

Self-Defense – My Thoughts

By

David Kirk, February, 2010

Self-defense is one of the reasons many of us have handguns, yet it is a topic we rarely discuss and on which there isn't a lot of information, and some of the information that is available is bad. How does bad information circulate? Because bad information usually sounds logical and obvious. For example, there are many articles circulating that state you need to use the biggest caliber you can afford, preferably a 45ACP. Other articles indicate that you're legally safe to shoot anyone who breaks into your home. Don't bank on either. These short, over coffee, discussions on defense are rarely useful.

The problem with the issue of self-defense is that nothing is true all of the time and everything is wrong some of the time. This is a life-and-death issue and should never be discussed lightly or briefly. If self-defense is one of the reasons you own a handgun, you owe it to yourself and your family to gain as much information as possible and to visualize as many possible encounters as you can. Translation: Don't assume, just because you have a loaded handgun on your nightstand, that you're prepared to defend yourself in case of a break-in.

Having said the above, I will limit this article to some of the basics with a few side comments on my view of self-defense. In no way should you believe all of this (*nothing is true all of the time and everything is wrong some of the time*) or assume that, having read this, that you now are prepared for self-defense. Further, the issue of self-defense has so many different points-of-view that it shouldn't be too difficult to locate an article that disagrees with much of what I wrote. That's the situation with self-defense. However, I recommend that you consciously seek some quality material that goes more in-depth and that gives you more examples. One of the books I've read is *The Concealed Handgun Manual* by Chris Bird. I don't know if it's the best, but I found lots of good information there that I could use.

Minimize the Risk:

Your first responsibility is to minimize risk. True, that's not the macho thing to do, but it's the smartest. Are your exterior doors mostly glass, easily broken? Do you have dead bolts for all doors (which might also reduce your home insurance?) How about movement-sensitive lights for your yard? Also, subscribing to a service that places a sign in your yard and installs electronic surveillance equipment will be cheaper than that new custom 1911 pistol you've been drooling for... ☺

Visualize the Intruder/Attacker:

The individual who breaks into your home or who causes a life-threatening environment did not do it by accident; the person had been thinking about it for some time. The individual knows that it is a violent and illegal act and that prison or death could be the outcome. The individual may also know your comings and goings and know who is at home and where their bedrooms are.

Specifically, the intruder may know a lot about you and your family. In the movies, the intruder is a smart, calculating person with a mental win/lose matrix in their head on what

they want to achieve. In reality, the intruder may be stoned on drugs and no longer capable of assessing risk or making decisions. In short, you may have a near-crazy person to deal with. Regardless, the key issue here is to be cognizant of the intruder's role in the break-in. When confronting this person, you need to be able to make split-second decisions on your actions.

And, to further complicate life, that intruder/attacker may not have deadly force in mind at all, but may just be drunk or on drugs or in need of money to feed a family or primarily concerned with stealing some of your possessions for a quick sell. No, I'm not defending that person, but any use of your gun requires that deadly force be a concern; that you are fearful for your life. At least that's my take on the law — but I'm no lawyer.

Anticipate the Public Reaction:

Yes, a gun magazine will probably write an article about your self-defense experience and hail you as a champion, a hero and an outstanding citizen. Despite that, you will discover that there are others who believe that you are an instrument of the devil, uncivilized, and that the individual you shot was a misunderstood, opportunity-deprived citizen who was not responsible for his actions. Summary: you will not be a universal hero; just be thankful that you saved your life and protected your family.

Anticipate the Legal Aspect:

In the movies, the good guy shoots the bad guy, the sheriff shakes his hand, the good guy kisses the girl and the townspeople all celebrate. Don't bank on it. When the police arrive, they won't be sure of who is who. After all, there you are with a gun and police officers, for good reason, don't like such encounters. Further, you fired your gun because you felt your life was in danger. The challenge will now be to convince others, after the fact, that you were in danger; not an easy task.

So you need to anticipate that situation and how you plan to present yourself. The police don't know you and will likely handcuff you as standard operating procedure (nothing personal, you understand.) They may even put you in jail overnight while they sort things out. Not what you expect, is it? You defended your family and now you are being treated as a possible criminal. Understand, you did shoot someone and the police don't take that lightly. You will want legal representation, regardless. I have no legal training, but have some awareness that grand juries and wrongful death lawsuits can be expensive, even if you are deemed innocent. Life ain't easy sometimes.

Part of the legal problem is that you presumably have a pistol permit and may infer that this empowers you to **use** your legally registered handguns. Not true. That permit entitles you, basically, to **own** the registered guns. Shooting them is a different issue. Anytime you fire a round — yes, anytime — you are subject to the law. For example, many years ago my wife gave me a Crosman air rifle so I could do simple target practice in our back yard. Sound innocent enough? It's illegal.

