# Police use of force on elderly dementia patient sparks urgent calls for reform



The current state of law enforcement in Britain prompts disconcerting reflections on the legality of certain actions that seem to have slipped into daily life without consequence. This week, instances such as shoplifting, fare evasion on public transport, and casual drug use seem to exist within a legal grey area, leaving citizens and observers wary of the implications. Meanwhile, some more severe actions appear to attract a staggering indifference; for example, a recent case involving the police response to a frail, elderly man has ignited fierce debate over the use of force by law enforcement.

In a profoundly distressing incident from June 2022, 93-year-old Donald Burgess, suffering from dementia and using a wheelchair, was subjected to a police response that many have deemed excessive. Following a report that Burgess was allegedly threatening care home staff with a knife, officers from Sussex Police responded with pepper spray and a Taser, actions that led to widespread condemnation and subsequent legal scrutiny. The Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) investigated the incident, and Burgess tragically passed away three weeks later. The investigation focused on whether the police's actions were reasonable and necessary, but the mere act of employing a Taser on such a vulnerable individual raises profound ethical questions regarding police protocols and the treatment of the mentally ill.

Captured on bodycam footage, the moment Burgess was confronted by the officers starkly illustrates the clash between policing and compassion. In a state of confusion, likely exacerbated by a urinary tract infection, Burgess displayed erratic behaviour. What followed was a spectacle of force: two officers arrived equipped with a battery of tactical instruments, seemingly so preoccupied with their operational mandates that they appeared to overlook the humanity of the individual before them. The aftermath of their actions highlights an unsettling truth about modern policing: a tendency to classify behaviours as criminal rather than addressing the underlying issues that may contribute to them.

Reports subsequent to the incident indicate that the two officers involved face serious allegations, including assault and even potential charges of manslaughter. However, their defence rests on claims that the use of force was within reasonable limits as they responded to a perceived threat. Critics contend that a fundamental disconnect lies at the heart of this defence: how can officers, trained to serve and protect, justify using lethal force on a senior citizen confined to a wheelchair? This question gains further urgency considering Burgess’s medical condition, which complicates traditional definitions of threat and aggression.

Competing narratives emerge as society grapples with the implications of this case. Some argue that the police are merely fulfilling their duty, tasked with ensuring safety in increasingly dangerous environments, while others lament a drift towards a militarised approach to public safety that threatens the very principles of justice and equity. There is a growing discourse suggesting that crime has become a medical issue, rather than a moral failing; this perspective is echoed in critiques of the broader policing ethos that seems to endow officers with an almost unbounded mandate to control perceived disorder.

The tragedy of Donald Burgess's passing amplifies a broader societal concern: as legal tolerance for minor infractions seeps into daily life, the threshold for using force against the most vulnerable appears alarmingly low. According to some observers, this sense of impunity among law enforcement risks creating a precarious environment where the dignity of individuals—especially those already marginalised by health or age—is routinely overlooked in the name of maintaining order.

As debates swirl around police reform and community safety, the legacy of cases like that of Burgess may push authorities to reevaluate their strategies and ensure that justice does not come at the expense of compassion. The call for a more humane approach to policing reflects not only a desire for accountability but also an acknowledgment of the need for reform in how society addresses crime and its underlying causes.

