

# Experts: Taser not intended as gun alternative

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**BY STEVE LAMBERT**

WINNIPEG ♦ Despite claims by politicians and some police officers that Tasers would save lives by preventing shootings, the devices that are being used by a growing number of police forces were never meant as an alternative to guns, experts say.

A Taser is an alternative to beating a subject with a baton or physically subduing the person who is threatening. It can prevent more serious injuries to the offender and the officers involved.

Statistics obtained by The Canadian Press show that in some of the cities that have recently adopted Tasers, the number of police shootings has remained fairly consistent and low, while Tasers are being used exponentially more often.

In Winnipeg, for example, police shootings of suspects are rare. There was one in 2003, and none in 2004. In 2006, the Winnipeg Police Service fired guns on suspects twice. They also started using Tasers in September of that year, firing them at individuals 37 times before the year was out.

"Tasers are not meant to replace firearms," Constable Adam Cheadle, the service's use of force co-ordinator, said in a recent interview.

"The Taser is on the same playing field as a baton or (pepper) spray."

Taser is the trade name for what police usually call a "conductive energy device." The weapon fires a probe that delivers an electrical shock for five seconds, stunning the target's neuromuscular system and usually causing him to fall from severe pain and muscle contractions.

In Calgary, there was only one officer-involved shooting in 2003 — two years before Tasers were introduced — and none in 2007. So far this year, Calgary police have "deployed" their Tasers 133 times. (A Taser is deployed whenever the machine is unholstered and its laser is activated, even if it ends up not being fired.)

In Montreal, police were involved in three shooting incidents in 2003, before they had Tasers. They also used their firearms three times last year, while firing Tasers 28 times.

Numbers in many other jurisdic-

tions are hard to come by. The RCMP, whose members have fired Tasers more than 3,000 times since 2001, said it doesn't keep track of how often firearms are used across the country. Police spokespersons in Toronto, Vancouver and Halifax were unable to provide comparable statistics on Taser and gun usage.

The numbers that have been released counter the idea promoted by some politicians and police officials in the early 2000s, when the stun guns were being introduced, that officers would be able to use Tasers instead of their guns and that could save lives.

When the RCMP unveiled plans to equip its Alberta detachments with Tasers in 2002, Sergeant Steve Gleboff told reporters "what we're trying to do is eliminate the necessity to shoot somebody."

Two years later, when controversy erupted over Taser usage in Ontario, then-community safety minister Monte Kwinter said the devices were a better alternative to firearms.

Even the man currently probing the RCMP's use of Tasers, Paul Kennedy,

head of the RCMP Public Complaints Commission, told a police oversight convention last year that being hit by a Taser was better than being hit by a bullet.

That expectation was wrong, according to the man who trains Calgary police officers to use Tasers.

"Use of force experts across Canada right now, we're kind of shaking our heads going, 'How did we give the impression to the lay public or the media that Tasers were ever supposed to be a replacement for lethal force?'" said Staff Sergeant Chris Butler.

"They were another use of force tool in the same regard as the baton, the pepper spray. Just another tool."

While Tasers may not reduce the number of police shootings, Butler said they have succeeded in reducing the number of injuries.

"In 99.7 per cent of Taser uses, there are no injuries. When you compare that to a baton use, the statistical likelihood of injuries from a Taser deployment are much less."

*The Canadian Press*