



Once the trigger is pressed through and the gun fires, the next shot can be readied by either *riding* the trigger to reset and pressing again or letting it go and slapping it back. Which method do you think will cause the most muzzle movement? (Photos Dave Spaulding)

Firearms: Trigger Control

More important than you think

- Dave Spaulding
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More attention should be given to one of the most fundamental shooting skills—trigger control. I've come to realize that trigger control is not well understood. In an article on a gun forum, for example, the author stated that trigger control was not at all important. According to the author, police gunfights occur at such close ranges that worrying about trigger control is unnecessary.

My thoughts: If you don't properly control the trigger, the muzzle will go off target and you will miss.

On the street, when an officer draws a gun and shoots, it's to defend their own life, not an innocent citizen. They place themselves *between* the criminals and the citizens. Thus, they must be able to shoot well enough to save their own lives. If not, they may be killed; it's as simple as that.

Get a Grip

The history of gun fighting has shown that the person who gets the first solid hit usually wins, which is why many hate the long, double-action trigger standard on many guns. The hand is a sympathetic organism; what one finger does, the rest will do, which makes it difficult to isolate the trigger finger. The most common mistake shooters make is squeezing the whole hand instead of just the trigger finger, which is why competitors like short-trigger actions.

This "dipping" is often attributed to anticipating recoil or "pre-ignition push," which I believe is true for new shooters. However, once it's realized they can control the gun's recoil, I believe experienced shooters shoot to 7 o'clock (right hand) or 5 o'clock (left hand) because they're trying to fight how their hand *wants* to function.

Example : Consider how many times a day you've turned a door knob, grabbed the steering wheel or picked up a glass. Maybe hundreds or thousands of times. Then, imagine trying to press the trigger on a handgun without squeezing fingers other than your trigger finger. I once called this "milking the grip" on a TV shooting show and was ridiculed on the Internet. But I also received a bunch of mail from people who told me they knew *exactly* what I meant because it was verbally/visually descriptive. If you squeeze the whole hand (a convulsive grip), the gun's muzzle dips off target and will cause a miss.

One method I was taught to correct this was called a "committed shot" in the early 1990s. Today it's called "slack out," and it's a method of depressing the trigger as the gun travels to the target so that when it stops, the shot is fired. The forward movement stabilizes the gun while pressing the trigger, and it works. Instructors teaching this say it should be used only when you're "committed to shooting" (thus the original name), and you can stop at any time by releasing the trigger.

However, I wonder if we're anchoring a skill in which an officer will slack out the trigger and fire a shot every time they extend their gun. When being taught this technique, officers undertake hundreds, maybe thousands, of repetitions to learn it, and I've seen negligent shots fired in training when using slack out. Also, doesn't slack out violate a cardinal rule of gun safety, "Never place your finger inside the trigger guard until the sights are on target and you're ready to fire."?

Understand that I'm not bashing the slack-out method. I'm merely offering a few thoughts so you can determine if what you're teaching is potentially problematic. If nothing else, it would be wise to include shoot/no shoot training to combat negligent sympathetic discharges.

It has been my observation in FATS training and on the street that police officers seek the trigger during times of high stress anyway, so teaching them to seek and apply pressure to the trigger seems unnecessary to me. I have my students apply pressure once the gun is on target, and this method has worked both on the range and on the street.

Hitting the Mark

Where to hit to win the fight

Handguns are not efficient fight stoppers. Cops carry them because they're *portable*, not because they're *effective*. Handguns are distance weapons that can be carried continuously, drawn quickly and used with reasonable effectiveness—if we do our part and place the shots well.

It was once said, "It's not important that you hit something; it's important that you hit something important." Violation of vital organs is key to incapacitation, but no small weapon can be counted on to incapacitate quickly every time. The human body is easy to kill, *but it's difficult to stop quickly*, and handguns are terrible at this. The areas most likely to bring about rapid incapacitation are:

- *The high chest:* This area is about eight inches in diameter and contains the heart, lungs, major blood vessels, spinal column, etc.
- *The brain vault :* A brain hit will bring about rapid incapacitation, but it's well armored under the skull and is normally in a constant state of motion. Unless you are very close, head shots with a pistol are difficult.
- *The pelvic girdle :* If the support structure for the upper body can be broken, a "mobility kill" will result, but the suspect can still shoot.

Hitting a vital area while you and the suspect are moving is difficult, especially under the stress of a gunfight. But it can be done and has been countless times. Police officers have prevailed by keeping their cool and shooting accurately, which means they controlled the trigger.

So how important is all of this? Read on and see how much one-eighth inch of muzzle movement means to bullet impact:

- *At 15 feet: 4 ½"* . If you were aiming at the center of the 8-inch high-chest region, you just moved out beyond its edge.
- *At 21 feet: 6 ¼"* .You have now moved from the center of the chest to the edge of the chest cavity or armpit.
- *At 30 feet: 8 7/8"* . A hit in the arm or maybe armpit.
- *At 45 feet: 1' 1"* . You have just missed the suspect's torso and sent a round down the street. (I hope something stops this bullet other than a child on a tricycle.)

Stay in Control

To control is to regulate or direct a mechanism. Trigger control means how much you allow it to move. Thus, the less we move it, the less likely we are to move the muzzle.

If we can minimize the movement of the trigger finger, we're less likely to flex the whole hand. Therefore, I believe in "riding" the trigger to reset, or the point where the sear has engaged the hammer/striker and the gun is prepared to fire again. On some semi-auto pistols, this is around one-quarter to one-half inch of travel and is one advantage of the pistol over the revolver. Some advocate that the trigger should be completely released, with the finger bouncing off the inside of the trigger guard, but I find this physiologically inefficient.

I once had a famous competitive shooter tell me this was the method he used and was the best for all. When I asked what he based his opinion on, he told me, "In my millions of rounds of shooting, I have found that I ..."

I held up my two hands in the classic "time out" formation and asked, "How many people will ever shoot millions of rounds? You are not the norm. You are the gifted exception!"

I'm not convinced we should emulate the well-practiced shooter on the competition circuit. No disrespect intended, but we're talking about *moderately* trained police officers, not the *gifted* . The best way to control any object is to stay in contact with it. *Example:* When you're driving a car, would you "slap" the steering wheel in order to direct the vehicle where you want it to go or would you stay in constant contact with it so that you can actually feel how far to turn the wheel to steer the car.

It's true that reset is different for every gun, and some claim the need for a "battlefield pick-up" makes practiced trigger control unwise, but how likely is it in U.S. law enforcement you'll pick up and use an unfamiliar gun?

Final Thoughts

Like many things firearms related, trigger control will continue to be debated, but I'll stick with what's simple and proven. Understand that trigger control not only means how much you allow it to move, but

also knowing when to place your finger on it. The secret to trigger control is training and practice. There's no substitution.

Remember : Officers must be active participants in their own rescue, which means hitting what they're shooting at. And trigger control, more than any other aspect of shooting, will determine how successful an officer will be when the time comes to save their own life.

Dave Spaulding is a 28-year law-enforcement veteran who retired at the rank of lieutenant. He currently works for a federal security contractor. He has worked in all facets of law enforcement—corrections, communications, patrol, evidence collection, investigations, undercover operations, training and SWAT—and has authored more than 800 articles for various firearm and law enforcement periodicals. He is also the author of the best-selling books, *Defensive Living* and *Handgun Combatives* .