

## **RCMP edits Taser reports, probe finds**

**Censored details include incident dates, injuries and whether individuals were armed**

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**JIM BRONSKILL**

**SUE BAILEY**

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OTTAWA—The RCMP is stripping crucial details about Taser firings from public reports as use of the controversial stun guns skyrockets across the country.

A joint investigation by The Canadian Press and CBC found the Mounties are now refusing to divulge key information that must be recorded each time they draw their electronic weapons.

As a result, Canadians will know much less about who is being hit with the 50,000-volt guns, whether they were armed, why they were fired on and whether they were injured.

Taser report forms obtained under the Access to Information Act show the Mounties have used the weapons more than 4,000 times since introducing them seven years ago.

Incidents have increased dramatically, topping 1,000 annually in each of the last two years compared with about 600 in 2005. The overwhelming majority of firings took place in Western Canada, where the RCMP often leads front-line policing.

As Taser use escalates, however, the RCMP has tightened the lid of secrecy.

Information stripped from the forms includes details of several Taser cases the Mounties previously made public under the access law. In effect, the RCMP is reclassifying details of Taser use – including some telling facts that raised pointed questions about how often the stun guns are fired and why.

A Canadian Press analysis last November of 563 incidents between 2002 and 2005 found three in four suspects Tasered by the RCMP were unarmed. Several of those reports suggested a pattern of stun-gun use as a handy tool to keep drunk or rowdy suspects in line, rather than to defuse major threats.

But the Mounties are now censoring Taser report forms to conceal related injuries, duration of shocks, whether the individual was armed, what police tried before resorting to the stun gun, and precise dates of firings.

In fact, Canadians now know more about the Tasing of dogs than humans. One of the most detailed new reports describes how a pooch named Princess was zapped with a stun gun in Maple Ridge, B.C., as five officers carried out a search warrant.

Princess was not given the standard warning: "Police! Stop or you will be hit with 50,000 volts of electricity!"

There was little point, the report goes on to note: "Subject would not have understood the command, as subject was a dog."

The RCMP cites the need to protect privacy and investigations to justify why it removed such basic details from other reports.

Liberal public safety critic Ujjal Dosanjh scoffed at the explanation.

"That's hogwash. That's absolute nonsense," the former attorney general for British Columbia said in an interview. "Whether or not someone was armed ... how does that violate privacy?"

Dosanjh noted that names and addresses are already removed from the forms.

"The RCMP is a public police force. They are accountable to Canadians. They have to provide that information so that people can judge for themselves whether or not their police force is acting appropriately."

Public Safety Minister Stockwell Day was travelling yesterday and was not available for comment.

Insp. Troy Lightfoot, who helps oversee RCMP Taser use, would not speculate on why the reporting changes were made. But he stressed there are still ways to monitor stun guns and other uses of force.

"I can tell you that there are many accountability systems in place with regards to police actions. You have the courts, you have coroners' inquests, you have a multitude of oversight bodies," he said. "There is a complaints process that can be followed."

Paul Kennedy, head of the Commission for Public Complaints Against the RCMP, said the decision to withhold details of Taser firings amounts to a self-defeating lack of transparency that bucks widespread calls for more – not less – public reporting.

"There seems to be something that is touching a chord with Canadians when they see the Taser."

The RCMP should be making public as much Taser data as possible, Kennedy said.

"There is nothing more important to the police than maintaining and restoring public confidence. How do you do that? You do that by getting your story out."

Stun guns have swiftly become the go-to weapon for scores of police and correctional officers across Canada. The RCMP has more than 2,800 Tasers and some 9,100 Mounties are trained to use them.