

Is the Glock Inherently Unsafe?

You've seen the endless discussions on Internet discussion sites. You've read the articles. You've seen the topics discussed ad nauseam and parroted by the mobs of Certified Experts on Everything About Guns who populate those boards, wander the aisles of gun stores, and offer unsolicited advice from the station next to yours at the range. What all these pundits have in common is a simple enough prospect, but one in which they hold the firmest of convictions and the most powerful of pseudo-religious faiths: They are convinced that the Glock pistol is inherently unsafe.

To hear the various "experts" pontificating on the topic, you've got to wonder how anyone puts a Glock in a holster without losing a hand or taking out a string of innocent bystanders. The Glock has an "unsupported chamber." The Glock will "kaboom," showering you with pieces of your own hand and fragments of Tupperware, because it can't handle the pressure of the ammunition loaded into it. The Glock will go off by itself when you chamber a round, or when you reholster it, or when you look at it funny. The trigger pull is so light that harsh words will cause the weapon to detonate. Even if all of the above don't get you, you'll probably shoot yourself or someone else because the weapon has no manual safety and you, under stress, won't be able to stop yourself from placing your finger over that deadly, light trigger. Oh, and if, by some chance, you survive all those dangers, you'll shoot yourself in the face when it comes time to take the dangerous ticking time bomb apart to clean it, because it's necessary to pull the trigger to take down the gun and there is no magazine disconnect.

Did I cover everything? I think I got the major assertions. The fact is, the Glock is a remarkably popular weapon with civilians and law enforcement agencies alike. There are very good reasons for this.

If the Greek philosopher Plato could have imagined a handgun in his world of forms – those concepts that embody the ideal versions of all we are capable of imagining, the earthly manifestations of which are but imperfect copies – he would have envisioned a combat firearm with a simple means of sighting, a barrel, a hand grip, a simple and light trigger, and a cocking and ignition mechanism that fires when the user pulls the trigger (but does not fire unless the trigger is pulled).

The closest "imperfect" manifestation of this Platonic form would be the Glock. Available in multiple popular calibers, the Glock comprises precisely the minimum number of features a combat handgun must possess. It has a comfortably sized, slip-resistant grip for the average male or female hand, which remains comfortable across a broad range of ambient temperatures. It offers a simple, easily upgradeable sighting system. It exhibits reasonable combat accuracy at 25 meters. It has an acceptable light trigger that is long enough on the first shot to permit mere mortals to recognize that the trigger finger is moving – but it has a very short trigger reset that permits rapid fire of multiple shots. There is no manual mechanical safety the user must remember to use, nor are there complicating features such as decockers or double-to-single action transitions in operation. Consisting of relatively few parts, yet customizable and available with accessory rails, The Glock can be tailored to suit almost any operator.

The Glock's loose tolerances and generously sized chambers promote feed reliability. The light trigger and soft recoil afforded by the modified Browning action also enables new shooters to quickly master the gun or simply to qualify with it. Glocks are also relatively inexpensive (and may cost less in today's dollars than they did when initially introduced). They are also inexpensive to manufacture.

Glock was the right gun at the right time for the US police market. The Glock appeared just as the transition from revolvers to semi-automatic pistols began in earnest. The Glock 17 and 19 poured gasoline on the blazing Wondernine revolution of the 1980s, which saw police trading in their six-guns for 9mm automatics to fight the drug wars exploding on American city streets. The Glock, like the AK-47, became one of the icons of "the ghetto," of urban, hip-hop culture. Even as the latest crop of rap stars (many of whom have rap sheets as long as their arms) go on at length about criminal activity and the Glocks they carry, even more of these weapons are riding in the duty holsters of law enforcement officers. Today it is estimated that 60% of US law enforcement and many Federal agencies issue Glocks. Nearly 2.5 million Glocks have been sold world- wide.

Why then, are so many shooters – members of the firearms community, the gun culture itself – so convinced that the immensely popular Glock is inherently unsafe? Why do they delight in reproducing anecdotal accounts of

civilians and law enforcement officers who have experienced negligent discharges while carrying or reholstering Glocks – and why are they so quick to blame the gun rather than the operator?

Why the weapon prompts so much outrage, scorn, suspicion, and debate probably stems from the fact that it slaughtered a lot of sacred cows when it was introduced. These authors are just old enough to remember the outrage in the popular press about the supposed “plastic pistol” that was going to be slipping past metal detectors left and right. This innovative pistol caused similar outrage among the firearms community, simply because it was so very different. It was and is a polymer-framed, striker-fired automatic with no manual safety. In a world previously (and arguably still, in some circles) dominated by the steel-framed, single-action, exposed-hammer, grip-safety and frame-safety equipped 1911, in concert with various other all-metal automatics festooned with decockers and other safeties in double-action, the Glock bucks multiple trends.

Some experienced gun enthusiasts rejected the weapon outright on principle, deriding it as “Combat Tupperware.” Pistols should be made of metal, they argued (and still argue). Glocks should have tighter tolerances. Glocks should not ride on such small slide rails. They should not have such light triggers, the experts warn. They should have manual safeties, these critics proclaim.

