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Tasers and Community Controversy: Investigating Training Officer Perceptions of Public Concern Over Conducted Energy Weapons

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Abstract

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Keywords

Use-of-Force, Tasers, Controversy, Community, Police Training, In - Depth Interviews

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Tasers and Community Controversy: Investigating Training Officer Perceptions of Public Concern Over Conducted Energy Weapons

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Over the last several decades, “Tasers,” “stun guns” and other conducted energy devices (CEDs) have become a widely adopted, though publicly controversial, form of police restraint technology. While there is a growing body of research on the physiological effects of these types of weapons, less attention has been devoted to the social effects of this technology. This paper draws on in-depth interviews with a stratified random sample of police training officers from two states (n=27) to explore the effect that community controversy over the use of CEDs has had on police organizational practices. In particular, we explore how police training officers: (a) Represent the sources of recent community controversies relating to CEDs; (b) Characterize the effects that community controversy has on officer practices and policy development. Keywords: Use-of-Force, Tasers, Controversy, Community, Police Training, In-Depth Interviews

Perhaps one of the greatest changes over the last decade to police use of force policies and tactics has occurred with the widespread adoption of Tasers™, “stun guns” and other conducted energy devices (CEDs). While adoption estimates vary, the Government Accounting Office (GAO) reported that more than half of law enforcement agencies in the U.S. have deployed some form of CED (GAO, 2005). And even though CEDs have become a widely utilized form of restraint technology, these types of police technology have continued to generate public controversy. For example, international human rights organizations (e.g., Amnesty International), police watchdog groups (e.g., local “Copwatch” groups), and civil rights organizations (e.g., American Civil Liberties Union, 2005) have strongly opposed the adoption of Tasers, and have routinely tied Taser usage to police in-custody deaths (see Amnesty International, 2004, 2008). Moreover, the controversy over these types of devices has been sustained by popular news media accounts of questionable CEDs deployments involving children, college students, pregnant women, protesters, and the mentally ill. As a result, a polarizing and emotional public debate has emerged in relation to the use of CEDs by police agencies. On one side, human rights groups and activists organizations have called into question the legitimacy and safety of weapons (Amnesty International, 2008). On the other side, CEDs manufacturers have strongly argued for the safety and effectiveness of these devices (see Taser International, Inc., 2008).

Strangely, while there has been a growing body of research on deployment patterns and medical affects of conducted energy restraint devices, there has been comparatively little research on the public controversy surrounding CEDs or its effect on police policy or training (Kaminski, 2009; McEwen, 1997; Thomas, Collins, & Lovrich, 2010). As a result, this paper situates police training officers within this debate and examines their perceptions of the controversy. In particular, we examine how police training officers perceive CEDs and how they make sense of the controversy surrounding Tasers. In addition to examining their

attitudes on the more controversial aspects of the Taser, we are also interested in how comfortable officers are with the weapon and how it has impacted their jobs as police officers.

Police Less Lethal Force and CEDs

Communities call on police officers to perform a wide array of social functions, ranging from providing front line social service roles to intervening in violent situations. Of all duties associated with policing, however, the capacity to use force is identified as one of the core functions of the police (Bittner, 1980). Indeed, police officers are the most visible instrument of state power a citizen may encounter. For police to perform their role, it is necessary for them to have the power to use force to restrain violent subjects. While departments typically have policies and guidelines on use of force procedures, officers have tremendous discretion as to when, and to what degree, force may be used (Alpert & Dunham, 2004). Yet, despite the need to use force, the problem of excessive force has been a recurring source of public controversy for police departments. For example, high profile uses of force by the police was often a catalyst for urban unrest during the 1960's (Walker, 2005). The 1991 beating of Rodney King was another high profile incident of police violence that provoked civil unrest and outrage. The fatal shooting of Timothy Thomas, the fifteenth African-American shot by police in five years, sparked riots in Cincinnati in 2001.

Due to controversies over police use of force and the political fallout that results from police shootings, police departments have long been interested in adopting "less lethal" means of subduing resisting suspects (Adams & Jennison, 2007). To solve the dilemma of maintaining the legitimacy of police use of force while ensuring officer safety, departments have long sought a more "humane" and less harmful means of restraining suspects. As part of this trend, conducted energy devices (CEDs) have emerged as a nearly standard piece of police equipment over the last decade. In particular, a subcategory of CEDs called electromuscular disruptors has come to play a crucial role in modern police practice. These types of CEDs work by transmitting a rapidly pulsed high voltage/low amperage that overrides a subject's skeletal muscles, inducing temporary paralysis and significant, but fleeting, physical discomfort. While the technology behind electro-muscular disruption has been around for decades, it is only in the last decade or so that these devices have seen widespread use in policing. The most commonly known CED (the Taser X26) is manufactured by Taser International, Inc. In fact, the Taser International's products have so thoroughly dominated the less lethal market that the public, media, and police officers generally refer to CEDs as "Tasers" (Wolf, Pressler, & Winton, 2009).

