

Personal Safety FAQ, v 0.61 (beta)

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Given the subject matter of this FAQ, there will be considerable difference in laws of customs of various jurisdictions. This document is NOT to be taken as legal advice, and the author accepts NO responsibility for ANY results or consequences arising from application or mis-application of any information presented. I'm not a lawyer-If you want legal advice, you'd do well to hire one.

We live in a dangerous world. How many people do you know leave their homes unlocked at night, don't keep guns, or feel perfectly safe walking through any neighborhood at all at two in the morning?

There are certain things you can do to hedge your own safety.

Part I: Principles of Personal Defense.

Jeff Cooper, a prolific writer and teacher on the subject, developed seven principles that he called his "principles of personal defense." These rules are at the heart of a successful strategy of personal safety from the acts of others. They are:

Alertness. You must be aware of your surroundings. You must know when there is someone behind you-you can learn to recognize people by the sound of their footsteps, and should learn to be curious when you hear an unfamiliar person. You should pay attention to your neighborhood- are there people who don't live there who hang around a lot? Any cars you don't recognize?

Do you feel like you're being watched? When driving, keep an eyes on the mirror. Are you being followed? When you last went through a grocery checkstand, you dealt with a checker. Could you describe the checker? The people in line ahead of and behind you? The person leaning on his car next to yours? The last time that someone came to your door claiming to be a meter reader, did you ask to see identification? One dodge of predators in our society is to gain access to a home under the guise of a utility worker. However, ALL utility workers carry ID, and show it on request. If the service was unexpected, it helps to call the company and see if they sent the person. (And don't call the number that the man at the door gave you. Find their number yourself- 555-1212 works in most if not all of the United States, and most other countries have directory assistance as well) Needless to say, if a man shows up at the door claiming to be from the power company, and they didn't send him, you don't let him in. Calling the police and taking the other steps in your plan for this incident would seem indicated. (It's worth noted that criminals have used this trick to gain access under other guises-police officer, firefighter, EMT, UPS/FedEx/ Postal Service, Joe Blow needing the phone because there's been an accident, and for all I know hoods have dressed up as cookie- selling girl scouts.)

A note about gut instinct:

It's worth noting one of the prevailing theories about hunches here-well, prevailing among the people who spend time theorizing about these things.

Hunches and instinct are often considered to be the result of information that your brain has assimilated

and processed subconsciously but not consciously. Whether or not that's actually true, it's as good an explanation as any and will serve for our purposes. The end result of all of the psuedoscience here is that your gut feelings about a situation are generally trustworthy. If a situation feels wrong, but you "can't quite put your finger on it," then it's a pretty safe bet that there is a problem present and that you may well not want to remain where you are. Trust your instincts-you have a few billion years' worth of evolution tied up in them.

The second principle is Decisiveness.

When confronted with a threat, you have to ACT NOW! There is no time to hem and haw. "Forgetting your head and grabbing your balls" as my scoutmaster put it can make a bad situation worse, but mulling when you don't have time to mull just gives your assailant more time to attack.

The law in the United States is almost universally a version of "You may use force when and to the extent you reasonably believe necessary to protect your life, or that of another person in the face of an imminent threat of death or grave bodily injury." Some states may impose limitations on self-defense in public, and others may impose what is known as the duty to "retreat to the wall" in which case you are (at least metaphorically) back-to-the-wall. It does help to read the statute and the case law in your state ahead of time.)

Principle Number Three is Aggressiveness.

This may seem odd, since we're talking about defensive action and to enjoy legal and moral justification must allow our assailant to strike or attempt to strike the first blow. However, there is one suitable response to physical attack-a FAST and STRONG counterattack. You can retreat all you want, and in some states you're required to do so to one degree or another. However, if the attack is pressed, sooner or later you'll end up back to the wall.

You may remember the Speck murders a few years back. The victims outnumbered their assailant considerably, and gave up massive amounts of force that could have saved their lives. Predictably, they died.

