

Tasers: People with experience of mental illness will suffer

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People experiencing mental illness will suffer from the introduction of Tasers into frontline policing, says the Mental Health Foundation.

An analysis by the New Zealand College of Mental Health Nurses of published figures during the year-long operational trial of Tasers showed that the Taser was fired in 50% of cases involving mental health emergency, compared to only 11% of criminal cases.

“The vast majority of people with mental illness are no more likely than anyone else to commit a violent crime,” says Judi Clements, Chief Executive of the Mental Health Foundation. “In fact, as these figures indicate, they are more likely to be victims of violence.”

The Mental Health Foundation shares concerns voiced by the New Zealand College of Mental Health Nurses and the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, who have urged wide consultation with the mental health sector before the introduction of Tasers.

“The risks posed to people taking prescribed medication for mental illness are unknown, as are the long-term effects of Taser use,” says Judi Clements. “Safety tests conducted in New Zealand were performed in highly controlled environments with healthy volunteers. This bears no resemblance to the real-world situations in which Tasers will be deployed.”

In the year 2006-07, police responded to over 8,000 callouts to mental health incidents in the community. The Mental Health Foundation believes that responsibility for mental health crises should be shared between police and mental health services.

“Police indicated during the trial that they are guided by mental health professionals at a scene with regards to Taser use,” says Judi Clements. “Professional bodies in the mental health sector have been very clear in expressing their concern about Taser use from the very beginning.

“The use of tasers in mental health emergencies needs to be fully investigated before this weapon is sanctioned for use on the general public.”

ENDS

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