

# So, You Want to Buy a Handgun... by K.E.

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As a follow-up to Frog's recent excellent article on gun-buying decisions, I thought I would drill down a bit on the handgun option – not to exclude the importance of long-guns, by any means! This article was originally quick-typed for a non-gun-owning friend at work who asked, “what kind of handgun should I buy”, when he was feeling a bit insecure due to the latest national conflagration (not the most current). As a result, this is my opinion, based on experience. I look forward to comments, as we can **always** learn from each other!

## The two most common types of handguns are Revolvers and Semi-Auto Pistols

### Revolvers

A revolving cylinder holds cartridges – fired cartridges cases are manually extracted before reloading. Revolvers do not typically have a “safety”, but rather rely on the long, heavy (7-8 lbs) pull of the “double-action” trigger mechanism to prevent unintentional discharge. “Double action” means that the trigger pull both retracts the hammer and drops the hammer (thus firing the shot). Many revolvers can be fired in “single action” as well, by cocking the hammer manually – at this point it takes a much more light trigger pull (3-4 lbs) to drop the hammer.



*Smith & Wesson .38 Special Revolver (5-shot)*

## Advantages

1. Virtually malfunction free – can live in a drawer for years and still fire when the trigger is squeezed
  2. No safety to remember – when you squeeze the trigger, it fires.
  3. Better suited to people who don't want to practice (though every firearm deserves practice!) because malfunction-clearing procedures are limited.
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    1. Doesn't require hand/wrist strength to "rack the slide" (as with a semi-automatic pistol).
    2. If the "Haters-of-Freedom" succeed in infringing on our Second Amendment rights, these will probably "stay legal" longer than the semi-auto pistols described below. Revolvers haven't been as "vilified" by the press and anti-freedom officials as have the semi-autos.
    3. All things equal, revolvers handle a broader range of ammo types (deep hollow-points, shotshells, etc.) than semi-auto pistols.

## Disadvantages

1. Relatively low ammo capacity (usually 5-6 cartridges...significant in the case of multi-person home invasion).
2. Slow re-load – must usually be loaded one cartridge at a time, after manually extracting the spent shell – even with "speed loaders" it's a slower process.
3. Usually "thicker" (wider) than semi-auto pistols, because the minimum width is determined by the cylinder diameter. Though they are *simpler to use* than semi-autos, they are still complex machines that don't take abuse well – a drop onto a hard surface can disrupt the delicate timing which aligns a chamber of the cylinder with the barrel when a shot is fired. Not good.

## Semi-Automatic Pistols

(aka, "autoloaders" or "autopistols", and in casual use, "automatics.") – A magazine, inserted into the grip of the pistol, holds the cartridges – fired brass cases are automatically extracted as the slide flies back from the force the firing of a cartridge. A new cartridge is stripped from the magazine and loaded into the chamber as the slide rebounds. Most semi-auto pistols have external safeties to help prevent unintentional

discharge. These safeties must be deactivated before the pistol will fire, thus requiring more practice to perform flawlessly under stress. Some pistols, such as the Glock “safe action” pistols, do not have an external safety, but rather a trigger safety that prevents discharge if the pistol is dropped, but any trigger pull will fire the weapon.

## **Advantages**

1. Simply stated – Firepower. Pistols in common calibers (9mm, .40S&W, .45acp, .357sig) often have magazines that hold 13-20 rounds. If the last round is the one that saves you, that’s how many you need!
2. Quick, high-capacity reload. With practice, a full magazine can be reloaded in 1-2 seconds!
3. Easier concealability – Many of these pistols are very thin (some less than 1”), and are easier to conceal than a revolver, whose ammo capacity is determined by the width of the cylinder

Most semi-autos are fairly durable.

## **Disadvantages**

1. Even when in perfect working order, there is more to malfunction during the semi-auto firing cycle than with a revolver.
2. Because of the malfunction potential (e.g., failure to extract, failure to feed, etc.), it requires more thought and practice to become competent with a semi-auto than with a revolver. Note: Due to the fast-action mechanics of a semi-auto, it demands more cleaning and maintenance than a revolver. Lubrication is critical.
3. Some ladies (and understrength men) don’t have the strength to dependably rack the slide to load, or to clear jams. Requires a firm grip to ensure the appropriate cycling of the action.
4. As stated above, if you plan to submit to oppressive government, then be prepared for your full-capacity magazines to be restricted or outlawed. (My suggestion: Buy more... *soon!*)

## **Semi-Auto Pistols**

### **Basic types of Semi-Auto Pistols (there are many more, but these represent most currently on the market)**

1. “1911 type” – First adopted by the US Army in 1911, this is a single action only (the hammer must be cocked manually, or by the slide in the course of firing), single stack magazine (usually 7-8 rounds), with a characteristic grip and thumb safety. Traditionally in .45 ACP (Automatic Colt Pistol) caliber. Many people love them, though, in general, they probably have the highest malfunction rate of modern pistols. Excellent products are made by Colt, Kimber, Para, and others. Good ones range from \$800-\$2000 and beyond.



