

Back Up Pistols and Revolvers

By: Jeff Chudwin

As a young police officer, an old salty Chicago “Copper” addressed me saying, “kid, get yourself one of these”, and he produced a small Colt revolver from his coat pocket. It had rubber bands around the grip to keep it in place (we had no rubber grips in those days). He went on, “ There is no faster draw than to start with your hand on your gun. Walk with your weak hand in your pocket, the bad guy will never see it coming. He’s looking at your gun in your holster. He will think he’s got the drop on you, but he’s wrong. The way you win kid, is to be ready, the be first in the fight.” He had been there and won, more than once. It was a different time, a different world, but the truths of the fight do not change.



1950’s Colt Cobra – from CPD Detective, rubber bands added Chicago Style. The hammer spur outlined in green, would often be cut off to prevent snagging on clothing.

Recently, in the law enforcement firearms classes that we do, a disturbing trend has evolved. When I ask the officers, “Who carries a backup handgun on duty?” the answer is almost no one.

This is in strong contradiction to years past where the majority would be so equipped.

The follow up question to the officers is “why not?” They have no answer but it soon becomes apparent when they are asked if anyone at their department made this a priority when they first were hired.

What has happened to the common sense policy of carrying a back up gun and why? First, they had no salty CPD Officer to put them on the track of practical reality. These young officers cannot be faulted for what they don’t know. It is the duty of every law enforcement trainer/FTO to focus on officer safety-survival issues. Having a backup handgun that can be vital to their survival should be taught on the first day.

There have been cases where officers have exhausted all ammunition in their primary handguns as happened in a police shootout in New Lenox IL on December 8, 2006:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ASnB1kG7xM>

The duty handgun may be rendered unserviceable due to a broken extractor or other essential part or being physically taken, or lost in a fight. We have seen multiple incidents around the nation over the years where law enforcement officers have used their backup handgun to save their lives. The LAPD Onion Field incident involving the kidnapping of two LAPD officers (and murder of one of the officers) is one that impacted police tactics and training. It was related to me by another experienced officer as a reason to always have a hidden backup handgun.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Onion_Field

Here in Illinois, a similar deadly event took place in the kidnapping and murder of Hillside Officer, Anthony Raymond. The evidence techs / investigators who recovered the officer's body from a shallow grave in Wisconsin were friends that I trained with early in my police work. The morgue photos they detailed were ones that I will never forget. We spoke many times afterward and came to an agreement that we would fight to the end on the street before ever surrendering our weapons and ourselves. Better to fight on the street where you have a chance, than to be forced defenseless into the car. That was our decision, and it still holds true today. A backup gun may be the deciding factor in giving you that chance and you winning the fight.

<https://www.odmp.org/officer/11046-patrolman-anthony-charles-raymond>

I wrote about several of these events in the early 2000's and heard back from one of the officers involved. He told me that during a traffic stop the driver attacked him and during the fight was able to rip his handgun from him. It was a Beretta 92 with a manual safety that was engaged. As the offender tried repeatedly to shoot the officer (but could not get the pistol to fire due to the safety being on), the officer drew a concealed AMT .380 auto pistol and killed his attacker. He said that without the backup pistol, he was in a gunfight with no gun.

Two other elements come into play as to why officers have no backup handgun: the first is lack of belief that they need it, and the second is cost.

As to belief, John Keats, the author said this; "Nothing is real 'till experienced." Those who experience a threat to life and survive have a very different view of reality afterwards. But those who do not survive have no lesson to learn. Personal experience has value, but it is a poor model that forces you to learn a lesson where the cost of failure is death or great bodily harm.

As Bob Dent, Oregon Senior Trooper (ret.) writes, "Police Work first gives the test, then teaches the lesson." But some tests will not earn lessons learned because you are dead. We must reverse what Trooper Dent illustrates as a continuing truth in law enforcement and train before the fight is on.

The truth is, **none of us is tough enough or will long enough to learn everything the hard way.** We must learn from other examples, both good and bad. Let history be our guide and law enforcement has a long and deep history when we consider the practices and tools of violence.

In November of 2018, at Mercy Hospital in Chicago, a gunman enraged over a domestic issue murdered three people: his fiancé, a young pharmacy worker, and a Chicago Police Officer, Samuel Jimenez. During this terrible incident one of the responding CPD officers arrived and was immediately fired on in his squad car. The round fired by the gunman struck another officer's holster and pistol, rendering the handgun out of service. It is not known whether this officer had a backup handgun. Other CPD officers entered the hospital under fire to stop the gunman. It was there that Officer Jimenez was fatally wounded, but his fellow officers finished the fight.



Holster impacted by 9mm round. Smith and Wesson M&P impacted by same round.

