

Discharge of firearms

This page is from APP, the official source of professional practice for policing.

First published 23 October 2013 Updated 25 March 2021

Written by College of Policing

7 mins read

The primary intention of the police, when discharging a firearm, is to prevent an immediate threat to life by shooting to stop the subject from carrying out their intended or threatened course of action. In most circumstances, this is achieved by aiming to strike the central body mass (the torso).

Where it is imperative that the subject is immediately incapacitated (for example, if about to detonate a person-borne IED), then an aim to strike the head or central nervous system may be considered.

For further information see APP on [weapons and equipment](#).

Accuracy of shot

Research indicates that the accuracy of shots fired under training conditions is generally greater than in operational circumstances. Police officers are normally trained to discharge conventional firearms at the largest part of the subject they can see, in order to increase the likelihood of striking the body and achieving the intended effect of neutralising the threat posed. In most cases, this will be the central body mass.

Physical response

The physical response to a person having been shot is unpredictable – there are a range of physical and psychological moderators which can contribute to the nature and extent of any response. Only shots striking the central nervous system (which is largely located in the brain and spinal cord) and the major organs (which are contained in the upper body) are likely to result in rapid incapacitation.

Conventional shot

The primary intention of the police, when discharging a firearm, is to prevent an immediate threat to life by shooting to stop the subject from carrying out their intended or threatened course of action. In most circumstances, this is achieved by aiming to strike the central body mass (the torso) and is known as a 'conventional shot'. However, if – for example – only the head of the subject is visible and a shot must immediately be discharged in order to prevent an immediate threat to life, then the authorised firearms officer (AFO) will have no option but to aim at and strike the only part of the body of the subject which is then visible, namely the head. A conventional shot should only be fired when absolutely necessary in self-defence or in defence of another when there is an immediate risk to life from unlawful violence and where the circumstances are not such as to require the immediate incapacitation of that subject by a critical shot.

Critical shot

There will be circumstances when aiming directly for the head or central nervous system will be necessary, as aiming to strike another part of the body would:

- be impractical in the circumstances
- present increased risk to life
- be unlikely to achieve immediate incapacitation

A 'critical shot' is a shot or shots intended to immediately incapacitate the subject. A critical shot should only be fired when absolutely necessary in defence of a person when there is an imminent and extreme risk to life from unlawful violence. A critical shot is a shot or shots to the head, if possible, or otherwise to the central nervous system or major organs.

In most circumstances, all of the information required to justify the discharge of a conventional or critical shot will be available to an AFO. In these circumstances, command authorisation is not necessary or appropriate. Such command authority may only be appropriate in very specific circumstances where the AFO does not have access to decisive information, and a commander does but is unable to share it (see access to decisive information).

Discharge of less lethal weapons

Alternative points of aim will be appropriate for approved less lethal weapons in accordance with weapon-specific guidelines. Where alternative points of aim and intended points of impact are

referenced in the guidelines, the purpose is normally to minimise the risk of unintentional effects or potentially lethal injuries, and to maximise the effectiveness of the weapons system.

Threat to life

When it is considered necessary to discharge a firearm at a subject, police officers need to shoot to stop an imminent threat to life. The imminence of any threat should be judged, in respect of the potential for loss of life, with due regard paid to legislation and consideration of absolute necessity, reasonableness and proportionality.

When an AFO decides to discharge a firearm, the number and sequencing of rounds fired will depend on the circumstances that exist at the time. Officers must constantly assess the threat posed by the subject and the continuance of that threat. Officers must be able to demonstrate that the degree of force used was absolutely necessary and relative to the threat posed. The use of excessive force is strictly prohibited.

The discharge of firearms by police may not necessarily result in the death of a subject. Every effort must, therefore, be taken by police to provide medical assistance.

Accountability for all rounds fired

AFOs are accountable for all the rounds that they discharge and they should be aimed so as to minimise risk (either directly or by ricochet) to any person other than the subject.

Where, in exceptional circumstances, a round is discharged towards a defined area for a specific purpose (for instance, 'containing fire') but it is not intended to strike a person, officers must take account of potential unintentional harm being caused as a consequence. This could also include death or serious injury of a person not in the immediate proximity. AFOs should not discharge intentionally harmless ('warning') shots with the intention of gaining compliance or to encourage a subject to stop what they are doing.

Officers should be aware that any discharge of a firearm may lead a subject or other officer to believe that they are under fire.

Moving vehicles

The circumstances in which it will be necessary for police officers to fire at, or from, moving vehicles are operationally rare. There may, however, be situations where life is at risk and the only course of action available is to engage a subject in, or from, a moving vehicle, or to fire at a vehicle in order to immobilise it (for example, where a vehicle is being deliberately used as a weapon by the driver with the intention of injuring or killing people).

In such circumstances, the inherent risks (see considerations when taking action) must be balanced against the likelihood that the action taken will prevent the loss or further loss of life. If such a course of action is deemed absolutely necessary, officers must be aware of the potential consequences and their responsibilities to the public.

For further information see APP on [vehicle stopping and immobilisation devices](#).

Shooting at moving vehicles

Firearms should not be discharged at a moving vehicle simply because it has failed to stop when directed, or to immobilise the vehicle, unless there is intelligence to support such action. Where the nature of the threat warrants the use of firearms to immobilise a moving vehicle and/or its driver, AFOs should consider the following.

- Their capability and the capability and limitations of their firearms and ammunition.
- The construction of modern vehicles means that shots are unlikely to be effective in immobilising the vehicle and there may be real danger of ricochet.
- Rounds may over-penetrate the vehicle, causing danger to innocent persons.
- If the driver is killed or injured, there is a high risk of the vehicle going out of control.
- When bullets, especially those from high-velocity weapons, strike the windows or bodywork of a motor vehicle, a flash may be produced which may resemble the muzzle flash of a weapon, thereby potentially causing officers to believe that they are being fired at. The same effect could be produced when a high-velocity bullet strikes the window of a building or other solid matter.

Shooting from moving vehicles

Firing a weapon while moving is likely to be less accurate than when done from a static and stable platform. Where the nature of the threat warrants the discharge of a police firearm from a moving vehicle, AFOs should consider the likelihood of any round missing its intended target and the increased risk to others in proximity to the subject(s).

Where the subject is also in a moving vehicle, there is clearly an increased likelihood of a round missing its target, of failing to achieve the intended effect and of greater risk to those in relative proximity to the subject.

Tags

Armed policing