When attacked, when it becomes clear that you are in danger at the hands of another, your life depends upon a swift and explosive counterattack. Remember-you have a duty to yourself to survive. You have no duty to submit. As an Aikido instructor of mine once said: "You have the right to exist, and the entire universe sanctions your right." Therefore, if you are in danger, you have the RIGHT to act to preserve your life. Resistance to violence is not always in fashion in modern society, but you have to be alive to be ostracized by those who fault you.

Remember-aggressiveness does not require that you actually initiate contact. Initiating a violent encounter is neither legally nor morally nor ethically justifiable. However, responding with great speed and energy to someone else's initiation against you is. Not only is it justifiable, but a response with all legally-justifiable force may be your only chance.

The fourth principle-Speed.

This blends in with decisiveness. You don't have time to waste. When you discover a threat, and you decide to act, you ACT and act NOW. No referee will call back the play in a self-defense situation.

Principle Number Five-Coolness

It's a simple rule-don't panic. Don't get buck fever.

When you need to figure out what to do, you need to have your wits about you. You need be calm, calm enough to not make your situation worse. Anger, so long as it is in the grip of your self-control, will not be a liability. When you lose your self-control, you destroy your ability to react appropriately to the situation.

Mr. Cooper recommends medium and large game hunting as a way to develop this trait, and I'm generally inclined to agree. The surest way to lose a trophy buck is to let fear or eagerness overcome your judgement, and those two elements (known in combination as "buck fever") fade as you learn to think and act clearly under stress.

The sixth principle is called Ruthlessness.

Remember-you are under no obligation to regard an attacker's safety to any degree that conflicts with your own. If someone comes to you with evil intent, you owe them no consideration. A would-be victim is simply higher in the hierarchy of value than a would-be attacker, in law and custom in the United States. (It is, however, worth knowing that this does not necessarily apply abroad. Many nations, including the United Kingdom, do not recognize self-defense as a defense to prosecution)

Overreaction is proscribed, both morally and legally. However, do not quail in the face of having to use force when it's necessary to protect your own life.

Last principle: Surprise

Most violent attackers expect their victims to be easy prey. Any reaction other than submission will throw them off balance. If you submit to an attack, you're giving the attacker what he expects. If you respond with all legally-justified force, you surprise the hell out of him at the very least. More often than not, that forces them to disengage. In rare cases where it does not, it still takes their equilibrium out from under them, granting the advantage to you.

(Author's Note: The book "Principles of Personal Defense" by Jeff Cooper is available for about eight bucks from the larger online bookstores-I got my copy from Spamazon. I liberally borrowed from that book for the preceding section, and would recommend it strongly to any and every person concerned with his own personal safety.)

Part II: A personal defense plan.

Improvisation can be overrated. If you force yourself to improvise, you lose time that could be better spent on executing your plan. Therefore, it seems wise to come up with ideas long before you need them.

Some things to plan for:

You're home alone, and you hear breaking glass inside the house.

You're home with the wife and kids (in bed, watching TV, at the dinner table, etc.), and you hear a window smash

You come home one night, and you expect your family home, and you find the door forced open.

You come home one night expecting the house to be empty, and you hear noises that indicate someone

inside.

You hear a knock at the door late one night, when you're not expecting anyone.

You hear a knock at the door, see someone in a phone company uniform, and aren't expecting a service call

You're out driving, and you suspect that someone's following you-they've followed you through several turns

You hear gunshots in your neighborhood

You're out walking late, and you see three young men you don't recognize walking towards you

I'm not going to answer your question for you-I don't know your individual circumstances. What I can do is make some suggestions to consider:

If you suspect you're being followed, start making random turns to confirm your worries. However, if you don't know the side streets well, be careful-if it's would-be carjackers, you don't want to end up in a cul-de-sac. And whatever you do, do NOT lead the tail to your home. Lose him first. If he's that persistent, drive to the police station, or find a police car and get his attention (An egregious traffic violation when you know that the officer is watching works well-at the worst, you get a traffic ticket that you might be able to beat in court)

If you suspect an intruder in your home, do NOT try to clear the house yourself. It's too easy to sneak up on a lone man. Instead, get yourself and everybody else in the house into a single "safe room" (more on this below), and call the police or sheriff. If you arrive home and suspect an intruder, back out and call for help rather than presenting a lone target to someone who may want to do worse than steal the silver. In some states you can legally kill to protect property, but getting yourself killed over property is not worth it and that's a risk that you run if you try to clear your house yourself. It's quite easy for an intruder to ambush a homeowner who decided to be a hero.

