Less-Lethal Force Selection

Version 1.0 · Current · October 2026

What It Is

Less-lethal force is force that is not intended or expected to cause death, though it may cause serious injury. The term does not mean safe, harmless, or automatically appropriate – it means the mechanism of injury is different from conventional penetrating ballistic trauma, and the expected lethality is lower under normal deployment conditions. Injury can still be severe, and death has occurred following deployment of every major less-lethal technology.

Less-lethal options are not a single category. They differ in effective range, mechanism, incapacitation reliability, injury potential, and what happens when they fail. In edged-weapon encounters specifically, the most important variable is often the timing constraint: a less-lethal option that requires two seconds to deploy and may fail on the first attempt has a different risk profile against a contained, stationary subject than against one advancing rapidly at close range.

The Selection Framework

Less-lethal force selection is not progression along a continuum. The relevant question is whether a given option can reasonably be expected to resolve the threat within the available time and tactical conditions, and whether the expected harm from that option is proportionate to the threat. Three variables govern this:

Distance. Each less-lethal option has a functional range. Below that range it may be unavailable, unsafe, or ineffective. Above it, it may not deploy or may deploy unreliably. Officers who allow distance to close have not merely lost a tactical advantage – they may have physically eliminated the less-lethal options that distance made available.

Timing. In a rapidly evolving encounter, the available response window may be shorter than the time required to deploy a less-lethal option and assess its effect. If a CEW deployment fails against an advancing knife-armed subject at 12 feet, the officer may have no safe interval to redeploy or to transition to another option before the subject reaches striking range.

Failure mode. Every less-lethal option has failure modes. The operational question is what happens when it fails. A failed OC deployment against a contained subject is different from a failed CEW deployment against a subject who is already within arm's reach.

Conducted Energy Weapon

The CEW (including TASER-family devices) is the primary distance less-lethal option in most edged-weapon contexts because it can be deployed from outside effective knife range and, when it achieves neuromuscular incapacitation, can prevent coordinated voluntary movement.

How it works. In probe mode, two probes establish an electrical circuit through the body and stimulate motor nerves, producing involuntary skeletal-muscle contraction – neuromuscular incapacitation (NMI). The intended effect is temporary loss of coordinated voluntary movement. In contact/drive-stun mode, the device produces localized pain but substantially less whole-body NMI.

What the evidence shows. CEW use is associated with reduced injury to both officers and subjects compared to encounters involving direct physical force, though effects are context-dependent and agency-dependent. The presence of a CEW also appears to alter officer and subject behavior, and some studies have found increases in overall force frequency when CEWs are introduced – a "weapons effect" that may reflect changed thresholds for when force is initiated.

The edged-weapon timing problem. CEWs were not designed specifically for edged-weapon encounters. A successful probe deployment requires distance for probe spread, time for the electrical cycle to achieve NMI, and further time for behavioral compliance to follow. Against a subject advancing at a run at 15 feet, the full sequence – deploy, achieve NMI, observe effect, reassess – may exceed the available time window. The relevant operational question is not whether a CEW would work in principle, but whether it can work in the specific available time and at the specific available distance.

NMI and knife retention. A successful CEW deployment is designed to impair voluntary motor control – which means a subject in active NMI may be physically unable to release a knife they are holding. Knife retention during an electrical cycle is not necessarily deliberate refusal to comply; it may reflect the intervention working as designed on the muscles involved. This distinction matters for how compliance and threat status are assessed during and immediately after CEW deployment.

Incomplete effect. Probe miss, insufficient probe spread, clothing interference, or partial contact can produce incomplete NMI. One probe in the body and one caught in clothing is a common failure mode. Officers who deploy a CEW and achieve only partial effect are in a more dangerous position than those who didn't deploy at all if the subject is already within knife range.

Handheld Impact Weapon (Baton)

The baton requires direct physical contact to be effective, which means deployment places the officer within or near the range at which a knife can cause serious injury. In most edged-weapon encounters, this is the central constraint on baton utility.

A baton can contribute to an edged-weapon response in specific circumstances: when the officer is already in close contact and disengagement is not available, when another officer is positioned to assist, or when the goal is interrupting a specific limb or movement rather than achieving general incapacitation. As a primary response option against a knife-armed subject at distance, however, it forces the officer to voluntarily close the gap the subject would need to cross to cause serious injury.

Injury rates in baton encounters are higher than for CEW or OC spray. Studies have found subject injury rates ranging from approximately 4% to 80% across different force contexts, with a weighted rate around 30% in comparative research. A baton strike to the head can constitute deadly force in its own right given the risk of serious neurological injury.

Police Service Dog

A police service dog can close distance rapidly, locate concealed subjects, and physically apprehend without requiring officers to enter contact range. These capabilities make it potentially relevant to edged-weapon encounters in a way that the baton is not.

