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**THE CHOICE OF HANDGUNS  
FOR  
POLICE OFFICERS**



**REVOLVERS OR SEMI-AUTOMATICS**

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# THE CHOICE OF HANDGUNS FOR NYC POLICE OFFICERS

## REVOLVERS OR SEMI-AUTOMATIC PISTOLS

### INTRODUCTION

The most important concern of the New York City Police Department is the safety of the people in this city, including its police officers. For that reason, the Department is conducting a controlled study to determine if the .38 calibre revolvers authorized for all uniformed police officers should be replaced by semi-automatic weapons.

The Police Department's deep concern for the safety of our officers and the people in this city is the reason, that we strongly support legislation that limits the manufacture and distribution of small arms, particularly semi-automatic assault weapons. In addition, we equip our officers with the safest and most effective weapons available and continue to study the feasibility of alternative weapons to the .38 calibre revolver.

As part of the New York City Police Department's on-going analysis, the Department undertakes the most comprehensive reporting on police shootings in the country. The results of this firearms discharge study are considered along with a wide range of technical, demographic and geographic variables in determining how to best equip our police officers. At the present time, we are continuing to use the .38 calibre revolver precisely because evidence to date shows that it is the safest and most effective weapon for the police officers and the citizens of this city, and there are unresolved issues concerning adoption of a semi-automatic pistol as standard issue for all officers of the New York City Police Department.

Several months ago the Department began a pilot project in which 213 patrol officers were trained and armed with Glock 9mm semi-automatics. Each of these officers is experienced, mature and under constant supervision while driving a patrol sergeant. Preliminary indications are that the semi-automatic pistols may increase the danger to both police officers and bystanders. This opinion is based upon a finding that the Glock 9mm semi-automatic has jammed, leaving an officer with no defense if under fire. Equally disturbing is the greater risk of accidental discharges and the increase in number of rounds fired that would endanger innocent bystanders and police officers. These concerns are discussed in more detail in this report.

## POLICE OFFICER SAFETY

### Mechanical Failure

Semi-automatic pistols are more prone to mechanical failure. The manufacturers of the Glock 9mm are continually refitting the weapon. This year the Suffolk County Police Department recalled the semi-automatic pistols possessed by its officers. The Tacoma, Wahington and Portland, Oregon Police Departments report similar mechanical problems requiring gun alteration. The manufacturer has refitted each gun, but there is no assurance that other mechanical problems will not develop.

The New York City Police Department has also experienced mechanical problems. There have been three shootings involving officers assigned to the pilot project. In the most recent incident, after the officer fired one round, the shell casing did not eject from his 9mm weapon. A semi automatic pistol is inoperable if the expended round is not cleared from the chamber. In this case the officer was rendered defenseless. The Albany and Buffalo Police Departments have also discovered that the semi-automatics have a tendency to jam.

Interestingly, semi-automatics cause problems for suspects as well as law enforcement officers. During 1991, there were 12 incidents in which semi-automatic weapons used by armed felons misfired. This finding alone justifies extreme caution in considering a move to replace a revolver with a semi-automatic as the authorized sevice weapon for all New York City police officers.

### Firearm Capacity

Proponents of semi-automatic pistols often compare the bullet capacities of the two weapons. Police service revolvers hold 6 rounds; semi-automatic pistols can hold more than 12 rounds of ammunition. This argument, however, is countered by a Department regulation that allows officers to carry a back-up revolver with 5 additional rounds of ammunition. In addition, officers are mandated to carry two speedloaders so that they can reload 12 rounds quickly. Each officer may elect to carry 12 rounds over and above the speedloaders. Thus each New York City police officer may carry 11 rounds loaded in available weapons and 24 additional rounds, if it is necessary to reload.

Reloading, however, is rarely necessary in an armed confrontation. Our firearms discharge records indicate that only 2 of the over 300 officers who fired their weapons in 1991 had to reload. Furthermore, although the number of semi-automatic weapons in the hands of criminals is increasing, weapons with low bullet capacity comprise nearly 80% of the more than 13,000 handguns seized by the NYPD in 1991. And although the number of rounds fired by suspects at police officers increased in 1990 the average number of rounds fired at police officers was less than 3 rounds per suspect.

## PUBLIC SAFETY

### Accidental Discharges

Semi-automatic pistols discharge accidentally at a higher rate than revolvers. The experience of the New York City Police Department shows that there are nearly 14 accidental discharges per 1,000 semi-automatic pistols compared to .75 (less than 1) accidental discharges per .38 calibre revolver. At the present time about 600 police officers are equipped with semi-automatic pistols. If all 31,000 officers were armed with these weapons more than 400 accidental discharges may occur each year with the attendant injuries and deaths.

