Pistol

Version 1.0 · Current · October 2026 · Codebook variable: `I_Pistol`

Definition

A duty pistol is a service handgun routinely carried by an officer as the primary immediately accessible conventional firearm. It is typically carried on the officer, available without returning to a vehicle or specialist equipment, compact relative to long guns, and intended for use across circumstances in which an officer may unexpectedly confront a lethal threat.

This platform profile should be read with Lethal Firearm Force, which contains the common evidence on firearm wound mechanisms, incapacitation, deadly-force justification, and the limitations of firearm "stopping power" claims.

How It Is Designed to Work

A duty pistol fires a single projectile with each trigger press. The projectile produces penetrating trauma through permanent tissue destruction, hemorrhage, fracture, organ injury, central nervous system disruption, and other projectile–tissue effects (Stefanopoulos et al., 2017; Hanna et al., 2015). Modern duty ammunition is commonly selected to balance adequate penetration, controlled projectile expansion, reliable function, barrier performance, and reduced risk of unnecessary projectile continuation. Those characteristics are ammunition-specific, not inherent to the word "pistol."

Primary Operational Characteristic: Immediate Availability

The defining operational advantage of the duty pistol is usually not superior terminal performance. It is availability. The pistol is already on the officer, accessible during routine patrol, available during unplanned contacts, available in confined or crowded environments, and available when there is no time to retrieve another firearm. This makes the pistol especially relevant to rapidly evolving lethal-force encounters.

Handling and Practical Accuracy

A handgun has fewer points of physical contact with the body than a shoulder-fired long gun, so its practical accuracy is more dependent on grip, sight or optic presentation, trigger control, recoil management, officer movement, subject movement, and stress. This does not mean a handgun is inherently inaccurate; it means the platform provides less mechanical stability than a properly shouldered rifle or shotgun.

The scientific literature contains extensive ballistics and injury research but comparatively little strong field research measuring police hit probability by firearm platform while controlling for encounter difficulty. Broad

claims that pistols are “less accurate” in actual police shootings should therefore be framed as a platform characteristic and training consideration, not a clean causal field estimate.

Injury and Safety Evidence

Handgun wounds vary greatly according to calibre, projectile construction, expansion, penetration depth, intermediate barriers, anatomical location, and number of wounds. Hanna and colleagues (Hanna et al., 2015) emphasize that a projectile’s mass and velocity define only the upper limit of potential wounding; actual injury depends on projectile construction, trajectory, and the tissues traversed. Fackler (Fackler, 1988) and Santucci and Chang (Santucci & Chang, 2004) similarly caution against inferring wound severity from nominal velocity or energy alone.

Evidence of Effectiveness

Overall assessment

Evidence strength: Strong for ability to produce serious or lethal injury; low for predicting immediate behavioural incapacitation; very low for clean platform-comparative police outcomes.

The duty pistol is capable of producing immediate incapacitation, delayed incapacitation, serious but non-incapacitating injury, fatal injury without immediate cessation of action, or a miss. The literature does not establish a reliable universal “one-shot stopping” probability for police handgun use.

Platform-comparison evidence

Sarani and colleagues (Sarani et al., 2019) examined autopsy reports from civilian public mass shootings and compared firearm categories, demonstrating an important point for this library: observed lethality cannot be inferred simply from assumptions that rifles are always more lethal than handguns, since handgun events in their selected sample were not less lethal than rifle events. The study should not be used to conclude that handguns are intrinsically more effective police weapons. It instead illustrates how strongly outcome data are affected by shot placement, number of wounds, event circumstances, and case selection.

Deployment Pattern

The duty pistol is most likely to be the firearm used when a lethal threat develops without warning, the officer is already engaged at close or intermediate distance, there is insufficient time to retrieve a long gun, the officer is moving through constrained spaces, the incident begins as a routine contact and escalates rapidly, or another firearm platform is unavailable. That deployment ecology is important when comparing pistol shootings with rifle or shotgun shootings: pistols are often present in the least planned lethal-force incidents.

When Its Use May Be Appropriate

A duty pistol may be used as lethal force where an officer reasonably perceives an immediate threat of death or serious bodily injury. See Lethal Firearm Force for the common justification framework. As a platform, the pistol is particularly relevant when the threat develops without warning and there is no time to retrieve another firearm.

Relevance to Edged-Weapon Encounters

Potential role

The pistol is especially relevant to edged-weapon response because it is usually the firearm already available when a knife, machete, sword, or similar weapon is unexpectedly presented or used. It may provide lethal-force capability without requiring the officer to enter contact range.

Conditions favouring deployment

Operational considerations include the immediacy of the edged-weapon threat, distance and rate of closure, movement, bystanders, barriers, backdrop, ability to disengage or contain, whether another person is already being attacked, and whether there is time to retrieve another platform.

Failure and continuation considerations

A handgun round that strikes the subject does not guarantee immediate incapacitation. An edged-weapon subject may remain capable of advancing, stabbing, cutting, changing direction, or attacking another person after sustaining serious or ultimately fatal handgun wounds. The relevant operational endpoint is therefore cessation of the lethal threat, not simply projectile impact.

Risk trade-off

The pistol's central advantage is immediate availability. Its disadvantages relative to shoulder-fired weapons may include less mechanical stability and greater dependence on unsupported hand control. Those limitations must be balanced against the fact that a theoretically more stable long gun has no value if it is not available when the threat develops.