The bullet struck the CPD Officer's holster, impacted and flattened against the slide and receiver, damaging the handgun, and saving the officer serious injury.

Using this example, I ask the student officers, "What is your plan when you are in a fight for your life and your duty handgun has failed or been lost?" You are alone, there is no other officer to aid and assist you. They have no answer other than run. "And if you cannot run to safety?" There has to be reality to impress the need. What more reality does one need?

We are a tribe, a most honorable one that I call the Blue Tribe. We have many wonderful attributes but one that is not good: we are the cheap tribe. Our attitude is, why should I buy it? If my department thought I should have it, they would issue it to me. Or it is the "go cheap" method where an officer is spending less only to get less. A back up gun is not a luxury but a necessity – and you don't want to be cheap with your life. You may say, "I have not needed it so far, so what is the chance that I need it at all?" If you really believe that, then go out on duty without your handgun, or just keep it unloaded as an ornament of office. No one is buying into that thinking, so why do officers fail to buy into a backup piece of potentially lifesaving gear?

Simply put, the officer does not believe it is needed or is looking at short term cost. The solution is to become a believer. You need to say to yourself, "I need this and will buy one immediately." As to the cost, work a few overtime shifts to buy what you need.

A backup handgun will last your entire career. From that point of view, you are paying \$25 a year for life insurance. You pay five times that much monthly to have cable tv.

Perhaps you don't know what you need, fair enough. Let's look at the multiple options available.

These are the attributes of well-designed back up handgun: absolutely reliable, good ergonomics, easily concealed, lightweight, accurate, and with sufficient power to achieve ballistically acceptable penetration to the human body. This may be either a semi-auto pistol or the original and still highly popular short barrel or snub nose revolver.

If you have only trained on a semi-auto handgun and have no knowledge of revolvers, then do some reading on revolvers and then go out and shoot an example or two.

If you don't know anyone who carries a backup revolver, you can contact one of your local gun shop-ranges and ask if you can try out a range rental.

My recommendation if you have only one choice is an "airweight" aluminum frame Smith and Wesson 442 (no internal lock-don't buy that model) .38 Special caliber revolver. It is a five shot, light weight (14.6 ounces), and is an easily concealed handgun. It is accurate at distances far beyond what we consider for a close-range defensive handgun. With the addition of Pachmayr Compact Grips, a couple speed loaders, and a Desantis pocket holster, this makes one the best combinations I have found.



442 Smith and Wesson (no external key lock model)



Ruger LCR – Light Compact Revolver

<https://www.smith-wesson.com/product/j-frame-150544>

<https://www.ruger.com/products/lcr/models.html>

<https://a.co/d/2kKpdNh>

<https://a.co/d/7i9ohnW>

<https://a.co/d/deSAQVj>

A very good article and web site related to revolvers is from friend Mike Wood who writes as the "Revolver Guy". Mike makes many good points about why the snub revolver works so well as a backup handgun.

<https://www.police1.com/police-products/firearms/articles/15-reasons-to-consider-a-snubby-revolver-for-your-backup-gun-3TwyPODiOZdQk2xm/>

<https://www.police1.com/police-products/firearms/articles/backup-guns-a-cops-insurance-policy-Kx6SI9RDljWM6jM8/>

<https://revolverguy.com/wadcutter-for-self-defense/>

As to the Smith and Wesson key lock design and why I recommend against it, read Mike's analysis. I agree, it is very unlikely that it will be a problem but when you can eliminate the issue in total, do so.

<https://revolverguy.com/the-history-and-future-of-the-smith-wesson-internal-lock/>

Another of the very lightweight hammerless revolvers is the Ruger LCR. It is another five shot option weighing in unloaded at 13.5 ounces for the .38 Special version and 17.1 for the .357 mag. The LCR has thicker rubber grips that aid in the reduction of felt recoil. As to using .357 magnum rounds in any of the lightweight snub revolvers, it is no fun to shoot. One reason I would buy the .357 version is because the additional weight of the longer .357 magnum cylinder helps reduce felt recoil and you can use the shorter .38 Special in the .357 magnum cylinder. As the .38 Special and the .357 mag. are the same casing other than length, you can use .38's in a .357 mag revolver but not the other way around. And, if you only had access to .357 ammo, you are still in business.

From a shooting standpoint, these small lightweight revolvers are a handful, and you would not spend the day shooting 200 rounds of full power duty ammo. But using light load .38's, like target wadcutters, 100 rounds for training is no problem. Some feel the .38 wadcutter is a very useable defensive load. Others want more power. Full power duty defensive loads should be tested and trained with and 50 rounds for practice and testing goes a long way. You need to train with what you carry.

