Study: Stun guns curb jail injuries

By Dennis Wagner
The Arizona Republic

The widespread use of stun guns and pepper spray in Maricopa County Jail has led to fewer injuries for guards and inmates, according to a study sponsored by the Justice Department.

John Hepburn, a professor with Arizona State University’s School of Justice Studies, said two years of research indicate that violent incidents have been resolved more quickly and safely since detention officers were armed with non-lethal weapons.

“When used appropriately, these devices are preferred to traditional hands-on strategies for controlling inmates,” Hepburn said in an interview. “They’re more effective, and produce fewer injuries.”

The findings on pepper spray appear to contradict another probe sponsored by the Justice Department, which criticized the jail for excessive force and specifically condemned oleoresin capsicum, a pepper spray.

That earlier report, by correctional consultant George Sullivan, was a catapult for the U.S. attorney’s civil-rights lawsuit filed against Arpaio and the county in October. Sullivan argued that pepper spray is potentially lethal and should be “strictly prohibited” except under rigid guidelines.

In contrast, Hepburn’s team of ASU professors found that pepper spray is an effective tool for control the inmate on altercation forms and surveys sponsored by the Justice Department, which criticized the jail for excessive force and specifically condemned oleoresin capsicum, a pepper spray.

Their report says non-lethal weapons did not reduce the number of violent incidents in jail, but did cut down on the number of inmate grievances, as well as injuries.

The ASU study was commissioned after Sheriff Joe Arpaio agreed to the Justice Department study — arming virtually all detention officers with pepper spray and electric stun guns in 1994. Those weapons, acquired with funds from National Sheriff’s Association, replaced manual methods of controlling prisoners.

-----

Jail injuries reduced

By Dennis Wagner
The Arizona Republic

This probably has reduced our injuries — and the inmates’ — by about 50 percent,” said Deputy Chief Larry Wendt, who oversees the sheriff’s custody operations.

Wendt said he and other jailers were hesitant to accept the new non-lethal weapons, acquired with funds from National Sheriff’s Association, replaced manual methods of controlling inmates.

-----

ONLINE: For excerpts from the report on the use of non-lethal weapons, see this story on Arizona Central, www.azcentral.com on the Internet.

-----

Dennis Wagner can be reached at 444-6874 or at dennis.wagner@pnj.com via e-mail.