Don't open the door to anyone if there's a chance that they're a threat. Little kids selling candy for school are usually harmless (if persistent), but you want to be sure that there's nobody hiding just out of view. Anyone from a utility company should have ID and show it on request, as should plainclothes police officers.

Are there any good hiding places near your house? Trim back bushes near windows to improve your field of view and to remove hiding places for would-be burglars.

How sturdy are the various points of entry? Is your door hollow- or solid-core? How good are your locks? Can the door be chained? Can the house be easily set aflame from outside?

Where are lights controlled from? Can you still call out if an intruder takes an extension off the hook? (Keeping your cellphone next to the bed is a good dodge for these situations)

In your car, do you have a way to call for help? Is it mechanically in good running order with at least half a tank of gas, in case you need to shake a tail?

If you keep a firearm or other weapon, is it simultaneously stored accessible to you and inaccessible to children and other people who cannot be trusted? Is it loaded and in good working order? (At times, there

is actually merit to keeping it unloaded). Have you received appropriate training in safety and marksmanship, and are you familiar with local and state laws regarding firearms use and storage and self defense?

Do you have a "safe room?" That's a room with a telephone, with only one access point. That access should be a door with a stout lock and a door viewer. In addition, the room should be readily accessible from all bedrooms, and should have a first-aid kit, room for all residents, and a weapon if you keep one for self-protection. In addition, a flashlight with good batteries is worthwhile enough to justify the expense, as is a floorplan of your house and a keyring with keys to the external door and a brightly-colored ribbon. When you call the police, throw the map and keys out a window, and tell the dispatcher that you've done so. That way, the responding officers can quietly enter the house, and will know where you and your loved ones are when they do.

Do you have a stalker problem? If so, document EVERY contact, EVERY incident of vandalism, EVERY incident of harassment and report them to the police or sheriff. In addition, you may wish to add Caller ID to your phone or request a trap-and-trace from the telephone company. If you can document stalking, you can have your attorney seek a restraining order against the stalker. In some cases, the stalker will persist or even escalate his attacks, but that's illegal in every state, a felony in some, and will lead to a criminal conviction and jail time-getting him out of your hair for the three hours that he actually spends behind bars. In addition, if he escalates his stalking and you are forced to use force in dealing with him, the existence of police reports and restraining orders will help to substantiate a claim of self-defense in the event that he or his heirs pursue civil or criminal legal action against you.

Also, in the event of stalking, you should give serious thought to moving out of your home temporarily. Don't tell anyone where you've moved to who cannot be trusted to keep their mouth shut. Don't enter a forwarding order at the post office-it's not impossible to dig those up. Instead, have a trusted friend or neighbor pick up your mail. In addition, when driving, use randomly- chosen routes with no pattern to them, and be especially vigilant in looking for people following.

Part III: Weapons

The keeping of arms for personal defense is somewhat controversial in the United States. This section is based upon the assumption that you have decided to do so.

If you keep a gun or other weapon, your number-one priority should be TRAINING. Few things are more dangerous to an innocent bystander than a person with a gun and no clue about safe handling. Safety training and basic marksmanship and personal protection classes are offered by the National Rifle Association, and sometimes by community colleges and local law-enforcement agencies. In addition, there are a number of more advanced schools listed at the bottom of this document.

I'm not going to recommend a specific make and model, or even a specific weapon. That choice is more a matter of personal preference than anything else. Some advantages and disadvantages to each option are below:

Tear gas or pepper spray: Legal in most jurisdictions; not lethal, so it avoids several legal issues; the gas emitted may blow back into your face depending on wind; Not always effective, and not effective if not sprayed into the eyes and nose of an assailant

Knife: Legal for carry in some places but not others-often subject to the same carry restrictions as

firearms; lethal with all attendant legal issues; doesn't always stop an assailant quickly; requires a certain degree of skill; requires close proximity to the assailant.