Visualize the Environment:

Let's assume a house break-in. How many seconds do you have to react? Do you go seeking the intruder or wait? Are you prepared to squeeze the trigger as soon as you encounter the intruder? How many seconds can you afford to wait? How far away is the

intruder? If the intruder is 6 feet away, he can reach you in one second. Can you react that quickly? Do you expect the encounter to end after firing one shot? Are you prepared for the deafening sound and muzzle flash that disorients (and temporarily blinds you at night?) Is your family prepared? Are you prepared for the risk that the intruder may take your gun from you? If you shoot, might the round injure a neighbor? Was your life in danger when you fired a round or were you just frightened?

I have no answers to any of these for your situation, but they are questions for you to consider. Unlike the movies, there isn't a lot of dialogue and positioning and adjusting for camera angle; an encounter would be quick, loud, and dangerous and your ability to react appropriately is vital, whatever 'appropriately' is.

Okay, let's now assume a public encounter. You enter a retail store and see a person with a gun holding up the cashier. The assailant is facing away from you. Do you shoot? Are there others in the store? Is the cashier in the line of fire? Witnesses will see two people with guns; will they know which person is the good guy? Was your life in danger? Or was it the cashier whose life was in danger?

Virtually all public encounters will be problematic; not just this example. The key is that the encounter must make you feel that your life is in danger and that deadly force is necessary. The big challenge we face is that, just because we're carrying deadly force doesn't mean we're entitled to use it. Life ain't easy sometimes.

Consider the Gun:

Okay, you want to use a gun to protect you and your family. Please don't use caliber alone as the deciding element. Let's review several elements of guns and shooting....

Revolver or Autoloader: This debate will never end, and for good reason; self-defense is very situational and no one gun fits every situation. The advantages of the revolver are its inherent simplicity and its lower sensitivity to jamming or misfiring, whereas the autoloader can generally be purchased in smaller sizes with larger capacities for cartridges. Here is a simplistic summary, subject to infinite debate... ☺

FEATURE	REVOLVER	AUTOLOADER
Easy to confirm whether loaded	Yes	No
Simple to operate	Yes	No
Insensitive to jamming	Yes	No
Quick recovery from misfire	Yes	No
Highly reliable	More so	Less so
Fast reload	No	Yes
Easier to conceal/smaller size	Less so	More so
High cartridge capacity	Less	More

From the above table, one might draw the conclusion that revolvers may be more appropriate for home defense and autoloaders more appropriate for concealed carry. Regardless, these are issues to consider and if you have family members who might need to use the gun, consider the complexity of the gun. For example, that 1911 pistol you love might sing and dance in your hands, but be confusing to your spouse who will be

challenged to know whether it's loaded or not. Always remember that one cause of gun injuries are accidents to family members.

Single-Action, Double-Action, or Double-Action-Only: Experienced individuals may prefer the single-action, but having it at the ready for self-defense requires that it be cocked-and-locked, a situation that may be dangerous to family members. Another concern for single-action is that there is little trigger effort required to fire the shot, possibly causing the gun to be fired prematurely.

A safer bet is to have a gun that works in double-action mode as you will be less likely to shoot before making a decision to do so. My preference is for double-action-only as that ensures that every trigger pull will be identical, very important when in a stress situation. And, I classify Glocks as DAO because part of the trigger pull puts tension on the striker and the remainder of the trigger pull releases the striker, functioning as a DAO.

Cartridge or Shotshell? With Taurus's Judge revolver, this is a new option that many may not be giving appropriate consideration. The Judge offers a choice between .410 shotshells and/or .45 long colt ammunition. Although I haven't had the opportunity to shoot a Judge, it appears to offer the facility to avoid peripheral damage or over-penetration and, when using shotshells, should have a higher probability of striking the assailant on the first shot. This gun is a compromise, but may be the perfect handgun for self-defense in close quarters, such as the home or apartment. Although initially a single offering, Taurus now offers a variety of the Judge model.

Calibre: Yes, a 50 calibre gun will have more punch than a 9MM, but this is only one aspect of gun selection. If we follow that line of reasoning, then a surplus bazooka would be even better. If your priority is to "get the biggest gun" then you need to be able to manage that gun in the worst situations you will ever encounter. Will others in your family be able to handle such fire-power? Can you? Shooting at a gun range is one thing, but firing a cannon in your bedroom is a different issue entirely. And your ear drums may not survive. Pick a gun you can handle in emergencies. Always remember that your goal is to STOP the intruder/aggressor; not kill him/her. Even a .22 or .32 calibre can be effective if you can handle it quickly and control it. (I do have a concern for .22 handguns, and I'll mention that shortly.)

Accuracy: We're not talking target-shooting here; we're talking life-preservation. This is no game. If you have to shoot, it will likely be at a distance of less than 10 feet. Yet, statistics indicate that most shots of self-defense MISS THE TARGET at that 10 foot range. Remember, your adrenalin is on overdrive and you're frightened more than you've ever been in your life. You may practice often with bullseye targets, but that is irrelevant to the issue of facing an intruder who intends to do you mischief. You will NEVER have time to use the sights on the handgun and any attempt to do so just puts you at a disadvantage. You need a new strategy for self-defense. (Reminder: Practicing quick-draw-and-shoot techniques is explicitly not allowed at the SPC ranges.)

