

**The Bill Blackwood  
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**

---

---

**Open Carry of Patrol Rifles  
As a Defense to Mass Shooting Situations**

---

---

**A Leadership White Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
Required for Graduation from the  
Leadership Command College**

---

---

**By  
Edward Guzman III**

**Bay City Police Department  
Bay City, Texas  
February 2020**

## **ABSTRACT**

Every day, many people and their families attend large events in their communities. Events such as parades, carnivals, concerts, rodeos, and block parties are just a few examples. These families often go about the day with little to no worry of their safety. In fact, they may see several on duty police officers at these events as well. The officer's main priority is keeping the peace and maintaining a safe environment at that specific event. The unfortunate reality of these types of events is that they are extremely susceptible to a mass shooting or mass killing event. There are several examples throughout history showing the damage that a person with ill intent can cause in an area populated with a large amount of the public. The officers assigned to secure these events are normally not carrying the ideal weapon to protect innocent lives if an attack like this occurs. Although the officers are well trained and armed with handguns, they will not be much help against a person using any type of rifle or long gun. Officers assigned to secure large crowded events should be carrying a patrol rifle. With proper education of the public, training of the officers, and specific policy mandates, this would be an excellent defense to a problem that is faced too often.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

	Page
Abstract	
Introduction . . . . .	1
Position . . . . .	2
Counter Arguments . . . . .	5
Recommendation . . . . .	8
References . . . . .	13

## INTRODUCTION

Mass shootings are an unfortunate yet real threat to public safety. This threat not only places many people in fear for their wellbeing, but also places an enormous responsibility on the public servants who have taken an oath to protect. Mass shootings often involve one or more persons entering a heavily populated area with the intent of killing and injuring as many people as possible (Osborne & Capellan, 2017). A recent example of this includes the 2017 shooting in Las Vegas at the Route 91 Harvest Music Festival near the Mandalay Bay resort. Although the possibility of this happening is always present, people will undoubtedly continue to attend sporting events, parades, concerts, community activities, and other events involving large crowds.

Law enforcement officers are often present at these types of events, providing security to the people in attendance. However, it is not very often that these officers are armed with patrol rifles. While the patrol rifle is a more-superior weapon than the handgun that officers normally carry, it is often not utilized until a deadly force encounter is already present, and, the, it is too late.

With mass shooting situations being a more-prevalent threat, the law enforcement officers providing security at these kinds of events are severely ill-prepared and could find themselves easily outgunned. Law enforcement agencies have a duty to prepare for the worst possible situation, and provide their officers with the necessary equipment to fulfill their oath to protect the citizens they serve. Agencies should have officers openly carrying patrol rifles while they are assigned to provide security at events that are susceptible to mass shooting situations. If this were to become a more

commonly practiced procedure, the number of lives lost during these horrible acts of violence could be significantly decreased.

## **POSITION**

There are several reasons why an officer should be equipped with a patrol rifle on his person while providing security to a large group of the public. One of these reasons is the fact that the chance of a mass shooting occurring is a very valid threat. On October 1, 2017, a man opened fire from the window of a room on the 32<sup>nd</sup> floor of the Mandalay Bay Resort in Las Vegas, Nevada. He shot down into a crowd of 22,000 people attending a concert at the Route 91 Harvest Music Festival (Pirani, 2017). As a result of this attack, over 50 people were killed and 527 were injured (Pirani, 2017).

Unfortunately, this event was not the first of its kind. In fact, a recent article by CNN provided statistics on 36 of the most deadly mass shootings that occurred in the United States from 1949-2018 ( "Deadliest Mass Shootings," 2018). With a major shooting occurring just this year, there is no sign of this type of threat slowing down. Anytime a large amount of the general public assembles for an event, the possibility of an attack occurring should be a serious consideration. Proper planning to handle and prevent this type of thing should be on the minds of every law enforcement agency.