Confined Spaces and Bystanders

The pistol's compact dimensions can make it easier to carry and manipulate in vehicles, doorways, narrow hallways, stairwells, and crowded environments. Compactness should not be confused with reduced bystander risk: missed rounds and projectiles that continue through or beyond the intended subject remain potentially lethal.

U.S. Legal Considerations

The constitutional threshold is the threshold for deadly force, not a separate pistol-specific standard. Platform selection may matter to reasonableness where it affects foreseeable bystander risk or how force was delivered, but the mere choice of a pistol does not create a different Fourth Amendment threshold.

Evidence Limitations

Most wound-ballistics studies are clinical or forensic rather than police operational studies, and pistol ammunition is heterogeneous, which means that neither wound-mechanism research nor general ballistics translates directly into encounter-level effectiveness estimates. Police handgun encounters are not randomly comparable with rifle or shotgun encounters, hit probability is confounded by distance, stress, subject movement, officer movement, lighting, number of officers, and training, and immediate incapacitation is rarely measured cleanly in the available evidence. Evidence specific to handgun performance in edged-weapon attacks is sparse.

Bottom Line

Primary advantage

Immediate availability during spontaneous lethal threats: the pistol is already on the officer when an unplanned encounter develops, making it the default lethal-force platform when there is no time to retrieve another firearm.

Primary limitation

Less mechanical stability than shoulder-fired platforms and no guarantee of immediate incapacitation; a hit does not reliably produce the immediate cessation of threatening behaviour that an officer may require.

Edged-weapon relevance

The pistol is likely to be the dominant lethal platform in rapidly evolving edged-weapon encounters because it is already on the officer, not because research establishes that handguns are uniquely effective against edged weapons.

Core Peer-Reviewed Evidence

1. Hanna, T. N., Shuaib, W., Han, T., Mehta, A., & Khosa, F. (2015)

Firearms, bullets, and wound ballistics: An imaging primer.

Injury, 46(7), 1186–1196.

DOI: 10.1016/j.injury.2015.01.034

Citation key: `<span class="cite">(Hanna et al., 2015)</span>`

Contribution: Reviews handgun, rifle, and shotgun wound mechanisms and emphasizes projectile construction, trajectory, and tissue interaction.

---

2. Sarani, B., Hendrix, C., Matecki, M., et al. (2019)

Wounding Patterns Based on Firearm Type in Civilian Public Mass Shootings in the United States.

Journal of the American College of Surgeons, 228(3), 228–234.

DOI: 10.1016/j.jamcollsurg.2018.11.014

Citation key: `<span class="cite">(Sarani et al., 2019)</span>`

Contribution: Comparative firearm-type evidence illustrating that observed outcome cannot be reduced to weapon category alone.

Limitation: Civilian mass-shooting context, not police use-of-force research.

---

3. Fackler, M. L. (1988)

Wound Ballistics: A Review of Common Misconceptions.

JAMA, 259(18), 2730–2736.

DOI: 10.1001/jama.1988.03720180056033

Citation key: `<span class="cite">(Fackler, 1988)</span>`

Contribution: Foundational correction of simplistic velocity, energy, and “stopping power” assumptions.

Evidence Rating

Lethality and serious-injury capacity: ★★★★★

Immediate incapacitation prediction: ★★☆☆☆

Platform-comparative field evidence: ★★☆☆☆

Edged-weapon-specific evidence: ★★☆☆☆

Overall confidence: High for injury mechanism; low-to-moderate for immediate stopping predictions.

The duty pistol is best understood as the default immediately available lethal firearm platform. Its operational importance arises from accessibility during spontaneous encounters rather than evidence that handgun wounds produce a uniquely favourable stopping effect. Gunshot outcome depends heavily on projectile behaviour, anatomy, shot placement, and the subject’s continuing physiological capacity. In edged-weapon encounters, the pistol’s principal advantage is that it can be brought into the response without delaying to retrieve another firearm. Its principal limitation is that a successful hit does not guarantee immediate incapacitation, and the platform offers less mechanical stability than a shouldered long gun.

References

Fackler, M. L. (1988). Wound Ballistics: a Review of Common Misconceptions. *JAMA*, *259*(18), 2730–2736. https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.1988.03720180056033

Hanna, T. N., Shuaib, W., Han, T., Mehta, A., & Khosa, F. (2015). Firearms, bullets, and wound ballistics: An imaging primer. *Injury*, *46*(7), 1186–1196. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.injury.2015.01.034

Santucci, R. A., & Chang, Y. J. (2004). Ballistics for physicians: myths about wound ballistics and gunshot injuries. *The Journal of Urology*, *171*(4), 1408–1414. https://doi.org/10.1097/01.JU.0000103691.68995.04

Sarani, B., Hendrix, C., Matecki, M., Estroff, J., Amdur, R. L., Robinson, B. R. H., . . . Smith, E. R. (2019). Wounding Patterns Based on Firearm Type in Civilian Public Mass Shootings in the United States. *Journal of the American College of Surgeons*, *228*(3), 228–234. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jamcollsurg.2018.11.014

Stefanopoulos, P. K., Pinialidis, D. E., Hadjigeorgiou, G. F., & Filippakis, K. N. (2017). Wound ballistics 101: the mechanisms of soft tissue wounding by bullets. *European Journal of Trauma and Emergency Surgery*, *43*(5), 579–586. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00068-015-0581-1

HOW TO CITE

Edged-Weapon Response Lab. (2026). *Pistol*. In *EWRL Evidence Library* (Version 1.0). https://droptheknife.org/evidence-base/I_Pistol (https://droptheknife.org/evidence-base/I_Pistol)