Accuracy and caliber are obviously linked. If the gun is too big, control may be lost and you may also hesitate a second or two before firing that cannon indoors and those may be seconds you can't afford to give up. Once you decide to shoot, your first shot needs to

strike the intruder/attacker. And you must be prepared to fire again, and maybe again, until the intruder stops. Stopping is the goal.

Your Body: Having a gun in your hand is fine, but your body position and how you're holding the gun is important. I remember watching cowboy movies where the hero holds the gun at his waist and shoots the gun from the hand of the bad guy. Let's get real. That strategy won't work, not now, not ever. You have to shoot to STOP the intruder. The gun must be held up where you can see it and clearly pointed at the intruder, finger on trigger and prepared to shoot immediately. Any delay if the intruder is within 10-20 feet could cause the gun to end up in the intruder's hand.

Practice: Yes, **this is key**. You need to shoot your defense handgun **often**. At a minimum, you should fire at least 200+ rounds, of which at least 100 rounds should be your chosen defense ammunition, before using the gun for defense. You should also ensure that you fire that gun with at least 50+ rounds every month. Your skill in shooting that gun needs to be continually tested and you and that gun need to bond as one. The gun must be rock-solid, reliable and as trustworthy as your best friend — because in a self-defense situation it will be your ONLY friend.

Cleanliness: You want the gun to function? Then you need to clean it EVERY time you use it. Yes, take it apart, clean it thoroughly. Treat it with the love it deserves. That gun will be the only friend you have if you ever need it. Telling yourself that "I'll clean it tomorrow" may be one day late.

Select Your Ammunition:

This ties, obviously, to your choice of gun.

First, self-defense ammunition is pricey. Such ammunition will likely cost more than twice as much (or more) than target ammunition and it's worth every penny. Do NOT attempt to save money by relying on target ammo or reloaded ammo for self-defense. They work, but if the chips are down, you need effective and reliable ammo (Note: Your reloads may be good, but their use may have legal implications.) Also, buy U.S. ammunition; it's the best there is. Generally speaking, self-defense ammunition will be some form of hollow-point configuration. Many cartridges designed for self-defense have a +P designation, which will certainly increase the muzzle flash and sound and will have a heck of a kick. Can you control that? Will you take the effort to practice 100+ rounds of this self-punishment?

Second, this will be ammunition that may be used in an environment that is close to innocent people. It is not unusual for 9MM or 45ACP ammo to go hundreds of yards beyond the intended target, possibly injuring innocent bystanders who are far removed from where the incident occurs. If you anticipate that your use of a self-defense handgun may be in close quarters, such as an apartment house or a home, you owe it to yourself to investigate ammo that is less sensitive to causing peripheral damage.

An excellent source for ammunition that minimizes peripheral damage is <http://www.dakotaammo.net/> and their Glazer Safety Slug is explicitly designed for that role. However, expect to pay for six (6) rounds what you normally pay for a box of 50 target rounds. Can you afford that? Better yet, can you NOT afford that? Having

ammunition that is designed for minimal impact on innocent people may pay you back a thousand-fold in case of any legal action. You need to buy the very best ammunition you can afford, not just for its safety to innocent people, but for its reliability.

Third, good self-defense ammunition may have feed problems, demanding that you test the ammo, despite its price, through many rounds to gain the confidence you need. Just because you've fired 5,000 rounds of target ammo through your gun doesn't mean that your gun won't choke on your new self-defense ammo. To feel confident, I suggest firing a hundred or more rounds of the self-defense ammo,

Some Ammunition Comments:

If you use the Taurus Judge, both Federal and Winchester have released .410 shotshells designed expressly for handgun self defense. The Federal shotshell contains four 000 buckshot and the Winchester contains three 000 buckshot plus some smaller shot. Since these were designed for self-defense, I encourage that you try them and see where the shot pattern falls for your gun. For close distances, you want a tight pattern.

I already mentioned the Glazer Safety Slug, but Dakota Ammo also sells Cor-Bon self-defense ammo. There are other brands, I'm sure, but this should give you a place to start.

Earlier, I shared a concern for .22 handguns for self-defense. Obviously, a bigger gun will deliver a bigger bullet, but using hyper-velocity hollow-points, such as the CCI Viper, will help. Rimfire ammunition isn't as reliable as centerfire, so always buy top-of-the line ammo.

Summary:

As I mentioned, I'm no lawyer so don't use my observations as legal advice. However, laws are intentionally vague on this issue, so I would avoid any advice that appears black-and-white; it's always going to be grey.

And, we have a number of quality, respectable and honorable club members who have Federal Firearms Licenses or who otherwise deal in gun-related products. If you're looking for special ammunition or a particular gun, I recommend contacting one of them instead of a website. From my personal experience, I get better information and more options and real answers. They've been in business for years and years and their presence and involvement are benefits we enjoy by being club members. (No, that's not an advertisement; I'm not in the business.)

If you want to discuss any of this, please use our club FORUM. Or you can write to me at dskirk at usa dot net.