



# Taser Use in Scotland: a Qualitative Study of Police Officer and Community Perspectives

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## Abstract

This study delves into police and public views on Taser deployment in Scotland, coinciding with its most significant introduction. Using comprehensive qualitative data, we highlight findings from interviews with 13 Specialized Training Officers (STOs), responses from 88 police officers, and focus groups involving 66 community members in western Scotland. Findings indicate officers largely perceive Tasers as an effective deterrent against violent crime, enhancing community safety. However, while the general public is predominantly supportive, concerns arise regarding potential misuse against youth and risks posed to the vulnerable. These apprehensions cast doubts over further Taser expansions. The study underscores key considerations for future policies, operational practices, and research avenues.

**Keywords** Police · Tasers · Violence · Communities

## Introduction

Over the last two decades, there has been considerable increased interest among police agencies around the world in less-than-lethal force technologies that can be deployed to confront dangerous or violent suspects. Among these, the use of the Conducted Energy

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Device (CED) (commonly referred to as “Taser”) has seen the highest level of adoption (Bishopp et al., 2015).

A Taser is a hand-held, battery-operated device resembling a handgun. It releases two barbed electrodes attached to 21-foot-long copper wires at a speed of 180 feet per second. Upon connection to a suspect’s skin or clothing, these electrodes deliver up to 50,000 V of electricity in rapid five-second bursts, temporarily immobilizing the individual by disrupting the normal functioning of their skeletal muscles (Bleetman et al., 2004; Lefton, 2014; Smith, 2015; White & Ready, 2009). Additionally, Taser has a drive-stun functionality where it can be pressed directly against the skin without deploying the barbs, causing pain to compel compliance without incapacitation. Different Taser models and cartridges allow for variations in range and functionality, catering to diverse operational needs.

Tasers debuted in North American police forces in 1999 and were introduced in the UK by 2003 (Bleetman et al., 2004). Presently, over 15,000 international law enforcement and military agencies employ them (Hallett et al., 2021). Although Tasers are commended as safer alternatives to lethal force—potentially curbing incidents deemed as police brutality—there are concerns about their potential misuse, causing undue harm (Kleinig, 2007; Sierra-Arévalo, 2019; Deuchar et al., 2021).

The issue ties into the broader concept of police legitimacy. Originating from political science (Lowrey-Kinberg & Buker, 2017), legitimacy is understood as “the recognition of the right to govern” (Bottoms & Tankebe, 2012, p. 124). Tyler (2006) underscores that procedural justice and the public’s perception of law enforcement’s fairness, trustworthiness, and respect influence state legitimacy. Thus, how officers use tools like the Taser can deeply impact their perceived legitimacy and the public’s trust in them (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Deuchar et al., 2021).

Although much research has been conducted into the perceived benefits and risks of Taser use within the USA, there is a relative paucity of empirical insights from wider, contrasting geographical and cultural contexts with much lower volumes of [violent] crime per head of population and where law enforcement may be generally regarded as an unarmed service. Scotland is one such location, and one where the first sizeable rollout of Taser only took place in very recent years.

The main focus of this paper is therefore to present insights from a research study conducted within a Scottish context on emerging officer and citizen perspectives on Taser use, against the contextual backdrop of the rollout of the devices to just under 500 frontline, specially trained officers (STOs). Established by Police Scotland in 2018, these officers serve in local policing divisions but are trained to deploy Tasers, a capability that not every regular patrol officer in Scotland possesses. As the name suggested, STOs are “specially trained”; they are required to go through a selection process to gain access to four days (approximately 30 h) of additional training held at Scottish Police Colleges (this being almost double the average mandatory training hours for Taser use in forces in England and Wales), with further, additional annual refresher training. During these four days, the officers participate in a range of scenario-based exercises involving the use of the Taser, learn from senior officers about the protocols and how to manage any risks, and are formally assessed on their performance and suitability throughout their engagement in the team-based exercises.

Drawing on a data sub-set from a wider empirical study, in this paper, we present data from interviews with and open-ended survey responses gleaned from STOs drawn from a range of police divisions across Scotland’s single force, Police Scotland, as well as focus groups with adult and youth community members from a wide geographical mix of urban and rural contexts. The dual focus on both exploring the views of officers and members of

the public in relation to the potential impact of Taser presence on perceived confidence, safety, and reassurance at a critical time of changing deployment policy and within a context where the presence of armed officers in the public domain is rare made our study somewhat novel.

In particular, the study provided a contrasting and compelling narrative, due to the very different contextual backdrop in comparison to the USA, where the majority of the research to date has been conducted. Firstly, as stated—unlike in the USA—Police Scotland is basically an unarmed service with only specialist teams of officers being trained in the use of, and regularly deployed with, firearms; for instance, in 2018/2019 [when our empirical research was conducted] armed response vehicle (ARV) officers comprised just over two per cent of the total number of officers across the country (c. 370 from a total of 17,000 officers). Conversely, almost all law enforcement officers in the USA are equipped with firearms. In addition, the rates of reported violence across the two countries differ significantly; for instance, in 2019, the violent crime rate in the USA was 366.7 per 100,000 of the population—compared to between 150 and 170 crimes per 100,000 in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2020; Statista, 2021).

Prior to presenting the data from our research, we first present insights from the extant literature on Tasers, their perceived benefits and risks, much of which (as stated above) have arisen from a US perspective. Second, we review the nature and extent of Taser rollout within the UK, focusing particularly on the recent emergence of Taser-equipped STOs in Scotland. Third, we outline the research methods underpinning our Scottish-based qualitative study, emerging as it did within the context of a larger mixed methods project. Fourth, we present the emerging data from interviews and open-ended survey responses with Scottish STOs and from focus groups with community members. Fifth and finally, we make recommendations for Scottish police policy, practice, and research.

## Literature Review

### Taser, Levels of Force, and Officer Decision-making

Recent wrongful death lawsuits involving Tasers, predominantly in the USA, have paved the way for case law that limits the use of the weapon. The 2017 US Court of Appeals decision emphasized the potential civil liabilities if Tasers are used on non-violent suspects, which led to new restrictions in several US states (Szep et al., 2017).