While the Glock’s long-term success has gone a long way to mute criticism of the weapon, rumors, myths, misinformation, and general suspicion of this simple, robust, easily maintained weapon persist in some circles. Does this, in fact, mean that the guns are inherently unsafe? Has Glock succeeded in deceiving so many gun owners? Is there a lurking danger of which we should be made aware?

As we will see, the factors that contribute directly to the Glock’s success are also the root causes of Glock detractors’ criticisms. Let us succinctly and with less sarcasm list the alleged dangers of the Glock as posited by critics:

1. Glocks have too light a trigger.
2. Glocks do not have a manual safety.
3. Glocks do not have a magazine disconnect
4. Glocks suffer more “kabooms” than other handguns
5. Glock’s customer service, when good is great, but when bad, is abysmal.

Glocks do have a light trigger. They don’t go off when dropped, when racking the slide, or when the trigger is not pulled, if they are in good repair. The standard-weight trigger is 5 to 6 lbs. It can be increased to 8 or 10 to 12 lbs. The light, fast-resetting trigger is, however, one of the reasons Glocks are favored as defense, law enforcement, and combat/defensive style competition handguns. The standard light trigger requires users to practice the basic rules of gun safety and gun storage. Glocks should NEVER be stored loaded when not in use. In use means on or near one’s person when used for self-defense. If not in use, storage requires unloading the gun and securing it and ammunition separately under lock and key. The light trigger makes it much easier for a child or untrained individual who has access to the gun to experience a negligent discharge when handling the weapon.

A negligently stored 12-pound-pull revolver might be harder for some children to shoot unintentionally, while the sight of the cartridges in the cylinder might give some adults pause. A Glock, by contrast, allows for no mistakes. Quite honestly, no gun does and all of them require proper storage – but guns with heavier triggers and more complex manual safeties are more forgiving because they do some of the operator’s thinking for him or her. (That is, after all, what a safety is intended to do. It stops the user from firing the gun unintentionally, even if the trigger is pulled. The Glock, by contrast, does none of the thinking for the operator.)

The Glock’s light trigger does not slow down the user. A heavier trigger pull provides a psycho-physical barrier in the form of the greater force required to move through it. This greater force likely reduces the risk of negligent discharge because the user must, on a heavier double action, both pull a heavy trigger and move the finger across a wider arc. This provides two mental stimuli to the effect of, “Hey, you’re pulling the trigger on the gun – did you mean to do that?”

Glocks, by contrast, afford the operator much less of a psycho-physical barrier when pulling the trigger. Civilians and law enforcement alike seem to have more incidents with Glocks than other firearms. This is not primarily due to some danger inherent to the Glock's design. Rather, it's a function of probability. The sheer numbers of Glocks sold mean that there are many Glocks out there. Their low price, high availability, and iconic status mean that many new shooters acquire them, often as a first gun. If they don't know what they're doing and don't keep their fingers off the triggers, the guns will fire. This is not the fault of the gun, which is doing what it was designed to do. This is the fault of the inexperienced operators.

The fact the Glock is often used in dangerous, stressful encounters and fast shooting sports (and the fact that it is perceived as ideal for these activities) also means that it is more likely to be used at the edge of the operator's envelope of performance. The Glock shooter may, therefore, experience a disproportionate number of negligent discharges compared to those experienced with guns used in other, slower, less stressful activities, or firearms that make it more difficult for the operator to fire the gun. This added difficulty also inhibits the gun's operator from deploying the weapon quickly and, possibly, as accurately (without much more training).

You can search the Internet to find negligent discharge stories. It only takes a few minutes on GlockTalk.com to find the DEA agent shooting himself in the leg or stories and questions from inexperienced shooters who really require the NRA basic pistol course. Despite all this, Glocks are NOT unsafe. They don't go off when in proper condition unless the trigger is pulled. Hence, the first four rules of gun safety again are being ignored. Keep your finger off the trigger!

As an aside, Glocks also likely contribute to the poor state of marksmanship and limited trigger control exhibited by many shooters today. The lack of learning to handle a 10 to 12lb trigger contributes to poor shooting. The Glock's moderate accuracy discourages the shooter from learning to fire a precision handgun, shooting bullseye or some other demanding target sport, in turn diminishing the average shooter's ability and belief in his or her ability to learn to shoot well.

The 1911 crowd loves to liken the Glock to a cocked and unlocked .45. You wouldn't carry John Moses Browning's Holy Handgun in that fashion because of the danger it would entail, so why would you carry a Glock with a round in the chamber? This criticism is specious. Glocks have a manual of arms like that of a revolver – with one notable exception. The Glock, with its light trigger pull, MUST be carried in a holster that completely covers the trigger guard. Those who don't cover the trigger guard risk negligent discharges. Those who foolishly use cheap holsters, carry inside the waistband Mexican style without a holster, or try pocket carry are a negligent discharge waiting to happen. The occasional self-inflicted groin- or buttocks-wound attests to this. Glock users' propensity to disregard the manual's injunction to always use a [proper] holster contributes to the risk. Those who use gadgets that block the trigger (which are supposed to magically leap free when a firing grip is taken), or who use such a widget in conjunction with a Clip-draw accessory, are courting disaster.