Even though CEDs were intended to function as a more humane means of restraining combative subjects, there has been considerable controversy related to the safety of these kinds of devices. In particular, media accounts of officers using CEDs on disabled, elderly, mentally ill, and other individuals posing no immediate threat have become common stories reported in the media. Moreover, a number of human rights organizations have highlighted more than one hundred cases where an in-custody death has been temporally associated with a Taser deployment (see Amnesty International, 2004). In addition, police watchdog groups have suggested that the introduction of Tasers and other CEDs into police practice has widened the net of force used by police departments or that officers may be using CEDs to administer unconstitutional pre-judicial corporal punishments (see Amnesty International, 2004; Wolf & DeAngelis, 2011). Some have also suggested that officers may be developing an over reliance on CEDs when other options, such as verbal control or hands on techniques, might be more appropriate in certain circumstances (Alpert & Dunham, 2010, p. 253).

A large proportion of the scholarship on CEDs has focused on either its effectiveness at incapacitating aggressive subjects (Government Accountability Office, 2005; Meyer &

Greg, 1992; White & Ready, 2007) or their health effects, especially cardiac and the secondary physical injuries to subjects resulting from a sudden loss in motor function (Fish & Geddes, 2001; Ho, Miner, Lakireddy, Bultman, & Heegaard, 2006; Kornblum & Reddy, 1991; Kosgrove, 1985; Levine, Sloan, Chan, Vilke, & Dunford, 2005; McDaniel, Stratbucker, Nerheim, & Brewer, 2000; McDaniel, Stratbucker, & Smith, 2000; Ordog, Wasserberger, Schlater, & Balasubramaniam, 1987; Vilke & Chan, 2007;). Overall, while Tasers are not necessarily medically benign, most of the preliminary medical research on Tasers has generally supported the idea that Tasers are less likely to physically injure healthy subjects than the use of hands-on physical force (hands, feet, or fists), impact weapon, or canines (Alpert & Dunham, 2010; Smith, Kaminski, Rojek, Alpert, & Mathis, 2007; Taylor & Woods, 2010). Moreover, a growing body of research has demonstrated that injuries to officers tend to drop when police departments introduce CEDs (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department, 2006; Jenkinson, Neeson, & Bleetman, 2006).

Research Questions

While the health consequences of Tasers are increasingly understood, we know far less about the organizational or social effects that the spread of this technology has had on police departments and police-community relations. More importantly, while the viewpoints of anti-Taser activists and Taser manufacturers have received widespread coverage in the mainstream media, less attention has been devoted to officer attitudes towards CEDs. As researchers, we became interested in the topic of police use of CED's because it represented a site of controversy where questions of police use of force and more "humane" forms of use-of-force tactics were debated. From our perspective, this public controversy is a useful cultural site within which we can explore the deeper social and cultural tensions that exist in relation to the use of force by institutions of formal social control. While there is an increasing body of criminal justice and policy-oriented research on the technical and medical aspects of CEDs, we know very little about how the controversy is constructed and internalized by those who use the device -- police officers. We felt a qualitative approach using in-depth interviews was the best way to examine how officers may interpret the meanings and controversy associated with CED's, and how that may shape grounded policing practices.

As a result of the lack of research on officer perspectives on CEDs and community controversy, we developed the following research questions for our study:

RQ1: How do officers view the effectiveness, safety and accountability mechanisms associated with these types of restraint devices?

RQ2: How do training officers understand and make sense of the public controversy over CEDs?

RQ3: What can be done to mitigate the problems and controversies related to the deployment of CEDs?

To answer these questions, we conducted in-depth telephone interviews with police use-of-force training officers in two states.

Data and Methods

The research methods for this study were reviewed and approved by Ohio University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) on August 21, 2008 (Ohio University was Joseph De

Angelis' home institution at the time the interviews were completed). After receiving IRB approval, we conducted in-depth phone interviews with a stratified random sample of police use-of-force training officers in two states. We chose to interview training officers because of their familiarity with police technology, and especially less lethal restraint technology. Moreover, use-of-force training officers are intimately familiar with the training practices of their department and are usually well informed about their departments' policies and procedures.

We interviewed police training officers in two U.S. states, Ohio and Idaho. We chose these states for two reasons. First, since the investigators on this project were working at universities in Ohio and Idaho, we believed that the training officers' familiarity with the universities would have a positive influence on their willingness to consent to an interview. Second, both of these states are not commonly the site of policing research. Due to the unique characteristics of each state we devised the following sampling strategy: In Ohio, 25 departments were identified using a random sample of municipal police departments from two strata based on municipal population. Using the US Census' 2004 Population Estimates, we randomly selected 15 departments from cities with 10,000 to 50,000 residents and 10 from cities with more than 50,000 residents. Since there is far less diversity in the state of Idaho in terms of municipal population, the Idaho survey included a random sample of fifteen municipalities with more than 10,000 residents. We did not conduct interviews with officers from departments located in municipalities with less than 10,000 residents because we found during the pilot stage of this project that very small departments tended not to have dedicated use-of-force training officers. As a result, we chose to focus on municipal departments in medium-to-large cities.

Table 1. Interview Response Rate

	N
Response Rate	
Departments in Sample	40
Responded	27
Refused	1
Non-response	12
Response Rate	68%

After the departments were selected, we took several steps to solicit interviews. First, we sought to identify the departments training officer(s) from the departments' websites (this information is available on ~ 25% of the departments websites). If the department did not post this information on their website, we contacted the department through the use of their general line and asked for the name and contact information (phone and email) of their department's use-of-force training officer. Once we secured the training officer's contact information, we contacted them by phone and sought to gain informed consent to conduct the interview. At the beginning of the interview, we explained the purpose of the study, the length of time the interview would likely take, and that the interview would be voluntary and confidential. Once the officer gave their informed consent, we conducted the interview. Once the interview was completed, it was transcribed for analysis. Of the 40 police departments contacted, 27 (68%) participated in the interviews (interview times ranged from 35 minutes to two-and-a-half hours). All of the officers that completed interviews worked for departments that had adopted or were in the process of adopting Tasers. Table 1 summarizes the overall interview response rate.