The concept of proportional force underscores that officers should apply force relative to the resistance they encounter (Bishopp et al., 2015). Legally acceptable force is necessary to control and detain a suspect, while excessive force falls outside of this legal protection (Hunt, 1999). Yet, some officers may view certain forms of excessive force as justified, given specific circumstances they face on duty. This balancing act of using force is often described through the “force continuum” concept, which ranges from minimal physical contact to lethal force, contingent on the threat level posed by the citizen (Bishopp et al., 2015). With the introduction of Tasers, there is a debate about whether officers might replace traditional force methods with Tasers, leading either to an escalation (“upgrade displacement”) or de-escalation (“downgrade displacement”) of applied force (Adams & Jennison, 2007).

Decisions on force application have legal foundations. In the USA, the *Graham v. Connor* (1989) decision underscores that officers should evaluate the complete situation,

considering the crime's severity, the threat posed, and the suspect's behaviour (see Barrow, 2001). Meanwhile, the European Court of Human Rights (1998) advocates the right to life and mandates careful scrutiny when life is deprived, emphasizing both the state's actions and the prevailing circumstances (*McCann v. United Kingdom* 1995; see Amnesty International, 1995).

Scotland, having its unique legal and cultural contexts, particularly when it was part of the European Union, tailors these principles to its policing guidelines. Scottish officers are guided by principles that emphasize the proportionality, legality, accountability, and ethicality of their actions, especially when applying force (Police Scotland, 2014, 2021). This aligns with the overarching European view but also reflects Scotland's specific commitment to maintaining the trust and safety of its citizens in law enforcement engagements.

## Evaluating the Efficacy of Taser

The use of the Taser by law enforcement officers has long been a topic of contention, balancing the perceived benefits against potential misuses and risks. The Police Executive Research Forum (2011) asserted the importance of communication and de-escalation, cautioning against over-reliance on weapons like Tasers. Empirical research supports this sentiment, with instances pointing towards "lazy cop syndrome," where officers may lean too heavily on Tasers as a substitute for conflict resolution or physical engagement (Torres, 2020).

On the side of benefits, Taser deployment allows officers to maintain distance from potentially violent suspects, offering a perceived safer alternative to other non-lethal methods (Adams & Jennison, 2007; McDonald et al., 2009). The effectiveness of the Taser is generally high, as indicated by Brandl and Stroshine (2017). However, effectiveness is not universal. White and Ready (2007) found that while 85% of suspects were subdued, 31% continued resisting post-Taser application. Similarly, Somers et al. (2020) noted factors like heavy clothing in colder months, missed wires, and the avoidance of direct contact in drive-stun mode could impact effectiveness.

When examining the safety profile of Tasers, some studies indicate they can reduce injuries to suspects (McDonald et al., 2009; Alpert & Dunham, 2010), while others reveal mixed results (Crow & Adrion, 2011; for a review see Dymond, 2014). However, Bozeman et al. (2009) emphasized that, although Tasers tend to result in fewer significant injuries than alternatives, their application is not without risk. Situational variables, such as the use during winter with suspects wearing heavy clothing, might compromise its effectiveness, leading to unintended escalation (Eastman et al., 2008).

The gravest concern arises when a non-lethal device like a Taser proves ineffective, possibly exposing officers and the public to increased danger. Williams et al. (2022) documented situations where fatal officer-involved shootings occurred following ineffective Taser use. Additionally, secondary injuries from Taser applications, such as traumatic brain injuries resulting from falls, can be potentially fatal (Kroll et al., 2016).

Amidst debates about the device's safety, potential health impacts also draw attention. While some claim Tasers can interrupt cardiac rhythms, leading to fatalities (American Civil Liberties Union of Northern California, 2005; Amnesty International, 2007), other studies suggest the electrical current poses no significant health risk (Bishopp et al., 2015; Bozeman et al., 2012; Dawes et al., 2010; Eastman et al., 2008; Levine et al., 2007). However, these conclusions often come from laboratory settings, which do not necessarily reflect real-world scenarios where suspects might be intoxicated or unhealthy (O'Brien

& Thom, 2014; Sierra-Arévalo, 2019; White & Ready, 2009). In White et al.'s (2015) randomized control trial involving 800 participants in Arizona, USA, results indicated that Taser exposure caused statistically significant reductions in one measure of verbal learning and memory, but that the effects were confined to lasting less than one hour and were highly individualized.

Considering these multifaceted implications, training remains paramount. Officers must be equipped to make swift decisions regarding Taser deployment in the “fog and friction” of the moment (Bunker, 2009, p. 8 94) and in situations involving vulnerable individuals potentially under the influence or experiencing mental health crises (Adams & Jennison, 2007). Failure to make the right decision leaves officers open to discipline or even criminal liability. The overarching narrative thus underscores the necessity of continuous evaluation of Taser use, weighing its effectiveness, safety profile, and situational suitability, to ensure the protection of both officers and the public.

### **Officers' Perspectives on Taser Use**

Beyond their practical application, several studies have investigated the perspectives of both police officers and the public on Taser use. De Angelis and Wolf (2013) found that while police view Tasers as a pivotal tool for their safety, bridging the gap between physical force and firearms, they also recognize public apprehensions about misuse. They believe many of these concerns arise from misunderstandings or misinformation and see a need for enhanced community education on Taser protocols. Dymond (2021) underscored the duality of Tasers: they can minimize injuries for both officers and suspects relative to other force options, but they are far from risk-free. This dual nature informs public opinion, with some viewing Tasers as a safer firearm alternative, while others see the potential for misuse, especially when an officer's judgment is impaired or in instances of systemic racism and bias.

The Independent Office for Police Conduct (2021) offers a synthesis of cases involving the use of Taser between 2015 and 2020. This study highlighted several incidents where Taser use was either inappropriate or questionable, reinforcing public anxieties about potential misuse. Furthermore, the review called for enhanced training, oversight, and accountability mechanisms to ensure Tasers are deployed appropriately and judiciously.

