



Target Accuracy vs. Defensive Accuracy: Understanding the Difference

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Often new shooters and perhaps even some more seasoned individuals misunderstand the target accuracy and defensive accuracy. In many cases shooters assume that accuracy is simply accuracy and that the tighter the group, the better shooter they are. While this is actually partially true, like all things in life there exists a time and a place for everything and understanding the differences in target vs. defensive accuracy can ultimately make the difference between life and death.

While undeniably valuable, being precise within shooting is an extremely valuable skill and ability, however it is within the context that the differences appear. Within this article, we will explore these differences and how as well as when they apply.

Target Accuracy

The intention of target accuracy is to create the smallest possible group on a target. Be that paper, steel or other non-reactive targets. With target accuracy, skill is often measured by the number of shots or holes placed as close as possible to the intended point of aim or center of the target.

Generally target shooting is engaged in within controlled conditions such as a public or private shooting range where the following information is readily available to the shooter:

- ~ The distance to the target, where the target is located, when the shooting is permitted or will begin and there is no immediate threat or time pressure constraints unless participating in some form of competition.

Because of these conditions, the shooter will typically be better able to focus on their marksmanship skills including: Stance, grip, sight alignment, breathing, trigger control, and follow-through.

Defensive Accuracy

The term defensive accuracy is “The ability to place rapid and effective hits on a target while within an immediate, life-threatening situation”.

In opposition to standard target accuracy which as stated above would typically be used within a controlled environment such as a range, the unpredictable nature of a defensive encounter will cause intense stress, will generally unfold rapidly and will also evolve quickly. Time will be extremely limited for decisions to be made and actions to be implemented with the overall intention and priority to be stopping an imminent and immediate threat while maintaining control over not only the weapon but each shot fired as well.

Again, unlike target shooting, the objective of defensive shooting is the smallest possible group, but rather to deliver sufficiently accurate hits on the threat.

Performance Under Stress

One of the key differences between target and defensive accuracy is found in the effect of stress on the body. Within a life threatening situation the body will release a series of stress hormones which can and often will effect the brains fine motor control, the shooters vision (Tunnel Vision) and cognitive processing. These physiological changes often will make increasingly difficult to produce the level of precision one may experience within a controlled environment such as a shooting range.

It is for these reasons that defensive firearms training often incorporates or requires time constraints, rapid / sharp movement and rapid decision-making.

This is done with the intention of assisting the student with the development of muscle memory and the increased ability to work through the stress and function under demanding conditions while always maintaining safe firearm handling to the best of their ability based upon the situation.

Overall Accuracy Remains Critical

The common belief that within defensive shooting poor marksmanship is acceptable is completely false, because the shooter holds for every round fired legal, moral and personal responsibility and must always seek to place shots only on targets which are intended and justifiable. The fact that situation is chaotic or outside of a sense of control by the shooter is in no way a legitimate reason or excuse to perform with accuracy which can endanger bystanders. In short, defensive accuracy is the application of appropriate precision under extreme stress.

It is here that both skill and muscle memory come together. There is a saying which says "You will not perform at your best under pressure; you will perform at the level of your training."

Within defensive shooting, the overall objective is to place hits within anatomically effective areas of the body with the intention of stopping the threat while at the same time understanding that the effectiveness of those hits will be affected by several conditions which may or may not be within the control of the shooter.

The Critical Role of Shot Placement

Perhaps one of the most critical aspects of defensive shooting is shot placement or the ability to place hits within anatomically effective areas of the body. Unlike target shooting where success is measured by the size of the shot grouping, within defensive shooting, success is measured in effectiveness at stopping the threat.

Again, in target shooting the goal and objective is to ideally produce a single ragged hole or an extremely tight grouping in shots within the center of the target. The ability to obtain this outcome will demonstrate consistency within the shooting fundamentals including: sight alignment, trigger control, grip, breath control and follow-through.

With defensive shooting however, the objective is significantly different and is not based upon the ability to produce the smallest group possible but rather to create the maximum amount of damage to the target as possible within the shortest possible time while at all times maintaining accuracy and control over the weapon.

