Tasers, noting that a small number of people have died after being hit with one.

"We've never had that issue with our pepper spray," he said.

Owens' and Haas' observations about rural areas seeing less use of Tasers bears out with the information from area departments.

Kehres said Fort Shawnee had three Taser deployments in 2010. Protsman estimates Lima officers use Tasers 80 to 100 times a year. Officials contacted by The Lima News did not have detailed information on Taser use because it isn't usually noted unless a problem arises.

Net benefit

While the Taser may not be the perfect weapon, police officials in the region say it does more good than harm. While not 100 percent effective, Protsman believes the Taser has been an effective tool for Lima officers.

Motter said the weapons reduce harm overall.

"I think without question the Taser reduces officer injuries and definitely public injuries," he said.

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