

Is Pepper Spray Enough? Or Do I Need a Gun?

Notes on Options for Self-Protection

By Joanne Mattera

Last year my 68-year-old neighbor was accosted in front of his Endicott Street home during the day by two homeless men high on drugs and alcohol. One was wielding a broken liquor bottle. Eight patrol cars arrived almost immediately, the result of concerned neighbors calling as soon as the first punches were thrown. My neighbor walked away shaken but relatively unharmed. The assailants, who gave Lifebridge as their address, were arrested. One had done time for arson, the other for robbery. One of them had been living in a car for several weeks, just down from where I reside.

There have been other incidents. A young woman returning from work was trapped in her car on Prescott Street while a man screamed, "I need a place to stay!" as he beat on the hood and windows of the vehicle. She was terrified. Another neighbor was verbally and physically threatened on Margin Street as she jogged by Lifebridge. The violence that spills out of Lifebridge daily—there have even been stabbings—has been filtering unbidden into our lives. Harassment and violence are now part of my once-quiet neighborhood.

In addition to physical assault, I am concerned about robbery. Salem has seen a huge influx of drug-addicted, often mentally ill, homeless people. When panhandling does not bring in enough money for a fix, theft is the likely option. Of course this is not true of all unhoused people—let me underscore that for the progressive-at-all-costs folks who think I am demonizing an entire community—but I am as personally pragmatic as I am politically progressive. I am thinking about responsible self-protection outside and inside my home.

What follows is information I sought for myself, which I have shared with friends and am now sharing publicly. Let me be clear: This is not advice for you, simply my research made available *if you wish to read it*. To compile it I spoke with Mike Caggiano, a Massachusetts-certified firearms instructor who runs Salem Firearm Safety in town; the sales staff at Army Barracks on Route 1 in Saugus, which sells guns and non-lethal weapons such as tasers and stun guns; and a member of the Salem Police Department who commented informally but asked not to be identified by name. I also drew on Google AI for basic information, which I identify in the text.

The information is divided into two categories of weapons and devices: those which require a License to Carry (LTC) and those which do not. It's a long read. If the links don't work in this PDF document, type the short ones into your browser. For longer links, scan the QR code.

Two options that do not require a License to Carry

Securing a License to Carry is time consuming and costly. However, there are options for self-defense weapons with few or no restrictions.



Varieties of pepper spray and gel with several methods of delivery

Pepper Spray

For basic self-defense, pepper spray is completely legal to carry on your person or in your car and to keep in your home. It's inexpensive, easily available, and easy to use.

A small container costs under \$25; a safety feature prevents it from discharging accidentally. You can purchase it over the counter from a firearms dealer, sporting goods store, even CVS.

There's also a **version with dye, visible under UV light**, which adheres to your assailant's skin or clothing for up to 48 hours, allowing police to identify him. You must buy in person from a licensed firearms dealer or authorized sporting goods store and be over 18.

Pepper spray gel is another option in this category. Unlike atomized pepper spray, which could be carried by the wind out of doors or sully an indoor environment, the gel comes out in a stream, sticking only to your target. As a stream, it travels farther than spray, allowing you to maintain more distance between you and your assailant.

Is there a difference between pepper spray and mace? Yes, according to Google AI: "Pepper spray has largely replaced the original mace because it is considered more effective for self-defense. Original mace was a tear gas compound that was often ineffective against individuals under the influence, while pepper spray uses oleoresin capsicum from peppers, which causes immediate, intense pain and temporary incapacitation. Today, Mace is often just a brand name for a pepper spray product."

Given my initial reason for looking into protection against someone drunk or high, I see pepper spray as an excellent solution.

