

Size Does Matter

by Jim Guigli

When it comes to bullets, size does matter, especially because few pistol shooters can put a bullet exactly where they aim. The smallest bullet, the .22 caliber, will stop a man if it hits in just the right area of the body, like the heart, neck, or brain, and penetrates sufficiently. A .22 to the spine might paralyze. Anything short of this placement and penetration may kill the person, a few days later, but not stop him.

A well-placed bullet from a .45 caliber automatic will certainly stop someone, but not necessarily kill him.

The goal of using firearms in self-defense is to stop the attacker. The attacker may or may not die from this bullet wound. That is the attacker's problem. What size of bullet is used is something for the writer to consider, however.

Small bullets are usually for small guns. Someone would want a small gun for light weight and easy concealment, i.e., "purse guns." Small bullets make small wounds, sometimes disabling and sometimes lethal. But a small caliber bullet can be so ineffectual that an attacker can be shot and not know it until the action is over, adrenalin is down, and pain is noticed: not a good thing if the gunshot is meant to stop him. Ronald Reagan did not realize he had been shot — with a .22 — until he was at the hospital, yet the wound was almost fatal.

Large bullets require larger guns. Larger guns are heavier and harder to conceal. But larger bullets are more likely to stop an attacker, whether or not the attacker dies from the wound.

This means a writer has to have a frame of logic when writing fictional examples of firearms selection and shootings. Why did the character select or use that particular gun, and, more important, was the outcome consistent with the capabilities of that gun and its ammunition?

For simplicity, common pistol ammunition for self-defense can be put into four groups:

Group 1. .22 short and long, and .25ACP.

Group 2. .32, and .380ACP (9mm short).

Group 3. 9mm, .38 Special, and .38 Super.

Group 4. .357 Magnum, .40, .41 Magnum, .44 Special, and .45ACP.

There could be a Group 5 for more powerful large pistol cartridges, .44 Magnum for example, but they are more appropriate for hunting, are more difficult to shoot, and will most likely over-penetrate. (See Wikipedia's extensive list of handgun cartridges for more information and photos: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Handgun_Cartridges).

Group 1 guns are revolvers or automatics in .22 caliber, and automatics in .25ACP (Automatic Colt Pistol). The classic purse gun is the Colt/Browning .25ACP — see Rita Hayworth in *The Lady from Shanghai*. These guns are better than nothing. Their value is intimidation, since no one wants to be shot, even with a .22.

Group 2 guns are revolvers and autos in .32 caliber variations, and autos in .380ACP. .380 is the most powerful cartridge found in truly small guns, and is considered by many to be the absolute minimum for self-defense. Many law enforcement members have chosen a small .380 auto as their concealed back-up weapon.

Group 3 guns are both revolvers and automatics that for decades were considered adequate for law enforcement and self-defense. Revolvers in .38 Special with snub-nose barrels for plain clothes, or 4 or 6 inch barrels for uniformed officers, were the mainstay of law enforcement across the nation. The 9mm automatic has been the choice of foreign armies for as long, causing the U.S. to switch from .45ACP pistols to 9mm for NATO compatibility. (Some U.S. Special Forces have switched back.) As popular as these guns were and are, years of law-enforcement-documented shootings have demonstrated that a body shot from them will stop an attacker only one out of two to three times, which is not good when your life depends on stopping the attacker.

Group 4 guns solve the Group 3 problem. They have proven to stop attackers three out of four times or better. This group shows the value of bullet diameter. The smallest, .357 Magnum (.38 Special with a longer cartridge case and more propellant), is no more powerful than the largest, .45ACP, but will be more likely to over-penetrate than the .45. A larger diameter bullet will provide more surface area contact, and therefore more shock to the attacker, especially if it dumps all of its energy into the attacker, and does not pass through the attacker's body (over-penetrate).

Modern hollow-point bullets, available in over-the counter ammunition, improve the performance of .380 and larger ammunition. They expand predictably while staying in one piece, yet still penetrate clothing like a leather jacket. (See the websites for Federal, Winchester, and Remington ammunition.)

May all your gun fights be fictional. Talk to me for more detail.

Other Resources:

Pocket Pistols — 2010 Buyer's Guide, by Harris Outdoor Group (an excellent magazine special issue on newsstands now through September)

Public Safety Writers Association — *Spring 2010 Newsletter*, [HANDGUNS PART I](#), by Tim Dees

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