Rojek et al. (2012) took a different approach by examining both officer and citizen accounts of police use-of-force incidents, not limited to but including Taser deployments. Their findings revealed discrepancies between how officers and citizens perceive and interpret the same incident. Officers often focus on procedural correctness and the threat they perceived, while citizens tend to view the incidents through the lens of fairness and necessity. This distinction underscores a broader chasm in perceptions, with citizens often questioning the need for force (or the degree of force) and officers defending their actions based on policy and personal safety.

Lastly, Yesberg et al. (2022) explored racial dynamics in public support for police use of force, including Taser deployment, in the UK. Their findings suggest that race significantly influences public perceptions. Minority groups, particularly those with a history of over-policing or negative police interactions, exhibited more scepticism and less support for police use of force, including the deployment of Tasers. This research underscores the necessity of understanding demographic nuances when gauging public opinion on Taser use.

In sum, the extant literature paints a picture of a complex interplay between police and public perspectives. While officers view Tasers as crucial tools for their safety and believe that many public concerns arise from misinformation, the public's apprehension seems rooted in genuine concerns about misuse, particularly in racialized contexts, and broader questions about the necessity and appropriateness of force.

## Taser Deployment within the UK and Scottish Context

As of this study, there are around 17,000 Taser-trained officers in England and Wales out of a total 123,000 officers. Notably, two forces have equipped every frontline officer with a Taser, and with ring-fenced funding from the Home Office, an additional 10,000 officers will soon carry them (BBC Gov.UK, 2019; News, 2019).

In the UK, police typically follow the National Decision Model over the “use of force continuum” (Adams & Jennison, 2007). This model promotes a systematic review of decision-making (Dymond, 2014) and tasks individual officers to decide Taser usage based on their judgment of “proportionality and necessity”. Notably, UK officers, especially in England and Wales, more often use Tasers to “red dot” suspects as a warning, rather than firing them (Home Office, 2013; Sierra-Arévalo, 2019). Although there is evidence of Taser misuse replacing verbal strategies in the USA, it is unclear if the UK mirrors this pattern (Dymond, 2021).

In Scotland, Taser usage was traditionally limited to Armed Response Vehicle (ARV) officers. An ARV officer is a specially trained police officer equipped to handle firearms and respond to incidents where weapons or threats of violence are reported. Unlike regular police officers who typically do not carry firearms, ARV officers have the authority and training to deploy lethal force when deemed necessary. However, a 2010 pilot in the Strathclyde force introduced Tasers to 30 STOs (Scott, 2012). After merging regional police forces in 2013, Police Scotland expanded Taser deployment, in part because of a reported surge in violence against officers (Police Scotland, 2016, 2017). Scottish police are trained to carry and use handcuffs, extendable batons, and PAVA irritant spray, as well as being trained in empty hand control and restraint techniques. The establishment of STOs underscores Police Scotland's commitment to maintaining safety while also acknowledging the traditionally unarmed nature of British policing. By contrast, the USA has a broader and more lethal array of equipment at the average officer's disposal, notably handguns and service rifles, which reflects different policing philosophies, public expectations, and the nature of threats faced by officers in the two countries. About 300 Scottish police officers total have died in the line of duty since the creation of modern policing in the 1800s, compared to over 100 officers annually in the USA (Scottish Police Memorial Trust, n.d.).

By June 2018, almost 500 STOs were Taser-trained, with their usage governed by the Conflict Management model. This framework requires a structured escalation approach: announcing STO presence, unholstering the Taser, aiming, red dotting, issuing a warning spark, and finally, firing (Police Scotland, 2018). Every Taser deployment necessitates a review by the Police Investigations and Review Commission (PIRC). Official statistics up to June 2019, shared with us by Police Scotland (2019), indicate that Tasers were involved in 525 incidents over a year. They were utilized 311 times, with a firing rate of just above 10%. In specific numbers, Tasers were drawn 135 times, aimed 17 times, red-dotted 118 times, and arced 8 times. PIRC's 2019 reports on Taser use in three regions confirmed that their discharges were deemed necessary and justifiable (PIRC, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c).

## The Current Study

### Focus and Methods

During the first 12 months of the Taser rollout to just under 500 STOs in Scotland, and against the context of the gradual emergence of deployment statistics from recorded Police Scotland data, the current study was funded jointly by Police Scotland and the Scottish Institute for Policing Research (SIPR). Against the backdrop of a larger, mixed methods study that focused on officer, police stakeholder, and community perceptions on increased Taser deployment and its impact on public reassurance and safety, in this paper, we focus on the captured qualitative perceptions of STOs and local community members in Scotland. In this part of the research, we sought to address the following key research questions: *What are the emerging perceptions regarding the Taser rollout in Scotland among STOs and local community members? Specifically, what are their collective views about public reassurance, confidence, and safety regarding the emergent Taser deployment?*

Our research team consisted of two academics from a Scottish University (one male and one female), a researcher from the USA, and a female Research Assistant who contributed 2.5 days weekly over 6 months. Together, we brought diverse policing research expertise to the project. Each team member was involved in data collection and analysis. On some occasions, only one of the team went out into the field to conduct interviews or focus groups, whereas on others two or three team members were engaged in this, depending upon availability and competing demands.

In the wider study, we had developed an online questionnaire that sought (during the very initial stages of the new deployment) to capture STOs' initial reactions to key statements about the potential impact of Tasers on officer resilience and confidence, public reassurance, and community safety via the use of Likert scales. As a team, we also sought STOs' willingness to participate in follow-up semi-structured interviews, and subsequently conducted these with a small sample of 13 consenting officers across Scotland. Of these, eight were male and five female and participants came from a range of geographical police divisions; the interviews were conducted either in person or (if the officers' locations were more distant) via the telephone. Interviews focused on exploring the STOs' initial perceptions about Taser deployment, their predictions about the device's impact on officer confidence and safety, its impact on public reassurance and safety, and any anticipated wider benefits and risks. Although the interview sample was small, it was rich in nature whereby the majority of officers had a tendency to be vociferous in the expression of their views, and the insights were later enriched further through the emergence of qualitative survey data (see below).

