

Behind the Badge

By Jon Blum

Are police officers always trained to shoot to kill violent suspects? Are police trained to shoot legs and arms too? This might save a life.

J. L.

Dear J.L.:

The actual use of a firearm by police to control suspect resistance is considered deadly or lethal force. Deadly force is any action, with or without a weapon, that could reasonably cause serious injury or death. *Serious* injury is typically defined as causing irreversible disfigurement, impairment, permanent loss of use, disability or death if left untreated.

State law authorizes the use of deadly force by sworn law enforcement personnel.

N.C. General Statute §15A-401(d)(2) - A law enforcement officer is justified in using deadly physical force upon another person when it is or appears to be reasonably necessary to defend himself/herself or a third person from what he/she reasonably believes to be the use or imminent use of deadly physical force.

Contrary to popular opinion, law enforcement officers are not trained to 'shoot to kill.' According to Garner Police Lieutenant Paul Shambaugh, a State certified Firearms Instructor, police officers are trained to shoot 'center mass' or human torso region when using deadly force. The intent is not to kill, but to stop the threat as quickly as possible. Lieutenant Shambaugh also said the following:

"If a person is trying to seriously injure or kill you, the quickest way to stop them from doing so is to target areas of the body containing vital organs. Not all, but most vital organs are in the torso region of the body. Precision shooting of extremities is problematic for several reasons. First, a direct hit to an arm or leg may not stop the pending threat. Second, arms and legs are much smaller targets and probably moving during the situation. Your chances of missing an arm or leg is significantly higher than the torso. A missed target may also endanger innocent by-standers. Last, but not least, the stress associated with most deadly force encounters decreases fine and complex motor skill performance. Officers usually have just enough time to react. Aiming becomes a luxury rarely allowed in deadly force situations. We never want anyone to be killed, but it can happen."

Other Sources of Interest

Graham vs. Connor, 490 U.S. 386, (1989)

Tennessee v. Garner, 471 U.S. 1 (1985)