

Pepper sprays get yet another shake; News and Trends; National Institute of Justice report

Security and law enforcement agencies continue to be peppered by studies on the safety and efficacy of oleoresin capsicum (OC), better known as pepper spray. A new report by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) documents the results of NIJ-funded studies.

Why more examination of a technology that's already been through the grinder, in the form of numerous analyses? The NIJ explains: "Though generally assumed to be safe and effective, the consequences of the use of OC, as with any use of force, can never be predicted with certainty. The need for reassurance remains."

One study found that pepper spray use by officers has reduced injuries to both police officers and suspects and has resulted in a decrease in complaints of excessive force.

Looking at the number of officer and arrestee injuries in three North Carolina police jurisdictions before and after pepper spray was introduced, investigators at the University of North Carolina's Injury Prevention Research Center found a correlation between pepper-spray use and a decline in injuries. For example, in the year before pepper spray was introduced, 87 State Highway Patrol officers were injured. In the year after, 58 were injured.

This finding corroborates years of research and anecdotal evidence, say experts. Among those who spotted the correlation between pepper spray and a reduction in injuries is Richard B. Isaacs, CPP Senior Vice President, the LUBRINCO Group, who says he introduced OC to law enforcement in 1988.

In another study, a professor of forensic sciences and pathology at the University of Texas, Southwestern Medical Center, looked at 63 cases in which deaths of in-custody suspects followed pepper spray use. In only two of the cases was pepper spray found to have been a factor in the deaths, and both of these suspects had asthma.

In one of these cases, the subject was obese, was handcuffed behind his back, and was placed face-down while being transported, suggesting that more factors than just the OC led to the death. Isaacs notes that in many cases of death where OC was a factor other causes likely contributed.

The other 61 deaths were solely attributed to factors such as drug use, heart disease, and positional asphyxia (in which subjects are placed in a position in which they struggle to breathe).

The NIJ report's author notes that even with these new studies, it is very difficult to prove a negative--that pepper spray wasn't or couldn't be a contributing factor in death. "The studies cited in this report do not and cannot prove that pepper spray will never be a contributing factor in the death of a subject resisting arrest," the report says.