

Triggernometry

The "Center Mass" Myth and Ending a Gunfight

By [Jim Higginbotham](#)

Surviving a gunfight isn't what you think it is. Don't let conventional wisdom get you killed. A well placed round to "center mass" in your attacker may not take him out of the fight. Lots of people stay in the fight after "center mass" hits, and some even win it. If you expect to win your gunfight, you have to make sure that you have effectively The "Center Mass" Myth and Ending a Gunfight ended the threat of your attacker. One, two or even several well placed "center mass" shots may not do what you think it will, and learning to recognize this before you gunfight may save your life.

There is a self styled self defense "expert" under every rock, and perhaps two behind every bush, these days. If you have a pet theory on what might work on the street then you can probably find a champion for that idea who actually charges people to teach them that skill. But few of the experts out there have ever been in gunfights, and even fewer have studied real gunfights to see how things really work out when the bullets really fly for blood.

There are more misconceptions out there than I can cover in one article but the one that probably gets to me the most, even over all the caliber wars that rage interminably in the print and cyber media, is the nearly universal acceptance that shooting a miscreant "center mass" with _____ (fill in your favorite make, model and caliber) shooting _____ (fill in your favorite ammunition) hyper speed truck killer is practically guaranteed to get the job done.

Having studied in this field from a number of decades, I have run into plenty of cases where bullets did not do what folks would have assumed. And I have now collected enough of these that I think that rather than being anomalies, they are actually closer to the norm. Center mass hits in a gunfight do not in most cases end the fight. Erroneous assumptions can get you killed!

There is a well known video in training circles in which a Highway Patrol officer shoots an armed subject 5 times "center mass" (this is not my assessment but the statement of his immediate supervisors which are interviewed on the full version of the hour long tape) with his 4" .357 Magnum revolver firing hollow point ammunition. All 5 hits failed to do the job and the subject was able to fire one round which struck the officer in the armpit. That round wandered around in the chest cavity and found his heart. The officer unfortunately died at the scene and his attacker is alive today.

In a class, I conduct under the title "Fire for Effect" I start out by showing a video of standoff in which a hostage taker is fired on by police with .223 rifles and .40 caliber

handguns. Throughout the whole disturbing sequence, which lasts about 10 seconds, the bad guy is hit multiple times in the torso with both rifle and pistol rounds. You can see him place his non-firing hand to his chest, clearly a lung is hit. However he is able to shoot his hostage 3 times, not rapidly. The hostage, a trim female, is active throughout the scene but later died from her wounds. In this case both the attacker and the victim had “center mass” hits that had no immediate effect.

I have accumulated confirmed incidents in which people have been shot “center mass” up to 55 times with 9mm JHP ammunition (the subject was hit 106 times, but 55 of those hits were ruled by the coroner to be each lethal in and of themselves) before he went down. During training at the FBI Academy we were told of a case in which agents shot a bank robber 65 times with 9mm, .223 and 00 buckshot – he survived! These are not rare cases. They happen quite often.

If a gunfight ever comes your way, your attacker may fall to a hit to the liver and he may not. He may fall to two or three hits to the kidneys, intestines or spleen, but he may not. He will certainly be in bad health. He likely will not survive, but what he does for the next several seconds to a few minutes is not guaranteed because you hit him "center mass."

Heart and lung hits don't statistically fare much better. I have three students and three other acquaintances who were all shot in a lung at the outset of gunfights. The students came to me after their fights to learn how to keep from getting shot again. Last time I checked all of those people were still alive and the people who shot them are still dead. Every one of them was able to respond effectively after being shot “center mass”, one might even say they were shot in the “A-zone”. And they were shot with .38 Special (three of them), 9mm, .357 Magnum and 8mm Mauser, so it's not all about caliber. One of those was a Chicom 12.7 mm round! He lived next door to me for many years. So, what's a person to do? First off, realize that one shot, even a fairly well placed shot may not do the job so don't set there and admire your handiwork or wait for it to take effect. But even two hits may not get the job done!