Another reason that officers should be carrying patrol rifles while providing security at large events is that rifles are proven to be far superior weapons than the handguns that officers carry on their duty belts. Although the officers working at these events are not completely unarmed, they could very easily find themselves outgunned or be rendered ineffective in defeating the threat at hand. On average, a police officer carries a 9mm, .40 caliber or .45 caliber handgun on their duty belt (Callahan, 2018).

These weapons can generally only hold up to fifteen rounds of ammunition per magazine. They also have a very limited range of fire when compared to a rifle. The modern patrol rifle is capable of holding thirty rounds of ammunition in a single magazine. This gives the officer a great advantage in being capable of firing many bullets at a target before having to reload the weapon (Callahan, 2018). The patrol rifle can also fire more accurately than a handgun when both are fired at equal distances (Oldham, 2008). After about twenty yards, a person firing a handgun must take significantly more time to take an accurate shot than a person firing a rifle. In the event of a mass shooter situation, the shooter will more than likely be moving, not stationary. The shooter will also likely be amongst a large crowd. The importance of being able to accurately take shots at the bad guy is one of the main reasons a patrol rifle should be preferred over a handgun (Oldham, 2008).

In 1997, officers in Los Angeles, California responded to a bank robbery known as the North Hollywood Shootout (Garrett, 2008). Multiple suspects were armed with high caliber rifles and wore high levels of protective body armor. The responding officers found themselves severely outgunned and many of them were pinned down and even injured. The suspects were unharmed by the officer's handgun rounds because of the armor worn. The suspects in this case were eventually stopped, but only after the arrival of specialized officers armed with rifles (Garrett, 2008). There have been multiple recent mass shootings in which the shooter was armed with a rifle. An officer providing security at a large event cannot afford to find himself outgunned by someone who decides to open fire.

AR-15 style rifles have become a very common weapon used in mass shooting situations. A student at a Florida high school recently used a rifle to kill multiple students and adults. In 2017, 26 people were killed by a shooter armed with a rifle as they attended church in Sutherland Springs, Texas. The shootings at a night club in Orlando, Florida, and, at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut are also examples of mass shootings in which the shooter was armed with an AR-15 style rifle (Lloyd, 2018). Because mass shooters are more and more likely to be armed with some type of long gun or rifle, law enforcement agencies should arm its officers to keep up with the firepower they are likely to face.

Not only would rifles serve as the ideal form of defense in a mass shooter situation, but they can also be an excellent deterrent. The Houston Police Department has recently begun arming its officers with patrol rifles while they provide security in busy airports during the holidays. Rumbaugh of the Houston Chronicle quoted Jeff Price, a professor of aviation management at Metropolitan State University of Denver, "It's a staple of airport security throughout the world, and I'm surprised it took this long" (2017, para. 8). Price also said that the rifles carried by the officers in airports allow officers to keep up with the firepower of any would be attackers and also provide an intimidation factor to anyone thinking about causing harm to the public. "It looks like a big scary gun to a lot of people and that's part of the intent. They want to look intimidating," (Rumbaugh, 2017, para. 8). Officers carrying rifles at large events would serve the same purpose. If a person planning an attack sees that the officers at the event are well armed and ready, it could very well deter an attack on the public.

Airports around the world have adopted the use of heavily armed guards standing visibly in popular areas both inside and outside of the terminals. After terrorist style attacks at an airport in Istanbul in 2016, the airport began placing trained officers and guards with rifles at strategic locations in the airport (Jansen, 2016). LAX in Los Angeles, California commonly stations police armed with rifles and dogs on roads leading to the airport terminals. The primary reasons behind these armed guards, is to help deter an attack, and to assist in rapid response times in the event that something happens (Jansen, 2016).

