

# Jail uses Taser guns to subdue unruly inmates

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Five seconds is all Clarke County deputies need now to subdue unruly inmates.

A handful of Clarke sheriff's jailers have been armed with electric-shock weapons commonly known by their trademark name — Tasers — that send a 50,000-volt jolt of electricity coursing through the body of anyone who puts up a fight.

The controversial, non-lethal weapons — critics call them cruel and unnecessary — are catching on throughout law enforcement as a way of subduing inmates who start

fight with deputies or other prisoners. DeKalb and Gwinnett counties both employ the devices in their jails.

The Taser-brand pistol fires a pair of thin wires connected to needle-tipped probes that puncture the skin an eighth of an inch and deliver a stream of electricity evenly through the central nervous system. One five-second dose will stop a 300-pound man in his tracks and bring him to the floor.

"It's a safe, non-lethal weapon used to immobilize a subject so that force which could cause injury isn't

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The Clarke County Jail is now using Tasers, like this one displayed by defensive tactics instructor David Fulgham, to control unruly inmates. The Taser shoots a projectile connected to wires that deliver a significant electrical shock.

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required," said Brett Hart, commander of the Clarke County jail. "In the last 45 days since it's been in use, we've seen a dramatic reduction in our use of force reports and deputy injury reports."

Hart said the jail — which currently houses more than 400 people who are either awaiting trial or serving county time — has been plagued with uncooperative, violent inmates who require force to subdue. Hart said the jail averaged about one incident a day, and several deputies lost time or were assigned to light duty because of on-the-job injuries sustained in brushes with inmates.

On Aug. 13, eight of the \$500 Tasers were distributed to deputies who completed a required four-hour training course that includes a one-second taste of their shocking power. Since then, Tasers have been used to subdue inmates 10 times. The message has gotten out, sheriff's officials say.

"Since then, the number of officer-inmate altercations has dropped to almost nothing," Hart said.

Said Lt. David Fulgham, certified to train deputies on the use of the Taser, "This, you can't ignore."

Not everyone thinks

Tasers in the jail are a good idea.

"The use of electric shock is normally reserved for livestock," said Russell Gabriel, director of the University of Georgia Legal Aid and Defender Clinic, which represents most of Clarke County's criminal defendants. "It is dehumanizing for both inmates and the jailers. What is the difference between this thing and a whip? Wouldn't a whip be cheaper?"

Responds Hart, "This was designed for humans in mind — it was not designed to incapacitate animals. It is designed to be humane, so that a human can be incapacitated with no injury as a result."

Sheriff's officials say the pain of the shock wears off after a few seconds with no lingering effects. Research, they say, has shown that Tasers create no lasting injuries, and they have withstood all legal challenges so far. But a training video showing deputies screaming out during demonstrations makes it clear the pain, however brief, is excruciating.

"We're not out here to torture folks," said Chief Deputy Gene Mays. "We're out here to control them with less injuries to them and to the deputies."

Only physical, hands-on resistance will prompt the

use of Tasers, Mays said.

"We're not going to use them just because somebody won't do what we tell them to do," he said.

Several safeguards prevent potential abuses of the devices, sheriff's officials say. When fired, the guns spray dozens of tiny, paper color tabs carrying numbers that correspond with the cartridge used. A computer chip keeps track of how many times the gun has been fired, and when.

"There's more backups and safeguards on this weapon than you could ever feasibly use," Fulgham said.

Gabriel said Tasers could lead to injuries to inmates who hit the floor. Sheriff's officials respond that a physical confrontation could cause far more serious injuries.

Gabriel believes the county jail has seen a progression of overprotective, unnecessary measures implemented in the past decade, such as the handcuffs and leg irons required for all defendants brought to court, including those charged with misdemeanors like bad checks and shoplifting.

"The introduction of the Taser is just one more step in this overly protective direction," Gabriel said.

Said Fulgham, the trainer, "This is nothing but a better tool to help us do a better, safer and more efficient job."

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