Things to consider

- . Every woman knows this, but it bears repeating: Be aware of your surroundings, especially at night
- . Earbuds reduce your situational awareness, as well as texting or scrolling as you walk. Both are as true for men as for women
- . Be familiar with your pepper spray device so that you can deploy it quickly and accurately
- . Be prepared to use it. Women are typically pressured to "be nice." Trust your instincts and use it if you feel threatened
- . Take it with you when you go for a run, do errands, or walk the dog. Pepper spray is effective not only against a two-legged predator but against a four-legged one, such as a vicious dog or a coyote. But don't waste it by spraying the air; the predator must be close enough to receive a blast to the face

Caveat

You cannot carry a pepper spray device onto a plane; however you may be able to put in in your checked luggage. Google AI: "The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) permits one 4 fl. oz. (118 ml) container of pepper spray in checked luggage, provided it has a safety mechanism to prevent accidental discharge and does not contain more than 2% tear gas."

A weapon that looks like a gun but isn't

Now we take a big step up to a device that looks like a pistol but for which you do not need an LTC. The brand I investigated is Byrna (www.byrna.com), but there are other companies, which you can research online. The literature for this type of weapon calls it a "launcher."



The Byrna launcher with accessories comes in two sizes for different hand proportions

Unlike conventional guns, which initiate a combustion that propels a bullet out of the chamber (see sidebar, page 7), the Byrna and other such devices use a carbon dioxide (CO₂) cartridge to project hard plastic pellets. CO₂ is the same stuff that launches a BB gun. The pellets are biodegradable. There's also a pellet option filled with capsaicin, similar to pepper spray, so your pellet will pack a powerful

one-two punch. Although I have not personally felt the power of a launched pellet, I'm told that the impact is strong enough to drop an assailant so that you can make an exit and call for help. And you have five pellets in the magazine—the insertable ammunition-feeding device—all of which can be launched successively with one CO2 cartridge in case you miss your target on the first shot.

"It's a crippling pain," says John Vatcher, who experienced it. A salesperson at Army Barracks, he took me through the simple operation of the weapon. He notes that the Byrna has fewer working parts than a pistol, and is thus easier to clean. The company provides online videos for many aspects of use and maintenance.

What I like about this weapon is that while it looks lethal, it's not. If you are thinking about protection against an assailant or thief inside or outside your home, the sight of a gun should be enough to deter him. However, the very thing that makes it appealing could work against you if that person has a real gun. Also, you'd better have good aim, which requires practice.

While you can legally purchase this weapon online, you would be wise to visit a store where it is sold. Have the seller take you through the steps of operation as Vatcher did for me. Handle it. Ask questions. Google "Where can I buy a Byrna" for a list of local dealers.

Things to consider

- . A launcher is expensive, at least \$500 for a set that includes the launcher, magazine that holds five pellets, a couple of CO2 cartridges, and a sample assortment of pellets.

- . You need a supply of practice ammo, about \$50 for 95 pellets; actual ammo (\$30 for five pellets); and 8-gram CO2 cartridges (about \$17 for a 10 pack)

- . Will you carry your launcher with you? If so, a holster is an option, but you can also carry it in a pocket or even a pack or purse. It is legal for you to keep it concealed—indeed, it is recommended—because you do not want to invite unwanted attention

- . You are not legally required to store your launcher in a locked box, but it must remain safely out of reach from anyone but you

- . You must target practice if you want to use your weapon safely

- . Unless you live in a rural setting and can practice outdoors on your own property, safely away from others, you'll need to find a practice range. There are gun clubs that offer annual, six-month, and monthly memberships, and some may offer a day pass for the shooting range (www.wheretoshoot.org). Practicing with your Byrna should not be a problem, but check to make sure

- . If you want to avoid a gun range, there is the option of practicing with an airsoft gun (Google it), which shoots soft pellets. This replica gun—the airsoft name is generic—is designed for recreational sports and practice. You should be able to shoot in your basement or garage without concerning the neighbors

- . Cost for an airsoft practice weapon starts at about \$40, and you can purchase it online

- . Ammo is under \$30 for about 1000 rounds

Caveat

Some customer comments on Reddit have cited faulty mechanisms in the Byrna launcher and lack of responsive customer service from the manufacturer. If you are considering one, have the salesperson address this issue.

John Vatcher, the Army Barracks salesperson, says he has seen only one problem out of the hundreds he has sold. "You would contact the manufacturer directly," he says, noting that Byrna is headquartered in Peabody.

