



# Effectiveness of Less than Lethal Weapons



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## Introduction

As the field of Criminal Justice evolves, many practitioners have recommended the inclusion of less than lethal weapons in policing. The primary goals of less than lethal weapons are to “incapacitate” an individual, rather than cause “serious harm” (Dymond, 2015). It is evident that these alternatives to lethal weapons have become a mainstay in police departments throughout the United States.

This research was conducted for the purpose of discovering the professional and psychological effects of less than lethal weapons for officers. Ten law enforcement officers were interviewed to gain their perceptions on how their jobs would be different if less than lethal weapons were absent. Officers provided their input about their feelings on the usage of less than lethal weapons, their current department’s use of weapons, the general public’s perceptions, and the suspects with whom they typically interact. Officers also explained personal complications and the process of administering less than lethal weapons.

## Results

Overall, officers feel that their jobs would be much more dangerous if they were not equipped with less than lethal weapons. Every officer that was interviewed stated that all of their patrol officers were armed with less than lethal weapons. While officers stated that they do not use their less than lethal weapons frequently, it would take a vital source away. Officers believe that they would then have to engage in more hands on scenarios which would not only increase officer injury, but suspect as well. In addition, with the absence of less than lethal force, officers believe that the number of officer shootings would increase. In contrast, some officers felt that certain law enforcement officers could use less than lethal weapons too quickly, without first resorting to communication with a subject.

Ultimately, officers believe that less than lethal weapons are a great alternative to having to go hands on or use lethal force. Officers stated that they are extensively trained and re-certified in various courses for their less than lethal weapons. Officers look to these less than lethal weapons as an effective way to make sure they don’t have to take those steps to protect the community and themselves.



## Abstract

As the Criminal Justice system is continually evolving, there have been many attempts at reforms and alternatives in policing. One specific alternative that has been implemented is the usage of less than lethal weapons. The ideology of less than lethal weapons stemmed from the Cold War in a militaristic setting, but have become much more prevalent in law enforcement in recent years. The influence and effectiveness of less than lethal weapons are crucial to officer and suspect safety. Previous research has been conducted with an emphasis in statistical analysis. This research focuses on the personal traits of police officers when being armed with a less than lethal weapon. Interviews were conducted with various police officers discussing the effects less than lethal weapons have had on their career. This qualitative analysis presents a better understanding on how police feel on the use of less than lethal weapons, and the struggles that come along with the use of less than lethal weapons.

## Methods

This qualitative analysis consisted of a total of ten police officers who were interviewed on their experience in usage of less than lethal weapons. The department size ranged from four full-time sworn personnel to 1700 officers. The experience of officers ranged from two years to retiree. The age of officers ranged from twenty-four to sixty-nine years old. The positions officers had ranged from patrol officers to detectives.

The questions sought to understand what less than lethal weapons are provided to officers, the amount of training they must receive to carry a less than lethal weapon, their personal experiences in using less than lethal weapons, and their perceptions on less than lethal weapons. The research conducted was intended to detect commonalities between the officer’s responses to their experiences with less than lethal weapon usage. All of the data collected from these interviews were recorded in 2021, however the answers officers provided were from experiences over the course of their careers.

## Discussion

Arming our officers with the best possible tools not only increases the likelihood of officer safety, but suspects as well. As our study shows, many officers feel an increase in confidence when being armed with less than lethal weapons. As stated by an officer in our interview, “I think the show of force of the Taser is very effective. I think the show of force of a Taser is more effective than the actual Taser”. The simple display of the Taser can serve as a deterrent, which in turn increases the odds of a suspect complying. Compliance is key in policing, and less than lethal force is a great tool in gaining that.

However, it needs to be recognized that less than lethal weapons are subjected to malfunction as well. While not many of the officers we interviewed have encountered issues with their less than lethal weapon, it is a possibility. Officers that were interviewed stated that subjects who were under the influence of drugs or alcohol had a greater tendency of being resilient to less than lethal force. In addition, officers stated that less than lethal does not always equate to non-lethal. Depending on a subject’s underlying health conditions, weapons such as the Taser can cause death in subjects.