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Armed policing

Discharge of firearms

Further information

APP on [weapons and equipment](#)

The primary intention of the police, when discharging a firearm, is to prevent an immediate threat to life by shooting to stop the subject from carrying out their intended or threatened course of action. In most circumstances this is achieved by aiming to strike the central body mass (ie, the torso).

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Accuracy of shot

Research indicates that the accuracy of shots fired under training conditions is generally greater than in operational circumstances. Police officers are normally trained to discharge conventional firearms at the largest part of the subject they can see, which in most cases will be the central body mass.

Physical response

The physical response to a person having been shot is unpredictable – there are a range of physical and psychological moderators which can contribute to the nature and extent of any response. Only shots striking the central nervous system (which is largely located in the brain and spinal cord) and the major organs, (which are contained in the upper body) are likely to result in rapid incapacitation.

Critical shot

There will be circumstances when aiming directly for the head will be necessary, as aiming to strike another part of the body would:

- be impractical in the circumstances
- present increased risk to life
- be unlikely to achieve immediate incapacitation.

A 'critical shot' is a shot or shots intended to immediately incapacitate the subject. A critical shot should only be fired when absolutely necessary in defence of a person when there is an imminent and extreme risk to life from unlawful violence. A critical shot is a shot or shots to the head, if possible, or otherwise to the central nervous system or major organs.

Discharge of less lethal weapons

Alternative points of aim will be appropriate for approved less lethal weapons in accordance with weapon-specific guidelines. Where alternative points of aim and intended points of impact are referenced in the guidelines, the purpose is normally to minimise the risk of unintentional effects or potentially lethal injuries, and to maximise the effectiveness of the weapons system.

Threat to life

When it is considered necessary to discharge a firearm at a subject, police officers need to shoot to stop an imminent threat to life. The imminence of any threat should be judged, in respect of the potential for loss of life, with due regard paid to legislation and consideration of absolute necessity, reasonableness and proportionality.

When an authorised firearms officer (AFO) decides to discharge a firearm, the number and sequencing of rounds fired will depend on the circumstances that exist at the time. Officers must constantly assess the threat posed by the subject and the continuance of that threat. Officers must be able to demonstrate that the degree of force used was absolutely necessary and relative to the threat posed. The use of excessive force is strictly prohibited.