

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

OTTAWA

How easily they use their tasers

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Ho-hum. Another police tasing, this time in Ottawa, on a teenager acting strangely near a busy road. Taser use is routine, the police insist yet again. If police wrote a news release each time they used a taser, "we'd be writing them 10 times a day," one officer said.

Memo to the Ottawa police: Write them 10 times a day, then. Boring it may be - for you. Doesn't the public have a right to know when the police are firing 50,000 volts of electricity at someone? Shouldn't the public have a say, through the civilian boards that oversee the police (Ottawa's board has appointees from city council and the province), in how this frightening and potentially lethal weapon is used? Shouldn't the police be accountable to the public for their use of force? After all, it is the public who authorized the use of proportionate force in the first place.

The Grade 11 student involved in the Ottawa taser incident told a reporter he had stepped into traffic and urged cars to run him over because was upset about breaking up with his girlfriend. If police used the taser to save this student from being killed or seriously injured on the road, their actions made sense. If that was the case, the police did not take the time to explain it that way - they said they were trying to "get the youth back into control" - and the student himself claims he was out of traffic and had his hands up when the police fired their taser.

The taser is a weapon of massive force. The United Nations Committee Against Torture says "the use of these weapons causes acute pain, constituting a form of torture." In a report by an independent review body of the RCMP's use of the taser, police officers on whom it had been tested spoke of the tremendous pain they experienced. It was like being punched 100 times in the face, one said.

Police see the taser not merely as a lifesaving option but as a no-fuss way to calm a tense situation. And there's the rub. There should be a fuss when police routinely use a 50,000-volt weapon that UN torture experts say is a form of torture. It's time civilian boards such as Ottawa's set tougher restrictions on the taser, and insisted the police give a clear public account of their use.