As this paper is primarily concerned with how officers describe their experiences with CEDs, how they view the controversy over CEDs, and what officers believe can be done to reduce this controversy, we opted for a research approach that allows for the exploration of in-depth meaning and contextual ideas associated with the deployment of CEDs. This type of research focus requires a qualitative method of analysis that is somewhat unconventional in police research. Recently, some quantitative research has begun to emerge that examines patterns of CED adoption, policy, field use, and the efficacy of these types of devices (see Thomas, Collins, & Lovrich, 2010). While such research is extremely important and has helped enhance our understanding of police less lethal force options, this work aims to fill in some of the rich detail in officer attitudes that can be missed by quantitative surveys. From our perspective, qualitative data analysis enables us to delve much further into how CEDs are understood by officers that use the technology (and in this case, officers that train other officers in how to deploy this type of technology). This type of qualitative research permits us to explore officer attitudes inductively, allowing for themes to emerge based on the rich narrative descriptions of officers (Patton, 2005). From this perspective, the descriptive accounts of police work given by police training officers may provide insight into officer attitudes that may not be anticipated in advance when developing large sample, quantitative surveys. Based on our research questions and the subsequent collection of interview data, we were able to transcribe, code, and analyze the data to investigate recurrent themes and subthemes in officer perspectives on Tasers and community controversies.

After the interview process was completed and each interview transcribed, we conducted an interpretive thematic analysis of the interviews with the assistance of NVivo 9™ software (QSR International, 2010). After receiving the completed transcriptions, we began the analysis by first reading through (“eyeballing”) each of the transcribed interviews multiple times, making relatively short, general notes about recurrent themes (Bernard, 2000). The goal of the initial readings was to develop a sense of the overall context of officers’ comments, as well as identify the broadest possible themes before we began to formally code each individual expression of themes and subthemes into distinct units (Thompson & Barrett, 1997). After we developed a sense of the broad thematic contours of the data, we began to more systematically and selectively code each text segment that matched each individual theme. As we read and re-read the data, we initially marked individual themes. However, as we were able to identify clusters of related thematic ideas, we began to re-code text segments hierarchically into themes and subordinate subthemes. For example, a theme initially coded as the “Public does not understand Tasers” was later coded as either misunderstandings due to “sensational” or “inadequate” media reporting.

While we did not explicitly adopt Grounded Theory as our theoretical approach, we sought to ensure reliability in our coding by utilizing the process of constant comparison (Dye, Schatz, Rosenberg, & Coleman, 2000; Strauss, 1987). Each individually coded text segment was compared to previously coded segments with the same classification across each of the cases. Over time, this led to substantial revision in the organization of the coding scheme. Once we were comfortable that we had identified the major themes and subthemes, we quantified the number of times each theme appeared across our cases. We opted to do this not in an effort to draw inferences to some larger population of training officers, but only to contextualize the relative frequency with which officers in this sample invoked particular themes during their interviews. These frequencies are represented in the charts found in the rest of this paper.

Findings

In order to develop some background and build rapport with each officer, we initiated interviews with a series of general questions about the makeup and organization of the officer's department. With these questions, we collected basic demographic information, whether the department had adopted some form of CED, patterns of use, training and existing policies regarding CEDs (and particularly Tasers). Before asking officers specific questions about CEDs, we queried about the department's use-of-force policies and procedures. We also asked officers about the presence of a community-policing program and how they would characterize their relationship with the community. The final parts of the interview probed training officers' understandings and viewpoints of the more controversial aspects of the CEDs. While specific questions were asked verbatim of each training officer, the interview was designed to be free flowing and as conversational as possible. Based on these interviews we were able to identify several common themes among the officers we contacted. While the general departmental information can be useful for understanding organizational context, the rich descriptive data contained in individual officer responses provides useful insight into training officer opinions and perceptions of the controversy, or lack thereof, in their communities.

After obtaining some basic information about the composition of the officer's department, we asked about the policies and training procedures the departments had implemented. Based on the officers' response, we ascertained that a little more than half of all uniformed officers in the departments we surveyed were certified to carry the Taser (with wide variations). Table 2 presents the department size, police carrying, and the training used required by departmental policy. Initial training typically lasted between six and eight hours, with an average of 6.8 hours. All but two departments required annual or ongoing recertification averaging 3.1 hours of instruction.

Table 2. Department Characteristics and Taser Training Hours

	Mean	SD	Range
Number of officers (n=27)	170	349	23 - 1780
Percent officers carrying Tasers (n=25)	51.9%	28.5	8%-100%
Training hours (n=25)	6.8	2.6	4 to 8
Recertification hours (n=25)	3.1	1.2	0 to 4

Table 3 presents a summary of Taser adoption patterns and training procedures reported by the training officers we interviewed. The Taser X26 is, by far, the most popular model of CED used with 19 of 25 departments using it exclusively. Several officers (4) mentioned that their department was considering adding other types of CEDs, such as the longer range Taser X12 shotgun round. We also had discussions with officers about some more of the specific aspects of the training procedures. For instance, we asked if officers were shocked as part of the initial training. All but five officers affirmed that officers were shocked by a Taser to allow them to experience the effects of CEDs firsthand, but most said it was a voluntary part of the training. A number of training officers who said it was voluntary also stated that nearly all trainees elect to have a CED used on them. Internal training was the preferred method of certification and most training officers were trained and certified by Taser, Inc., who subsequently trained the department's officers.

