



## This High-Tech Police Lasso Is Being Condemned By Mental Health Experts

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Photo: Wrap Technologies

Earlier this year, Buffalo police deployed a controversial new weapon on a Black transgender woman who they perceived as having a mental health crisis.

Wearing just a t-shirt in the freezing cold, the woman was restrained by police with a BolaWrap 100, a \$900 hand-held lasso device that discharges Kevlar tether with four-pronged metal hooks. Propelled by gunpowder, the tether ejects at 513 feet per second and entangles the target at a range of 10-25 feet. A witness told local news station WBEN that no one made attempts to reassure or console the woman, despite the presence of a mental health professional. She also wasn't given blankets or warm clothing after being detained by police.

Buffalo is one of 500 law enforcement agencies across the U.S. using BolaWrap, according to Wrap Technologies, the company behind the device. And last week, the Seattle Police Department approved a pilot program to test the devices, with one Seattle city

councilmember saying the device could "help de-escalate situations and reduce the number of tragic outcomes."

Wrap specifically markets the weapon for use against people who are "non-compliant," "emotionally disturbed," "mentally ill," and suicidal. "Many of the people law enforcement encounter aren't just criminals," BolaWrap inventor Elwood "Woody" Norris said in a video on Youtube. "They may be hard of hearing, they may be mentally challenged, they may be on drugs. So they are oblivious for one reason or another to the commands of law enforcement. You don't want to kill that person." In a statement to Motherboard, a Wrap Technologies spokesperson claimed BolaWrap was "specifically designed for early intervention to prevent escalation of force."

But activists and mental health experts say the new technology will only cause more harm.

"The ordinary violence of policing gives rise to extraordinary discourse that attempts to justify unconscionable cruelty against those who are deemed disposable or otherwise too disruptive to power, capital, or the status quo," Talila Lewis, a disability justice attorney and volunteer director of Helping Educate to Advance the Rights of Deaf Communities (HEARD), told Motherboard.

"This weapon will lead to more unnecessary police encounters, unjust detentions, unconstitutional search and seizures, and completely avoidable physical harm and death—especially for Black/Indigenous, disabled, trans, young, elderly, and other marginalized people."

The pricey weapon has garnered increased interest in the aftermath of last year's George Floyd uprisings, which called for redirecting bloated police budgets into historically underfunded areas like public health, education, mental health services and affordable housing. 628 U.S. police agencies have received training, signaling growth for the company.

Wrap, which expects the global "non-lethal weapons" market to grow to \$11.85 billion by 2023, plans on expanding sales to mental health institutions, school teachers, and homeowners, and also recommends deploying it for riot control.

While the BolaWrap is advertised as humane, the weapon's origin story paints another picture. Norris, who also created the infamous Long Range Acoustic Device (LRAD), drew inspiration for the weapon from the techniques used by nomadic peoples in Latin America to hunt animals. "I got an idea, to take the *bola* that *gauchos* use [to hunt animals] and bring it into the 21st century," said Norris, in reference to people in South America on horseback. The company also describes BolaWrap as safe, "non-threatening," and "pain free," while admitting on its website that the device's metal hooks can penetrate the skin.

Elliot Fukui, a member of the Fireweed Collective, a group that offers mental health education and mutual aid through a healing justice lens, disputes Wrap's characterization of BolaWrap as "non-threatening."

"If someone is experiencing an emotional crisis, overstimulation, hallucinations, or a flashback, it is absolutely a punitive tactic to use force or restraint against that person," Fukui told Motherboard. "It is dehumanizing and cruel to assume that the Houseless, Neurodivergent, Disabled, and Deaf must be subdued like cattle because we are in an altered state or do not communicate in a way [abled people] deem valid."

As disability justice abolitionists call for less police involvement in people's lives, the BolaWrap is increasingly being used against their communities in the field. During March and April, police departments in California, Colorado, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Ohio, South Carolina and Maryland deployed the weapon, according to Wrap. The public is often barred from viewing police body camera footage, but departments are freely turning over hand-selected footage to Wrap to aid the company's aggressive advertising efforts. The Buffalo Police Department's deployment isn't featured.

If Wrap's advertising sounds familiar, it's because it is.

Wrap CEO Tom Smith has made millions as the former CEO of Taser Inc., a company that pioneered stun guns as "less than lethal" and de-escalatory weapons. In 2011, Taser—which rebranded as Axon in 2017 after it pivoted to selling body cameras and other police tech—tweeted in favor of using Tasers to arrest individuals in mental health crises to "prevent the use of deadly force." But in 20 years, over 1,000 people have died following police use of tasers, and there's no evidence that tasers have reduced police use of firearms or force.

Axon's profits ballooned from the sale of body cameras following the Ferguson protests in 2014, and Lewis sees BolaWrap as the latest manifestation of a similarly co-optive process. "This weapon is yet another illustration of how police 'reform' increases power and resources for policing systems while producing additional and more efficient ways for people to be harmed by and swept into the carceral nexus," said Lewis. "Policing succeeds at perpetuating itself first by arresting people's imaginations such that people can only envision police as the 'solution' to societal problems—even and especially those problems created and exacerbated by police themselves like generational structural inequity, for example."

After last Summer's uprisings, grassroots movements have achieved minor victories in reducing the public's contact with armed police officers. San Francisco and New York City are starting to dispatch teams of professionals in response to some mental health calls, rather than police. However, disability justice advocates warn that mandatory social and health services can be as damaging as policing and cages. Oftentimes, institutionalized people are systematically abused and prevented from making decisions about their own lives.

Instead, many advocates prefer autonomous, person-centered, community-based groups that are run by people most directly impacted by harmful systems. [Mental Health First](#), a non-hierarchical crisis response group, trains unarmed volunteers to de-escalate situations through “socially competent” mental health services in Sacramento and Oakland. Program Coordinator Asantewaa Boykin told [The OaklandSide](#) that volunteers get to the root of the threat of harm, find out how imminent that threat might be, and help the caller avoid that harm. They aim to eliminate the need for law enforcement involvement in mental health crises, decriminalize mental health issues and substance use, and address their root causes: white supremacy, capitalism, and colonialism.

From Fukui’s perspective, carceral and punitive systems will never provide adequate healing or care. “We have to stop thinking from a [reactive] place and start building proactively to get mad, disabled and neurodivergent people what they need to stabilize, heal and connect,” said Fukui. “Disability Justice practices are grounded in safety and wellness planning, mutual aid, and breaking isolation for our collective survival. Policing is about getting someone off the street because they make people feel uncomfortable.”

***UPDATE: This article has been updated to correct the name of Wrap Technologies’ CEO. It is Tom Smith, who was previously CEO of Taser, Inc along with his brother, Rick.***

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