The central limitation is injury severity. A bite causes physical injury in essentially every successful deployment – puncture, laceration, tearing, and in some cases vascular or structural damage. This is not a failure mode; it is the mechanism. Bites requiring emergency treatment occur frequently, and hospitalization is not rare. The K9's value proposition in high-risk encounters is that it may prevent a more dangerous outcome (firearm use or officer injury), but it does so through an intervention that routinely causes serious physical harm.

Training philosophy matters substantially. Research comparing bite-and-hold versus find-and-bark systems has found that training model affects bite frequency and injury rates across agencies – agencies that adopted stricter controls saw sharp reductions in bite-patient presentations. The K9 should therefore not be treated as a fixed-risk technology; agency policy and training determine a significant portion of its injury profile.

Extended-Range Options

Extended-range impact weapons (kinetic impact munitions, bean-bag rounds, rubber bullets) and extended-range chemical weapons allow force to be applied from distances where a CEW might not deploy reliably or where approach is tactically unfavorable. Their effective range varies significantly by projectile type, and injury severity from impact munitions at close range can be substantial. They are most commonly deployed in situations where some distance and time are available – not in the seconds-compressed dynamic of a rapid close-range advance.

Chemical agents (OC spray, CS, CN) require the subject to be affected before behavioral change occurs, and onset is not instantaneous. Cross-contamination at close range affects officers as well as subjects. Against a subject in severe behavioral crisis or under significant intoxicants, effectiveness may be substantially reduced.

Shields as a Bridge Option

A ballistic or riot shield does not itself resolve a knife-armed encounter, but it changes the geometry – inserting a physical barrier that must be navigated before the weapon can reach the officer. This buys time and may make other options available. A capture shield, designed for close-range physical control in confined spaces, goes further: it is intended to help a team close distance deliberately, maintain contact, and physically control a person.

Shield use in patrol police contexts is not standard practice, and the evidence base for shield-plus-team tactics in edged-weapon encounters is very thin. The strongest analogue is corrections practice, where entry teams routinely use shields against inmates who may have edged weapons in confined environments. That model – coordinated team, hard barrier, physical capture – has not been systematically studied in police patrol contexts, but the design logic is directly relevant.

The Less-Lethal Decision in Edged-Weapon Encounters

The relevant question is not whether a less-lethal option should be tried before lethal force but whether a less-lethal option can reasonably be expected to resolve the threat within the tactical conditions of this specific encounter. That assessment depends on:

- current distance and rate of closure
- whether the subject is advancing, stationary, or contained
- available cover and room for repositioning
- whether time exists to deploy, assess effect, and respond to failure
- whether other officers are positioned to provide backup or cover
- whether a civilian is at immediate risk and cannot tolerate a delay for less-lethal attempt

A contained, stationary subject at sufficient distance is a very different situation from a subject who has already crossed the 15-foot threshold and is accelerating. Less-lethal options are most viable in the first scenario. In the second, the question is whether the available option can reliably stop the threat before the failure mode becomes fatal.

The Constitution does not require less-lethal attempts before lethal force in every case – the legal question is whether the force used was objectively reasonable given the threat and the circumstances, not whether a less-lethal option was available somewhere nearby. But policy can and often does impose a higher standard, and operationally, officers who fail to consider and preserve less-lethal options through their distance and positioning decisions frequently find themselves in situations where those options are no longer feasible.

Policy Implications

1. Match less-lethal training to edged-weapon contexts specifically. Generic less-lethal training covers deployment mechanics. Training for edged-weapon encounters requires training on timing constraints, minimum deployment distances, failure modes, and decision-making under rapid threat development.
2. Preserve less-lethal options through positioning. An officer who has closed to contact range cannot use a CEW effectively. Maintaining distance is not merely a de-escalation tactic – it is the precondition for less-lethal options to remain viable.
3. Train for CEW failure against an armed subject. The scenario in which a probe deploys, achieves partial effect, and the subject continues advancing is predictable and should be a standard training scenario rather than an unexpected outcome. Officers who have only trained for successful deployments have not trained for the decision that actually matters.
4. Capture shield tactics are a gap in most patrol-officer training. For encounters where containment and time allow it, a coordinated shield-plus-team approach may offer a way to resolve an edged-weapon encounter without lethal force that is not currently part of most agencies' patrol-level less-lethal repertoire.

HOW TO CITE

Edged-Weapon Response Lab. (2026). *Less-Lethal Force Selection*. In *EWRL Evidence Library* (Version 1.0). https://droptheknife.org/bulletins/less_lethal_force_selection (https://droptheknife.org/bulletins/less_lethal_force_selection)