Table 3. Patterns of Taser Adoption, Training, Injury Reduction and Safety

	N	Percentage
Department has Taser?		
Yes	25	92%
No	1	4%
Adopting	1	4%
Which model?		
X-26 only	19	73%
M-26 only	1	4%
Both	6	23%
Are officers shocked?		
Voluntary	13	56%
Yes	5	22%
No	5	22%
How are officers Trained?		
Internal	8	42%
Internal (Taser Master Trainer)	8	42%
External	3	16%
Reduction in Officer Injury		
Yes	12	52%
Yes, anecdotal	2	9%
No	3	13%
Don't Know/Unclear	6	26%
Safety Concerns		
No	19	76%
Yes, cardiac	2	8%
Yes, accidental discharge	2	8%
Yes, suspect falling	1	4%
Yes, excited delirium	1	4%

Officer Views of the Benefits of CEDs

After obtaining departmental information and probing about the patterns of deployment and training procedures, we asked questions about each training officer's feelings about the use of CEDs. One central area we inquired about was the officer's perception of the overall safety of the device. We found that officer safety was a primary reason for favoring the adoption of CEDs (See Table 3). Suspect and citizen safety was also routinely mentioned by training officers. In addition to open-ended responses, we also asked each training officer directly "do you think Tasers are safe?" Overwhelmingly, officers voiced a belief that CEDs were safe devices. Fully three-quarters (76%) of officers had no safety concerns about CEDs and a majority indicated that the adoption of these devices resulted in an overall pattern of injury reduction. During the interviews, officers would often elaborate on their reasons for believing the device is safe.

I have no concerns at all over the safety of the technology. It's been proven safe... safe enough out here and all its deployments, and everything that I've read and studies they've done, the Taser's never actually caused a death yet. (Officer M)

In fact, many officers were quick to refer to the same studies and literatures certifying CEDs as safe and effective device. Other officers have mentioned that they had the CED used on them during training and that was the proof that the CED is safe: “I’ve taken 12 full exposures to the Taser including a 20 second continuous exposure. And, I find that, you know, as soon as it’s over, I have recovered within a second of the effects of it.” (Officer K) Indeed, many officers used their own experience in being shocked by a CED (as part of the standardized training procedure for certification to use the device) as evidence for the safety of this type of technology.

In only a handful of instances (six total), did officers mention or imply that they were not sure if CEDs were safe or not. Even in these few occasions, it was a vague concern of unknown effects or uncertain risks,:

I think there’s still the unknown out there. As far as, you know, I think the human body is such a fascinating thing, that you know, you will never know everything about it, and will know, never know, and everybody’s different (Officer H).

Several officers did mention the subject of in-custody deaths, but they also made the point that “other factors” were responsible for the deaths, including factors such as excited delirium, positional asphyxia, drug use, and other medical problems. Again, officers referred to studies that seem to indicate this. For example, one officer argued that: “People have died after they’ve been Tased, but autopsies have proven...that it wasn’t the Taser – it was because of drugs or something else in their system” (Officer M). Another officer (J) mentioned being concerned about potential adverse effects. Yet, the officer was also quick to point out that deaths were being caused by factors other than CEDs:

You can’t help when you hear those situations where you hear people that are dying from that, but they, they’ve been very consistent and clear that it’s always, there’s other factors involved. You’re dealing with someone with some cocaine, psychosis, positional asphyxia situations...medical problems that are only, that happened to be a factor in that case. And, they’re maintaining and have successfully supported the fact that the Taser was not the result of that. But, you know, common sense, you still can’t get a little, you can’t help but get a little concerned.

We found that despite some occasional, but ambiguous concerns about the safety of CEDs, officers generally felt that these devices were a safe piece of police restraint technology, especially when adequate training and accountability procedures are in place.

Besides injury reduction, one of the ways that officers represented the safety of CEDs was by emphasizing the device’s deterrent effect, which can be used to reduce the risk of harm to both officers and suspects brought about by hands-on control techniques. In particular, officers talked about the deterrent effects of simply unholstering and aiming a CED. For example, Taser International’s X26 has a laser guide that is used to aim the weapon. The recognition, on both sides of the Taser, of the meaning of the “red dot,” is said to alter suspect behavior, often preventing an escalation of tense situations into something dangerous. The deterrent effect of the “red dot” was mentioned, in detail, by four of the officers that we interviewed, as in the case of this officer’s description:

I can tell you circumstances where people have seen the red dot from the Taser and just automatically given up because of the tool itself is intimidating.

