



THE RAND CORP. STUDY OF NYPD HANDGUN TRAINING

The New York Police Department (NYPD), and other Police Agencies large and small, issue handguns to Officers for use in protecting the Officers and the public. And each year millions of tax dollars are spent on Agency firearm facilities, firearms, and firearms training.

The Officers are trained to shoot, but not how to shoot effectively in life threat situations, which is closely akin to sending soldiers into battle with guns but no bullets. And beyond the cost in dollars spent, is the greater cost of Officers injured or killed and the damage done to their families, plus the added costs of: collateral damages, disability pensions, replacements, legal actions, and etc. that flow from this state of affairs.

BACKGROUND

In January 2007, the NYPD paid the RAND Corporation to examine the firearm-training program of its force of about 37,000 Officers. The examination resulted in a 2008 report which details a variety of training issues, and gives recommendations for improvement.

One issue identified, is the clear disconnect between shooting effectiveness when in training and when on the job. And that issue, which can have life or death consequences, is not addressed specifically with a recommendation.

The following focuses on the disconnect as detailed in the report. Also included is information on practical shooting methods, which are said to be equally effective both on the range and on the street. And they can be taught within the time and range constraints placed on students and instructors.

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Firearm incidents get major play in the press. However, what does not get publicity, is that those incidents are relatively rare. Per the RAND report, it is statistically unlikely that an Officer will discharge his or her weapon during his or her entire career on the Police force.

For example: during 2006, only 156 Officers out of the force of some 37,000, were involved in a firearm-discharge incident. And fewer than half of those incidents involved an Officer shooting at a human being. Most involved Officers shooting at dogs.

Also, according to the Department of Justice (DOJ): "of the 43.5 million persons who had contact with Police in 2005, an estimated 1.6% had force used or threatened against them, a rate that was nearly the same as in 2002 (1.5%)."

The rarity of incidents might be a reason for not doing much if anything about them administratively. However, for the participants, they are deadly serious and personal. And if one goes badly, it can become a public relations nightmare for an Agency.

Per the report, firearms training has increased dramatically over the past 100 years, as has the quality of weapons carried. **But on average, there appears to have been very little improvement in the ability of Officers to hit their targets during the rare firearms incident.**

The average hit rate for NYPD Officers involved in a gunfight between 1998 and 2006 was 18 percent. For every five shots, four bullets missed the intended target and went somewhere else. And that hit rate is consistent with the "normal" hit rate in armed encounters which hasn't changed much for years and years.

The average hit rate for Officers who shot at subjects who did not return fire, was 30 percent. Officers hit their targets 37 percent of the time at distances of seven yards or less. And hit rates fell off sharply to 23 percent at longer ranges.

Also, Officers in gunfights fired 7.6 rounds on average, compared with an average of 3.5 rounds for Officers who fired against subjects who did not return fire. **And most Officers have firearms with a capacity of well over 7 rounds, plus extra magazines.**

FBI statistics show that life threat incidents happen at very close ranges. Between 1989 and 1998, of the 682 local, state, and federal law-enforcement Officers in the United States who died because of criminal action, **nearly 75 percent (509) received fatal wounds while within 10 feet of their assailants.**

Now, if you are wondering about the hit rates, and why they are so low, you need to understand that there is a "twilight zone" of sorts in the world of the gun, where reality is intertwined with tales like The Emperor's New Clothes.

Where else would you find job performance scores of 18, 23, 30, and 37 percent in life or death matters, to not result in a 911 call for all the King's horses and all the King's men.

The disconnect between on the range performance and on the street performance, is the long standing elephant in the room, and about which nothing much has been done other than recognize its existence. For years, the very low hit rate was attributed to error on the part of Officers.

During the 1970's a long term and in-depth study of NYPD Police combat cases, produced findings in line with those of the RAND study. It is known as the NYPD SOP 9.

THE TRAINING LOAD

The NYPD Police Academy trains, approximately 4,000 recruits each year in two classes of about 2,000 recruits each. Included are two weeks of firearm and tactical training that includes handgun qualification. **A minimum of 78 percent hits on a number of stationary targets from fixed firing positions is required to qualify.**

There also are semiannual firearm qualifications which include a two-part lecture, practice fire of 45 rounds of ammunition at stationary targets at 7-, 15-, and 25-yard distances, **un-scored**

practice on a tactical pistol course, and **qualification** firing of 50 rounds at stationary targets at 7-, 15-, and 25-yard distances. **A minimum of 39 hits is required to qualify (78 percent).**

A comparison of the qualification requirement with on the street hit rates, clearly shows a disconnect between them.

Per the report, the firearm-qualification program is less about making sure Officers can effectively use their pistols in real-life situations, than it is about meeting legal requirements and professional standards.

And while the qualification course meets the standards required by the state of New York, and it is consistent with national norms, shooting at paper targets on a known-distance range is basically just target practice.

Also, the handgun qualification process implies that qualifying Officers are proficient, but a consensus among Police firearms trainers, is that the training does not substantially enhance Officer or community safety.

Steps have been taken to make shooting training more realistic, including firing at moving targets, firing from cover and crouched positions, moving to different firing positions and distances plus firing from each, firing in pairs, and firing after exertion. However, it is impractical time and resource wise, to provide that training to all Officers. **And those exercises are not scored.**

A SOLUTION

Hopefully, the time is near when tax dollars and employee time will no longer be frittered away on training and qualifying that has little relationship to on the job incidents.

Bill Burroughs, in his paper of several years ago: Components and Considerations for Combat Shooting, said that "Shooters miss at close ranges because of faulty, incomplete and, yes, negligent training."

He also said that combat shooting is actually quite simple and anyone can learn it.

In a span of less than two hours and with shooting fewer than 100 rounds of ammunition, an Officer can be taught The Applegate System method and reproduce it during periods of stress. And marksmanship levels are high inside the distances where the method was designed to be used - close quarters.

Bruce K. Siddle, in his 2000 paper: The Science of Combat Point Shooting, said that Barron and Beasley had trained more than 500 students in the Applegate System of Point Shooting. And that scores increased to 95% and higher, from 90-95% on the static firing line.

More importantly, students maintained the simple Point Shooting system when they participated in stress induced dynamic training exercises. Barron attributed the improvement to the simplicity of the Applegate System.

Now, just because something appears to be very simple, practical, and doable, and just because it holds the promise of improving the safety of Officers and the public, and providing tangible returns for millions of tax dollars now being spent, does not mean it will happen.

In the world of the gun, such things are squelched by professional standards, legal requirements, tradition, and competitive shooting results.

The powers that be, like doing things in traditional ways. And they defend them with the zeal of true believers.

The URL for the RAND Corporation report in PDF form is
http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG717.pdf. [This is a link to it.](#)

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