

# A Look at Less-Lethal Devices

By Adam L. Weitzel, Esq.

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*This article is intended to provide information. It is not an endorsement of particular devices or methods. Each church and ministry must determine how they wish to address safety and security for their particular situation.*  
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As their name implies, less-lethal devices are designed to deter or incapacitate a person without necessarily causing death or serious bodily injury, although both can still occur. Less-lethal devices are excellent options for schools, where state laws may prevent the carrying of concealed weapons, and churches where parishioners may feel uncomfortable with armed greeters.

**Less Lethal Devices:** Less-lethal devices can generally be broken down into five categories:

**1. Impact weapons.** Impact weapons include the typical baton, the compact collapsible baton, long flashlights, and short plastic kabutons often carried on key chains. They work by applying blunt force and increasing your mechanical control of the intended target. While they are relatively simple to operate, they have the lowest success rate. They can be effective for certain uses, but you must be very close to the target to use them, and if the target has a diminished sense of pain (which could be caused by drug use), they will be less effective. Don't be fooled, however, into thinking that the simplicity of an impact weapon reduces your obligation to train with it. It is one thing to strike wildly at someone with a heavy flashlight. It is another thing all together to effectively employ an impact weapon to control a target without causing injury to either the target or yourself.

**2. Chemical weapons.** Pepper spray is the most common chemical weapon. Its effective range is around 8 feet, which means the person employing the pepper spray is required to get within the 21 foot reaction-gap, and may possibly be assaulted by the target before they can respond. Chemical weapons also carry the risk of cross-contamination and excessive exposure. Once you deploy a chemical weapon, you are just as exposed as the target. Because of this, chemical weapons are rarely appropriate for interior security teams. There are also many reported situations where the targets were able to fight through the pepper spray, or the chemical weapon was simply not effective on the intended target. For example, although I wasn't under attack, I once sang the entire Army Song in an Army tear gas chamber without my protective mask on. It was incredibly uncomfortable, but I fought through it. Keep that in mind when deciding to employ chemical weapons.

**3. Electrical weapons.** The TASER is an electrical weapon that administers an electrical charge sufficient to interrupt the target's normal muscular control. The goal is to temporarily incapacitate the target by inducing muscle spasms. A TASER operates by firing two metal darts which, once inserted into the target or his or her clothing, as long as they are within 1 inch of skin, allows a current of 50,000 volts to pass through the target's body. The effective range is 15 feet for civilian models, and 25 feet for law-enforcement models. However, the darts separate at a rate of approximately 2 inches per foot traveled. Therefore, if the security officer is more than 14 feet away, the possibility of missing the target with one or both of the darts, rendering the weapon useless, is increased. Benefits of the TASER are that it is very effective, it can be deployed quickly, and it can easily be concealed and employed in a church setting. The biggest downside of the TASER is its novelty. When you issue a TASER, somebody is going to want to try it out, and it is likely that a member of your security team will use it on themselves or a friend.

**4. Compressed air weapons.** There are a variety of compressed air weapons that can launch pepperballs, OC rounds (tear gas), or paint marking balls. These weapons are designed primarily to deploy massive amounts of chemical weapons at greater distances, and are ineffective and inappropriate in a church setting.

**5. Less-lethal munitions.** In earlier days, it was a shotgun filled with rock salt. Now, you can purchase multiple types of less-lethal munitions that are designed to deliver sufficient amounts of kinetic energy to

disable a target without necessarily killing them. They include rubber bullets, beanbag rounds, and shotgun shells loaded with rubber pellets. These items can be effective, depending on their use, but have a few limitations. First, less-lethal munitions are generally not as accurate as metallic munitions and can wobble in flight. As a result, you should not employ less-lethal munitions when the target is surrounded by victims, hostages, or innocent bystanders. Second, they are more likely to cause death depending on how close to the target they are deployed and where the round strikes the target. Finally, less-lethal munitions require your security team members to carry firearms, which brings all of the concealment, safety, and training issues that other munitions bring.

**Having Enough Gun:** On the opposite end of the spectrum, people in the security industry understand that having "enough gun" can reduce violence. Reports have shown that the less weaponry you carry, the more likely you are to use it. It may be because your security personnel are more willing to actually employ pepper spray as opposed to shooting someone with a TASER or handgun. It could also be that an aggressor may be more willing to force the issue against a lesser-armed security team member. In either case, having "enough gun" can reduce actual violence.

Additionally, you never want to respond with less force than the aggressor. If you expect your security personnel to engage a target, they should be able to match or exceed the target's available force. If an aggressor comes into your church with a knife, you hope your security personnel have more than pepper spray if you want them to engage. If you cannot match or exceed an aggressor's force, you will be required to submit until greater force can be brought to bear. This is a lesson the Los Angeles Police Department learned the hard way in 1997, during a bank robbery in North Hollywood. Police officers armed with handguns and a few shotguns got into a firefight with two men armed with multiple, fully-automatic rifles and protected by body armor. The police were vastly overwhelmed until SWAT officers arrived with assault rifles. In the end, it took over 300 law enforcement officers 44 minutes to subdue the two heavily-armed robbers.

**Check Local Laws:** If you decide to employ less-lethal devices, be sure to check your local laws first, regardless of the category. Many states and municipalities have laws that limit the possession or carrying of certain impact, chemical, and electrical weapons. You want to make sure you are not creating legal liability in your efforts to protect your church.



## **About the Author**

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