Whether they've had personal experience being tased before, it's a deterrent tool. But you know, the biggest benefit has just really been that, it doesn't, you know, both the suspect and the officer don't get into that physical combat, and so it just reduces injuries to both parties uh, involved. (Officer N)

Officers also mentioned the deescalating potential of the weapon. As the prior quote demonstrates, some officers argued that the simple act of unholstering and pointing CEDs can have a deterrent effect, which enables officers to avoid using much more serious forms of force. Another officer further describes the deterrent effect of drawing the CEDst:

I know that the controversy has definitely affected public opinion as far as most, you know, we've actually had, you know, like I said, about a dozen deployments. But, we've drawn the taser and pointed it at a lot of people. And, as soon as they see it, see the laser dot, they, we've had several comments where, 'Oh, that's one of those tasers. I give up.' So, which has actually worked out well for us. (Officer K)

Table 4. Open-ended categorical themes mentioned by police training officers of Taser strengths and limitations (Poisson frequency)

	Category Frequency
Main benefit of Taser	
Officer and Citizen Injury Reduction	6
Officer Injury Reduction (only)	3
Deterrent Effect	4
Avoid contact or "hands off"	3
"Equalizer" for female officers	2
Effective situations	
Resistant/Noncompliant Suspect	13
Suicidal Person	5
Emotionally Disturbed	4
Domestic Situations	4
Alcohol Related	4
Prevent fleeing	2
Animals	1
Situations Not Effective	
Thick clothing	8
Large/strong people	3
In crowds/bystander close contact	5
Flammable situations	2
Distance	2
When suspect too inebriated	3
Drawbacks	
Overdependence/reliance	5
Extra burden	5
Officer injury (AD)	1
Officer misuse	2
Deskilling	1
No Drawbacks	7

In all, officers viewed CEDs as effective use-of-force devices that aids police in a variety of situations. Table 4 tabulates several of the common themes regarding the benefits, efficacy and limitations of CEDs based on our interviews with officers. From the point of view of the police officer, CEDs become a vehicle by which officers can de-escalate potentially volatile encounters without resorting to dangerous types of physical force. Overall, the officers argued that this aspect of CEDs made policing safer for both officers and suspects. Also of note is that two officers (male) felt CEDs were an “equalizer” for female officers against larger or stronger individuals. Besides subduing noncompliant suspects, officers found CEDs to be effective in a variety of situations including when used on emotionally disturbed individuals, suicidal persons, and in domestic situations.

Clearly, safety and injury reduction are represented as a central benefit of CEDs, in addition to the utility of these devices for controlling noncompliant suspects. Yet, while training officers indicated near universal approval of CEDs in terms of their tactical merits and usefulness, a number of the same officers were also quick to add that CEDs were just “another tool” within their available use-of-force options (mentioned six times), and that this tool is not without limitations. When asked, most officers mentioned situations where CEDs would not be effective and several officers noted drawbacks including the problem of officers becoming over-dependent on these devices, carrying extra items in their belts, and the possibility of misuse. Training officers were also cognizant of the limitations of CEDs and spoke of the reduced efficacy of the device on people with heavy clothing or suspects who are too large to be incapacitated by the device. Some also discussed the safety of deploying the device in flammable situations, near bystanders, or if the suspect is at risk of falling. Seven other officers said that they saw no drawbacks at all about the device. In sum, officers voice widespread support in the use of CEDs as safe and effective weapon.

The Perception of the Controversy

Throughout our interviews with police training officers, we found that police were keenly aware of the contentious public debate over CEDs. During the later half of our interviews with officers, we sought to identify why police training officers thought CEDs were a controversial police technology. To accomplish this, we asked about citizen complaints regarding CEDs and the interaction between the police and the community, as well as how officers would characterize the public’s knowledge of the devices. While some officers were hesitant to talk about the contentious aspects of CEDs, most willingly volunteered their points of view, and others talked about it with only a little prompting.

Table 5 summarizes some of our findings regarding police perceptions of community relations and public knowledge of CEDs. Overwhelmingly officers reported having a positive relationship with the community, and nearly two-thirds reported that their department had regular dialogues with the community. Almost half of training officers reported receiving citizen complaints about the Taser (11), and 4 out of 24 departments that addressed this issue said that a formal complaint had been filed by a community member complaining about the inappropriate use of a CED. Despite reporting warm relations with the community, half of all officers who responded said that the public was not well informed about CEDs. From here, we sought to examine how training officers perceived the relationship between public perceptions and controversy over CEDs.

Table 5. Prevalence of Citizen Complaints, Police-Community Relations and Officer Perceptions of Citizen Knowledge About Tasers

	Response Frequency	Percentage
Citizen Complaints About Taser?		
Yes	11	46%
No	13	54%
Relationship to community		
Very Favorable	10	38%
Generally Favorable	14	54%
Neutral	1	4%
“Mixed”	1	4%
Regular Dialogues With Community		
Yes	17	63%
No	10	37%
Public well informed		
Yes	3	13%
Somewhat	6	25%
No, but improving	3	13%
No/Not at all	12	50%
Received Media Attention?		
Yes	13	59%
No	9	41%
Media Attention Positive or Negative?		
Positive	8	57%
Mixed	4	29%
Neutral	1	7%
Negative	1	7%

To elicit officers understanding of this controversy, we asked, “Why do you think the Taser is controversial?” Based on officer responses, we found several central themes relating to the source and reasons for the controversy. These items are tabulated in Table 6 and elaborated on in the next three sub-sections. We also interviewed officers about the perceived misconceptions the public may have in relation to CEDs.

