

Caliber Selection

As a firearms instructor, I always enjoy teaching beginners. I typically get a lot of couples and families who sign up for beginners classes. Invariably, the question always comes up, “what is the best gun,” or “what is the best caliber?” Of course, the answer is “it depends.” That’s like asking, what is the best mode of transportation?

These first-time shooters are actually asking a very good question and with good reason. In the case of a couple or a family, the primary concern is most often personal protection inside the home or outside the home. The rule of thumb was generally to use the largest caliber gun with the greatest capacity you can comfortably handle. With the recent advances in bullet engineering, the 9mm x 19 cartridge is considered the best choice for a defensive pistol. While larger calibers exist, the 9mm x 19 provides the best penetration and the largest magazine capacity.

Discussions about pistol cartridge selection for personal defense, so often someone remarks that many people have been killed with .22 caliber bullets. While true, this is not the purpose of defensive shooting.

The purpose of a firearm for a defensive shooter is not to kill an attacker. The purpose of the defensive pistol is to stop an attack as soon as is humanly possible. While small calibers are capable of causing death, it may be many hours or days after the person has been shot.

Armed citizens do not deploy their defensive firearms unless they are justified in using deadly force. Remember, the goal here is stopping, not killing. We want the attack to stop as quickly as possible. Sub-caliber (smaller than 9mm x 19 or .38 Special) bullets may well stop an attacker and cause death, but will likely take some time for this to occur. We may have a few seconds. This is not the movies or television. To put this in perspective, the gunfight at the OK Corral occurred in about 30 seconds and some 30 shots were fired. How many shots can criminals get off and how many people can they injure in just a few minutes before they succumb to their wounds?

Bullets stop a person because they damage the human body. Deep penetration and the width of the wound channel in the vital zone are what bring an attack to an end and with the least amount of danger to the innocent people. For this reason, informed defensive shooters select a defensive handgun caliber. Defensive shooters will carry a load with a dependable expanding bullet that is also powerful enough to penetrate to the vital area.

We shoot to the vital zone with an adequate defensive caliber in order to stop the attack now. If, during the criminal attack, the perps lose their life, this is a by-product of their felonious choices. However, killing them is not, and should not, be our goal. We want them to stop their attack. We want them to stop their attack as soon as possible. It takes a good deal of power to accomplish this task. Light calibers simply cannot be expected to do this quickly in a regular basis.

When routine concealed carry is not a primary concern, then the size of the gun is less of an issue. Basic physics teaches us that force (the amount of energy a bullet carries when fired) is the result of the mass of an object (the weight of the bullet) multiplied by the acceleration (speed in feet per second of the bullet).

The more force a bullet has, the harder it hits, the more it penetrates and the more it transfers force—all good and necessary for personal protection. However, the second rule of Newtonian physics teaches us that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. In other words, the more force a bullet has going forward the more force the gun has going backward (recoil).

The more mass a gun has, the less acceleration (perceived recoil) a particular cartridge will produce. So, in home defense, a full-size gun helps recoil-sensitive shooters handle more powerful calibers with a higher level of comfort and accuracy.

The second concern is the catch, however. Guns constitute a significant expense for many people, and in these tough times, a family may not be able to or be interested in purchasing different guns for each family member. One gun in one caliber may often have to fit the needs of everyone in the household.

Focusing on just the most popular personal-protection calibers, presented here are some of their differences and their relative strengths.

Special Note: What about the .22 LR, +P ammunition and expanding bullets? The .22 Long Rifle, or .22 LR, cartridge is everywhere. It is super cheap, fun and easy to shoot with almost no recoil. However, while it is perfectly lethal, and any gun is better than no gun, it does not produce enough energy to reliably stop a threat in short order and is not considered suitable for self-defense. It is, however, excellent for target practice, and if more than one gun is in your budget, a .22 for training would make a good choice.

Most ammunition manufacturers sell cartridges in all calibers designed specifically for personal protection. These are intended to provide the maximum energy for a given cartridge and use bullets that will produce the most effective terminal performance. Ammunition can be found in standard pressure varieties as well as +P or +P+, which produce higher-than-standard pressure and velocity. This higher-pressure ammunition should only be used in guns rated to handle the extra forces, and it will produce more recoil.