Law enforcement often criticizes Glocks for lacking a manual safety or magazine disconnect. Again, this is a tradeoff made by design. Glocks are intended to be holstered if not being shot. Holding a suspect at gunpoint was not the primary concern when Gaston Glock designed his Austrian military pistol. A Glock holstered in a proper retention holster provides excellent protection from disarming attempts. However, once the gun is out and a suspect is covered, it is up to the officer, his training, and his physical abilities to secure the gun. In a struggle, there is no means to drop the magazine or engage a safety to avoid having your own gun used against you. Some departments mandate magazine disconnects for this very reason.

It is often asserted that Glocks suffer catastrophic explosive failures (kbs, or "kabooms") more often than do other guns. You can't search long on the Internet before finding a picture or video of an exploded Glock. The question we must ask is, what really failed? In nearly all cases of "kabooms," the use of poorly reloaded and/or high-pressure ammunition is to blame. Glocks have a loose chamber that promotes feed reliability. As a result, they should NOT be used with reloads and definitely not with lead ammunition because lead ammo fouls the polygonal barrel and results in higher pressures.

If you look for instances of "kabooms," you will find that, unlike 1911s (which may shatter their slides and throw metal) and revolvers (whose frames may bend while the exploding weapon throws chunks of cylinder), Glocks that suffer catastrophic explosive failure generally blow downward. This destroys the frame and blows the

magazine out but, in lighter calibers at least, the explosion does not result in serious injury. Hand injuries are likely to occur, but the “kabooms” for the most part are contained. This does not mean they are not very dangerous or potentially deadly. Typically, however, the explosions are the result of bad ammunition or ammunition whose pressures are not within the Glock’s specifications. These problems are not inherent to the Glock itself.

Glock as a company sometimes can be its own worst enemy. As far as these authors know, Glock has never had a recall that it called a recall. Glock is a relatively small company (most gun manufacturers are small companies, for that matter). With about 600 employees, Glock can’t afford to make too many mistakes. On occasion, it has had to repair or replace handguns, and in 1992 it performed a “six part upgrade” to address the potential for a discharge while racking the slide. Other issues addressed by the company include the Phase-3 lockup encountered by NYC, the defective rail on E-Series frames, the modification of various parts (at times resulting in follower incompatibility for certain magazines and pistols), and the occasional specification and part design changes that require an upgrade. Every gun manufacturer has these issues a times, but Glocks are around in such large numbers that problems become a large liability and cost, which are difficult for a small company to address. Glock resolves the issues, but arguably without the fine customer service that, say, Smith & Wesson provides. Glocks tend to fail on the side of firing. Other gun companies seem to fail on the side of not firing.

Finally, the biggest issue the Glock faces has nothing to do with the company or the handguns it manufactures. The biggest safety problem inherent to any Glock is the Glock user. Well-educated and trained gun enthusiasts and police officers love Glocks because they get exactly what they need from them – and nothing they do not need. Inexperienced shooters and some poorly trained police in over-stressed situations, however, sometimes push themselves beyond what they can handle. The result is that they discharge their Glocks accidentally, or they use the multiple-shot speed one can wring from the Glock to use what might be considered excessive force in the public eye. At press time, a high-profile shooting in late November in New York City resulted in one dead groom (leaving a bachelor party with a “dancer” to go to “dinner”) and two other men wounded. Undercover police had been surveilling the club for drugs and prostitution. An officer was nearly run over by a van and the van driver (the deceased groom) rammed an unmarked NYPD van twice. Officers discharged fifty shots at the three men, who turned out to be unarmed. The incident demonstrates the impressive firepower of the Glock, but this can work against law enforcement in the court of public opinion.

Inexperienced gun owners may find that the light trigger, the need to press that trigger before disassembling the Glock, and the ability to fire when the magazine is removed all constitute hazards around the home, when their maintenance activities or dry firing practice results in executed televisions, bullet holes in the walls, or errant shots that pass into neighbors’ apartments. This is negligence at its most egregious. Before pulling the trigger of a firearm for ANY REASON WHATSOEVER, the user must, by habit and painstakingly inculcated ritual, check the chamber, check it again, and then check it once more before checking it again. The gun is not safe for dry firing or maintenance until the user has assured himself multiple times that there is no round in the chamber and no live ammunition anywhere in the vicinity.

The Glock is an excellent weapon that does what it is designed to do very well. It is simple, robust, easy to maintain, and easy to operate. Glock owners, like all firearms owners, must train diligently, obey all the rules of gun safety, and carry their weapons in quality holsters. They must observe the proper handling and manipulation of their weapons, according to the Glock’s manual of arms, with an almost religious fervor. This must be done so that doing things the right way becomes habit, something that is done out of ingrained custom without conscious thought. The same is true of any gun owner, but it is perhaps more so with a weapon as simple as the Glock. There is nothing inherently unsafe about the pistol, but there is nothing artificially safe about it, either. ♠

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