



The Mythical 21' Foot Rule: Understanding the Tueller Drill

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Introduction

One of the concepts within firearms community which is widely discussed and just as frequently misunderstood is the so-called “21' Foot Rule”. Often treated as though it represented a precise distance within an assailant armed with a knife automatically will automatically becomes a lethal threat and justify the use of deadly force. However, this perception could not be further from the truth.

The so called “21' Foot Rule” was originally developed to be a training exercise developed by Salt Lake City, Utah police Sergeant Dennis Tueller in the early 1980s. The intent was to demonstrate a simple but important principle that: an individual can cover a surprisingly large distance in a very short amount of time, before general and human reaction can occur.

Because of the frequent misinterpretation of this principle, the need to understand this distinction is essential who carries a firearm.

How did the 21' Rule Come Into Existence

As covered previously, Sergeant Dennis Tueller developed this training exercise after considering the question: How close is too close when confronted by someone armed with a contact weapon?

The experiment compared two separate principles:

- 1. The time required for a person to cover approximately 21' feet.*
- 2. The time required for an individual with a holstered firearm to recognize the threat, draw, and engage the target.*

The initial results within the original experiment demonstrated that an average healthy adult could cover 21' (7 yards) within approximately 1.5 seconds while charging.

It is important to understand however that the 1.5 second timeframe was an approximate average, not a fixed time and could vary widely between individuals and later experiments found considerable variations within individual running times, demonstrating that a distance of 21 feet (7 yards) could be covered with times ranging from 1.24 to 1.83 seconds, with an overall average of 1.5 seconds, dependent on the individual.

The importance of this discovery wasn't that 21' feet represented a magical boundary, but Rather, it illustrated the relationship between distance, time, reaction, and action.

There Exists No Legal Standard Regarding a “21' Foot Rule”

Perhaps the biggest problem with this concept is the widely accepted, yet inaccurate belief that it actually represents a law, rule or regulation. In truth, there exists no universal legal rule or standard which indicates that individual who is within 21' feet may automatically be shot. Likewise, being more

than 21' feet away does not automatically mean that a person cannot pose a lethal threat and that the circumstances surrounding a potential use of lethal force are considerably more complicated than a measurement of distance on the ground. Several additional factors need to be considered, including the general behavior, apparent intent, movement, environmental conditions, does there exist an available escape route and the presence of bystanders. All of these circumstances, considerations and variables are required to determine if the use of lethal force will be justified.

Reaction Time is the Key

The long standing value of the Tueller concept is found within what it tells us in relation to understanding reaction time. Unfortunately, there is a tendency by individuals to underestimate just how quickly someone can move and within a closer proximity, an individual will need even less time to to close the distance. This is particularly concerning because the brain needs to perceive exactly what is happening, interpret what it is perceiving, make a decision and then tell the body to react and unfortunately all of this will take time, which is called a reactionary gap.

Distance and the Reality of a Threat

Another serious misconceptions regarding the so called 21' foot rule is found within the belief that distance alone can / will determine if a lethal threat exists. IT DOES NOT! While distance from a threat is an important consideration for other reasons, as stated throughout this article, an arbitrary measurement does not and will not ever be the singular determining factor within a threat assessment.

For example, ask yourself would a individual who is standing 10' away from you yelling angrily, who is not moving forward in your direction and does not appear to have a weapon or item which could be used as a weapon, be considered a greater threat than someone who is 25' away with a knife and was cutting up cardboard, who is not saying anything, rather they are just looking at you intently. Which one do you think represents a greater threat?

This is because it is important to always remember that a person standing 10 feet away is not automatically an imminent lethal threat simply because of the distance or their general behaviors, conversely, an individual who is farther away could potentially present a significantly greater threat depending on a totality of the circumstances present.

Human Considerations With This Concept

The Tueller concept / drill remains continues to provide an illustration of several human-performance principles, including:

1. Action vs. Reaction – An individual who is in motion will often maintain an advantage over someone who must first recognize and interpret that movement or behavior.
2. Time is critical – An individual who recognizes / interprets danger quicker will often have a greater chance to make an appropriate decision.
3. Distance is critical – Because greater distance will generally provides more time to perceive and respond to a developing situation or circumstance.

Why this Myth Can Be Dangerous

Perhaps the most concerning problem with the so-called “21' foot rule” is found in the belief by individuals that this arbitrary measurement will in some way convey permission to use lethal force, and it is important to remember that the original experiment was not conducted for that purpose, but rather it was performed as a training experiment to determine reaction time.

Another Way to Consider the 21' Foot Concept

Possibly the best way to understand and remember the 21' concept is to, rather than considering the distance of 21' feet as some magical distance, understand the principles held within it:

1. Distance will generally create time.
2. Time will effect decision making opportunities.
3. Human reactions are rarely instantaneous.
4. Threat assessment involves more than distance.
5. Every encounter is context-dependent.
6. A training exercise is not automatically a legal standard.
7. Avoidance and de-escalation should remain priorities whenever possible.

In Conclusion

A better way of understanding the the “21' foot rule” is recognize the objective it was intended to establish and the concepts learned as a result of those findings including that time and distance are interconnected and that time, distance, perception and human reaction are all important.

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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.