After years of trying to get a grasp on this I have come to look at the results of shooting a living breathing target – be it a human attacker or a game animal – as falling into 3 or 4 categories. They are :

Instant Collapse – this takes place 1 to 2 seconds from the shot being fired

Rapid Collapse – this can take from 3 to 15 seconds and is quite common.

Marginal Effect – this can even be a lethal hit but it takes from 15 to 300 (yes 300!) or even more seconds.

The 4th is simply unacceptable and is a total failure.

The last category we don't like to discuss but happens too often . We saw it recently in Washington with a Center Mass hit from an officer's pistol and the subject was still walking around the next day.

What is “effective” shooting? Sad to say, it is demanding. It is also, I think, variable depending on the conditions. For example, the robber armed with a scattergun who is standing 10 feet away must be stopped “right now!” If you do not bring about Instant Collapse someone may very well die...that someone may be you!

On the other hand, if there is a gang banger launching bullets in your general direction using un-aimed fire about 20 yards away then a hit that brings about Rapid Collapse might do the job.

I cannot imagine a Marginally Effective result being very desirable in any case, but it does buy you some time in some cases.

How does this relate to hits? In order to achieve Instant Collapse you must scramble the “circuitry” that keeps the bad guy on the attack. That means the brain or spinal cord. The head is not only a fairly difficult target to hit in the real world – because it moves a lot – but it is also difficult to penetrate and get a pistol bullet into the place it must be to be effective. For normal purposes we might write off the head, keeping it in reserve for very special circumstances.

The spine is not that easy to hit either. It isn't large, and to be effective the hit needs to be in the upper 1/3 of the spine or at a point about level with the tip of the sternum. I think that is around T11. But of course the huge problem is that it is hidden by the rest of the body. We are the good guys, we don't go around shooting people in the back. So the exact location is something that can only be learned through lots of practice on 3D targets. Your point of aim on the surface changes with the angle at which the target is facing.

The bottom of the spine isn't much use. I know of several people shot in the pelvis. It did not break them down as many theorize. I am not saying it doesn't happen but in the only case I know of in which it did the person who was “anchored” with a .357 magnum to the pelvis killed the person that shot him – you can shoot just fine from prone.

A shot, or preferably multiple shots to the heart and major arteries above the heart (not below!) may achieve Rapid Collapse, but not always. Officer Stacy Lim was shot in the heart at contact distance with a .357 Magnum and is still alive and her attacker is still dead! Score one for the good guys...or in this case gals!

So now what constitutes Marginal Effectiveness? A hit to the lungs! Even multiple hits to the lungs. Unfortunately though, most often lung hits are effective in ending the fight because the subject decides to quit the fight, not because he MUST. A famous Colonel Louis LeGarde once wrote what is considered "the" book on gunshot wounds. 65% of his patients shot through the lungs – with rifles! – survived with the predominant treatment being only bed rest!

Effective Practice and "Dynamic Response"

The goal of practice, one would think, is to make correct, effective shooting techniques a matter of reflex, so that you don't have to think about what you are doing in a gunfight. Most people will perform under stress at about 50 to 60% as well as they do on the range...and that is if they practice a lot! If they only go to the range once every other month that performance level decreases dramatically. Shooting and weapons handling are very perishable skills. Also folks tend to practice the wrong stuff inadvertently. I put this in the classification of "practicing getting killed" but that too is a topic for another day.

Let's talk about a basic response, what I call "Dynamic Response." Situations vary and this is not meant to be a universal answer, just one that will work for about 80% of scenarios.

It is pointless to stand still on the range and shoot a stationary target, unless you simply want to polish up some marksmanship fundamentals. That is a necessary part of learning to shoot. But if you are practicing for a fight, then fight!

Some rules.

Don't go to the range without a covering garment – unless of course you always carry your gun exposed (no comment).