According to the officers we interviewed, the most common misconception held by the public relates to a lack of understanding about CED technology. Twelve officers said that the public thinks that CEDs electrocute suspects. An additional five officers specifically mentioned that the newness of a technology and the perception of change could instigate controversy. As one officer describes the source of the controversy:

Any, any time you use new technology, and this happens when they introduced OC spray, years and years ago, it happened when police officers switched from revolvers to semi-automatic pistols, because the increased number of bullets, any time you change, and then when you throw in the mix of using what is perceived as electricity, then it becomes highly controversial. (Officer J)

From the point of view of this officer and three other officers, the introduction of CEDs is no different than the introduction of prior force technologies in policing. The skepticism among public is thought to be a result of the novel nature of the use-of-force technology. While this was mentioned regularly, many of the officers who elaborated on the

problem of controversy felt that the public misunderstood the nature of the technology, and often misunderstand how CEDs have helped to improve the force options available to officers.

You need to explain to ‘em that, you know, people, you know, the rules, you know...the rules are that young men die, and number two – you can’t do anything about it... People wantin’ to fight the policeman and unfortunately, sometimes they die... And then, prior to the, the tasers, we’re doin’ the same thing that Wyatt Earp did – we either beat ‘em or we shot ‘em. We’ve not had that much change within a 150 years ‘til the tasers came about. (Officer E)

After eliciting feelings such as this, we then probed to officers for their viewpoints on CEDs and the roots of the controversy. We found that the officers we interviewed tended to see the controversy over CEDs as stemming from a variety sources. How officers view each of these sources is worth examining in some detail. What follows is a description of the three main themes that we found in how the training officers explained the source of the controversy, which we describe as the misinformed public, the sensational media, and the agitation of activist groups with a political agenda.

Table 6. Open-ended categorical themes mentioned by police training officers for sources and solutions to the Taser controversy. (Poisson frequency)

	Category Frequency
Public Misconceptions (open ended)	
Thinks Electrocutation	12
Thinks Lethal	4
Doesn’t understand technology	5
Media	1
Barbs	1
Reasons For Controversy (open ended)	
Media	8
Misinformation (within general public)	9
Interest groups	4
Because it is a new technology	5
Use of force	2
Lethality	2
Corporal punishment	1
How to reduce controversy?	
Education	9
Public Dialogue	6
Media	3
Training	3

The Misinformed Public

The first and most commonly mentioned aspect of the CED controversy was the role of the public’s misconceptions about police work and use-of-force. As we probed officer responses about the controversy, we found that many of them were quick to mention that they

felt that the public does not understand police work, in general, and are specifically misinformed about CEDs.

[It is] public misinterpretation of, of events associated with [the Taser]... It's like, you know, officers respond to somethin', they don't want to go hands-on, and the risk of injury to the subject or themselves. They use a taser. Boom! You know, that guy dies and, you know, it's a whole big investigation...I'd say there's a misconception that a Taser has a high probability of injury or death. I'd say that's probably about the biggest misconception... there's a misconception that it's a cure-all for anything. (Officer A)

The above reflects a common misgiving about how the public perceives police work; the public does not understand the reality of what police do. This officer believes that the public is naive about the way force is used in the field, and therefore misinformed about the effects of the weapon. In addition to mentioning a lack of understanding in the public about police work, another officer also mentioned a lack of awareness of the technical specifications and medical effects of the high voltage/low amperage electrical current used in CEDs:

You know, and they just, they don't understand that it's not really, they think that the person is being electrocuted. Um, well, people think that a wall socket is a 110 volts and that kills people. So, so they think 50,000 volts is just electrifin' 'em, and torturin' 'em, and killin' 'em. (Officer B)

Not only did officers mention that they felt that the public was misinformed about the technical aspects of CEDs, they often mistake these devices as the cause of force-related suspect fatalities, when really the death is caused by other factors that are unrelated to CEDs. As Officer C explains: "They think that the Taser kills people. Uh, and they don't take into account... they have lethal amounts of uh, controlled substances in their, their person, and then they end up dying."

Even though almost half of officers interviewed mentioned the "problem" of a misinformed public, this was not always the perception among all officers. One Ohio officer said that they thought the public had "gotten better over the years" adding that:

Before we went to them, uh, we approached the media, we approached public safety committees, we approached private groups, we approached the groups that historically are at odds with police, uh, and offered them the opportunity to come in, to ask us questions, to see demonstrations, to look at the technology, to ask, you know, unrestricted, you know, access to our people on it, to ask them about that. And, that's why I think we've had little or no uh, controversy here in [Ohio city] about the use of tasers. (Officer K)

The above officer demonstrates an understanding of community policing principles where police departments can work and interact with the public and community groups in order to potentially ease public concern over police practices. This shows a belief that controversy might be mitigated through greater openness and dialogue with the community. Besides the public, officers discussed several other social actors in greater depth. These actors include the media and activist groups.

The Sensational Media

As the previous passage indicates, the training officers routinely mentioned that the media plays a major role in shaping the public's understanding about CEDs and other aspects of police use of force. While not always the case, police can often have an antagonistic relationship with the media. Conflicts of interest, differing institutional goals, and critical reporting have all been sources of this antagonism. For example, Officer C stated directly: "We don't have a good relationship with [local newspaper]." Not only may there be strain between the media and police, officers often pointed out that it was the media's fault that the public was ill-informed about CEDs.