## **COUNTER ARGUMENTS**

Someone opposing the open carry of rifles by officers may argue that the majority of these officers have access to the weapon in their patrol vehicle already and carrying it would cause other concerns. In 2015, law enforcement professionals who were in attendance at the Federal Bureau of Investigation's National Academy took a survey on the use of patrol rifles in their agencies (Phillips & Jarvis, 2017). There were 370 usable surveys as a result of this, and the information gathered indicates that over 95% of police departments in the United States allow its patrol officers to be equipped with rifles on the patrol level (Phillips & Jarvis, 2017). Seth Stoughton, a law professor at the University of South Carolina, and ex police officer points out that the rifles are cumbersome in nature and it would be difficult to fight a suspect if it came down to it (McKay, 2018).

It is clear that agencies across the U.S have adopted the patrol rifle as another tool and option to have available, however, the weapons are kept in the vehicles officers use to patrol the streets. Sometimes they are in the trunk of the vehicle and other times



they are kept locked in a rack that is installed in the passenger compartment. In 2008, a statistic was found when evaluating several school and workplace active shooter situations. Fifteen seconds was found to be the general length of time between deaths once an active shooter situation begins (“Patrol Response Challenge,” 2008).

Officers working large events such as parades, or concerts are not normally near the patrol vehicle their rifle is kept in. Once a mass shooting begins, the amount of time taken to retrieve a rifle would not be ideal in saving lives. With the rifle being locked away in the officer’s vehicle, getting to it may not even be possible. With someone dying every fifteen seconds, leaving the area of the threat to retrieve the rifle would not be productive in providing adequate protection to the public. Although it may be a cumbersome weapon for some officers, the ability to decrease the amount of lives lost in a mass killing event far outweighs this issue.

Some law enforcement agencies may oppose the open carry of patrol rifles by their officers’ at large events, due to the public’s opinions on police militarization. Police militarization is a hot topic in the media these days. After several incidents in dealing with protestors and rioters following the shooting of Michael Brown in Baltimore, or the use of tear gas and pepper spray on the Occupy movement in California, the public outcry against police militarization has been in the spotlight recently. With the rise in active shooter type events, agencies have adopted the patrol rifle as another tool. The rifle has historically been looked at as a weapon of the military. Because of advances in the way police are dealing with active shooters, agencies have armed street level officers with these military style rifles as well. These officers will likely be the first to arrive on scene and will have to address the threat immediately (Phillips, 2016).

Agencies choosing to arm their officers with rifles and have them carry them openly may be hesitant or against this because of the public pressure to not portray a militarized group of warriors. The community opinion and relationship is a very important aspect of policing in the United States.

Although the issue of police militarization might be a hot topic at the moment, it is not a new issue to law enforcement. Sir Robert Peel has been credited with forming the first modern police force in London during the 1820s. He adopted the structure he used to develop his force from the military with the mission being to proactively prevent crime by the use of foot patrols. Peel also adopted the military rank structure and chain of command (Wyrick, 2013).

Throughout history there have been several key events that have pushed for a more-militarized police force. One of the first was the Munich Incident at the 1972 Olympics in Germany. This event started with a terrorist group taking several athletes and coaches hostage. At this time the German police force responding to this incident did not have any formal training or equipment in dealing with this time of situation. The police put a plan together that failed miserably. All hostages, as well as an officer died as the result of an attempt to end the situation (Wyrick, 2013). As a result of this failure, German police forces developed a specialized group known as GSG9. This group was armed with military style equipment and became familiar with militarized tactics to handle special situations. The group would later be a major influence on the development of SWAT teams in the United States (Wyrick, 2013). Militarization has been an intertwined aspect of police growth throughout history. Although it may be a

more talked about issue, it is not something new to law enforcement, and should not be discounted as an effective way to protect the public.

Opponents to the open carry of patrol rifles by police at crowded events would argue that these rifles would increase the risk of innocent people being killed. Many believe that because of the high power of the rifle, innocent people could be killed from what is called over penetration. Overpenetration as defined by Shooting Illustrated is “a bullet passing through a threat and continuing with the potential to cause unintentional damage to a bystander or object” (Mann, 2014, para. 1). With this definition in mind, many believe that officers firing at a threat could more likely unintentionally harm an innocent person.

