

Laser Threats and Assaults

Considerations for Law Enforcement Personnel*

Laser threats and assaults are increasingly common threats facing law enforcement and public safety personnel. Commercial-off-the-shelf (COTS) lasers are available to the public as laser pointers. These devices—which can be considered ‘counter-optical lasers’ when directed against response personnel—are a clear threat. Counter-optical lasers can be deployed against personnel, surveillance cameras, facial recognition systems, aircraft, and drones (Unmanned Aerial Systems) to disrupt and degrade human vision and interrupt tactical operations.



Laser Used in Hong Kong Protests
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Lasers are currently used to disrupt aircraft and as ‘disruptive’ devices used by protesters and during riots. The disruptive use of lasers in protests and riots was initially seen in Seattle during the 1999 World Trade Organization Disturbances known as the “Battle for Seattle” and more recently during public order incidents, demonstrations, and riots in Hong Kong; Santiago, Chile; and Portland, Oregon. While lasers used at protests are unlikely to cause permanent eye injuries due to their low-power and the stand-off distances generally encountered, dazzle, temporary flash blinding, and disruption are common when red, green, and blue lasers are deployed. Field countermeasures exist and magnifying optics should never be utilized. Whenever personnel experience pain, are potentially injured, or experience aftereffects from laser exposure they should seek medical evaluation from a qualified vision specialist (ophthalmologist or optometrist). Criminal laser strikes should be documented in a crime report and tracked by criminal intelligence units and jurisdictional intelligence fusion centers.

References

Robert J. Bunker, “Terrorist and Laser Weapons Use: An Emergent Threat.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 31(5), 2008, 434-455; <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100801980294>.

Robert J. Bunker, “Use and Potentials of Counter-Optical Lasers in Riots and Terrorism.” *TRENDS Research & Advisory*, 21 April 2015; https://scholarship.claremont.edu/cgu_fac_pub/943/.

“Recognizing Laser Threats,” *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, 77 (4), April 2008; <https://leb.fbi.gov/file-repository/archives/april08leb.pdf/view>.

Laser Assault Awareness Visor Card



American Military University’s “Laser Assault Awareness” Visor Card is provided to alert law enforcement and public safety personnel about the nature of laser threats and immediate personal protective actions they can take if subject to laser assault or exposure. The Card was developed by LtCol (ret) Matt Begert, Dr. Robert J. Bunker, and Dr. John P. Sullivan. American Military University’s Visor Cards for Public Safety Personnel provide a great reference* to help officers make the right decision. The 4-in. x 6-in. laminated cards can be tucked behind a cruiser’s sun visor or carried in a pocket for quick reference.

The Laser Assault Awareness Visor Card is available at https://start.amu.apus.edu/common/dl/visor-cards/visor_laa.pdf

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*The information provided herein is intended as a guideline only. The appropriate local and national law enforcement regulations should also be consulted.