

U. S. grapples with misuse of personal Tasers

'Fashion With A Bite'

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In a modern-day duel, a restaurant owner and a Colorado security guard simultaneously drew their stun guns and simultaneously zapped each other during a weekend spat over an illegally parked van.

The incident is raising questions over whether private citizens should be allowed to buy stun guns to protect themselves.

The fight began on Saturday night when Harvey Epstein confronted two private security guards for clamping a metal boot on a company van parked outside his Mexican restaurant in Boulder, Colo. The situation escalated when Mr. Epstein putted out a pair of bolt cutters in an apparent attempt to remove the boot.

The security officer said Mr. Epstein threatened him with the tool. Mr. Epstein, for his part, alleges the security guard pointed a stun gun at his mother's face.

"I immediately responded with my personal Taser," Mr. Epstein told a local newspaper, the Daily Camera. "And we shot each other at the same moment."

While stun guns are prohibited weapons in Canada, American citizens may legally use them in most states, including Colorado. Taser International, the world's largest stun gun maker, sells them to consumers as personal security devices, including a model with headphones and a built-in MP3 player, offering Americans "both security and music while on the go." Some are small enough to fit in a purse and are available in both metallic pink and leopard print (the latter is marketed as "fashion with a bite").

Taser International received a round of publicity earlier this year, when an Arizona woman began holding "Taser parties" to sell the devices to women, Tupperware-party style. The company suggests that when used in self-defence, the victim run away and abandon the device while it delivers a 30-second blast of energy to the attacker (it offers a replacement Taser free of charge).

Police groups and Amnesty International have expressed concern that the personal devices could wind up in the wrong hands.

"This incident raises the question of who exactly is getting the personal Taser and how it's being used, and misused," said Dalia Hashad of Amnesty International USA. The group is not particularly concerned about women buying them for

personal protection, but rather who is acquiring them with ulterior motives. The devices can be used in domestic disputes, or to attack and disable women from up to 4.5 metres away so they can be abducted or raped, Ms. Hashad said.

The way consumer models are being marketed encourages people to think of them as toys or accessories, rather than as serious weapons, she added.

The issue was also raised during the last national conference of the Fraternal Order of Police, the largest law-enforcement labour union in the United States.

"There is an apprehension among some of our members that they could be used as offensive weapons against police officers," said Jim Pasco, the group's Washington-based executive director. "Once you've Tasered a police officer, you can get his gun. Then the problem becomes even worse."

Mr. Epstein, who was arrested for felony menacing and using a stun gun during the commission of a crime, said he carries a personal Taser because he handles "large amounts of cash" and escorts employees to their cars late at night.

Neither Mr. Epstein nor the security guard required medical treatment after their jolts. Pat Wyton, a Boulder police sergeant, labelled the incident a "bonehead deal."

He said it is "a little concerning" that Tasers are available to the public, but stressed officers must be prepared for anything.

"We have to be aware of what's out there that can hurt us, whether it's a Taser, or a knife, or a rock," Sgt. Wyton said.

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