Between 4 and 5 months after the initial survey and interview data had been gathered, a second questionnaire survey was sent out to all 500 existing STOs across Scotland. The questionnaire was designed in such a way as to explore further emerging perceptions among officers about the rollout of Tasers, following their initial 16–20-week period of being deployed with the devices. Specifically, the survey was designed to capture officers' follow-up views on the advantages and drawbacks of Tasers, the extent to which they could now identify any specific perceived impact on police confidence in dealing with potentially violent incidents and any potential benefits and risks in terms of community safety. However, it was also designed to explore the extent to which officers believed that the presence of the Taser had thus far acted as a deterrent, how they had experienced public reaction to the device and to capture examples of specific



operational situations where they believed the Taser had helped to de-escalate potentially volatile incidents, as well as any remaining challenges. In addition to the continued use of Likert scales, the follow-up survey included opportunities for open-ended responses from officers.

In total, 174 STOs completed the follow-up survey. As we had found during the initial survey, this response rate was encouraging since evidence suggests that it is often difficult to elicit high response rates from volunteers who are prone to being over-surveyed (Woof et al., 2019). The majority of the respondents (82%) were (as with the initial survey) male and the most common age ranges were between 21–30 (43%) and 31–40 (38%). Almost all (95%) were Constables, and a large proportion (75%) had been in service for either less than five years or between 5 and 10 years. The officers served in a wide range of geographical divisions (urban and rural) within the national force, and the majority had been deployed as STOs for either 1–3 months (36 per cent) or 4–6 months (56 per cent). In total, 88 of the 174 officers (70 male, 18 female) provided responses to the open-ended questions on the survey. Given the richness of this qualitative data, as a team, we opted not to conduct any follow-up interviews since the emerging insights from initial interviews ( $n=13$ ) combined with those emerging from the responses within post-deployment questionnaires ( $n=88$ ) enabled us to reach data saturation.

Simultaneously, a total of eleven focus groups were held with various community groups across Scotland during the first 6 months of the Taser rollout, with anything between four and 11 participants per group. The sample included representation of age, gender, ethnicity, and social and personal challenges including physical and mental ill-health. In total, 66 individuals took part in these focus groups—47 males and 19 females. Their ages ranged from 16/17 year olds to those over the age of seventy. There was also a mix of ethnicity. Specifically, 41 of the participants were young people between the ages of 15–19 (28 male and 13 female, of whom 39 were white and two were from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic [BAME] groups), with the majority ( $n=26$ ) residing in socially disadvantaged, urban neighbourhoods and a smaller number ( $n=15$ ) in more rural parts of Scotland. A further 25 were adults with an age range of 30–73 (19 males and six females), of which 18 were white and seven (four males and three females) were from the BAME community. Of the total sample, six adults disclosed that they had a history with mental ill-health and/or alcohol dependency while two adults and two young people had physical disabilities. The focus group questions enabled the team to explore the community members' collective perceptions about Taser deployment, including their views about the device's impact on officer confidence and safety, its impact on public reassurance and safety, and any anticipated wider benefits and risks. Accordingly, the questions used during officer interviews, within officer questionnaires, and during community focus groups were similar, and enabled a comparative perspective to emerge. Collectively, as a research team, we accessed the community groups via various gatekeepers, including youth outreach teams, adult education programmes, physical and mental health charities, BAME outreach support groups, schools, and the police. The majority of these organizations were already known to one or more of research team members from previous research and practitioner-based endeavours. Members of the research team thus made initial approaches to the gatekeepers in each organization and negotiated opportunities to provide posters and leaflets advertising the research study and these were subsequently displayed in the organizations' premises and/or handed out to their members/contacts.

In this paper, we focus specifically on the insights gained from initial semi-structured interviews with the 13 STOs and follow-on, open-ended responses gleaned from the second questionnaire survey completed by 88 officers, as well as those gained from focus



groups in local communities. For ease of reference, Table 1 provides a summary of the relevant data sources, numbers of participants alluded to above, and the gender splits.

Interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed for ease of data analysis. Data from both interview/focus group transcriptions and open-ended survey responses were anonymized and the participating officers and local citizens are informed of this. A thematic analysis of data sets was conducted, with the support of *NVivo* software. First, we engaged in an inductive approach to open and axial coding to identify the most salient themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Throughout this process, individual coding conducted by each of the research team was compared and discussed in order to ensure the confirmability and trustworthiness of emerging themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Second, overarching themes were interpreted in light of the existing literature on the use and misuse of Tasers, benefits, risks, and levels of force substitution and displacement. Thus, our inductive approach to data analysis was in keeping with the interpretative paradigm suited to privileging participants' perspectives on the common themes that emerged from the data (Deuchar et al., 2019). This analytical approach led to the emergence of four overarching themes: *violence, resources, and mental health; benefits and risks; and officer training and availability challenges*.

In the sections that follow, insights from officer interviews, open-ended officer questionnaire responses, and those from focus groups with community members are presented, with salient quotations used to support discussion relating to the above themes. To preserve the anonymity of participants, when presenting direct quotations, a coding system has been used throughout.

## Findings

### Law Enforcement Perceptions of Taser Deployment

#### Violence, Resources, and Mental Health

During interviews with officers, they indicated a common belief that the emerging roll-out of Tasers was required because of a perceived increase in violent incidents in Scotland (which, as alluded to earlier, articulated with wider reported increases in violent crime rates; see Scottish Government, 2019b, 2020). They believed that a tendency towards knife carrying had re-emerged in some Scottish communities (following several years of decline), disrespect towards, and physical assaults of, officers had increased, and there had also been a recent spate of firearms incidents in certain parts of the country. Officers also believed that violent reactions from members of the public was more

**Table 1** Summary of data sources

Data source	Participants	Male	Female	Total
Semi-structured interviews	STOs	8	5	13
Follow-up questionnaires	STOs	70	18	88
Focus groups	Community members	47	19	66

unpredictable than before because of a perception regarding the escalation of substance misuse intertwined with mental ill-health:

I think what's maybe changed is the violence that kind of erupts here now is more unexpected. People seem to go from zero, to wanting to kill us, without any intermediate stages, whereas before you had an idea who was going to kick off and who wasn't. Now, it's more difficult to predict with people taking drugs and whatnot ... there's a lot of paranoia.—*Male Sergeant T10 [Interview data]*

