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An estimated 500 people have died from police use of tasers nationwide between 2010-2021



By Samantha Kummerer 
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There have been around 500 fatal taser encounters with police between 2010 and 2021 across the country, according to Fatal Encounters.

The death of Darryl Williams by [Raleigh police](#) on Tuesday was not the first time a person has died from a taser in North Carolina or in Raleigh.

While no state or federal agency officially tracks the number of deaths or injuries that stem from police officers' use of tasers, the site, [Fatal Encounters](#), attempts to track police-related deaths from the past two decades

"It makes it difficult to really gauge how large the problem is or what solutions might be because again, it would have to be taken on an individual department basis," said Kristie Puckett Williams, the Deputy Director for Engagement and Mobilization for American Civil Liberties Union of North Carolina.

There have been around 500 fatal taser encounters with police between 2010 and 2021 across the country, according to Fatal Encounters.

The number of annual incidents nationwide have declined since 2018 with 72% fewer fatal incidents reported in 2021 than in 2018.

Fatal Encounters reported 13 incidents of fatal taser use in North Carolina; ranking it as the 12th state in the country for fatal encounters.

"We have found over the years that tasers are an incredibly effective tool at reducing officer injuries, suspect injuries and bringing successful conclusions to some of these incidents. But we also know that they can cause death," said Hendersonville Police Chief Blair Myhand, who also serves as the North Carolina Association of Chiefs of Police president.

In another incident, RPD officers [killed a man with a taser](#) in 2013. Raleigh police responded to a call involving a naked male who they later learned violently assaulted a minor in his home. Forty-five-year-old Thomas Sadler died after officers used a TASER on him when he became "physically aggressive."

Some of these deaths stem from an individual having preexisting medical conditions but sometimes it is because officers use the weapon incorrectly.

"You don't know when you encounter someone with their medical history. So the police have no way of knowing that's why they should be very cautious about when and how they use these weapons, because they are just that weapons," said Puckett Williams. "So when is it acceptable to deploy weapons on citizens on residents of a community when is that acceptable?"

The Charlotte- Mecklenburg Police Department and city of Charlotte had to pay \$10 million for a wrongful death suit that involved an officer fatally shot a teenager in the chest with a taser in 2008.

A 2011 fatal incident involving the Pinehurst Police Department led to a court case that changed the law surrounding when officers should use tasers. Ronald Armstrong

suffered from schizophrenia and officers were trying to involuntarily commit him when officers fatally tased him.

In the lawsuit that followed, *Armstrong v. Village of Pinehurst*, the court determined tasers should only be used if someone poses an immediate safety risk.

"Erratic behavior and mental illness do not necessarily create a safety risk," the judges wrote in the opinion.

The I-Team's review of the incidents documented in North Carolina by Fatal Encounters found many of the cases started with a call involving a nonviolent incident. Many of the encounters escalated when police said the individual was acting erratically or resisting arrest.

A [previous review of nationwide incidents by USA TODAY and the Arnolt Center](#) found, "Four of five cases that ended in death began as calls for nonviolent incidents, and 84% were unarmed."

Puckett Williams said she thinks agencies should continue focus on de-escalation tactics given how many of these incidents begin.

"These are not like, 'Oh, there was a mass shooting and we were chasing this person with an AR-15 down the street,'" she said. "These are poor people, for the most part who don't

want to go to jail that day, but whatever reason and these are very minor incidents that lead to someone being killed."

Law enforcement's handling of mental health crises has become a key concern in communities across America.

Cities like Durham and Raleigh have launched innovative ways to divert some of these calls away from an armed officer response.

The North Carolina chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) regularly works with agencies to develop crisis intervention teams. NAMI NC's Public Policy Director Ashish George said more efforts to de-escalate are needed to reduce these fatal encounters.

"There are no villains and heroes which is why it's important to remember that law enforcement, is asked to do too much and people with mental illness are often failed by society," George said. "The outreach we do to law enforcement is meant to keep in mind that everyone has legitimate interests and everyone's safety is paramount."

While tasers have the ability to kill, they have also been found to prevent major injuries and deaths.

A [2011 report from the U.S. Department of Justice](#) found that conduct energy devices, such as tasers, "can significantly reduce injuries to suspects and the use of CEDs can

decrease injuries to officers."

The report found injury rates on citizens ranged from 17-64% with a majority of the injuries involving minor bruises, strains and abrasions.

Myhand said North Carolina does not have any specific training requirements or laws surrounding officers' use of tasers. Instead, these policies and training requirements are set agency by agency. Officers in his Hendersonville department receive annual training.

"We know there are instances where people have died from the use of a taser and sometimes those are because they were used improperly. Sometimes it was an unknown medical condition, but we have strict policies on the use of these and frequent training to make sure that our officers know how to use these in a proper way," he said.

[The Raleigh Police Department's policy states](#) the use of a taser or a 'conduct energy weapon' is required to be reported and a Use of Force reported will be completed any time a taser is used.

"Conducted energy weapons may be used when it is necessary to incapacitate or gain compliance from a person who is actively resisting, exhibiting active aggression, or to prevent individuals from harming others or seriously injuring themselves," the RPD policy stated.

The policy stated that officers should avoid using the weapon on an individual's head, neck, genital area, and "the chest area that cross vectors the heart." Officers also need to avoid use near explosive materials, when the individual is pregnant, driving, in handcuffs, or in a position where they could fall.

Myhand said most agencies are required and do review their use-of-force incidents annually to evaluate what training needs to change and what tools are ineffective.

"We're really pushing de-escalation training now, which is something that you know, when I came on the job didn't exist," Myhand said. "We're learning from our past and not rooting ourselves in it and we are really looking to always get better and find better ways of doing our job and serving our communities."

More details surrounding the recent incident in Raleigh will be released when the five-day report is completed.

"I'm going to be reading that five day report. Hopefully the tapes will be released and we'll be able to review the body cam footage or the dashcam footage," Puckett Williams said. "What I'm sad about is that someone had to die in order for us to be able to have these conversations. But what I'm hoping is that this conversation leads us to have a real conversation about what does safety look like and who deserves to be saved?"

[WATCH | Mom, best friend identify man who died in custody of Raleigh police](#)

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