Effective Shot Placement

Whenever engaging within a defensive shooting situation, shot placement remains a critical aspect of success. When engaging a living target overall objective is to stop or at least significantly reduce the movement ability of the threat allowing for effective and safer retreat. This is most often achieved by creating the loss of blood from the target and the most effective way to accomplish this is to create multiple points of leakage which will be discussed further below.

In order to increase the effectiveness of proper shot placement, the following factors generally need to

be considered and applied all at the same time:

- ~ Accuracy, speed, your distance from the target, the movement of the target, the environmental conditions, the presence of bystanders within the immediate area and legal considerations.

The emphasis must always be on making deliberate, well-placed hits rather than firing rapidly without sufficient control over the weapon or the environment to the best of the shooter's ability.

Why a Single Hole Isn't the Goal

When most new shooters begin, they will often equate skill and ability with the production of a single hole within the center of their target. While there are several reasons for this one of the primary reasons is found in the general inability to actually practice any other type of shooting skills because of range restrictions which are more often than not present.

While the development of target marksmanship skills is a critical skill for many reasons including the building of a solid foundation, it is not a significant measure of success within defensive shooting or training.

As discussed within the previous section, within a defensive situation the overall goal is the destruction of tissues and leakage of bodily fluids with the intention of stopping or significantly slowing the target's aggression and unfortunately most of the time a single projectile will not achieve this objective nor will a single hole. This is not to say that a threat cannot be stopped with a single shot as this can and has happened, however the chances of this are extremely low. Therefore several holes which each produce tissue damage and loss of blood and fluids will often lead to increased success.

This is not to say that poor overall accuracy is in anyway acceptable, but rather that the placement of multiple shots into an extremely tight area is not generally recommended within a defensive situation and may actually be more of a detriment than a benefit.

An ideal grouping pattern to strive for is the ability to place multiple (5 or more) shots within an 8" circle at 10 yds or 30 ft. rapidly and at all times controlled.

Why Target Practice Still Matters

Nothing within this article is in any way intended to dismiss target shooting as unnecessary or unrealistic but rather an important step in the progression of shooting ability and skill. Target shooting not only helps develop skills but also helps to develop and maintain muscle memory in addition to multiple other essential skills which are needed by defensive shooters and it is for this reason that in addition to other defensive forms of training and practice, shooters should also practice basic target shooting on a regular basis as well.

In Conclusion

It is important to understand that target accuracy and defensive accuracy are not competing philosophies. While both are different, each maintains a specific role to play and are actually still both continue to use the same fundamental marksmanship principles only within different ways.

A skilled shooter knows that accuracy should never be sacrificed at the altar of speed within a defensive scenario. However, the pursuit of perfect precision can ultimately lead to catastrophic outcomes.

Ultimately, the shooter needs to have and maintain the proper skill and ability to increase their chances of success by learning to balance speed, accuracy and control over their weapon at all times.

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About the Author

Brian S. Williams is a professional firearms instructor, tactical trainer, and executive security consultant with greater than 35 years of experience in firearms instruction, use-of-force training, and protective operations. As the founder of several firearms training and security organizations, he has developed and delivered firearms, tactical, and instructor certification programs for civilians, law enforcement officers, military personnel, and licensed security professionals throughout the United States.

Over the course of his career, Mr. Williams has trained and certified more than 10,500 Connecticut pistol permit applicants, instructed more than 2,000 civilians and hundreds of law enforcement and security professionals in advanced firearms and tactical applications, and provided remedial firearms training to military and correctional personnel. He served as a Marine Police Officer and Watch Commander with the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection and was appointed to the Connecticut State Police Firearms Advisory Council, where he contributed to firearms training and policy discussions.

Mr. Williams holds numerous professional certifications, including NRA Training Counselor, NRA Law Enforcement Firearms Instructor, General Dynamics Simunitions FX™ Instructor, The Heckler & Koch International Training Division and Sig Sauer Academy Instructor certifications, and USCCA Concealed Carry and Home Defense Instructor. He is the author of *Welcome to the Real World: A Dangerous Place to Be Caught Unprepared* and has been recognized as an expert in firearms by the Connecticut Superior Courts. His work continues to emphasize responsible firearms ownership, sound judgment, lawful use of force, and practical, reality-based training.