I think a lot of it has to do with terminology. I think there's a lot of hype by the media. I think in some areas, I think you have pandering to the minority community, especially if the officer who uses the, the Taser, or any kind of force, shooting – whatever, you know, if it's a, if it's a white officer and you have a minority criminal, a suspect, that gets played up a lot. And, I think that the newspaper uses the wrong terminology when they say the Taser, you know, delivers, you know, like they're electrocuting people with this handheld device...Plus, the newspapers want to sell papers, so that old expression – if it "bleeds, it leads." Like, on the news, or on TV, or in the paper. The big splash when somebody goes belly up after they get tased. (Officer T)

Of course, the very imperatives of police work calls for media attention. The spread of CEDs has only accentuated this coverage. Officers also mentioned the "spectacle" (Officer B) of CEDs, combined with it being a "new technology" (Officers M, K, C) that "always get's a lot of coverage." (Officer D). To some officers, the media coverage of CEDs is similar to stories about the introduction of OC spray a generation before. Still, officers mention the subject of deaths, use on vulnerable populations (e.g., pregnant women), and cases of "excited delirium" as something that the media seizes on.

Anytime dealin' with mental illness, cases of excited delirium, anything, involving in-custody deaths, all of those things have always been uh, hot button topics just because, you know, they lend itself towards scandal or to some... abuse that is always been characterized in the media, historically. (Officer R)

While officers had much to say about the media, one final area worth mentioning relates to the aforementioned perception of a lack of knowledge in the general public about the technical aspects of CEDs, which they see as being reinforced by inadequate news media reporting. Officers often mentioned how the phrase "50,000 volts" (specific number mentioned by eight officers) is cited in media accounts of Taser International's CEDs. This number, many officers felt, was technically misleading and reflects ignorance in the media about the engineering of CEDs.

Because, the media always puts it in their story that 50,000 volts of electricity. And, and they use words, they use words like shocked, and stun gun, and stuff like that. And, I think the media gives the Taser a bad rap because as soon as the Taser makes the initial contact it automatically decreases from 50,000 volts to 12,000 volts and the pulses per second goes from 19 pulses per second to 17

pulses per second. But, the media kind of forgets to put that stuff in. They're, all you ever hear and see in the media is 50,000 volts. (Officer P)

In all, these depictions of media accounts by police training officers reflect a view that the media sensationalizes stories related to CEDs. These narratives show how many officers think the media "gets it wrong" and contributes to a misinformed general public.

While some officers spoke in negative terms about the capacity of the media to perpetuate misinformation about the Taser, others reported that the media could serve a productive role in educating the public about the positive features of Tasers and other CEDs. Specifically, a number of officers (5) mentioned how the media could be used to "get the word out" and educate the public about CEDs. Opening up to reporters, as well as other communities, could mitigate conflicts with the media and, by extension, the general public at large.

I think they need to keep the media informed. I think, you know, like we did, we had the media come... We had a newspaper guy take the ride and we had a female reporter take the ride. And, the basis of their whole story was, you know, "Hey. Just, just comply. You don't, you don't want to do this." (Officer P)

For these officers, while the media could promote controversy, they could also serve as a mechanism by which those controversies could be defused. By demonstrating how CEDs are used and giving them access to the police perspective on the role they can play in police work, these officers seemed to believe that they could foster a more cooperative, less contentious relationship with the public.

Activist Groups with an Agenda

The final social actor we have found in training officers' accounts of the controversies over CEDs was the role of activist and social justice groups. In our interviews, activists were depicted by many officers as outsider groups pushing a political agenda. Commonly mentioned groups include Amnesty International and the ACLU. Both of these organizations have issued publications critical of CEDs and have publicly questioned the safety and legitimacy of such weapons in police work. Some officers have mentioned such "liberal" groups have created conflicts of interest within the community and contribute to a degree of misperception and antagonism between the police and community. For example:

And, uh, the president of [Social Justice Group] is [a Local College graduate], alumni. (laughter) And, when Police Department A was trying to adopt Tasers they ran into big problems because there, I mean, there's a large uh, you know, a large political base in, at Local College students and, obviously, in faculty, and alumni that are faculty, and everything. (Officer E)

Also mentioned were groups that had a political agenda, expressed open hostility toward police, and did not care about the difficulties that officers face in the field.

So, it's the liberals out there that, that basically want to tie officer's hands and don't care about officer injuries, they just care about perception that we're usin' it to punish people. (Officer O)

Such liberal groups were thought to have other motives and were not depicted positively by police officers who mentioned them.

You know, we've got people and organizations out here, like Amnesty International, that it's not gonna matter what we use, they're not gonna like it. For whatever reason. Uh, you know, uh, PETA's involved – only because Taser, in the past, has done testing on pigs. But Amnesty International is probably the biggest opponent to the taser. But, they also oppose the use of pepper spray... (Officer M)

Like the media, training officers said that these groups also play a role in spreading misinformation to the general public. Misunderstandings of the technology along with baiting by activist groups was repeatedly mentioned by one officer:

Misinformation, lack of educating the public, and then just groups like the ACLU that really don't want any use of force done. That coupled with the fact that a lot of um, coroners and doctors don't fully understand the technology um, you know, just puts out a lot of misinformation out there. (Officer B)

Amnesty International is mentioned by several officers as being a source of wrong information being seeded in the general public. Another officer's account represents this sentiment in stating:

Well, the misconception is that electricity is causing death and there have been a number of in-custody death uh, situations that they related after the use of Tasers. Uh, Amnesty International is by far the biggest one that says, "Tasers are causing in-custody deaths." But, you know, the technology doesn't support that. And the legal findings don't support that. Even the medical findings don't indicate that. (Officer K)

Our data shows that officers regularly mentioned the importance of activist groups in misleading the public and stoking community controversies. Officers reported that these groups are a source of false information who are intent on "tying the hands" of police and limiting the force options available to police.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, we were concerned with exploring how police use-of-force training officers viewed the role that CEDs play in policing. Overall, we found that the training officers held a favorable view of CEDs and the role they play in bringing about the compliance of resisting suspects. The training officers noted not just the value of the incapacitating effects of CED's but also their deterrent effects as well. Echoing the language of CED manufacturers, the officers were quick to discuss the relative safety of the device, along with the advantages of CED's relative to other force options. In all, the officers in our study expressed a generally cautious, but welcoming, view of CEDs. While these results indicate a positive viewpoint on CED's, the officers readily acknowledged the dissenting opinions and negative portrayals of the devices. Accordingly, officer perceptions of the community controversy over CEDs was the second area we examined in our interview responses.