Likewise, the shape and weight of the bullet affects both terminal energy and performance. A heavier bullet carries more force but is slower, and velocity has a much higher multiplier effect on force than does mass. Most self-defense ammunition is designed to expand on impact in order to have the maximum effect on the target. It is for this reason that different types of expanding ammunition are so popular with law enforcement, as well as those interested in personal protection.

.38 Special: This cartridge is considered by many experts to be the minimum revolver caliber necessary for adequate personal protection. For decades, this was the standard round for law enforcement and it served well, even using the plain round-nose lead ammunition. Anyone who chooses this soft-kicking cartridge today will be even better served thanks to the availability of specialized self-defense ammunition.

.357 Mag.: As the name implies, this is a powerful cartridge with a reputation for producing one shot stops against two-legged predators. That power runs both ways and it can be tough to handle for some. One notable benefit here is that, since this is just a .38 Spl. with a slightly longer case and a lot more power, revolvers chambered for .357 Mag. can be loaded with .38 Spl. for recoil-sensitive family members. The reverse, however, does not apply.

.380 ACP: Long popular for small semi-auto pistols in Europe and countries where possession of military calibers is restricted, the .380 ACP (or 9 mm Short, 9mmK, 9mm Kurz, 9mm Browning – 9x17) cartridge has taken the US by storm in recent years. This is thanks to the increased popularity of concealed carry and the ability of this cartridge to fit very small guns. This is still considered a sub-caliber self-defense cartridge, even with today's specialized self-defense ammunition. While it was carried for decades by European police officers, this was considered ceremonial as their primary defensive firearm was a rifle. Most famously, it was carried by James Bond in the Walther PPK. Since nearly every small pocket guns are available now in the 9mm x 19 cartridge, the 9 x 17 cartridge has no advantages but has several disadvantages.

9 mm (9x19): Considered the perennial European cartridge, the 9mm is fast, straight shooting, light kicking, easy to find and cheap to shoot. It is equally at home in full-size guns as in small concealed-carry ones. It is for these reasons that this 9 x 19 has widespread use among modern law enforcement agencies and militaries (including ours) worldwide. It is the best for self-defense with proper ammunition and easy for beginners to master. The .9mm is a favorite among most law enforcement agencies and individuals focused on self-defense, and for good reason. AKA 9mm Luger, 9mm para, 9mm Parabellum.

.40 S&W: Is it better to have big, powerful rounds or more of them? This is America, so why not both? The .40 S&W cartridge is a less-powerful version of the 10 mm, and it offers heavy bullets with a sufficient velocity. For a time it was used by law enforcement, recent advances in bullet technology have shifted agencies back to the 9mm x 19 since the 9mm has comparable or better ballistic qualities, as well as increased magazine capacity.

.357 SIG: First introduced in 1994, the .357 Sig caliber was SIG's answer to a cartridge to bridge the gap between an anemic 9mm x19 and the .45 ACP. Due to several factors, including the bottleneck case, it never gained mainstream popularity. This is an excellent caliber, however snappy recoil and higher prices due to being more a specialty round than a mainstream round.

10 MM: The 10mm also was to bridge the gap between the 9mm x19 and the .45 ACP round. Initially the FBI adopted this cartridge, but soon dismissed the 10mm due to excessive recoil and hard for many agents to control the pistol. The 10mm round has begun a resurgence recently and many people are appreciating this well engineered cartridge. Being a specialty round when the market demand is so small and being a much heavier bullet, pricing will be much higher than similar 9mm x19 ammunition.

.45 ACP: This is the American cartridge: big, loud and powerful. Nearly half an inch in diameter, hollow-point ammunition resembles a flying ashtray as much as a bullet can. This heavy, slow-moving cartridge was the standard for the U.S. military for over 70 years and served on every battlefield (and still does) where Americans have fought. While it has stout recoil, it feels more like a push than a jab, and with practice, it is manageable by most and preferred by many. Unfortunately the diminished capacity of the .45 makes it take a back seat to the 9mm x19 cartridge.

In the end, the key is to get out to the range and try out a variety of guns and calibers to find the one you like best. Just like buying a car, if you are only getting one to share, it is always best to test drive it and make it a family decision.



.45 ACP, 10MM, .40 S&W, 9X19