Don't practice drawing your gun fast – ever! – While standing still.

Part of the Dynamic Response is to step off the line of attack (or on rare occasions that are dependent on circumstances backwards or forwards) and present the weapon with as much alacrity as you can muster and engage the target with overwhelming and accurate fire! By the way, never assume a fight is completely over just because you canceled one threat. Don't practice "standing down" too quickly. We have a video attached which will hopefully give you the right idea.

I wish there was a formula of how to stand and how to hold your gun but there really isn't. We don't do "Weaver vs. Isosceles vs. Modern Iso vs. whatever". We don't do "Thumbs Crossed vs. Thumbs Forward vs. Thumb Up...never mind." Those are things for you to work out on your own. You use what makes YOU effective not what works for a guy who practices 50,000 rounds the week before a big match (that is not an exaggeration). Competitive shooters will throw out advice on what works for them. It may not work for you.

There is also not "one true gun". Your skill is far more important than what you carry, within reason. We are not really talking about "stopping power", whatever that is, here but rather effectiveness.

I can find no real measure – referred to by some as a mathematical model – of stopping power or effectiveness. And I have looked for 44 years now! Generally speaking I do see that bigger holes (in the right place) are more effective than smaller holes but the easy

answer to that is just to shoot your smaller gun more – “a big shot is just a little shot that kept shooting”. True, I carry a .45 but that is because I am lazy and want to shoot less.

A good bullet in 9mm in the right place (the spine!) will get the job done. If you hit the heart, 3 or 4 expanded 9mms will do about what a .45 expanding bullet will do or one might equal .45 ball...IF (note the big if) it penetrates. That is not based on any formula, it is based on what I have found to happen – sometimes real life does not make sense.

Practicing Dynamic Response means practicing with an open mind.

Circumstances in a real gunfight are unpredictable and the more unpredictability you mix up into your practice the more your brain will be preparing itself for a possible real gunfight.

In real life, your gunfight may be dark, cold, rainy, etc. The subject may be anorexic (a lot of bad guys are not very healthy) or he may be obese (effective penetration and stopping power of your weapon). There are dozens of modifiers which change the circumstance, most not under your control. My only advice on this is what I learned from an old tanker: “Shoot until the target changes shape or catches fire!” Vertical to horizontal is a shape change, and putting that one more round into his chest at point blank range may catch his clothes on fire, even without using black powder.

We tell our military folks to be prepared to hit an enemy fighter from 3-7 times with 5.56 ball, traveling at over 3,000 feet per second. This approach sometimes worked, but I know of several cases where it has not, even "center mass."

With handguns, and with expanding bullets, it is even more unpredictable, but through years of study I have developed a general formula, subject to the above mentioned unpredictable circumstances.

2-3 hits with a .45

4-6 with a .40

5-8 with a 9mm

With a revolver, the rounds are not necessarily more effective but I would practice shooting 3 in a .38 or .357 merely because I want 3 left for other threats. Not that those next three won't follow quickly if the target hasn't changed shape around my front sight blade. A .41, .44 or .45 Colt I would probably drop to two. Once again, they are not that much more effective than a .45 Auto but I don't have the bullets to waste.

In any case, I want to stress the part that it is more about how you shoot than what you shoot, within reason. It is also more about the mindset and condition of the subject you are shooting which is not under your control. Take control – buy good bullets and put them where they count the most! And remember “anyone worth shooting once is worth shooting a whole lot!” (but please stop when the threat is cancelled, we don't advocate “finishing shots”).

Gunfights are ugly things. I don't like to talk about the blood and guts aspects of defending life any more than the next guy. But it is our lives we are talking about here. By researching how gunfights are fought, and more importantly, how gunfights are won,

it may give both of us the edge if a gunfight ever comes our way. I hope to cover many of the points I have learned and learned to train others in over the coming months. It isn't as easy to write about it as it is to teach it in person, but you can only succeed if you are willing to try. I hope you enjoy the ride. Press on!