Against this backdrop, officers predicted that the issuing of Tasers would provide them with a helpful additional resource to support their policing efforts. This was based on the officers' perceptions that their rollout had emerged as a direct consequence of police cuts. On the latter, the views about an apparent reduction in police resources were not necessarily a true representation of the current levels of policing in Scottish communities. For instance, in 2018, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice in Scotland made a public commitment to protect the police resource budget, with a projected boost of £100 million by 2021 (Scottish Government, 2019a). However, officers believed that Tasers would provide a valuable tool for dealing with violent incidents against a backdrop of limited access to police "back-up" on the ground:

In days gone by you'd be a lot more confident with dealing with violent people because you knew you'd have back-up around the corner. Certainly, now the numbers on the ground ... have maybe dropped by 60-70 per cent from numbers 10 or 15 years ago ... certainly it comes into part of the decision-making when you're dealing with groups that you don't have the back-up round the corner that you used to have.—*Male Constable T2 [Interview data]*

... cutbacks have obviously been made in various places, people don't get the level of support that they, that they either need or want. And because of that, I mean the police are the only agency that can't say 'no'.—*Male Constable T6 [Interview data]*

## Officer Training and Availability Challenges

All officers believed that the training they had completed in order to become qualified as STOs had been robust, thorough, and helpful. They described the way in which the training sessions had provided them with a thorough understanding of how to use the device and a focus on how to deal effectively with issues of vulnerability. They had also introduced them to a range of scenario-based learning activities where they had the opportunity to make rapid decisions about how to interpret a physical threat, the way in which to offer verbal warnings or commands prior to potential Taser use (in relation to the Conflict Management Model) and to assess when and against whom it may be appropriate or inappropriate to discharge the device (White & Ready, 2009). Although generally very satisfied with the content of the training, several officers believed that 4 days' preparation was not sufficient but welcomed the annual refresher training that they would be entitled to in the future.

Final open-ended comments on the survey underlined officers' positive perceptions about the Taser. Having been deployed for several months with the device, most officers believed that they had grown comfortable with the Taser, that their confidence and feelings of safety had increased as a result, and that they now believed that the Taser was an essential piece of kit that allowed them to feel better prepared to deal with violent incidents they attended, without the same risk of injury (Alpert & Dunham, 2010). One negative element highlighted by officers was the geographical distance that some officers had to

travel to collect Tasers; this could lead to less time on the streets or even a lack of opportunity to deploy. Added to this was the perceived difficulty with the sharing of holsters and cartridge holders, and the perceived discomfort associated with being equipped with the holster while driving (see also White, 2018):

The one-hour round trip I have to make at the start and end of my shift to collect it/ deposit it means I am out of the area I police for two hours of every nine hour shift, meaning not only is there no Taser coverage, there is one less officer on the street to answer calls.—*Male Constable TT13 [Survey data]*

Only issue with being an STO is equipment, we are having to share items like holsters and cartridge holders which should be personal issue to officers, this has an impact on time as officers' belts need to be dismantled and rebuilt on a regular basis.—*Male Constable TT14*

The Taser is carried in a holster attached to a utility belt. It is awkward and uncomfortable especially whilst driving.—*Male Constable TT15 [Survey data]*

In sum, although officers clearly felt well equipped and prepared by the training, some evidently felt it was a little inadequate. It appeared that the participating STOs generally had had previous anticipated perceptions about the benefits associated with rolling out of Tasers confirmed. However, there were clearly some remaining issues in terms of availability of the devices and the travel time needed to pick up equipment.

## Benefits and Risks

Although officers clearly had a range of other tools at their disposal (including batons, handcuffs, and PAVA spray [an incapacitant spray similar to pepper spray]), they appeared to view the Taser as a credible alternative to their other weaponry (which, as alluded to earlier, generally does not include firearms in Scotland). Some evidently anticipated engaging in upgrade displacement where they may substitute the Taser for older equipment at a lower level of force during incidents involving physical resistance (Adams & Jennison, 2007), thus allowing them to handle a violent situation from a distance, without the need to get close to a suspect (Sousa et al, 2010):

The benefits for me of using the Taser is the distance factor and the ability to control something at a distance, obviously being a violent, a violent incident. Meaning that we don't have to get as close as we used to have to get to try and influence someone's behaviour.—*Male Constable T7 [Interview data]*

We've also got the option that you can show the Taser and you can show the flashes of electricity in the Taser to almost warn someone ... I think wi' the baton, you're almost thinkin', "well, you need to come, I'll need to hit wi' this baton" ... whereas with a Taser you can hit them from obviously about five meters at the most.—*Male Constable T5 [Interview data]*

Writing from an American perspective, Sierra-Arévalo (2021, p. 96) highlights that law enforcement officers regularly cite "safety concerns" as a reason for their use of force. This was evidently the case among our own sample of Scottish officers, where even the presence of the *capacity* for force was seen as a means of addressing safety concerns. Among the responses to the open-ended questions within the survey conducted after officers had been deployed with Tasers for up to 5 months, the majority of participating STOs indicated a belief that potentially violent operational incidents

would not have been resolved as quickly and safely without the Taser's presence. They also believed that the device had made them feel more in control and reduced the risk of serious harm to themselves, their colleagues, and the public:

The presence of the Taser became a focal point itself, and with the suspect in question being very attentive towards the Taser, this reduced the potential of him becoming aggressive towards myself and my colleagues and reduced our risk of serious harm. The suspect followed instructions, and placed his knife on the ground, allowing himself to be arrested. This would not have been brought to as quick an outcome without the Taser being present.—*Male Constable TT8 [Survey data]*

In all of the instances I have used (withdrew) my Taser the accused/suspect has complied 100% ... using the Taser definitely made me feel I had more control of the situation and increased my personal safety.—*Male Constable TT1 [Survey data]*

Conversely, a minority of STOs felt that it was impossible to assess whether or not the incidents they had been involved in would have been resolved as quickly and easily without the presence of the Taser, and one officer indicated that its presence had not had the desired effect of de-escalating aggression among some suspects (supporting earlier findings by White & Ready, 2007):