Impact weapons: Legal for carry in some places but not others; Requires a certain degree of training; bad public image in some places (which matters if you actually use one); May or may not constitute deadly force for legal and practical purposes; requires close proximity to assailant. As a practical matter, in the areas where peace officers are not authorized impact weapons for duty use, they are probably best avoided for the simple reason of avoiding criminal charges from their use.

Martial arts/unarmed combat techniques: Requires a certain degree of skill and a certain amount of physical strength to be effective; requires close proximity to assailant; generally defensible if any degree of force is justified, provided that lethal techniques are used only when deadly force is justified

Firearms: Requires a certain degree of skill; subject to legal restrictions in all jurisdictions; Effective when used properly; ALWAYS constitutes deadly force for legal purposes; does not require close proximity to attacker.

My own feeling on the matter is that when selecting a weapon, you should take these factors into account, along with your training and ability to commit to more of it, and legal laws. A good self-defense plan should probably include both deadly and non-deadly degrees of force. Many law enforcement agencies have a continuum of force that runs like this: Officer presence/verbal command; unarmed restraint technique; irritant gas; impact weapon; firearms. This suggests the order in which various options should be tried in order to prevent the use of an inappropriate degree of force. You may wish to try and procure a copy of your local department's rules as a guideline to what is considered legally-justifiable in your area. As a practical matter, you are not expected to arrest a violator or to place yourself in physical danger to do so, but you are also expected to make certain efforts to avoid situations in which the use of force may be required.

As far as selecting a firearm goes...(deep breath)...

You start with a list of firearms that are inherently accurate and reliable. In my experience, Sig/Sauer, Browning, Colt and clones, and Beretta semiautomatic pistols are both of those when reasonably clean. Glocks are (in my experience) accurate and reliable whether clean or dirty. In addition, I have yet to hear about reliability or short-range (out to ten meters, which is generally as long as pistol gunfights usually go) accuracy problems with double-action revolvers made by Colt, Smith and Wesson, Taurus, or Ruger. In general, your best bet is a semiautomatic pistol chambered in the 9x19mm (Also known as 9mm NATO, 9mm Parabellum, or 9mm Luger), .40 Smith and Wesson, or .45acp cartridges, or a revolver chambered in .38 Special or .357 Magnum. All of these are commonly carried by police departments in the United States, the revolvers somewhat less so in recent years due to their six shot capacity in contrast to the ten round or more carried by most modern pistols.

With that list (and other models-there are other good choices) in mind, select one with a fit and balance that suits your hand. If you have an opportunity to test-fire a weapon before buying (many ranges offer rental guns), do so. You may have to reject certain models due to excessive recoil.

Once you've determined the models that are accurate, reliable, with a good fit and controllable, determine whether it will function reliably with a suitable defensive round. As a general rule, you should focus your search on jacketed hollow-point cartridges made by Remington, Winchester, Federal, Triton, or CCI.

Some would also suggest Cor-Bon, but reports have been made that Cor-Bon's quality control was unreliable, and that components were not consistent from one lot to the next. You purchase 200 rounds of your chosen ammunition and fire them at the range. If you suffer more than one malfunction, (greater than 0.5% failure rate), the round may not be suitable. It's expensive, but IMHO worth it. In addition, you want to be sure that the ammunition/gun combination is accurate enough to fill your needs. The exact definition of "accurate enough" is somewhat vague, but I would suggest that being able to keep all rounds on a target the size of an average adult male torso at fifteen meters is good enough.

Upon selecting your self-protection pistol and load, more training and practice is in order. A weapon with which you have not practiced won't do you that much good.

It's worth noting that the sole real advantage of a handgun is that you have it with you. In your home, a shotgun may well be a better choice. Shotguns are very effective at close ranges, and not subject to the same restrictions as handguns in some jurisdictions.

My experience and reading suggests that the best choice is a twelve- or twenty-gauge pump- action, made by either Remington or Mossberg. Both models can be had with barrel lengths in the 20-22-inch range (some say 18.5-20" instead) , which IMHO is about optimum, at \$200-\$300 new. Loaded with large birdshot at closer ranges, the shotgun is an effective home defense arm. However, loading the first two rounds birdshot and the rest buckshot (fewer pellets, but larger ones) offers considerable versatility. As with any other weapon, training is a necessity.

