

## Assault Weapons: the issue of lethality

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Assault-type weapons are a looming public safety problem. Admittedly, their current rate of misuse may not seem significant, particularly in view of the overwhelming rate of handgun violence. But appearances can be misleading. Assault-type weapons likely figure in more incidents than what can be measured, as police recordkeeping deficiencies and problems of definition make it difficult to arrive at a reliable estimate of their misuse.

“Assault weapon” is an ambiguous term. Definitions in Federal and State laws are bound to arbitrary characteristics such as model name, and minor extrinsic features such as the presence of a handgrip. For our purposes, an assault weapon can be defined as a firearm that has a *highly developed capability to overcome armed resistance*. This is a function of degree. Variables that can be considered, in order of importance, include:

- Rapid-fire capability, including cyclic rate and recovery time.
- Lethality of the projectile. Variables that affect lethality include the bullet’s kinetic energy, its composition and configuration (i.e., round-nose, hollow-point, etc.) Comparisons between projectiles can be made using the relative stopping power formula (RSP - see *Ring of Fire*, pg. 91) or by simply measuring the velocity and energy of known commercial ammunition (see *Shooter’s Bible*). A surrogate indicator of lethality is a projectile’s ability to overcome protective garments, such as a Class II-A ballistic vest.

For example, the typical load for the Colt Sporter is the .223 Remington hollow-point, with a muzzle velocity of 3240 fps and a muzzle energy of 1282 fp. By way of comparison, a Federal Hi-Shock 147 gr. 9mm. (Luger) pistol cartridge has a muzzle velocity of 975 fps and a muzzle energy of 310 fp (numbers are from *Shooter’s Bible*). A simplistic analysis is that the .223 round is four times more lethal.

- Accuracy at range.
- Speed of deployment.

Proliferation of assault-type weapons is a public safety issue of great importance. If such weapons continue to be imported, manufactured and sold, their misuse will likely increase. At some threshold of density (i.e., availability) the threat will become obvious. For handguns, that point arrived many years ago. For assault-type weapons, the level was reached at a bank in North Hollywood.

As heavily armed adversaries become more common, police injuries and deaths will increase. This may accelerate law enforcement’s transition to a militarized model. “Community policing” notwithstanding, the increasing deployment of SWAT units and widespread acquisition of shoulder weapons signals that this change has already begun. As preoccupation with survival comes to the forefront, police response patterns will become more defensive. Concerns such as interacting with citizens or with the legal niceties of gathering evidence may give way, and the day when officers simply walked up to a vehicle or residence

will be no more. Given the proliferation of deadly weapons, these consequences are ultimately inevitable.