



Violence Policy Center

1730 Rhode Island Avenue, NW
Suite 1014
Washington, DC 20036

202.822.8200 voice
202.822.8205 fax
www.vpc.org web

“Big Boomers” – Rifle Power Designed Into Handguns

Summary

1. Big boomers are rifle power designed into handguns. During the 1990 to 1999 period, 20 law enforcement officers were killed by gunshot wounds as a result of rounds penetrating their body armor. All of these rounds were fired from rifles. However, the big boomer handguns that are now being designed and marketed by the firearms industry have elevated the power of handguns to the level of rifles. Big boomers have thus become “vest busters” and present a deadly challenge to law enforcement body armor’s life-saving record.

2. Big boomers—a serious new threat to America’s public safety officers—are the gun industry’s latest attempt to stop its steady market decline. The American firearms industry has been sagging for decades. Although the industry enjoys brief periods of resurgence, the long-term trend for civilian gun manufacturers continues to be one of steady decline. In order to expand its customer base, the gun industry has tried to lure women and children into the “shooting sports.” For recent example, it has mounted a national campaign to get more children interested in hunting, for the most part by watering down hunter safety laws and regulations so that younger children can hunt. However, the principal means gun manufacturers use to rejuvenate their stagnant markets is design and marketing innovation aimed at introducing greater lethality into the civilian market. Within the last several years, the industry has introduced “big boomers”—handguns that fire ammunition that can penetrate the body armor that has saved the lives of thousands of law enforcement officers over the last three decades. This big boomer market trend is now established as a profit-maker that is “good for business.” The number of manufacturers who make big boomers is increasing and the models they manufacture are proliferating.

3. Big boomers are “vest busters.” They threaten to make obsolete the body armor that has saved thousands of officers’ lives. Body armor can stop handgun rounds, but it cannot stop handgun rounds with the penetration power of higher-powered rifle rounds.

4. The Violence Policy Center (VPC) reported in June 2004 on the armor-defeating potential of the first new big boomer, a 50 caliber magnum handgun introduced by Smith & Wesson in February 2003, the Model 500. This handgun was designed around a new cartridge called the .500 Smith & Wesson Magnum. The striking power of the .500 Smith & Wesson Magnum round substantially exceeds the protection level of the highest grade of concealable body armor normally worn by law enforcement officers in the field, known as Type IIIA. The Model 500 thus combines the convenience of a handgun with the vest-busting power of a rifle, a clear danger to law enforcement personnel. In the few short years since their introduction, 50 caliber magnums have already begun to show up in criminal episodes.

5. The .500 Smith & Wesson Magnum round, and the Smith & Wesson Model 500 handgun, illustrate how the gun industry's singular freedom from consumer product health and safety regulation allows it to recklessly develop and market increasingly lethal products without consideration for public safety. In its earlier report, the VPC stated: "Following a well-established gun industry pattern of design and price competition, it is likely that other manufacturers will soon develop and market their own versions of handguns chambered for the .500 Smith & Wesson Magnum round....[T]he 500 Smith & Wesson Magnum will proliferate as other manufacturers market copies of the round and handguns chambered for it. Prices will fall and the threat to law enforcement officers will rise."

6. The current study documents that the predicted proliferation has indeed occurred. Smith & Wesson and now other firearm manufacturers continue their reckless pattern of designing and introducing into the civilian market handguns that are almost certainly capable of defeating law enforcement body armor. In addition to introducing a more easily concealable model of its Model 500, Smith & Wesson has designed and begun marketing yet another handgun with vest-busting rifle power, the Model 460 XVR (X-treme Velocity Revolver). Other manufacturers have introduced their own version of handguns chambered for the .500 Smith & Wesson Magnum round.

7. Meanwhile, another variety of vest-busting handgun has appeared on the U.S. civilian handgun market, exemplified by the FN Herstal Five-sevenN. This handgun is chambered for a very high velocity 5.7mm round that was originally developed specifically as an armor-piercing round designed for use by law enforcement and counter-terrorism teams. After an initial outcry from law enforcement agencies about the availability of this combination of gun and armor-piercing ammunition, the manufacturer agreed not to import into the United States the variety of its 5.7mm ammunition specifically designed to penetrate body armor. Nevertheless, questions remain about the viability of the current federal definition of what constitutes banned "armor-piercing ammunition," the capabilities of the ammunition the manufacturer continues to import, and the availability of its armor-piercing variety through channels in informal markets such as gun shows.