Editor's Notes: Correspondents have suggested that the Winchester Defender is also a suitable choice and belongs here. The same correspondent also strongly recommends against the Mossberg Maverick, as it is made abroad with somewhat unreliable quality control.

Also, correspondents have disagreed with the recommendation of birdshot as an effective short- range defensive load. While I disagree with their disagreement (in general), it is worth noting that birdshot loses its effectiveness very quickly as range and the need for penetration increases.

IMHO, rifles generally do not make suitable home-defense arms. While they are effective stoppers, they pose a significant risk that the projectile will overpenetrate and endanger bystanders, people in other houses, etc. That's not usually a risk with birdshot, not usually a great risk with buckshot or hollowpoint pistol bullets. However, for the same reason that I recommend against rifles I advise against full-metal-jacketed pistol bullets (also known as 'ball' or 'hardball'.)

For the record, correspondents have written to suggest that the .223 Remington loaded with commercial 55-grain loads actually poses less of an overpenetration risk than a 9mm pistol load. I have not had an opportunity to test this, and would welcome a citation of a study in which this was found to be the case.

If you live in a state where it is legal to carry concealed (There are six or seven with flat bans, another dozen where the issue of permits is at the discretion of some official, and the remainder where permits shall be issued to all qualified applicants - sorry, fellow Jayhawkers, but we're SOL), and you have secured the paperwork to do so, you'll need a decent holster. While not going into specifics, I advise belt-slide or inside waistband (IWB) holsters worn on or slightly behind the strong-side hip as offering the best combination of fast draw and retention against being grabbed. In general, cross-draw and cavalry-draw (butt forward carry) holsters pose retention problems, and drawing from a shoulder or ankle holster in a hurry is not easy. Whichever you choose, you want one in which you can reholster

one-handed without having to look at what you're doing. Retention features such as thumb breaks are nice, but not strictly necessary on a concealment holster.

Part IV: Sources of Training:

Author's Note: I do not have any comments on which of these schools is best for a given application. I do not consider myself to be adequately qualified to make such commentary.

Lethal Force Institute, operated by Massad Ayoob, who is one of the leading teachers of self-defense in the context of legal and ethical issues.

Gunsite Ranch, a shooting school in Arizona that is generally well-regarded, although the former owner (the aforementioned Jeff Cooper) disagrees.

Jim Crews, who teaches a shotgun and carbine class that seems generally well-regarded. (Enough so that I'm hoping to take one next time he's in my neighborhood and I hear about it ahead of time)

COMTAC, a school that operates the Tactics-L listserv discussion group from which much of this information was derived.

Defensive Tactics Institute, operated by John Farnam, a well-regarded school for defensive firearms handling.

InSight's Training Center operated by Greg Hamilton.

KR Training operated by Karl Rehn. This school teaches a number of introductory classes, including the one required for the issuance of a Texas Concealed Handgun License

The next two links are not properly considered to be training in and of themselves. Instead, they are competitive organizations that will provide an opportunity for the personal defense student to evaluate his ability to perform under some degree of stress: International Defensive Pistol Association

International Practical Shooting Confederation

Part V: References:

Note: Other books will be added as they come in and are studied. In the meantime, correspondents have recommended the addition of "In Self Defense" by Mike Izumi, and anything at all by Gabriel Suarez.

Cooper, Jeff: "Principles of Personal Defense" Paladin Press, Denver 1989

Ayoob, Massad: "In the Gravest Extreme; The Role of the Firearm in Personal Protection" Policeman's Bookshelf, Concord, New Hampshire 1980

Ayoob, M.: "Stressfire: Volume One of Gunfighting for Police: Advanced Tactics and Techniques" Policeman's Bookshelf, Concord, New Hampshire 1984

Tegner, Bruce: "Complete Book of Jujitsu" Thor Publishing Company, Ventura, California 1986

Applegate, Rex: "Kill or Get Killed."