



CATCH & STUN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this report, Strategies for Youth examines the use of Conducted Electrical Weapons¹ (also known as CEWs, tasers, or stun guns) by law enforcement officers on children and adolescents. We summarize the history of CEWs, their original intent, the training provided to law enforcement agencies that purchase them, and the circumstances surrounding their growing use by police forces across the country since the 1990s.

We then focus on how these weapons have been deployed by police against young people, through case studies, summaries of research on their physical and psychological impact, and an evolving database of lawsuits mounted to challenge their use. We look at the few research studies we identified that focus on the physical and emotional impact of tasers on young people's developing brains, psyches, and bodies. A chapter describes the federal cases brought on behalf of youth who have been tased and the trends in the federal courts' treatment of these incidents. This section also offers examples of major law enforcement agencies' policies regarding use of tasers. The report concludes with a set of recommendations for how legislators and other policy and decision-makers can reduce the physical risk and psychological trauma that young people experience when they are the subject of a "tasing."

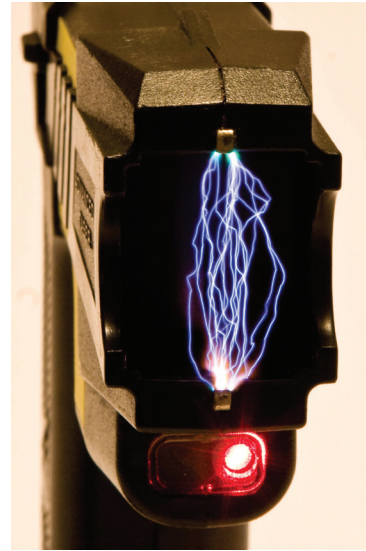
Highlights of our review include the following:

- Since the 1990s, when tasers became widely used by police departments across the country, they have, and continue to be, used on children and youth who do not pose a threat to the safety of police officers or others. The vast majority of young taser victims who we were able to identify were unarmed, engaged in non-existent or minor offenses, and many were running away from officers at the time of their tasing.
- Tasers are frequently being used by police on children and youth who are in distress or emotional crisis, and, as a result, they are exacerbating their trauma and distress.
- By dint of their psychological and physical lack of maturity, the use of CEWs on young people is particularly risky, threatening long-lasting permanent physical and emotional damage, and even death.
- Axon, the sole distributor of tasers in the United States, recommends against using these weapons on children. The company provides a manual and training; but it is ultimately up to the law enforcement agency to ensure officers are trained and provide oversight. Such training is not required by statute, nor is it uniformly implemented and supervised by law enforcement agencies which purchase their technology.

- What “policies” exist regarding use of tasers on children and youth by law enforcement are scattered, fragmented, and developed by local law enforcement agencies, often in isolation. The federal government offers guidelines for the use of CEWs based on field experience—but only for adults, not youth.²
- Very few law enforcement agencies document when and against whom tasers are being used, and few states provide any oversight. Only the CDC collects data regarding injuries resulting from police intervention involving CEWs.
- What little documentation exists reveals CEWs are being disproportionately used against children and young people of color.

By illuminating this issue, we advocate for a two-tiered set of responses. First and foremost, we seek the strict regulation and monitoring of the use of CEWs by police on young people. Tasers are considered “less lethal,” not “non-lethal” weapons. There is a huge risk of both physical and emotional trauma—and even death—on young people who are the subject of tasing. They should be banned in almost all circumstances involving children or teens; used as a last resort, only when public safety is at imminent risk and when individuals are facing serious physical threats. There should be a mandatory rigorous review activated automatically every time it is used on anyone under the age of 21. Only by doing so, will we be able to prevent more deaths and injuries.

But that is not enough. When we look at the ways in which tasers are being used by law enforcement on children and teens within the context of broader patterns of unnecessary use of force and racial disparities, it is clear that police need far more extensive training in de-escalation, adolescent psychology, effects of trauma, racial bias, and on negotiating and talking to young people as a first response. This train-



ing needs to be backed up with enforceable policies and standards, with rigorous oversight by local and state agencies, and with public accountability. Police officers must forego adopting technological devices, like CEWs, frequently marketed as solutions, [in favor of re-learning the “soft” skills](#) endorsed by Timothy Roufa, a former police officer: empathy, compassion, nonverbal communication, active listening, adaptability, rapport-building, critical thinking, observation, and conflict resolution. It is in the widespread adoption by police of these “lost arts” —not in a new technological invention—where the replacement for CEWs is best located. As Strategies for Youth has been advocating for years, the dramatic reduction in the use of tasers on children and adolescents needs to be part of a broader reorientation by police toward developmentally-appropriate, racially-equitable, and trauma-informed approach to policing of youth which focuses on de-escalation, partnerships, and on ensuring that young people receive the support they need.

¹ The word “taser” has evolved from a brand name to encapsulate all similar products (like “Kleenex”). It can be used as a noun (“he used a taser on me”) or a verb (“he tased me” or “tasered”). This report utilizes “tase” as a verb.

² Conducted Energy Devices: Policies on Use Evolve to Reflect Research and Field Deployment Experience, Paul A. Haskins, National Institute of Justice. <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/252727.pdf>