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EDITORIAL

The Police and Tasers

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New York Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly is eager to make the use of firearms a last resort for his officers. Now, based on a recommendation from the RAND Corporation, he and his top lieutenants are considering arming more New York police officers with a less lethal but still controversial weapon, the Taser. Mr. Kelly has concerns about the device, which delivers a jolt of electricity meant to temporarily incapacitate the target. He is right to move with caution.

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In 2007, after a Queens man, Sean Bell, was killed by police fire, Mr. Kelly asked RAND to recommend ways to minimize police shooting. The study, released earlier this month, made several suggestions, including training police to avoid indiscriminate firing. The Taser proposal has attracted the most attention.

About 345,000 Tasers have been sold worldwide, according to the manufacturer, and a growing number of police departments have added Tasers to their arsenals or are considering them. About 500 are deployed here, and the RAND study suggested that the New York Police

Department consider using more of them. The study also recommended caution since there was a dearth of reliable information about their effectiveness.

Tasers fire electrified darts from as far away as 35 feet to immobilize the target. Some New York police officers say the devices are useful in subduing suspects who are on drugs or are mentally disturbed. New York police officers encounter some 80,000 such situations in a year.

There are also risks. Tasers can seriously injure, and even kill, their targets. Amnesty International says Tasers have caused 300 fatalities around the world. A California court earlier this month found the device maker, Taser International, shared blame in one death, a rare legal defeat for the company.

If more Tasers are deployed in New York City, strict conditions would have to be imposed on who could use them and under what circumstances. They might make sense as a last-resort alternative to lethal force, but it would be folly to allow them to be used in more routine situations like crowd control or policing political demonstrations. Nor should they be seen as the full answer to the problem of police shootings.

The RAND report suggested beginning with a pilot program in a few precincts. Mr. Kelly should give the matter the most careful study before taking even this limited first step.

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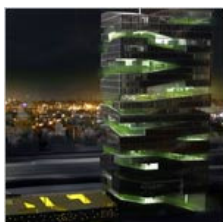


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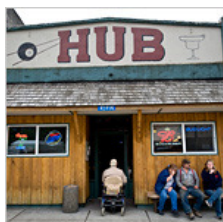
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