

Report: U.N. officials call Cheatham County Taser incident 'torture'

United Nations officials recently called out U.S. jailers – particularly in counties in four states, including Cheatham County – for allegedly using excessive force via Taser shocks against inmates in incidents which could be construed as “torture.”

The U.N. special rapporteur on torture cited a recent Reuters [report](#), which included video footage of 22 incidents in four jails: Franklin County, Ohio; Franklin County, Arkansas; McCurtain County, Oklahoma; and Cheatham County, Tennessee.

Nils Melzer of the rapporteur did not return the Times’ email seeking comment; however, in a [Reuters story](#), he stated that each incident requires investigation, and some, including the one in the Cheatham County Jail, showed evidence of “torture.”

Tennessee is one of 27 states to issue stun guns to guards in state prisons, the Reuters report finds.

In the Cheatham County Jail, officers removed then-inmate Jordan Norris from his booking cell after he apparently became violent toward himself and other inmates on Nov. 5, 2016.

Norris was tied to a restraint chair, though he was able to loosen one arm, after which Detective Mark Bryant used a stun gun on Norris at least four times — one of which lasted for approximately 25 seconds — according to a Tennessee Bureau of Investigations release.

The Police Executive Research Forum says that shocking an individual for more than a cumulative 15 seconds could increase the risk of injury or death, Reuters' investigation states.



This photo, included in the lawsuit against three Cheatham County Sheriff's deputies, depicts some of the taser burn marks on Jordan Norris. (Photo: Submitted photo)

Norris suffered more than 40 pairs of Taser burns, though many were unaccounted for by authorities, according to a previous Times story.

Surveillance video surfaced of the incident, and shortly thereafter, 23rd District Attorney General Ray Crouch requested TBI agents investigate Bryant, 39.

In the video, Bryant can be heard telling Norris, "I'll keep on doing it until I run out of batteries," as he continues to administer shocks.

According to the Reuters investigation, the Cheatham County Jail had been using stun guns for just under a year at that time.

The TBI investigation launched in August and Bryant was indicted in September, charged with four counts of aggravated assault and one count of official misconduct. He was booked in the Cheatham County Jail on a \$750,000 bond.

Bryant is set for trial Jan. 23.

His attorney, Dan Cook,, did not immediately return the Times' call for comment.



Mark Bryant (Photo: Courtesy of TBI)

Norris filed a lawsuit in U.S. District Court. The suit blamed Bryant and two accompanying deputies — Josh Marriott and Jeff Key — of deprivation of civil rights, citing use of excessive force and failure to protect.

The lawsuit settled in September, though the terms were kept confidential, according to a [release](#) from Raybin & Weissman, which represented Norris.

"I think it's good that we've got international oversight of this issue," Attorney Ben Raybin said of the U.N. citation. "I think excessive force in our jails and prisons is a significant issue that often goes overlooked.

“Taser devices ... have a great ability to be overused and misused, and I think having this oversight is an important (part) in improving how people are treated by law enforcement.”

When asked what he thinks about U.N. officials using the term “torture” to describe incidents in the U.S. — specifically citing the one against his client — Raybin recounted Norris’ experience: He had been strapped into the restraint chair, apparently unable to cause harm, yet still was caused pain by law enforcement officials.

“It certainly can be” interpreted as torture, Raybin said. “I can’t really think of a better word to describe (the incident). We did use that word in the lawsuit, that that type of force does appear to amount to torture. (It’s) sort of what the legal standard is,” in which law enforcement officials administer pain, allegedly without a legitimate reason.

At the time of Bryant’s arrest, Cheatham County Sheriff Mike Breedlove released a statement: “As sheriff, I am saddened this happened within our jail,” he said. “We have taken all necessary steps to prevent this from happening again. On my watch, excessive force will never be tolerated.”

Breedlove also stated previously that Bryant had been terminated. The other two corrections officers were placed on administrative leave.

He declined to provide further comment to the Times last week.

Raybin said he appreciates that Breedlove expressed the need to review and make changes to the department’s use of force policy, but said that the “next question” will be: What changes have been made — or will be made — to make sure similar incidents don’t happen again?

“I think oversight and transparency are important, (and) that we have outside groups that are monitoring law enforcement,” Raybin said.

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