*“1911” type (.45 ACP Single-Action – 7-to-9 shot)*

2. Polymer Frame, Glock type – Introduced in the 1980s, this type pistol has been adopted by militaries and police forces around the world due to reliability, durability, reasonable accuracy, and excellent value. The frame is a virtually indestructible polymer, with barrel and slide made from hardened steel. They are “striker” fired (no traditional hammer to drive the firing pin into the primer, but rather a spring-loaded striker). They operate somewhat between true single action and double action, as the striker is “half cocked” when a round is chambered. Pulling the trigger completes the striker cock and releases it to fire the shot. Trigger pull is consistent from 1<sup>st</sup> shot to last. Most have “double stack” magazines, which increase the width of the grip, but also increase the ammo capacity. Capacity ranges from 10-20 rounds, and can be commonly had in .380, 9mm, .40 S&W, .357 SIG, 10mm and .45 ACP calibers.

Glocks have no external safety, but some other brands of polymer frame pistols do, e.g., some variants in the Springfield XD line and the SIG P320 lines. Good ones range from \$500-\$700.



*GLOCK 22 (.40 caliber striker-fired – 11-16 shot)*

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3. “Double action/Single Action Pistols – Many models are available, most commonly SIG-Sauer, Walther, and Beretta. As the name implies, these pistols can be carried with a round in the chamber, but with the hammer down. The first trigger pull is long and heavy, as with any double action, but after the first discharge, the hammer is cocked by the slide, and it fires in single-action (i.e., a light trigger pull drops the hammer) from that point until the magazine is empty. They usually have some external safety as well. The advantage: some feel safer with a chambered pistol having the hammer down – first shot is much like a revolver. The disadvantage: inconsistent trigger pull – requires a lot of practice to maintain good aim in the transition from the first to second shot. Different models have single stack or double stack magazines. Capacity usually ranges from 8-15 rounds, depending on caliber. Good ones range from \$700-\$1000 and up.



*Beretta 92fs (9mm double action/single action – 16 shot)*

### **Consider Your Purpose!**

If home defense *and* concealed carry are goals – look for medium size with the best compromise between ammo capacity and size (i.e., concealability)

But if home/vehicle defense is the only goal – then look for high capacity, without regard for size.

### **Caliber?**

My general advice is to get the largest caliber than you can handle. Will female family members be trained? If so, 9mm *may* be best. .45acp is often cited as “the standard”, but arguments over comparative ballistics and “stopping power” abound. Since  $\text{Energy} = \frac{1}{2}mv^2$ , the size of the bullet doesn’t tell the whole story. Studies show one-shot stops at >85% with anything 9mm or larger, ***if the bullet is well-placed***. The smallest caliber that should be considered (and then only for concealment or back-up) is .380 or .38 Special. Regardless of caliber, shot placement is the main determining factor in stopping the threat- major disruption of the neurological system (brain or spinal cord) and/or cardiovascular system (producing a fast, profound drop in blood pressure) is what stops violent, aggressive criminals....in other words, practice until you’re accurate! Having said all this, if all you can handle and dependably shoot is a .22 pistol...**GET A .22 PISTOL** (if you’ve exhausted all avenues to handle a more lethal round). Though .22 LR at pistol velocities can certainly be lethal, it is

rarely **QUICKLY** lethal, which is what you'll need to stop the threat. But, many bad guys will turn and run as soon as it starts popping! I don't know about you, but I wouldn't want to be on the receiving end!

### Personal recommendations

The following are my personal recommendations. (Your mileage may vary!):

Remember, no single firearm serves all purposes. In these uncertain (or should I say, "certain") times it's best to get a concealment pistol, a home defense pistol, and, of course, a 12 gauge pump shotgun, which is a great home defender and versatile defense/hunting weapon – with **practice** (the kick is pronounced and quick, repeatable pumping is essential!). You need to buy *plenty* of practice and self-defense ammo as well – many power-mongers have designs on trying to circumvent the Second Amendment and recent Supreme Court rulings by limiting the availability of ammo....after all, the Constitution didn't say anything about "keeping and bearing *loaded* arms", did it? Having said that....

You can't go wrong with a Glock in 9mm, .40 S&W, or .45 ACP (aka, .45 Auto) caliber. It's the best value out there, and the most dependable; however, you must consider the pros and cons of the lack of an external safety. All Glocks that are chambered (a cartridge in the chamber) are in "condition one"...ready to fire, and should be holstered (to guard the trigger). A good holster with a *full-coverage trigger guard* is essential!