In my experience I have had aggressive persons who continue to be aggressive regardless of the presence of the Taser. I have thankfully been able to deal with these occasions through other means, however I am glad it is there and would rather have the Taser than not.—*Male Constable TT11 [Survey data]*

Some STOs went even further in their comments, indicating that the presence of the Taser had brought a renewed sense of authority in vulnerable situations out on the streets against the backdrop of an increasingly reduced sense of powerlessness in the job. With the changing demands on policing and the intense public scrutiny associated with the merging of the legacy forces into Police Scotland, some officers reported a sense of increased tension which had impacted on their sense of authority to do their job (see also Deuchar et al., 2020), as summed up in the quote below:

Let's face it, traditionally we police by consent but we don't have that connection with the public and those we serve anymore. We lost our authority when we moved from a Police Force to a Police Service. Instead of enforcing the rule of law and ensuring safety and public order we now have to do as we are told by the public as if we don't they complain that we were uncivil, we are disciplined and thus the circle continues. Taser has given the police authority in situations where we have lost our authority, i.e. violent incidents - it's sad but true.—*Male Sergeant TT7 [Survey data]*

While most officers could not identify any experienced risks with the presence and use of Tasers during deployments, during early interviews, a minority cited the slim potential for aftereffects whereby (where it was actually discharged) it could lead to head injuries if the impact of the electricity led to citizens falling to the ground. One male officer also highlighted the added risks associated with dealing with people with existing mental health issues and the way in which the Taser's presence could add to issues of personal vulnerability (reflecting wider concerns raised by O'Brien and Thom, 2014; Sierra-Arévalo, 2019). However, reflecting the official statistics released by Police Scotland (2019) that indicated that Tasers had thus far most commonly been drawn or "red dotted" during potentially violent incidents (as opposed to actually being fired), in the final survey responses, the

majority of the responding officers indicated that the mere presence of the Taser alone had helped them to de-escalate potentially volatile situations more easily:

It has also been noticed by persons who would have otherwise attempted to cause disorder and have then backed down or moved away of their own accord.—*Male Constable TT6 [Survey data]*

On most volatile situations, the sight and presence of my Taser has led to a quick de-escalation without it leaving my belt.—*Male Constable TT7 [Survey data]*

Klinger and Slocum (2017) draw attention to possible sources of Taser failure, including failure of both probes to make positive contact with a suspect, a lack of spread between pairs of probes, or a suspect fighting through the effects of a sound deployment. However, no such sources of failure were reported on by officers in the current study. Open-ended comments provided by officers in the follow-on survey also indicated that they had experienced mixed but quietly positive public reactions to the increased presence of Tasers in local communities during their first few months of deployment.

### Community Focus Group Perceptions of Taser Deployment

Participating members of the public had more nuanced reactions to the presence of Tasers than officers appeared to suggest. Ready et al. (2008) highlight that members of the public may often differ in their appraisals of Taser depending on the favourable or unfavourable media images of police practices that they have been exposed to. Among members of our community sample, while there was a certain amount of support for the police to be armed with Tasers (particularly in urban areas), there was also considerable (albeit, potentially misguided) concern expressed by some participants over how they might be deployed, as a result of images and stories they had seen on social media:

Maybe some police officers may just use them too quick? ... You see on social media, obviously in other countries ... somebody's been arrested but they've been Tasered for no reason. ... that scares me 'cause I've got a son who's growing up and will one day be a teenager ... you see it, like there's force being used that's sometimes unnecessary ...—*Adult Community Group P5 [Focus group data]*

I've saw videos and all the voltage killing people and all that, [officers] using [Taser] too much when they don't need to. I just think doon here, when officers get a bit angry, innit? ... I've saw videos and that when they're using it just the slightest wee bit, pulling it oot and that, just using it 'cause they can ... it happens everywhere, when someone has too much power ... they always misuse it for wrong things.—*Youth Community Group P3 [Focus group data]*

These comments speak to Skolnick's (2011) observations about the concerns that may emerge regarding officers using Tasers as a less-than-lethal tool to deliver street justice. Some local citizens were concerned about the potential risk of escalating events into potential "competitions for status and respect" between officers and suspects if Tasers were more widely used (Sierra-Arévalo, 2019, p. 422):

But someone's obviously, if a criminal's armed and they've still got that weapon in their hand, like say it was a gun and they see the officer pulling out a Taser, that's gonnae cause them to react. Like that could just trigger something ... Aye, that could then cause the police to be shot.—*Adult Community Group P5 [Focus group data]*

The above comment, which was not untypical among the community members, illustrated how their views sometimes contrasted to those of officers. While officers were evidently convinced of public support in relation to Tasers, community-based interviewees were evidently not as convinced about Taser deployment as officers perceived. The community participants were quite specific about the conditions under which they felt Tasers should be used in the community, which included the need for appropriate and proportionate use, where there was a physical threat or unpredictable, potentially volatile, and dangerous behaviour (Bleetman et al., 2004):

If used correctly yes. If the criminal or the perpetrator is being violent. If they have got somebody as a hostage. If they've got somebody as, like if they're a threat. I don't agree if it's, they're just drunk and disorderly and they're being a pain in the butt. And they just kinda Taser them ...—*Adult Community Group P5 [Focus group data]*  
With the police using the Taser, it should only be used when the suspect, or whatever it's called, is ... being volatile and aggressive towards the officers or they bring out a weapon.—*Youth Community Group P1 [Focus group data]*

Furthermore, policing with Tasers obviously caused some consternation for some respondents. While it was felt it would increase community safety in a general sense, on a personal level for some, it would be likely to increase their fears (Sierra-Arévalo, 2019). There was also a feeling among some participants that Tasers should not be rolled out to all officers:

But then I don't want community polis [police] to have Tasers 'cause I don't think it would be, it wouldnae feel safe to see [all] the polis wi' Tasers ... So if you see the police out wi' a Taser you know it's serious, aye it's serious ... obviously if it's a trial and it's so many at a time, I don't think it should be them phased out to every officer ... It's only a certain amount.—*Adult Community Group P5 [Focus group data]*

In sum, the majority of officers had generally had their positive predictions about Tasers confirmed following their first few months of deployment and believed that the mere presence of the device had acted as a deterrent, helping them to de-escalate volatile operational situations and bring confrontational situations to a conclusion more quickly while avoiding injury. Others believed it had also added to their street authority and believed that benefits far outweighed any minimal risks. Community members themselves, however, had more mixed views than officers evidently perceived. Although generally supportive of the devices, some were concerned about how they might be deployed and the potential risk of escalating volatile incidents.