One of the reasons for accidents is the 2-step process to unload a semi-automatic pistol. The first action is to drop the magazine; the second action is to clear the chamber by pulling back the slide and ejecting a remaining round of ammunition. If the order is reversed; with the slide pulled back first followed by dropping the magazine, a bullet will be left in the chamber. This one bullet in an "unloaded" gun poses a threat to police officers on the job, their families at home, and innocent bystanders in the street. If all 31,000 uniformed officers were armed with semi-automatic pistols, there is a very real possibility that one or more of these officers may reverse the unloading procedure. The New York City Police Department does not want to take that chance.

### Increased Risk to Police Officers and Bystanders

Additional Rounds Fired - There is a documented tendency for more rounds to be fired from semi-automatic pistols than revolvers. For example, in the first year that all Transit Authority officers were issued semi-automatic weapons they fired 43 rounds of ammunition in 4 incidents involving armed confrontation - a rate of 10.7 rounds per incident. This finding is backed up by the New York City experience which shows that plainclothes officers who are authorized to carry semi-automatics fired 59 rounds in 7 armed confrontation incidents - 8.4 rounds per incident. This is double the number of rounds fired from .38 calibre revolvers which is consistently below 4 rounds per incident. On the densely populated streets of New York City, each errant bullet poses a substantial risk to innocent bystanders and police officers.

### Propensity to Penetrate Targets and Ricochet

Semi-automatic ammunition is often jacketed to improve the cycling of each round through the magazine into the chamber. Jacketed ammunition has a greater propensity to penetrate targets and ricochet upon impact. Again, these bullets threaten the safety of police officers and civilians. Some police departments reduce this danger by using lower velocity ammunition. However, this reduces the cycling efficiency of the gun and could cause the weapon to jam.

## COST

The issuance of semi-automatic weapons would result in the loss of hundreds of police officers each day for training, a loss of patrol officers at a time when both the City and State of New York have committed scarce resources to bolster police presence and visibility. In a department of 31,000 officers we would lose the equivalent of 370 officers (including 45 firearms instructors). Expensive 9mm ammunition would have to be purchased by the New York City Police Department at a cost of more than \$6 million each year. The weapons would cost the officers over \$13 million dollars.

## UNIQUE FACTORS THAT DETERMINE WEAPON SELECTION

Some states did not use an increase in shooting incidents to justify the issuance of semi-automatic pistols. The choice of a firearm for police officers is based on many factors of which the number of shooting incidents is but one. Outside of New York City, police officers often patrol alone in desolate areas with backup officers miles away. These factors were certainly considered by each department in making their decisions to replace standard issue service revolvers. That rationale, however, is not applicable to New York City where back-up officers are immediately available if not on the scene.

Whatever their reasons, each law enforcement agency should have the authority to make these important decisions based on their unique characteristics. The experienced law enforcement executives in the New York City Police Department deserve the same deference from the State Legislature.

## USURPATION OF PROFESSIONAL LAW ENFORCEMENT DECISION-MAKING

Assembly Bill #9932B mandates that local police agencies with more than 1200 officers authorize the issuance of semi-automatic weapons for all patrol officers. The Bill overlooks the serious safety issues that are still under review. Some of this carefully accumulated evidence points to a real threat of injury or death if these weapons are issued to 31,000 police officers on the crowded streets of New York City.

Legislative infringements on the decision-making responsibility of police professionals are, and should be, rare. Such incursions are particularly inappropriate when the safety of police officers and the public is at stake. Law enforcement officials, not legislators are, and should be, held publicly accountable for the protection of police officers and the deaths and injuries caused by firearms issued to those officers.

The State Legislature also disregards the findings of eminent criminologists who have recently addressed this issue. It is their belief that "... the response by government policy makers when considering adopting high capacity weapons must go beyond the emotional and perhaps shortsighted pleas for more firepower. The long term consequences of yielding to such pleas could be less beneficial to the officer and to the community than had more reasoned responses been pursued." \*

We live and work by a set of Values in the New York City Police Department. We have pledged to "protect the lives and property of our fellow citizens..." and "value human life..." So long as we follow that code we will base professional judgments on reliable data. So long as integrity influences our decisions, we will not rely exclusively on the often biased information supplied by manufacturers, the inapplicable findings of other police agencies; or the well-intentioned but overreaching opinions of a political body.

\* R. Paul McCauley, Ph.D, Department of Criminology, Indiana University of Pennsylvania and Steven M. Edwards, Ph.D, Southern Police Institute, University of Louisville in a paper entitled, Concerns with the Adoption of a High Capacity Handgun for Law Enforcement Officers: More Bullets-More Risks?