

Media Release
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TASER EXPANSION COMES AT THE EXPENSE OF VICTORIA'S MOST VULNERABLE

Today's announcement that Victoria Police will conduct a trial to roll-out Tasers to all uniformed and traffic management police in Bendigo and Morwell leaves vulnerable groups at risk of greater harm.

"This announcement reflects the race to the bottom in the Victorian Government's pre-election law and order agenda. We are seeing good, evidence-based policy being discarded in favour of policies that won't work and that will place Victorians at greater risk, particularly our most vulnerable groups," said Emily Howie, a senior lawyer with the Human Rights Law Resource Centre.

"Currently, Tasers are only being used by Victoria Police in two specialist units – the Special Operations Group and Critical Incident Response Teams. This roll-out will see Tasers in the hands of less experienced and less trained general duties police. Former Chief Commissioner Christine Nixon in 2008 ruled out the expansion of Tasers to general duties police. It's not clear why a broad-based roll out of Taser is now considered appropriate," said Ms Howie.

"The Taser is not a non-lethal option," said Hugh de Kretser, Executive Officer of the Victorian Federation of Community Legal Centres. "It is a less-lethal option that carries a risk of death. Amnesty International reported in December 2008 that more than 330 people have died after police Taser shocks in the USA since 2001. In Australia, there have already been five reported deaths following Taser exposure, including the widely publicised death of Antonio Galeano. Evidence from overseas, and increasingly from Australia, suggests that Tasers are prone to misuse. Expanding Taser use to general duties police in rural Victoria creates unacceptable risks of abuse, injury and death."

"This is not a question of whether you'd prefer to be Tasered than shot," said Mr de Kretser. "There are better ways to reduce police shootings, such as refocussing on negotiation and cordon and contain tactics, better incident planning and better training around dealing with mental illness".

Mr de Kretser said, "Victoria Police Taser use data, recently obtained under Freedom of Information laws, highlights the risks to vulnerable groups. The data suggests around 73% of Taser use in Victoria was against people in mental health crises and that 85% of subjects were affected by prescription or illegal drugs. This is particularly concerning given that the greater risks of harm that flow from using Tasers against persons who are in mental health crises or who are affected by drugs and alcohol are well documented."

"Another concern is 'mission creep'", said Ms Howie. "The Queensland Police Service has acknowledged that one of the key risks associated with the use of Tasers is over-reliance on them by police officers. That is, Tasers become a weapon of first choice, and a barrier to the development of skills and experience in negotiation and talking down situations."

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