During focus groups with local community members, there were also differing opinions on levels of violence and weapon carrying in urban and rural locations. In general, the perception was that there was relatively little crime and violence in rural areas, while in those neighbourhoods that lie on the periphery of large urban areas there was a different perception articulated:

Youths obviously hang about ... [and] ... there's reports of people coming down from [named city] and causing fights. There's a lot of violence happening in the area. I feel really unsafe walking about in [named town] ... it's all schemes, all different schemes ... it's all schemes I think that cause it.—*Adult Community Group P11 [Focus group data]*

Additionally, there was a perception among local people across the majority of the communities that mental health issues were escalating and becoming policing issues, that these

were perceived as a potential threat to the suspect, police, and the public, and that Tasers were perhaps needed because of the unpredictable behaviour that could ensue:

I think they need, there's a bigger chance they need their Tasers then because these people are so unpredictable. ... mental health is on the rise ... the polis [police] are having to deal wi' that.—*Adult Community Group P5 [Focus group data]*

The overall perceptions of community members appeared to align with officers in terms of the apparent rise in violent crime overall, particularly in urban settings, and the intertwining of this with issues of mental ill-health (NHS Health Scotland, 2017). The insights from the majority of participants also appeared to support data released by the Scottish Government (2019b) at the time of our fieldwork that suggested that a slight increase in non-sexual crimes of violence occurred across Scotland in 2018/2019 compared to the previous year (following over a decade of significant decline).

## Discussion

In our research study based in Scotland, we delved into officer and citizen perceptions of Tasers following their 2018 rollout to nearly 500 Specially Trained Officers (STOs). Our findings draw from interviews and surveys involving STOs across Scotland and focus groups with adult and youth community members from diverse urban and rural areas.

The research highlighted mixed views between officers and citizens. Officers perceived a rise in violent incidents towards them, correlating with national statistics (Scottish Government, 2019b). Citizens' perspectives, however, varied based on their locale, with rural inhabitants less attuned to shifts in violence.

STOs believed Tasers addressed increasing community violence, burgeoning mental health issues, and shrinking police resources. They saw Tasers as a deterrent for violent crime and a tool for their safety and the community's. As their use of the Taser evolved, most STOs felt violent situations were resolved more efficiently than with alternatives like batons or PAVA spray. However, choosing the Taser over these alternatives hints at potential "upgrade displacement", which could affect police legitimacy (Tyler, 2006; Adams & Jennison, 2007; Lowrey-Kinberg & Buker, 2017; Sierra-Arévalo, 2019).

Officers often saw the Taser as a symbol of renewed authority amidst growing public scrutiny and opposition. Yet, its use was mostly as a compliance tool, seldom being fired (Police Scotland, 2019). Community members acknowledged the need for Tasers given the escalating mental health-driven violence in Scotland. Their concerns leaned towards Taser deployment possibly escalating situations and increasing public anxiety.

Officers felt the community either supported or was indifferent to Taser usage. They believed that the public was less worried about Taser-associated health risks, possibly overlooking those with existing vulnerabilities (White & Ready, 2009). Officers also emphasized the need for refresher training, improved equipment, and managing the additional weight from carrying a Taser.

While some findings align with Sierra-Arévalo's (2019) study, differences emerged. In Scotland, there was no evidence suggesting newer officers were inclined to use Tasers excessively. Yet, some community members, possibly influenced by social media, feared its indiscriminate use as "street justice" (Stinson et al., 2012, p. 14), raising concerns about its potential threat to the vulnerable. Increased Taser presence was seen by some citizens as a factor that might heighten community concerns, rather than allay them.



## Study Contribution and Limitations

The dynamics of public trust, safety, and reassurance are foundational pillars for the successful implementation of any policing initiative. In the case of the Taser rollout in Scotland, understanding these facets becomes even more pertinent, given the potential implications for police-community relations and the operational realities officers face daily. This research, which hinges upon semi-structured interviews with the 13 STOs, open-ended questionnaire responses from 88 officers, and focus group interviews from local communities, is vital for several compelling reasons. First, direct conversations with STOs offer raw, unfiltered insights into the challenges and advantages they perceive with the Taser deployment. As the frontline personnel equipped with these devices, their experiences, apprehensions, and feedback are invaluable for shaping both training and deployment strategies. By integrating the views of a wider group of 88 officers through open-ended questionnaires, moreover, we aimed to capture a broader landscape of police perceptions, ensuring that our findings are not overly skewed by the potential biases of a smaller group.

Second, the role of the police is inherently intertwined with the community they serve. Focus group interviews from local communities act as a crucial barometer to gauge public sentiment. Are they reassured by the increased Taser deployment, or does it spark concerns about excessive force? Their collective perceptions play a paramount role in determining the success and acceptance of this initiative. Relatedly, the research aims to understand the intersections and potential gaps between STOs' perspectives and those of the community. Are there misconceptions on either side? Are the perceived benefits by officers aligned with community sentiments about increased safety?

Of course, while our dataset provides valuable insights, the study faced limitations. Primarily, our interview data consisted of a small sample of officers due to funding constraints. Findings must also be carefully interpreted in light of the scope of Taser deployment in Scotland. While there are approximately 500 deployments annually, they have taken place in the context of approximately 10,000 resident-police contacts. It is crucial to consider this scale when drawing conclusions from our small sample. Our study also did not delve deeply into any correlation between Taser deployment and officer injuries. Such data could provide invaluable insights into the efficacy of Tasers as a tool for ensuring officer safety.

