Should the New Zealand police be armed with Tasers?

Introduction

Arming New Zealand policemen with Tasers has become a controversial issue of late as the assaults on officers increase, leading the police to consider the Taser's adoption. But will arming police with Tasers be able to counteract the attacks on officers? In this research report, the safety of police officers is discussed, along with the advantages and dangers of Tasers. This decision is important because it will affect the lives of every New Zealander: whether or not the police possess the ability to ensure the public's safety and whether or not they should be armed with Tasers.

The police's safety

The safety of police officers is becoming a problem as the rate of violent crimes rises. Statistics given in the current events programme, Sunday, estimates that, from police research, six officers are injured on duty every single day. These injuries are the result of attacks on officers, and these attacks are putting everyone in danger—especially the victims that the police are trying to protect. Bryony Brown, a policewoman interviewed in Sunday, describes the public's treatment of officers: "You're treated lower than a piece of dirt. You're verbally abused, not only physically abused." The public's cooperation is crucial if police are to work efficiently. Without it, officers' lives will be risked even further. This year alone, two officers—Constable Wilkinson and Sergeant Wooton—have been deliberately killed while on duty: an unprecedented number. Incidents like these show that the police are facing more risks than they should be. Whether or not arming officers with Tasers will completely reduce this extra risk is unknown, but what is evident is that police are definitely in need of a better method of self-defence.

The Dangers Tasers pose:

Tasers are not completely devoid of risks, and opponents are afraid of Taser related deaths as well as the possibility of police becoming over reliant on it. The TVNZ's website (tvnz.co.nz) wrote that the police have recently admitted that, in overseas statistics, one in 870 people died from being Tasered. The Amnesty International article also was concerned that police were trained, were aware of the risks, and used the weapon as a last resort. An Internet article from the New Zealand Herald's archive website said that 55% of pepper spray victims have been Maori. The Waikato Times have also noted that, in the US, Tasers had been used to force information from people instead of in violent situations. All these facts paint a dangerous picture of police misusing the Taser, or not being aware of its serious side effects or being ill prepared in its use. I think that strict guidelines and government supervision will be needed if officers were to be armed with it. Otherwise, there is a danger of police targeting those belonging to the Maori ethnicity or those with mental illnesses: Maori people could be mistaken to be dangerous because of the higher Maori/Pacific crime rate (a statistic given in the TVNZ website), and people with mental illness may find it harder to follow the police's instruction, leading to misunderstandings which could result in the use of Tasers. In saying that, only 48 complaints have arisen from pepper sprays since they were issued to police officers seven and a half years ago: a fact stated by Superintendent John Rivers in a Close Up interview. So if pepper sprays can be managed sensibly, Tasers could be handled similarly. I think that if the Taser's adoption is successful, the deaths avoided and the public's safety definitely outweighs the risks that are involved.

Positive effects of Tasers

Tasers have many positive effects on the police and the public's safety. As reported in an article in The press and another article from the New Zealand Herald website, the 12 month Taser trials were successful and the mere presence of the Taser is a deterrent for offenders with most of them surrendering when threatened with it. Therefore, Tasers should allow officers to react better in violent situations or help them avoid confrontations altogether. Then, it may also reduce the number of their injuries while on duty. According to the same internet article, a national poll showed that most New Zealanders favoured police carrying firearms routinely. Tasers, while having the same incapacitating effect, cause little or no permanent damage. The TVNZ website (tvnz.co.nz) also reported that there were two incidents during the Taser trials where, if the Tasers had not been present, firearms would have been used instead. In short, these reports all demonstrated that Tasers will give police officers the ability to react without causing unnecessary and avoidable deaths—something that everyone hopes to happen. Tasers will increase the police's power to assist victims, without the police needing to seriously injure offenders. Tasers will reduce and possibly eliminate the need for firearm usage, letting justice to be delivered in court instead. In my opinion, there are many merits to Tasers despite its many drawbacks. The Police have already used firearms so I think that Tasers, a less lethal and less dangerous weapon, could be as well.

Conclusion:

Personally, I think that the research indicates that the Taser's adoption is the right decision. Yes, there are still risks, but none that is higher than the risk that comes with firearms. While Tasers cannot completely eliminate the attacks on police officers, it will provide them with a way to defend themselves. Tasers are a preferable alternative to firearms and while there are cases of Taser misuse overseas, it can be prevented with police discipline. In conclusion, Tasers will increase the police's defence, hopefully increasing their safety as well. With the rising attacks on police officers, Tasers are an unavoidable option for the future.