Several options that require a License to Carry

You may feel that pepper spray and/or or a pistol-type launcher is sufficient for your needs. But if you prefer a voltage-emitting device such as a taser or stun gun, you will need an LTC, the same license required for a gun. This seems unnecessary to me, but it's Massachusetts law.

The SPD officer I spoke with has a different view, that with an LTC you would have the option of purchasing your choice of voltage-emitting devices or an actual firearm. "You don't have to decide right away. The license is good for six years," he says, adding, "This is the advice I would give to my mother."

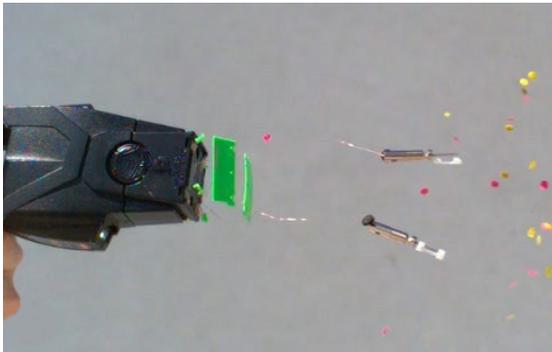
I'll get to how to secure an LTC, but first let's look at the weapons for which you need it.

Tasers and Stun Guns

The advantage of these devices—which emit a powerful zap of 50,000 volts of electricity (or higher)—is that they are not lethal. They work with a combination of voltage, amperage, and frequency. Says Google AI: “A high-voltage, low-amperage shock is designed to incapacitate the target without causing lethal injury. The high-frequency pulse of the electricity disrupts the body’s muscle control.”

Tasers

A taser typically looks like a gun and is intended to be shot like one. How it works, info from Google: An ammo cartridge is powered by a nitrogen gas cylinder within the cartridge. The trigger activates the cylinder, which blasts the cartridge sending two metal wires out toward the target, unspooling as they travel. There are no bullets. Barbs at the end of the wires attach to clothing or skin to deliver the shock as described. The duration of the shock is about five seconds.



The taser emits barbs that embed into the skin of an attacker, rendering him briefly immobile. The “confetti” you see are anti-felon identification tags specific to the cartridge deployed

The speed of deployment, from the time you pull the trigger to the time you hit your target, is virtually instantaneous. You’d better hit your target because the cartridge is not reusable. However, if you do hit your intended target, pulling the trigger again or holding it down after the initial cycle ends will typically deliver another dose of voltage. Literature and online information suggest that a taser is not the ideal self-defense weapon for the average person, because you have just the one shot to hit your target. Also, while it is highly effective against bare skin or light clothing, layers or leather may prevent the barbs from penetrating sufficiently.

Here’s a You Tube video that shows the deployment of a taser in slow motion and the aftermath of a direct hit to bare skin:



Cost

- . \$400 to \$600 is the average price for the device
- . A two-pack of cartridges runs \$50 to \$70

Stun Guns

While a taser can be shot from a distance, a stun gun requires that you physically deliver the blast to your assailant. The term “gun” may be a misnomer, because while some models do look like a pistol with grip and trigger—ranging from about \$200 to \$400—many are designed to resemble cellphones, pens, and functioning flashlights, and most retail for well under \$100. You can deliver multiple successive shocks, if necessary, but only enough to incapacitate your assailant.



An assortment of stun guns, including one that looks like a cell phone

Things to consider

- . All voltage-emitting devices incapacitate the person when they are receiving the voltage, but the effects stop when the voltage stops. The person will be immobile for only a few seconds afterward, so be prepared to hit him with a blast of pepper spray and then get away and call the police ASAP. Your own adrenaline should help you here
- . Aside from tasers, stun devices are battery operated, most rechargeable, so make sure they are sufficiently charged for use
- . They must be stored safely. The small personal safety devices may look innocuous but can deliver a blast, too
- . If you are touching your attacker when you deliver the blast, will you also get shocked? The literature says no, which Google AI confirms: "The electrical current from a stun gun travels in a circuit only between its two contact points (prongs or deployed probes) on the target's body. It does not pass through their entire body or to the user's body." You can see this clearly in the YouTube video noted earlier.

