

# **Average Police Sniper Distances**

By Derrick Bartlett

Average distance of a police sniper shooting in the United States? For at least the past 20 years, the generic answer to that question has been “around 70 yards.” This yardage has been stated as fact in sniper schools, articles, books, and conversations around the country. When pressed for a source of this information, most people have credited “the FBI’s statistics.”

When the American Sniper Association was formed in 2000, one of the first orders of business was obtaining a copy of those statistics to see how current they were, and to try to update them. We were somewhat amazed to discover that the FBI didn’t collect information or statistics specific to police sniper shootings. The report so many snipers, instructors, and authors had been quoting and relying on was, in fact, a myth, a complete urban legend.

Realizing this information had never been collected, ASA seized upon this as an opportunity to impact the sniper community in a beneficial and positive way. We initiated a project to gather statistical data about police sniper use of force engagements. We developed a survey form that asked the questions we felt were of most interest and importance to sniper teams and administrators. We established the parameters of our survey field with regard to the agencies to be involved, time span to be covered, and types of engagements that would qualify as “sniper” shootings.

## **Survey Methodology**

The US Department of Justice’s Bureau of Justice Statistics was asked to provide a current listing of agencies from around the country that maintain a SWAT team. The DOJ’s annual report, “Law Enforcement Management Statistics, Data of Individual State and Local Agencies,” provided an alphabetized listing of 897 agencies to contact. Agencies outside of our initial contact schedule were made aware of the survey process through presentations made by ASA personnel at tactical conferences, sniper schools, seminars, and competitions, nationwide. After advising them of the survey and explaining our goals and objectives, interested attendees were given survey forms to complete. Notifications were also made on our website, and in the Snipercraft newsletter. Articles explaining the survey process and its goals and objectives were published in several major tactical and law enforcement magazines. As a result of reading the articles, agencies contacted ASA to request forms. These were faxed or e-mailed to those requesting them.

By monitoring newspapers and wire services, we were made aware of sniper-related incidents occurring around the country during the survey period. In these cases, we were able to directly contact the involved agencies to obtain information. The end result of this process was that, although our initial contact pool was limited to agencies known to have SWAT teams, many agencies beyond the scope of this group voluntarily participated in the survey after direct contacts with ASA personnel. This, in turn, has led

to a more comprehensive and complete survey of tactical teams around the country by reaching additional teams that would not have been included.

After the data collection phase of this project was completed, time was invested in verification of the information gathered. Many of the agencies contacted in the initial phase were contacted again to clarify vague or conflicting information. Hundreds of additional man-hours were spent searching newspaper archives in attempts to find story details about most of the documented incidents. This project was ambitious at the outset and has proven arduous in the execution.

We are proud to announce the release of the Police Sniper Utilization Report. This report is a significant accomplishment and is unprecedented in its scope. A comprehensive study of the use and effectiveness of police snipers in the United States exists for the first time in history. The finished product is not a dry recitation of numbers and statistics. Instead, we have compiled data and relevant anecdotal information, which will prove useful in understanding how snipers have been employed over the past two decades.

In addition to knowing the average distance of police sniper shootings, you will find other operational information, for example, the longest and shortest distances encountered. The breakdown shows how many have occurred in daylight, as opposed to low light. You will also see how often shots have passed through intermediate barriers, as well as how many have passed through their intended target. Many more operational circumstances are recorded and quantified here as well. The data in this report will give administrators, snipers, and team leaders a clearer picture of real world sniper operations. We expect it will also help dispel a number of misconceptions about snipers. We hope this information will assist you and your SWAT team leadership in structuring training, buying equipment, and planning deployments.

An important point worth mentioning deals not with the contents of the report, but with the process itself. In contacting agencies around the country, many were eager to participate. Obviously, these are teams who see the value in compiling this type of operational research. Others amazed us by finding a variety of reasons to refuse to share basic statistical information with us.

### **Highlights**

Only shots that were the result of “a deliberate long rifle shot, by a person assigned to the sniper position, against a designated human target,” are recorded as a sniper shot. This excluded shots by entry or perimeter officers, or shots taken with handguns or sub machineguns. It also excludes shots on animals, cars, or other objects. We did receive report forms detailing shootings in these categories. We received responses from 664 agencies fitting our search criteria. We found that in some cases, agencies had either consolidated with other agencies into multi-jurisdictional teams, or had disbanded their teams altogether.

To date, we have collected reports of 219 sniper shootings occurring between 1984 and 2004. Not surprisingly, the .308 Win has been the most common caliber used by snipers, occurring in 74% of the reports. Others employed have included .223 Rem, 30-06 Spfld, .270 Win, 6mm Rem, .243 Win, and 30-30 Win. Contrary to common beliefs, just half of the persons shot were struck in the head. The other half were hit in the body or their extremities. Of all these shots, 80% were fatal. Of the shots fired, 34% were in barricade scenarios, 36% were in hostage situations, and 21% involved a suicidal subject.

Much of traditional sniper training has been limited to prone, bipod, 100-yard shooting drills. A fact verified by the report is sniper shootings are very likely to be done from a variety of distances, and seldom from a prone bipod position. Instead, documentation shows snipers have had to utilize standing, sitting, kneeling, squatting, and improvised positions as well. Hopefully, this knowledge will inspire teams to incorporate position shooting into their training programs in the future. It certainly removes the most common excuses to avoid doing so.

