

Leg Shot Syndrome

By [David Nash](#)

I talk a lot about lethal force, and one concept comes up almost universally. I call this idea the leg shot syndrome. The leg shot syndrome is expressed by the statement "I wouldn't aim to kill; I would shoot the robber in the leg."

I believe I know where this thought comes from. It comes from the fact that everyone I give firearms classes to comprise the "good guys." Good guys don't go around killing, robbing, raping and hurting people. They believe that everyone has redeeming qualities. Good guys don't want to kill people, they didn't start the encounter, and if they had their way, the bad guy would just leave.

Now before I get tons of hate mail, let me say that I understand the reason people think this, and I wish everyone in the world felt that way. If there were no bad guys, there would be no crime. I could then put more energy into my primary job of preparing for natural disasters instead of diverting energy to preparing for criminal disasters. While understanding and admiring this idea, I want to emphasize that this is not a good way to *apply* this concept.

There are many reasons why this philosophy is not sound in the lethal force arena. Some of these reasons are legal, some tactical, and some, yes, are even moral. I will jump into what I hear as the most widely used reason why the leg shot syndrome should not be used, legal.

A handgun is a lethal weapon. Unlike a baseball bat, a butcher knife, or a policeman's baton, there is no less lethal way to use a handgun against another human. The law does not distinguish the difference between shooting a person in the head, and shooting a person in the chest. If there is not legally defensible motive and the person dies it is still murder. A bullet cannot be recalled once it leaves the barrel, and the person who fired the bullet cannot decide what it does upon entering a person. There is a major artery in the human leg (the femoral artery), which if severed can kill a person as quickly as shooting them in the chest.

Tactically manipulating a firearm under lethal force pressure is extremely hard. Quite a few books and statistics from a vast amount historical data show that only about 1/3 of the rounds fired impact *on the target*. This doesn't seem to be that bad, until you look at other statistics that show approximately 90% of gun fights happen under 7 yards and comprise less than 3 total shots. How realistic is it then that when most people can would be lucky to hit their attacker, you are going to hit one of the smaller areas, and an area that is most likely to be moving?

Tennessee (and every other state I have found that has a defined handgun training curriculum) specifies shooting *center-mass* with the *intent* to stop. This involves two concepts.

The first being center-mass, which means aiming your projectile to impact inside the largest target area (the chest), since this is the area you have the greatest ability to actually hit. Also, a hit in the chest area has the greatest probability of stopping your attacker.

Intent to stop means neither aiming to kill, or shooting to wound. Either of these are irrelevant; your legal self defense right is centered upon the attacker being able to kill you, and *trying* to kill you. If the mere presence of your legally owned firearm causes the attacker to stop, it has done its job. If one well placed round to center mass persuades the criminal to stop, that's okay. However, if it takes 3.5 boxes of cartridges to stop a drug crazed, gangbanging, terrorist from killing you, then so be it.

This intent to stop is the first half of my moral argument. The other reason comes from plain street sense. I have spent a few years working in corrections. These years are split between entry level corrections, working on the recreation yards and cages listening to inmates talk about themselves and their crimes, to working as a supervisor in maximum security units and applying inmate psychological knowledge to help keep the prison running smoothly.

Criminals do what they do because it works for them. If a mugger or a rapist tries to talk you into leaving with him, it's because it has worked for him before. Believe me, a violent criminal hasn't decided to start being a violent criminal just because you are there; a criminal starts small and works up gradually, becoming more violent. If a criminal gets away with hurting you, *he will do it to someone else*.

I am not saying that vigilante justice is okay. I am not advocating deadly force as a punishment for a criminal, either. What I am saying is that you are a reasonable person, with an inalienable right to life and liberty, minding your own business, living a peaceful life. You have a right do what you need to do to be safe, to go home to your family. This criminal attacked you, tried to hurt you for no reason other than his personal gain. You're not trying to kill him, only making him stop trying to kill you. That is not wrong, that is right. Your family needs you, make sure you do what needs to be done to be there for them. (Other articles by David Nash can be found on his www.shepherdschool.com web site.)