The Springfield XD and XDm lines have been heavily advertised, and seem to be a good value. Consider them "Glocks with an external safety", but without the massive, around the world experience to confirm their reliability, though good evidence is mounting. Most have a grip safety, some have thumb safeties as well. \$500-700

The Kimber 1911s are probably the best made, most reasonably priced *production* pistols of the 1911 type. Expect to pay at least \$1,000. Colt, Springfield, Remington and others also make excellent 1911 pistols. Custom shops, such as Wilson Combat, Night Hawk, and Ed Brown make great 1911s, but expect to pay \$2,000 and up!

I like the SIG P220 (in .45 ACP) or Equinox (an upgrade of the P220) in the single-action/double-action line – \$800-\$1200. Also single/double action, the Beretta M9 (9mm) was the official sidearm of the U.S. Army from the mid-1980s to recently, when SIG won a new contract. Civilian Beretta offerings include the 92 FS, 92 A1, and others -\$700-\$1000.

If you decide on a revolver, look at Smith & Wesson, Taurus, or Ruger in 2"-to-4" barrel, .357 magnum caliber. You can practice with .38 special rounds for less kick and less money, but for business, the .357 magnum will stop most anything (with good shot placement....remember?) They are commonly available in 5 round cylinders, but S&W makes a 6 and 7 round. Prices range from \$400-1200.

Those who are weak-of-hand and don't foresee a lot of practice, may consider a S&W .38 special Airweight revolver. For practice, use .38 Special full metal jacket or roundnose. For defense, keep it loaded with .38 Special +P hollow points (Corbon makes a good one!). \$400-\$600. Remember, the lighter the pistol, the more forceful the perceived recoil. Also, the (relatively) new S&W M&P Shield EZ in .380 and 9mm is making quite a splash with those who find it hard to rack a semi-auto slide. My neighbor's wife has one, and she **loves** it! \$350-\$500.

If small size (i.e., concealability) is the primary goal, several ultra thin (< 1 inch) 9mm semi-autos are available, of various quality, including the Kel-Tec p11 (around \$350) and PF-9 (~\$300), Walther PPS (around \$650) and a few Kahr models (\$400-700). "Pocket pistols" in .380 caliber are good back-up guns, and certainly better than nothing...but 9mm is generally considered to be the least powerful caliber for dependable self-defense. Having said that, as always, a well-placed shot with a less powerful or smaller caliber is much preferred to a poorly placed shot with a cannon! These .380 "pocket pistols" include the Kel-Tec p3AT (around \$300), the Ruger LCP (around \$400) and a few others by Kahr and Para. The venerable Walther PPK (of James Bond fame) is about the size of the 9mm pistols mentioned above, but is chambered in .380, and is very well made (around \$800+). If you look at pocket pistols, be sure to consider the ammo capacity – many are only 6+1 (6 in the magazine and one in the chamber), and as such, are only marginally better than a revolver in this regard, but *much faster* to reload. Most pistols in this category are "double action only" (with the exception of the SIG P238, which is single action) thus have a long, heavy trigger pull and no external safety. Good holsters (with good trigger coverage) are a good idea!

### **Disclaimer**

The foregoing suggestions represent only one man's view of available items, mostly based on my experience. This article is meant to help with understanding the broad categorical decisions that you must consider. The specifics will require research and testing. Find a good gun shop, preferably with a range, and then rent different handguns until you find one that feels right. Most indoor ranges rent all of the common varieties on the market.

**The most important consideration is this:** *A gun is nothing more than a tool.* Purchasing the right tool for the perceived job is important, but investing the time and money in learning to use it is paramount! Get good instruction, and practice, practice, practice. Remember the old, but true, adage: "practice doesn't necessarily make perfect....only *perfect* practice makes perfect!".

And remember, the only reason anyone would ever have to take your gun away, is to do something to you that they wouldn't be able to do if you had a means of defending yourself! (paraphrased from Aaron Zelman, a great American!)

Good luck!

**P.S.** If you decide to become a gun owner, it may be good to study a little about our Nation's history and Founding Principles. *Why* do Americans have the Constitutionally-protected Right to Bear Arms? Is it all about our Right to Life, and thus, its corollary, the right to self-defense? (How can you have a Right to life, without a Right to protect it???). What does world history suggest about the effects of governmental disarmament of civilians? What is the risk-to-benefit of civilian gun ownership? If only government employees had guns, would it solve all our problems?....what does history say? If **no one** had guns, would everyone be equal and happy? Is the Right to Bear Arms simply about the guns – about private property? Or, is it more about *what the guns protect*? If you should decide to fight for the Right to Keep and Bear Arms, would you be fighting for the guns, or fighting for what the guns protect? After all, as stated above, guns are *just a tool*....no more, no less.