Although overpenetration may be possible, it is very unlikely. In fact, it is less likely that a bullet fired from a .223 caliber rifle could overpenetrate the target than it is when a bullet is fired from the handgun an officer would normally use (Caleb, 2016). There have been extensive studies done on the penetration depths of bullets when fired from different types of firearms. Rifles that shoot the .223 caliber bullets commonly carried by law enforcement agencies showed better results than handguns on a consistent basis. This means that not only will a rifle shoot more accurately, and at further distances, but it will also be less of a liability to innocent lives.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Throughout history, law enforcement has changed and evolved in many ways. Growth is important and necessary, but, is at times very difficult to implement or accept. With the continued loss of human life, and the increased threat to a person's safety at certain large events, it is clear that an increase in the level of security provided at these

events is very much needed. Law enforcement agencies should have their officers openly carry patrol rifles while working at these large events. The idea of mass shooting situations is not a new one. It has been an event throughout history that can happen at any moment and in almost any setting. Recent attacks in Las Vegas, at the Mandalay Bay Resort, and at the Pulse night club in Orlando, Florida are just examples of how quickly these incidents can happen. Both of these events have happened in the last two years, and are not even the most recent examples. Mass shootings show a pattern of continuing to occur. Officers armed with rifles at large events such as concerts or parades would greatly improve the chances of them being capable of stopping the threat before too many lives are lost.

Rifles are also proven to be far superior to the handguns officers are normally armed with. They increase the amount of ammunition that can be carried, and also give the shooter a very stable and accurate platform to shoot from. A well-trained officer with this type of weapon will be capable of providing a high-quality of protection to the public. Mass shooters have chosen the AR-15 time and time again to attack innocent people. Often times the shooter is armed better than the officers providing protection to the people involved in the shooting. An officer only armed with a handgun could find themselves outgunned and out of the fight while innocent people die around them.

One of the most notable events in law enforcement history was the North Hollywood Shootout. In a time where no street level officer had access to a rifle, they found themselves pinned down and outgunned while attempting to stop two bank robbers that were armed with high powered rifles and body armor. The event finally came to an end when SWAT officers arrived with their own rifles to eliminate the threat.

Not only are patrol rifles more effective in eliminating the threat, but they can also serve as a deterrent to future attacks. Officers working for Houston Police Department recently began openly carrying rifles in the airports they provide security for. One of the hopes and expectations is that the mere presence of the well, armed police will act as a deterrent to any would be attackers. A professor of aviation management described the rifles to “be big scary guns” (Rumbaugh, 2017, p. 8), and hoped they would serve the purpose of being intimidating to others. Other airports around the world have also begun arming guards and officers with rifles to increase their ability to respond to critical situations and also act as a deterrent to anyone planning an attack.

Someone in opposition to officers openly carrying rifles at large events would argue that the majority of officers these days already have access to rifles that are carried in their patrol vehicles. The majority of U.S police agencies have adopted the patrol rifle as a backup weapon choice by this point. This change began to occur when leaders in the law enforcement community began seeing the need to arm its officers with similar fire power to the type used against them. Although this is true, it is not an efficient way to protect the public in mass shooter type situations. An officer standing at an event will not be near his vehicle or have access to his rifle in the event of a shooting.

Another argument might be that the public’s view on the militarization of police would place a bad outlook on these officers or the agencies they work for. The militarization of law enforcement has been a highly debated topic in the media recently. With several publicized incidents involving the use of military type equipment and tactics

on protestors and other members of the public, the thought of arming officers with military style rifles may not be an easy decision to make. However, one of the first modern policing models was based on military tactics and structure. Throughout history, law enforcement has taken and adopted military equipment and training and used it to provide a necessary level of protection to the public.