Night vision equipment has played only a limited role in actual shootings to date. However, there is a demonstrated need for teams to purchase and train with night vision. Nearly 45% of the shootings documented occurred during low-light hours.

We were able to document several instances where two snipers fired simultaneous shots at a single suspect. However, none of the reports received recorded sniper engagements on multiple suspects.

The shortest sniper shooting included in the report is five yards. This shot was taken indoors in a hostage situation. The sniper was forced to use a teammate as a standing support to make a shot on a very elusive and fleeting target. This was accomplished in poor lighting within a compressed time frame.

The longest shot to date is not as clear. The one incident we were able to best document was 187 yards, again in a hostage rescue operation handled by the Pennsylvania State Police. We were able to interview the sniper and he provided ample documentation to verify the distance. Legend has always mentioned a 400-yard sniper shooting at the Washington Monument as the longest on record. However, in keeping with our stated criteria of "a deliberate long rifle shot against a designated human target," we felt this one involved too many exceptional circumstances to qualify as a sniper shooting, per se. We were fortunate enough to be able to talk to one of the snipers involved that day. A protester, later identified as Norman David Mayer, claimed to have explosives in his van as it sat near the base of the monument. When the van started to drive away, a fusillade was unleashed in an effort to stop it. In reading the reports, it is revealed that as many as fourteen officers with rifles fired an undetermined number of rounds at the subject's van, allegedly with the intention of disabling the van. However, the driver was killed after being struck four times. The average recorded distance in this incident was 485 yards. It is also worth noting this is the earliest recorded use of night vision scopes by police snipers.

The average police sniper distance was 51 yards. Of all the sniper shots, 95% took place between zero and 100 yards. The rest were equally divided between the 100 to 150 yard bracket and the 150 to 250 yard bracket. This has profound training implications.

Among the many lessons learned from reviewing the report, one in particular is worthy of a special mention. The majority of the documented sniper shootings were done with .308 Win caliber weapons. Where the ammunition is listed, the overwhelming choice has been the 168- grain MatchKing bullet, also known as the HollowPoint BoatTail. This round has been the preferred ammunition for snipers for decades, based primarily on its accuracy and consistency. However, a serious shortcoming of the round has always existed. A frighteningly high number (90%) of sniper shootings have resulted in through and through wounds. Shot placement isn't a contributing factor as these results have occurred with both headshots and torso hits. There seems to be a direct correlation between over penetration and the use of the HollowPoint BoatTail bullet, so favored by snipers to date. The round is not a true hollowpoint, which is designed to expand in tissue. As a result, its performance, in terms of terminal ballistics, raises, or should raise, concerns among sniper teams currently using this bullet. While it has reliably stopped people, it is very likely to come out the other side.

Of the shots taken, 23% involved intermediate barriers. This fact alone should encourage the use of a bullet other than the MatchKing HollowPoint BoatTail. In study after study, this load has performed poorly after penetrating barriers, including both tumbling and large differences between point of aim and point of impact. At some point, this MatchKing HPBT bullet is going to cause an inadvertent injury or death to a hostage or team member, or result in a miss after a barrier and the resulting consequences. Hopefully, by documenting these problems, we can steer teams away from this bullet and encourage manufacturers to work on better designs for our purpose, like a Match-grade tactical bullet.

### **The Caveat**

The report carries an implied warning for every agency reading it. We have clearly documented what snipers are facing in realworld operations. Knowing what snipers are really doing should become the framework for designing training to prepare your team for the realities of the job.

From this day forward, if a team chooses to do otherwise, they do so at their own peril. This report will help quantify the standards all teams will be expected to meet. It is important that the tactical community not shy away from taking a critical look at its training and deployment history and pay attention to the lessons waiting to be learned.

Where applicable, we have identified learning points found in specific incidents. In many of these, the responsible sniper team provides them. Others are drawn from

objective analysis of the facts of the incident. In the tactical world, information has incredible value.

Ours is a profession involving split-second decisions that can save lives, and reliable information can literally make the difference between life and death in an operation. However, information is useless unless it is openly shared. What is contained in the report is information agencies have agreed to share with the rest of the tactical community, with the hope that it will make your job safer and easier. If you learn nothing else from reading the report, we hope you will come away with an understanding of how important it is to share your experience with others.

Although the initial report is completed, the process is not. Our hope is to make it a living document. We hope to encourage agencies to help us maintain current data by reporting any sniper involved shootings to the ASA, as soon as it is practical. This will keep us from having to mount a similar collection effort three years from now when we hope to publish an updated report. We understand the issues raised by ongoing investigations and pending litigation. Our need is for statistical information. The information requested on the survey form is basic, non-judgmental details contained in an incident report. We don't need investigative information that could be subpoenaed or otherwise used in a civil case. The individual officer or agency involved is not part of the database and neither is identified in the report.

Most agencies around the country routinely provide Uniform Crime Reports to the FBI. What we are asking for is the same sort of diligence in reporting any sniper-involved shootings that occur in your jurisdiction. All data and information collected will be considered sensitive, and will not be distributed to the general public. A Sniper Utilization Survey Form can be found on the American Sniper Association website, [www.americansniper.org](http://www.americansniper.org). Derrick Bartlett is the President of the American Sniper Association and a sniper with the Ft. Lauderdale, FL Police. For a copy of the report, or for more information, he may be reached via [info@americansniper.org](mailto:info@americansniper.org).