As we investigate the collective views about public reassurance, confidence, and safety regarding the emergent Taser deployment, the findings will serve as a roadmap for refining policies, addressing misconceptions, and tailoring community outreach strategies. We hope this research can act as a model for future deployments or policy changes, emphasizing the need to consider both the views of the implementing officers and the receiving community. In the end, research like this endeavours to bridge the gap between policy implementation and its real-world implications, ensuring that the Taser rollout in Scotland is both operationally effective and socially responsible.

## Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice

In its Policing 2026 strategy, Police Scotland (2016, p. 8) emphasizes the goal of enhancing the safety and wellbeing of individuals and communities. The force emphasizes collaborative, community-engaged policing, prioritizing protection based on threats and harm, and prevention of ongoing community challenges like violence and mental health issues.

They also stress values of fairness, integrity, respect, and a rights-based policing approach to bolster legitimacy.

International studies suggest that Taser use can help officers maintain distance from suspects, offering a potentially safer alternative and reducing injury risks (Adams & Jennison, 2007; White & Ready, 2007, 2009; Alpert et al., 2011; Dymond, 2021; Sierra-Arévalo, 2019). This aligns with Police Scotland's protection and prevention objectives. Yet, considering the importance of community engagement and procedural justice, Police Scotland may need to focus on gaining community trust concerning future Taser implementations. Based on our research, we have five primary recommendations for Scottish police policy and practice.

First, Police Scotland, in collaboration with PIRC, should create and maintain a database of investigated incidents where the Taser has been discharged, the instances of where short-term or longer-term health-related conditions became apparent post-incident, and the extent to which disadvantaged young people and other vulnerable groups have become targeted. This would perhaps help to alleviate some of the anxiety and fear that we uncovered among community members in relation to the potential for indiscriminate use of Tasers to emerge and health consequences to ensue. This recommendation reflects those made in the USA by the Police Executive Research Forum (2011) in relation to the need to collect and "analyse information to identify [Taser] trends" (p. 23) and to ensure that all those who have been exposed to their applications should "receive a medical evaluation and thereafter monitored regularly if being held in police custody" (p. 21).

Second, there often exists a divide between what occurs during police-resident encounters and what the public perceives. This divergence can influence public sentiment, policy decisions, and even the interactions themselves. For this reason, Police Scotland should launch a public awareness campaign highlighting the rigorous training STOs undergo, the controls provided by the PIRC-referral process, and the low frequency of Taser discharges. This would reassure the public about procedural justice and counteract perceptions formed by international media reports of Taser misuse. This suggestion also aligns with recommendations from the Police Executive Research Forum (2011), emphasizing Taser awareness programs for communities and training public information officers to effectively inform the media and public about the devices.

Third, the national force should continue to develop further scenario-based and judgement-based training programs for STOs (reflecting earlier recommendations by the Police Executive Research Forum, 2011). However, going further than these suggestions, we also believe a robust assessment exercise should continue to form part of these programmes; Police Scotland should consider the volume of officers to be trained, and ensure that they maintain a focus on proportionality that prevents the public from being over-exposed to operational officers who are equipped with Tasers. Integrating public-facing components could also be advantageous. Exposing residents to the types of encounters officers face might bridge the gap between reality and perception, fostering greater understanding and cooperation.

Fourth, Police Scotland may need to seek additional funding from the Scottish Government to increase the number of Tasers and ensure they are easily accessible and efficiently equipped for STOs. Our study uncovered substantial operational hurdles associated with Taser deployment that need addressing. For example, feedback from officers about the need to drive 2 h to procure a Taser points towards inefficiencies and logistical challenges that can influence their attitudes and usage patterns. Addressing these hurdles could be of paramount interest for police executives and government officials aiming to optimize Taser deployment.

Fifth and finally, given the limitations associated with our small sample of officers who participated in interviews and in light of the above recommendations, it will be essential that further research is conducted on the nature and impact of Taser deployment and public reactions towards this as the device inevitably continues to become embedded in the ongoing work of Police Scotland in the years to come.

As already alluded to in the introduction to this paper, given the contextual differences between the USA and Scotland in relation to the relative volume of violent crime per head of population and the differing nature of law enforcement's generic approach to firearms deployment, it would be helpful to initiate comparative research between these and other contrasting global contexts. In particular, future, longitudinal research in Scotland (where the national force is in a general sense viewed as an unarmed service) could explore in more detail the extent to and ways in which upgrade displacement emerges in terms of officers choosing to deploy the Taser in place of other approaches residing at the lower end of the "force continuum" in particular situations (Adams & Jennison, 2007; Bishopp et al., 2015). Follow-on surveys and interviews with those on the receiving end of Taser deployments and their family members and wider community members could enable researchers to explore in more detail the implications of Taser use on police legitimacy in comparison to other uses of force (Lowrey-Kinberg & Buker, 2017; Sierra-Arévalo, 2021).

A comparative perspective could also be initiated that allows researchers to explore how this compares with community perceptions about police legitimacy in wider contexts such as the USA where Taser deployment may in some cases be viewed as resulting in downgrade displacement where the Taser substitutes for firearms use and results in a lower level of force (Adams & Jennison, 2007). International comparisons gleaned from longitudinal data on Taser use and corresponding fluctuating crime statistics could also enable researchers to provide more definitive conclusions about the extent to which use of the device over time can potentially impact on the emergence of safer communities, and how this interacts with public perceptions of officer legitimacy. It is hoped that the insights outlined in this paper may help to stimulate such future research.

## Conclusion

In the intricate dance between community safety and policing methods, the Taser rollout in Scotland stands as a pivotal chapter. Through a qualitative exploration of officer and community perspectives, this research underscores the multifaceted implications of introducing such a tool in contemporary policing. While Tasers may present as a potentially safer alternative in officer-citizen confrontations, their deployment cannot be isolated from the broader socio-cultural fabric in which they operate. The insights gleaned, ranging from frontline STO experiences to grassroots community sentiments, illuminate the nuances of public trust, reassurance, and safety perceptions. As Scotland strides forward in its policing journey, this study highlights the imperative of aligning operational strategies with the very communities they aim to protect. The harmonization of policy, practice, and public sentiment will be the touchstone of progressive, effective, and humane policing in the years to come.

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