Caveat

Legal requirements vary from state to state, something to consider if you travel. Stun devices are generally legal in most states but, notes Google AI, "Hawaii, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, and Washington D.C. have significant restrictions or bans." Keep this in mind if you are just driving through, say, Providence on your way to someplace else.

Other states may not require a license but may have age limits or restrictions as to where they can be carried. Best to check online if you'll be traveling. If you are flying, a stun device cannot be taken in a carry-on, but, according to Google, "it is generally permitted in checked luggage."

Handguns

You've seen handguns on every TV cop show. What you may not know is that in real life guns may be heavier than you think. They are also expensive, and they require all kinds of accessories, including ammo, a holster, and perhaps a gun safe, because when not in use a firearm must be kept in a locked container. If you commit to a gun, you need to commit to target practice and gun cleaning. Also, this hardly needs to be said: A handgun is a lethal weapon. Your responsibility is enormous.

Two types of handguns

Fully automatic weapons are for military use, so I did not research them. The focus here is on two types of handguns: semi-automatic pistols and revolvers.

Revolver

This is the gun of TV westerns. A rotating cylinder typically holds six cartridges (the "six shooter"). You may have had the toy version as a kid. You have two options:

- . **A single-action revolver** requires you to execute two consecutive individual actions to make a shot. The first is to manually cock, or pull back, the hammer; the second is to pull the trigger to release the hammer, which will strike the cartridge to initiate the shot



The two individual actions of a single-action revolver: cocking the hammer, above, and pulling the trigger, below



- . **A double-action revolver** looks about the same but incorporates both actions by pulling the trigger. (The hammer may be concealed in the body of the gun.) For self-defense, this may be the better choice. In either case, when the cartridges are spent you eject them manually

The other salient features of a revolver are its shape and size. Some revolvers look like cowboy guns; others are sleeker and more compact. A revolver with a short barrel—the tube through which the bullet passes—is known as a snub-nose. It's smaller and typically lighter, making it easy to conceal and handle for self-defense. Size, weight, material, action type, and manufacturer all determine cost, which could run between \$300 to over \$1000.

The semi-automatic pistol

There is far more to know than what I can tell you here. The short of it: As with revolvers, there are many versions of this type of weapon with regard to material, size, and the caliber of ammunition it takes. Material—metal, plastic, or a combination—is a factor in weight and handling, as is a weapon designed for good balance, something you will feel as you handle a variety of guns. The weapon's size and ammunition caliber determine power. Do your initial research online to see the range of options and prices, but there is no substitute for visiting a licensed gun store to physically handle the ones that appeal to you. A good salesperson will make suggestions based on your price range and criteria.

Expect to pay between \$500 to over \$1000.



A semi-automatic pistol stores its bullets not in a cylinder but in a magazine, inserted into the grip, which typically holds six to 10 cartridges. Every gun requires ammunition of a specific size, which information is stamped onto the exterior of the weapon. As you shoot, the spent casing is ejected. When the magazine is empty, you eject it and reload successive magazines that you have prepared beforehand.

For information about bullets and caliber, Google "what is caliber" or scan here:



Choosing and buying your weapon

- . First, choose the weapon for how you intend to use it. For self-defense, a small, concealable gun is the best choice. You need to be able to access and deploy it easily and quickly
- . Second, your gun needs to fit the size of your hand. Small hand, small gun; a larger hand has the option of a larger gun
- . Third, strength matters. Some weapons require more grip and trigger strength. Arthritis or weakness in the wrists and thumbs require a weapon easier to hold and shoot. As with hand size, choose for what your body allows
- . The best way to get the best fit is to go to a licensed firearms dealer and handle a number of weapons. If you're a woman, sexism from an old-school diehard behind the counter may be an issue. Don't be intimidated! Speak up or take your business elsewhere. If you are buying, you need a good working relationship with a gun dealer, since you may have follow-up questions or need to return for accessories or repairs



The snub-nose revolver is small and easily concealable

. “Buy from a licensed gun store in Massachusetts,” says Mike Caggiano, owner of Salem Firearm Safety in town (www.salemfirearmsafety.com). You may be tempted to buy across the line in New Hampshire to save on sales tax but, he notes, the gun would have to be shipped to a licensed Massachusetts dealer who would charge for the handling and paperwork. No savings there.