This research probed police training officers' understanding and description of the controversial aspects of Tasers and other similar CEDs. While the officers reported good relations with the community and widespread support from citizens, the officers did refer to some tensions with specific groups within the community. In particular, officers reported problems related to public understanding of the Taser, media sources having interests in portraying Tasers in a somewhat sensationalistic way, and activist groups that are hostile toward any use of force by the police. Based on our interviews, the officers argued that the problems and controversies associated with CEDs were not the result, necessarily, of the technical features of the devices themselves, but rather were a part of larger sociological forces that shaped the interaction between the police and the community actors. Overall, the officers argued that the controversy stemmed from several fundamental misunderstandings that the public holds about police work and the medical effects of CEDs. They also believed that these misunderstandings had been fostered and reinforced through the agitation by several community actors, particularly the media and activist groups. In general, they argued that the media and various activist groups stoked fears of CEDs by exploiting misinformation and sensational stories about Taser abuses and injury. Crucially, though, a number of the officers argued that the dynamics of the public controversy over CEDs is similar to the public controversy over other types of less lethal force technologies, such as pepper sprays. Implicit in their comments is the idea that the current controversy results less from technical features/medical effects of CEDs, and more from fundamental and broader tensions and anxieties that exist in the community over how and when the police use force.

Of course, even though the officers spoke in somewhat negative and frustrated terms about the role that the media and activists play in generating controversy and promoting misinformation, they did point to a few areas where lessons can be learned about how departments can respond to the controversy over CEDs. For example, several officers mentioned that their departments had successfully avoided most of the public controversy over CEDs by conducting vigorous public outreach campaigns targeting community groups. From this perspective, local departments may be able to counteract some of the negative features of national-level debate over CEDs by reaching out to local residents and community groups to explain how and when their officers use these devices. By holding community meetings and scheduling demonstrations to showcase the limited medical effects of these devices, these officers implied that controversy can be managed and is not necessarily inevitable at the local level.

Similarly, in addition to outreach to community groups, a number of officers noted that their departments had been successful in shifting local reporting in relation CEDs. While many of the officers we spoke with did mention the somewhat unhelpful role that the media can play in fostering misinformation, a number of the officers argued that the media can play a positive role in promoting a more adequate understanding of how CEDs function in police practice. By conducting outreach with reporters, bringing them on ride-alongs, performing demonstrations, allowing them to sit through trainings (and also allowing them to experience a cycle of the Taser themselves), these officers indicated that local media reporting can become a vehicle by which the public is informed about the benefits of CEDs for officers (and resisting suspects). Moreover, these officers implied that these types of media outreach activities can improve the deterrent effects of CEDs by publicly highlighting the effectiveness (and painful nature) of such of restraint devices. So while officers did seem to be somewhat frustrated with the media, overall, they did seem to indicate that the media, with the right kind of outreach, can play a positive role in informing the public about the benefits of CEDs and the importance of less lethal force options in local police policies and practices.

This research has aimed to explore previously unexamined questions regarding how police officers perceive conflicts in the community over CEDs and other less lethal force

options. The use of in-depth interviews enabled us to explore how training officers depict changing use of force technologies and their relationship to the larger community. This project represents an attempt to move discussions of force alternatives beyond the national level debates between anti-taser activists and CED manufacturers and to take seriously the experience of officers who use these devices in the field. Our research however, raises a number of important questions that should be explored in future research. For example, how has the controversy influenced how officers use the CEDs? Clearly the training officers we interviewed were aware of the public controversy over CEDs. Yet, it is still unclear how these types of public controversies filter down to ground-level force policies and practice. Have departments changed how they integrate CEDs into their force policies or training practices based on public concern over CED use? Have line officers begun to use CEDs and other similar less lethal force options differently as a result of the public attention to these types of technologies? Even though there is a small yet growing body of research on how police departments are classifying CEDs within their formal use-of-force policies (see Alpert & Dunham, 2010), we still do not know whether these larger cultural conflicts over less lethal force technologies are influencing how officers understand and actually use force in grounded social encounters with resisting suspects.

This research reports on the qualitative results of in-depth interviews with police training officers. While this is a useful approach for inductively understanding how a small number of officers make sense of the controversy over CEDs, there are important limitations to this type of research. In particular, while we utilized sampling procedures to reduce the impact of selection bias, the small sample sizes limit the generalizability of this research. It cannot be assumed that the attitudes of the officers we interviewed reflect the attitudes of police training officers nationally. However, even though there are limitations to this type of work, we believe that qualitative research can fill in gaps left by large sample surveys and help us to understand in more detail how local actors such as police training officers make sense of broader controversies over police less lethal force technology.

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