Unlike external hammer revolvers such as the link below illustrates, the advantage of the hammerless revolver such as the Smith and Wesson 442 or the Ruger LCR is that they are slick and do not hang up on clothing when being drawn from a pocket or under concealment clothing.

<https://www.smith-wesson.com/product/j-frame-150184>

Carried in a jacket pocket, pants pocket with large opening, under a vest, or on the ankle, these revolvers offer big protection that can be extremely fast to put in action. A very important safety point is that a holster is mandatory for any type of carry, especially pocket carry. Nothing other than the handgun can be in the pocket to prevent an object such as a key getting inside the trigger guard and causing an unintended and possibly catastrophic discharge.

For those working in plain clothes or off duty, the ability to access your primary handgun may be blocked by a coat or heavy winter clothing covering the handgun. Using pocket carry in a coat, you can have your hand on your backup and if needed, shoot through the pocket. This is where the hammerless revolver has the advantage over a semi-auto. The semi-auto slide must run back and forth in the firing cycle and will likely hang up and malfunction when fired in a pocket. The revolver cylinder simply rotates when the trigger is pulled, not having the semi-auto malfunction issue.

If weight is not a consideration, the Kimber 6S is a superior piece of gear. All stainless steel, with a six round cylinder, it handles the hottest .357 loads with ease. Weighing 23 ounces, it is the heavyweight of the category and the most expensive. If you work in high humidity or on and over water, the stainless is a big advantage in keeping corrosion at bay.

<https://www.kimberamerica.com/k6s>

The Semi-Auto Option

The second option is a semi-auto handgun and the choices are near endless. Some desire to carry the same handgun as their primary duty handgun for interchangeability of ammunition and same manual of arms.

The problem is the size and weight of a reduced size duty handguns. It is doable, such as a Glock 17 paired with a Glock 26, however many officers don't like the increased weight. For pocket carry the size can be unworkable. An ankle holster is very commonly used and while I am a big fan of ankle carry, there is a difference between a lightweight object versus a brick attached to your lower leg for hours on end. Galco and DeSantis make very good ankle holsters for both revolvers and semi-auto pistols.

<https://www.galcogunleather.com/ankle-glove-ankle-holster-861019.html>

<https://www.desantisholster.com/die-hard-ankle-rig/>

The Glock 42/43, the SIG 365, the Smith and Wesson Shield, the Ruger LCP series of pistols are all choices I have tested and currently see on the street. There are many others made by Springfield Armory and Kimber that are equally serviceable. With reliability at the forefront, we want a handgun that has a proven record or years of sale and use. Most smaller handguns do not get much range time. They are shot, tested for accuracy, and put in use. That is a mistake in my view. If we carry a handgun of any type it is because we may need it. To think that if you can shoot one handgun "well enough" that you can shoot any handgun "well enough" is not true.



Glock 42 .380 auto top left, Glock 43 9m/m bottom left,
Sig P365 9m/m top right, Ruger LCP II .22 LR bottom right

Caliber choices in the semi-autos range from the smallest .22 long rifle (LR) to the most common .380 auto, 9m/m, .40 cal., and .45 auto loadings. The .22 is limited in power but still deadly. However, given the need to stop the attack immediately, the .22 is not the choice. What about the others? It is simply a matter of choice. Recoil in the smaller pistols leads to a saying, "easy to carry but hard to shoot." Yet the smaller pistols such as the Glock 42 is very comfortable to shoot for extended training as are all those pictured above. After many years of conducting ballistic testing and reviewing actual street incidents, the basic truth is that bullet placement against the most vital human anatomy is more important than caliber. Bigger bullets create larger wound channels, no question, but if not impacting in a location that shuts down central nervous activity, creates major blood loss, or structurally breaks down bones and

joints, a determined attacker can remain in the fight for a long time. Long enough to continue to commit murder as was clearly the case in the FBI Miami Shootout in April of 1986.

https://books.google.com/books/about/Forensic_Analysis_Of_The_April_11_1986_F.html?id=dJLBAAACAAJ

The book is attached to this article.

There is a lot of good information on the web, but also some that falls short. Two of the web sites that have many valuable posts related to backup type handguns are Activeresponsetraining.net and The Revolver Guy at <https://revolverguy.com/>.

Here are links to additional articles that tell of officers winning the fight with a backup handgun:

<https://calibrepress.com/2017/04/back-guns-pt-2/>

<https://www.policemag.com/weapons/article/15349942/freeway-shootout-backup-gun-to-the-rescue>

There is much more information available regarding backup handguns. Check out the above links, look at videos, get hands on, and then make a choice. If you are working the street without one, get one.

The bottom line is that one day your life may depend on having a back up handgun. It is hidden life insurance and a second line of personal defense. All gear can fail or be lost and redundancy is vital. Remember, "two is one, and one is none".