



LOS ANGELES POLICE DEPARTMENT
TACTICAL CONCEPTS
Tactics Training Overview

Tactical Concept No. 17

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FIREARM SAFETY

INTRODUCTION

The Four Basic Firearm Safety Rules guide our Department's handling of firearms. These rules are the first lesson a recruit is taught when they begin their firearms training in the Academy, and they are used as a reference throughout an officer's career. Adherence to these rules promotes officer safety during a necessary and dangerous part of a police officer's profession, weapons handling – and is in accord with our guiding principle of reverence for human life.

PROCEDURE

Firearms safety is a critical component of officer safety. Officers must have the ability to safely draw, holster, manipulate, and discharge their weapons at all times, especially when involved in a stressful situation. The firearms safety rules were established based upon real life situations and are applicable at all times: in the field, on the range, and when off-duty. Violations of any of the firearms safety rules can result in possible injury or death. Therefore, violations of the firearms safety rules may result in disciplinary action up to and including termination.

Four Basic Firearm Safety Rules

The Four Basic Firearm Safety Rules are as follows:

- 1. All guns are always loaded.**
- 2. Never allow the muzzle to cover anything you are not willing to shoot.**
- 3. Keep your finger off the trigger until your sights are aligned on the target and you intend to shoot.**
- 4. Be sure of your target.**

Officers are required to know and apply the Four Basic Firearm Safety Rules throughout their career. These rules must be ingrained into an officer's natural thought process and as a conditioned response. Any violation of the Four Basic Firearm Safety Rules may result in the unintentional discharge of a round. This is a serious matter with the potential for tragic results.

This Tactical Concept applies to both administrative handling of a firearm and tactical operations. When applied in a training environment (e.g., on a firing range), the rules are to be adhered to for range safety. However, in the field, where situations are fluid, unpredictable, and rapidly evolving, the rules are there to assist and guide the officer in safely handling their firearm during dynamic situations.

Application During Field Operations

Rule No. 1 – All Guns Are Always Loaded: This safety rule is not meant to be taken literally because every firearm is not always loaded. The fact that an officer knows the condition of a firearm does not matter. For this rule, the concept is to remind the officer that they should handle the firearm with respect and with the assumption that the firearm is loaded, meaning the officer shall acknowledge the potential for lethality. Officers shall handle any firearm in a manner that will minimize risk and avoid an unintentional discharge.

This safety rule also directs that the officer must be mindful of the proper storage of the firearm. Improperly storing a firearm could allow another person with less training to access the firearm which could lead to an intentional or unintentional discharge resulting in serious bodily injury or death.

Although separated into two different rules, in the field, the following two rules work together.

Rule No. 2 – Never allow the muzzle to cover anything you are not willing to shoot: This rule reminds the officer that they shall always be aware of muzzle direction to avoid intentionally, or unintentionally, covering someone with the muzzle of their firearm unless they are willing to shoot that individual. The word “willing” in this case means that the officer is ready or prepared to fire only if necessary. This rule makes it clear that an officer shall not cover anyone with their muzzle, including a suspect, unless doing so can be justified.

Rule No. 3 – Keep your finger off the trigger until your sights are aligned on the target and you intend to shoot: This firearm safety rule is a continuation of the prior rule and introduces an officer’s intention to shoot, meaning the officer plans on discharging their weapon. The officer’s finger should stay off the trigger (alongside the frame) until the officer has an intent to shoot. Should an officer prematurely place their finger on the trigger before they have aligned their sights on the target and have the intent to shoot, the officer increases the possibility of an unintentional discharge that could potentially result in serious bodily injury or death.

Note: While an officer should be prepared to act and may have the intent to discharge their firearm, intent does not guarantee action. Officers should continuously assess the suspect’s behavior and the overall situation. In some instances, the suspect’s actions may warrant the discharge of the firearm, followed by reassessment of whether additional rounds are necessary. During this process, the officer may remain on target, with their finger on the trigger, while actively evaluating the threat.

Once it is determined there is no longer a deadly threat, and there is no longer justification for the officer to remain on target, the officer shall remove their finger from the trigger, assume a low-ready position, and continue to assess the situation.

Rule No. 4 – Be sure of your target: This safety rule requires officers to know at whom or at what they are aiming. There should be no doubt in the officer's mind that the suspect the officer is aiming and/or firing at is the person who appears to pose an imminent threat of death or serious bodily injury to the officer or others. The officer shall also consider their background and foreground while in a deadly force situation; however, an officer always has the right to defend his or her own life or the life of another.

Low Ready

The position which officers assume once they have presented their firearm, but have not yet made the decision to shoot, is the *low ready* position. From the low ready position, an officer may assess a tactical situation or conduct a search with the firearm while having it readily available for a quick transition to a shooting position.

The low ready position is the preferred position for conducting building or ground searches, including searches for an armed suspect. When searching, the muzzle is low enough for the officer to observe the surrounding area. During low light conditions, the low ready position can be used in conjunction with a flashlight. While at the low ready position, the trigger finger is not on the trigger. Trigger finger placement when off the trigger in low ready position is dependent on the weapon system (e.g., pistol, shotgun, rifle).

When a potential suspect is located, the muzzle is maintained down range in a manner that does not physically cover the suspect, unless doing so can be justified. Any intentional pointing of a firearm at an individual by an officer shall be reported consistent with Department policy.

CONCLUSION

Adherence to the firearms safety rules promotes officer safety during a necessary and dangerous part of a police officer's profession. The safety rules apply to both administrative handling of a firearm and tactical operations. Officers should be cognizant of their muzzle direction, and able to articulate why the circumstances dictated the level of force used. The continuous and tireless application of the safety rules provides for consistent and safe manipulation of firearms, in accordance with our core value of Quality Through Continuous Improvement and our guiding principle of reverence for human life.

Important Reminder

Deviation from these basic concepts sometimes occurs due to the fluid and rapidly evolving nature of law enforcement encounters and the environment in which they occur. Deviations may range from minor, typically procedural or technical, to substantial deviations from Department tactical training. Any deviations are to be explained by the involved officer(s), and justification for substantial deviation from Department tactical training shall be articulated and must meet the objectively reasonable standard of the Department's Use of Force policy.

Field Training Services Unit
Police Training and Education Group

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