. A basic firearms safety course with a state-certified instructor, such as the one I took from Caggiano, will familiarize you with the handling and use of a pistol, both in a classroom setting with dummy (empty) rounds in a real weapon and at the range, where you will shoot live rounds. If you’re going to own and use a weapon, you must learn to use it comfortably. And, importantly, to obtain an LTC you must show, among other things, proof of completion of a Massachusetts-approved course in basic firearms safety.

. Weapons can range from a few hundred dollars into the thousands. Look at the weapons within your budget and know that accessories, such as safety glasses, electronic ear protection, and holster or carrying case, will add to the price. Ammunition will be an ongoing expense.

Things to consider

. A used gun, purchased legally through a licensed firearms dealer, could be an economical option or allow you to trade up to a higher-quality weapon.

. There is also the issue of target practice. If you opt against club membership, you may be able to purchase a day pass at a local range. Info here: www.wheretoshoot.com.

. With regard to gun club membership, consider how much time you want to spend around guns and people shooting them. The sound of gunfire can be physically jarring, even with ear protection.

. The loss or theft of a firearm is a serious issue. There is a protocol you must follow within 48 hours. Scan here:



Pellet vs Bullet: What’s the Difference?

The pellet launcher uses the force of released CO2 to propel a round plastic projectile from the barrel of a hand-held device. The trigger mechanism pierces the CO2 cartridge, whose escaping gas forces a **pellet**, one of five contained in a magazine, to be expelled with significant but non-lethal force. There is enough power in one CO2 cartridge for all five pellets to be released if you pull the trigger successively. However, once that CO2 cartridge is pierced, even if you do not launch all five pellets, the gas will escape over time.



Byrna pellets: pepper-filled, left, and plastic



Parts of a bullet

What we call a **bullet** is actually a metal casing or cartridge—usually brass or steel—that contains all the elements needed to project the actual bullet, usually lead, which is at the tip of the assembly.

Google AI: “Pulling the trigger releases a spring-loaded firing pin, which strikes the primer at the base of the cartridge case. The impact of the firing pin ignites the sensitive compound in the primer, creating a small spark. This spark travels through a small flash hole into the main body of the case, igniting the propellant [gunpowder] stored there. The powder burns rapidly, creating a large volume of high-pressure gas. This pressure forces the bullet out of the open end of the case and down the barrel of the gun at high speed.”

Securing a License to Carry

Some restrictions apply, such as having been convicted of a violent crime, which you can read here or scan below:

www.salemma.gov/907/Firearms-Licensing.

Assuming you meet the criteria, this is what you will need to provide in Salem (criteria may differ elsewhere):

- . Massachusetts driver's license with your current residential address
- . Birth certificate (and Naturalization documents if applicable). "A passport will work," says my SPD source
- . Social Security card
- . DD214 Long form if prior military or active Guard/Reserve with most recent LES statement
- . Massachusetts approved Basic Firearms Safety Course certificate or Hunter Safety Course
- . Two recent bills with your name/address
- . \$100 check or money order payable to the City of Salem



Things to consider

- . A background check will be conducted by state and federal agencies. Your criminal and mental health history, if you have either, will be the focus
- . In Salem, you will be interviewed in person at the police department by the Firearms License Investigator
- . As with a passport, expect to be photographed
- . You will also be fingerprinted