It is imperative that as discussions about policing evolve, we foster a principle of humanity that transcends the binary view of law enforcement as either enforcers or protectors. In this context, we might remind ourselves that social order must not come at the cost of human dignity.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-14767817/PETER-HITCHENS-Donald-Burgess-police-shoplifters-thugs.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[2]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-sussex-66023467)
* Paragraph 2 – [[2]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-sussex-66023467), [[5]](https://news.sky.com/story/police-pepper-sprayed-then-tasered-one-legged-93-year-old-man-who-later-died-prompting-investigation-12665534)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ckmjdlkxjjmo), [[6]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/apr/25/sussex-police-officers-deny-assaulting-man-93-taser-pepper-spray)
* Paragraph 4 – [[4]](https://www.irishtimes.com/world/uk/2022/08/05/inquiry-after-death-of-disabled-dementia-patient-93-tasered-by-police/), [[7]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cw4zk17glyeo)
* Paragraph 5 – [[5]](https://news.sky.com/story/police-pepper-sprayed-then-tasered-one-legged-93-year-old-man-who-later-died-prompting-investigation-12665534), [[6]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/apr/25/sussex-police-officers-deny-assaulting-man-93-taser-pepper-spray)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-14767817/PETER-HITCHENS-Donald-Burgess-police-shoplifters-thugs.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-sussex-66023467> - A 93-year-old man, Donald Burgess, who had dementia and used a wheelchair, died three weeks after being Tasered by police in a care home in St Leonards, East Sussex, on 21 June 2022. The Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) investigated the incident, and a file of evidence was passed to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) to determine if any officers should be charged. The officers involved used PAVA spray, a baton, and a Taser during the incident. Burgess was taken to hospital and died on 13 July 2022. The IOPC's investigation focused on whether the force used was reasonable, necessary, and proportionate.
3. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ckmjdlkxjjmo> - Two Sussex Police officers, PC Rachel Comotto and PC Stephen Smith, have pleaded not guilty to assaulting 93-year-old Donald Burgess, who had dementia and used a wheelchair, with pepper spray and a Taser in his care home. The incident occurred on 21 June 2022, when the officers responded to a report that Burgess was threatening staff with a knife. The officers used PAVA spray, a baton, and a Taser on Burgess, who was later handcuffed. He was taken to hospital and died three weeks later. The case has been sent to Southwark Crown Court for further proceedings.
4. <https://www.irishtimes.com/world/uk/2022/08/05/inquiry-after-death-of-disabled-dementia-patient-93-tasered-by-police/> - An inquiry has been launched after the death of 93-year-old Donald Burgess, a disabled dementia patient, who was Tasered and pepper-sprayed by police in a care home in St Leonards-on-Sea, East Sussex, on 21 June 2022. Police were called after reports that Burgess, who used a wheelchair and had one leg, was threatening staff with a knife. Two officers used PAVA spray, a baton, and a Taser on Burgess, who was later handcuffed. He was taken to hospital and died three weeks later on 13 July 2022. The Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) is investigating the incident.
5. <https://news.sky.com/story/police-pepper-sprayed-then-tasered-one-legged-93-year-old-man-who-later-died-prompting-investigation-12665534> - Two police officers from Sussex Police have been handed gross misconduct notices and are under investigation for manslaughter after using a Taser, baton, and incapacitant spray on 93-year-old Donald Burgess, who had dementia and used a wheelchair. The incident occurred on 21 June 2022, when officers responded to a report that Burgess was threatening staff with a knife. After using the Taser, Burgess was handcuffed and taken to hospital, where he died three weeks later on 13 July 2022. The Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) is investigating the use of force.
6. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/apr/25/sussex-police-officers-deny-assaulting-man-93-taser-pepper-spray> - Two Sussex Police officers, PC Rachel Comotto and PC Stephen Smith, have pleaded not guilty to assaulting 93-year-old Donald Burgess, who had dementia and used a wheelchair, with a Taser and pepper spray in his care home. The incident occurred on 21 June 2022, when the officers responded to a report that Burgess was threatening staff with a knife. The officers used PAVA spray, a baton, and a Taser on Burgess, who was later handcuffed. He was taken to hospital and died three weeks later. The case has been sent to Southwark Crown Court for further proceedings.
7. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cw4zk17glyeo> - Two Sussex Police officers, PC Stephen Smith and PC Rachel Comotto, have been charged with assaulting 93-year-old Donald Burgess, who had dementia and used a wheelchair, at a care home in St Leonards, East Sussex. The incident occurred on 21 June 2022, when the officers responded to a report that Burgess was threatening staff with a knife. The officers used PAVA spray, a baton, and a Taser on Burgess, who was later handcuffed. He was taken to hospital and died three weeks later. The charges follow an investigation by the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC).