

## What are stun guns? Tasers?

Stun guns are hand-held, battery-powered electronic devices designed to deliver an electric shock to an attacker. They are not guns in the traditional sense of the word. A stun gun has two metal contacts which need to be pressed against the attacker.

Tasers (also battery-powered) propel two metal barbs over a distance of several yards. These barbs, connected to the hand-held unit by wires, are intended to attach themselves to the attacker. These wires are then electrified to incapacitate the assailant at a distance.

These devices stop attackers by pain, rapid fatigue of their muscles, and/or overriding the body's neuromuscular system and disrupting voluntary muscle control.

## Are stun guns and tasers legal?

It depends on where you live. In the United States, certain states and municipalities have laws which restrict the ownership or use of stun guns or tasers by people other than the police. Given the vast number of jurisdictions in this country, and the rapidity with which laws can change, it is necessary for each individual to research the laws of her own state and municipality. You could check with a lawyer, your police department, your state's attorney general, or perhaps a dealer of self-protection equipment. You should probably check with more than one of these sources, since experience has shown that incorrect and conflicting answers are common. Another option is to read the laws yourself. Copies of your state's statutes can be found on the Internet and in public libraries. Also, courthouses typically have law libraries which are open to the public.

As an example, according to current Massachusetts General Law, Chapter 140, Section 131J, both Stun guns and Tasers are illegal for civilians to possess.

## Do they work?

Based on manufacturers' and dealers' claims, one would think that these devices are remarkably powerful defensive tools which unfailingly stop assaults. Reality, however, sometimes falls short of marketing hyperbole.

Several of AWARE's instructors have taken a course which, in part, trains its students to be able to quickly and accurately use a handgun while under stress, in pain, or even if wounded. One of the exercises ran as follows:

Each student faced a target at a distance of about five yards, with his or her handgun fully loaded and holstered. Standing behind the student was an instructor with a 50,000 volt stun gun. The instructor applied the stun gun to the student's arm, leg, or back. The shock of the stun gun was the signal for the student to draw her handgun and to empty it as quickly and as accurately as possible.

Although the reactions of the students varied, all were able to quickly draw their guns and deliver multiple center-zone hits. Hundreds of students have successfully completed this exercise. While the stun gun did hurt, it was not incapacitating. To be effective, the stun gun, a contact weapon, must be held in contact with the assailant for a number of seconds, or he must voluntarily break off the attack.

Various stun gun manufacturers are coming out with new units with ever increasing claimed voltage. They still suffer from the traditional downsides, the principal of which is the necessity of having to hold the unit in contact with your assailant for as much as 5 or 6 seconds, during which time he will not exactly be cooperative. Other factors include battery strength, voltage, and the fact that you must be close to your attacker.

Tasers are a different story. There have been several generations of Tasers on the market. Law enforcement has been very positive with respect to its effectiveness. While the "older" models had outputs in the 5 to 14 watt range (probably used in the much publicized Rodney King incident), these new devices have more power and an excellent safety record. Note that there are civilian and law enforcement versions, with the latter having more power and range.

There are many variables affecting the efficacy of these devices, including model, wattage, contact time, battery strength, and so on. The taser must be aimed at, and hit your attacker. You only have one, or at most two, sets of darts in a taser.

Based on our experiences thus far, we are currently unwilling to entrust our lives to a stun gun, but would consider a taser where it is legal to possess.