Finally, an opponent to officers being armed with rifles at large public events might argue that the high powered fire arms would increase the risk of over penetration, causing accidental death to an innocent person. In the event of a mass shooter situation, there will be a certain level of chaos. The shooter is likely to be moving and be among large crowds of people. The possibility of a bullet entering a bad guy and then exiting to possibly hurt or kill someone else is a real threat. Over penetration has been studied and tested in many ways. Although the threat of this happening is possible, studies have shown that it is less likely to occur with a rifle than it is with the handguns officers would normally use.

With minor changes to most police department policies, and a good amount of awareness and communication to the public, law enforcement agencies could immediately begin to have their officers carry rifles while providing security at large events. Agencies should take advantage of local and social media outlets to inform the citizens of the change ahead of time, and explain the benefits it would bring in increasing their safety. Along with this notice, it is very important that agencies train their officers in a well scripted, and uniformed response to the public's questioning about the carry of the rifle. Policies could be put in place, mandating the rifle be slung on the officer's back when it is not necessary for use. This could appear less

threatening to the public and also keeps the officer's hands free for other tasks.

Implementing these changes and allowing officers to be better armed and ready for an event should be done to increase the quality of protection officers can provide to the citizens they serve.

## REFERENCES

- Caleb. (2016, July 14). Why high powered 5.56 NATO/223 ar-15 ammo is safer for home defense (FBI overpenetration testing) [Blog post]. Retrieved from <http://preparedgunowners.com/2016/07/14/why-high-powered-5-56-nato-223-ar-15-ammo-is-safer-for-home-defense-fbi-overpenetration-testing/>
- Callahan, M. (2018, March 2). *4 ways PDs can justify a patrol rifle program*. Retrieved from <https://www.policeone.com/police-products/firearms/articles/471820006-4-ways-PDs-can-justify-a-patrol-rifle-program/>
- Deadliest mass shootings in modern U.S. history fast facts. (2018, February 19). Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2013/09/16/us/20-deadliest-mass-shootings-in-u-s-history-fast-facts/index.html>
- Garrett, R. (2008, May). Long guns on patrol. *Law Enforcement Technology*, 35(5), 30-36.
- Lloyd, W. (2018, February 16). *Why AR-15 style rifles are popular among mass shooters*. Retrieved from <http://abcnews.go.com/US/ar-15-style-rifles-popular-mass-shooters/story?id=53111745>
- Mann, R. (2014, July 16). *Overpenetration*. Retrieved from <https://www.shootingillustrated.com/articles/2014/7/16/overpenetration/>
- McKay, J. (2018, March 8). Does Arming Police with Semi-Automatic. Retrieved from <http://www.govtech.com/em/disaster/Does-Arming-Police-with-Semi-Automatic-Rifles-Make-a-Community-Safer.html>
- Oldham, S. (2008, June). Active shooter equipment. *Law & Order*, 56(6), 75-78.



- Osborne, J. R., & Capellan, J. A. (2017, July). Examining active shooter events through the rational choice perspective and crime script analysis. *Security Journal*, 30(3), 880-902.
- Patrol response challenge. (2008, March/April). *Law & Order*, 56(6), 62-68.
- Phillips, S. W. (2016). Myths, militarism and the police patrol rifle. *Policing & Society*, 26(2), 185-196.
- Phillips, S. W., & Jarvis, J. P. (2017). The police patrol rifle. *International Journal Of Police Science & Management*, 19(2), 72-80.
- Pirani, F. (2017, October 3). *The deadly Las Vegas massacre by the numbers: How many injured and more*. Retrieved from <https://amp.usatoday.com/amp/86513524>
- Rumbaugh, A. (2017, November 20). Houston police patrolling busy local airports with AR-15s. *Houston Chronicle*. Retrieved from <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/business/article/Houston-police-airports-with-12372755.php>
- Wyrick, P. T. (2013). *Police militarization: Attitudes towards the militarization of the American police* (Master thesis). (Order No. 1522889)