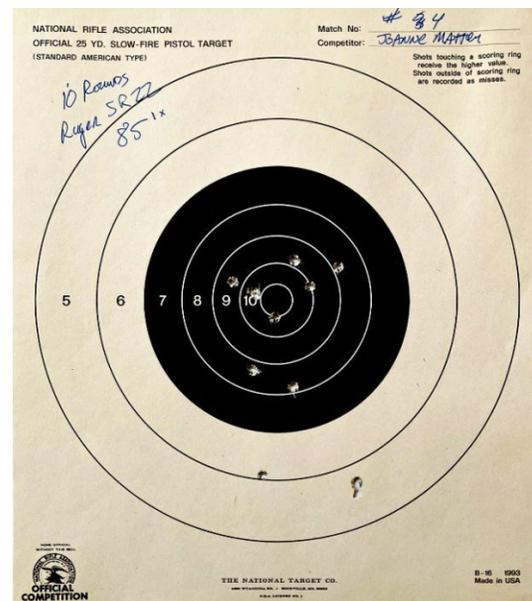
Before you shoot

You need to ask yourself: Am I prepared to fire this weapon at someone? Am I prepared to kill him? Could I live with the knowledge of having killed or maimed someone? In a split second you must determine the degree of danger you are in and then act swiftly and accurately. Hesitation gives your assailant the advantage.

I took the required course to qualify for my LTC. I read the NRA handbook on gun safety (clear and informative). I practiced loading and

unloading a semi-automatic weapon in class with dummy rounds and then shot many rounds of live ammunition at a range. Shooting is powerful. It takes practice to get comfortable with loading live ammo, assuming a comfortable stance, aiming correctly, pulling the trigger, feeling the recoil, and hitting the target. I found shooting stressful, not recreational, but felt a strong sense of satisfaction in hitting the paper target accurately (after some practice).

I should point out that the advantage of a well-aimed handgun is that it offers self-protection at a distance. And the more distance between you and your attacker, the better. That's a powerful reason for considering one.



A note about targets

The bullseye target, above (which happens to be mine) is for precision practice, whereas the silhouette, below, is preferred for defensive shooting practice

All images except my target are from the internet



Know the law

If you choose to own and use a gun, you must be familiar with Massachusetts law. Our state imposes a “duty to retreat” before you resort to deadly force. Google AI is by no means a substitute for actual research, but this is a start: “In Massachusetts, you can use a weapon for self-defense only if you reasonably believe you are in immediate danger of death or great bodily harm, and using force is necessary to prevent it. You must first take all reasonable steps to avoid the conflict, such as attempting to retreat, unless you are in your own home where the ‘castle doctrine’ applies and you have no duty to retreat. The force used must be proportional to the threat, meaning you cannot use deadly force against a non-lethal threat.”

In other words, if someone comes at you with a stick, you would likely be culpable if you shot at or killed him with a gun.

However, the threat of sexual assault changes that equation. Here’s Google AI again: “While the legal definitions of ‘great bodily harm’ can vary by jurisdiction, it is generally understood that the threat of sexual assault is a severe and life-altering event that can create a reasonable fear of great bodily harm.” So you should not be legally culpable if you use a weapon to try to prevent the act, even if you kill your attacker. Note, though, that you cannot shoot in retaliation *after* an attack has occurred. There’s surely a large legal gray area, but that’s the black and white of it.

What I’m getting

My research has led me to the conclusion that non-lethal weapons are the better choice for me right now. I am the new owner of a Byrna pellet launcher and an airsoft practice gun. I will buy a stun gun to carry with me as soon as my Licence to Carry is processed. In the meantime, I keep pepper spray in my pocket. This may seem like overkill, but the good thing about these devices is that none of them will kill.

Still, I hope I will never have to use any of them against an assailant or intruder.

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I have not considered a knife

While it is legal to carry a knife—even a switchblade—in Massachusetts, I haven’t considered a knife as an option, because the physical act of plunging a blade into a human body is not something I think I can do. And hesitation in any act of self-defense can get you killed.

Further reading

The internet is loaded with gun information. Whether you are interested in general information or a particular brand, Google it. You Tube videos are also informative. For general info, I have found these two websites useful:

. Mindful Defense



. On legality of weapons in Massachusetts



About me: I am a 25-year resident of Salem, an exhibiting artist and published author. I was moved to consider weapons for self-defense as conditions in my Downtown neighborhood have become markedly less safe. I publish the monthly “Salem News You Don’t Get in The Salem News,” a narrative report of police incidents involving homeless residents of Salem, from information obtained from the Salem Police Department. You can read it at: www.gesna-salem.com/onoh-news