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SAFETY AT THE SHOOTING RANGE DURING FIREARMS TRAINING PROTECTION OF THE LOCAL POPULATION AND RISK MINIMIZATION

Abstract

The article presents a comprehensive overview of safety principles applicable during firearms training. It discusses key organizational, technical, and psychophysical factors influencing participant safety, including equipment, clothing, mental and physical condition, experience level, and the instructor's role. The text emphasizes adherence to weapon control procedures, communication protocols in emergencies, and the establishment of safe zones. Special attention is given to medical preparedness, including first-aid equipment, communication with duty officers, and knowledge of emergency procedures. The study also highlights the importance of systematic training evaluation, debriefing, and experience sharing among instructors.

The conclusion indicates that a high level of safety in firearms training can only be achieved through consistent application of safety rules, proper course organization, and continuous improvement of both participant and instructor competencies.

Keywords

safety, firearms training, instructor, procedures, medical support, psychophysical readiness, training organization

Introduction

Safety constitutes one of the most crucial aspects in the organization of training sessions, courses, and workshops related to the handling of firearms. This issue concerns both civilians developing their skills in the field of sport shooting and individuals who perceive firearms as tools of personal protection. Although firearms are gradually ceasing to be a social taboo and are becoming increasingly accessible, their use continues to require a responsible attitude and a high level of user awareness¹. The growing interest in firearms training stems not only from easier access to information but also from the rising public awareness of the importance of safe weapon handling skills².

The motivations of individuals applying for firearm permits are highly diverse. For some, shooting represents a hobby; for others, a form of recreation or a continuation of family traditions associated with hunting. For a considerable group of individuals, firearms serve as instruments of sporting competition or as a means of enhancing personal safety competencies³. a relatively small percentage of applicants cite threats to life or health as the primary reason for obtaining a firearms license.

A specific group within this context consists of minors participating in sport shooting competitions. Their training must take into account not only age-related restrictions concerning the type of firearm and shooting discipline but also the need for particular attention to safety-related aspects⁴. In such cases, the priority lies not merely in the acquisition of shooting techniques, but primarily in the formation of proper habits and attitudes concerning the responsible use of firearms and ammunition.

1 A. Idzikowski, *Szkolenie strzeleckie. Bezpieczeństwo – charakterystyka zagadnienia*, Legionowo 2014.

2 K. Konopka, *Prawo i bezpieczeństwo na strzelnicach publicznych*, „Magazyn Policji KSP” 2022.

3 *Ogólne zasady bezpieczeństwa obowiązujące przy uprawianiu sportu strzeleckiego*, Polski Związek Strzelectwa Sportowego (PZSS).

4 *Bezpieczeństwo na strzelnicy – podstawowe zasady*, Warszawa 2025.

Safety rules during training

Every individual applying for a firearm license must undergo mandatory theoretical and practical training, completed with a state examination as well as medical and psychological assessments. The training encompasses the knowledge of legal regulations, principles of safe firearm handling, and practical shooting skills. This requirement applies to all user groups – civilians, sport shooters, hunters, security personnel, firearm collectors, and law enforcement officers alike.

However, obtaining a firearm license should not be regarded as the culmination of the training process. Each firearm owner is obliged to continuously improve their skills, both technical and related to the safe operation of weapons. This requirement is not only of a legal nature but also of an ethical one – as a firearm owner bears responsibility for their own safety and that of their surroundings.

The instructor's role and responsibilities

The instructor, trainer, or teacher conducting the classes plays a pivotal role in the teaching process. The duty to properly prepare and conduct training in a manner that ensures maximal participant safety falls squarely on them. This responsibility encompasses both methodological and organizational preparation – selecting the venue and timing of the training, determining the number of participants, providing necessary equipment, and assessing the skill level, knowledge, and psychophysical condition of trainees. The training content should always be adapted to the participants' level of advancement. A different approach is required for athletes who train regularly under a coach's supervision than for recreational groups or beginners who are frequently encountering a firearm for the first time. In the case of such groups, particularly at commercial shooting ranges, the instructor should exercise increased vigilance and caution when admitting participants to live firing⁵.

A separate category comprises the training of uniformed-service personnel, whose curricula and training procedures are regulated in detail by statutory instruments and internal departmental regulations⁶. Despite a high level of oversight and professional preparation of staff, incidents may still occur in such environments as a result of routine or momentary lapses in concentration. For this reason, one should always apply the principle of limited trust, maintain a high level of vigilance, and respond decisively to any deviations from established safety rules⁷. Hazardous situations may arise not only during shooting activities themselves but also during routine handling of firearms – for example, during cleaning, maintenance, or adjustment of sighting devices. The most frequent cause of accidents is routine and the belief in “complete control” over the weapon. Therefore, every user, regardless

5 A. Kaczmarek, *Organizacja systemu szkoleń strzeleckich w polskiej Policji*, „Securitologia” 2017.

6 Ustawa z dnia 24 maja 2013 r. o środkach przymusu bezpośredniego i broni palnej (Dz.U. z 2013r. poz. 628).

7 Rozporządzenie Ministra Spraw Wewnętrznych i Administracji z dnia 26 sierpnia 2014 r. w sprawie szczegółowych zasad szkolenia strzeleckiego funkcjonariuszy Policji (Dz.U. z 2014 r. poz. 1195).

of experience, should continuously rehearse basic safety rules, intervene when observing unsafe behaviour in others, and refine their habits regarding the responsible handling of firearms.

Preparation of the instructor. General principles of preparation

The instructor should prepare methodologically, organizationally, and technically, with due attention to safety aspects. Key tasks include:

1. inspection of the technical condition and safety of firearms and ammunition;
2. preparation of firing points and the shooting area in accordance with safety principles (designation of safe zones, movement routes, muzzle-direction corridors);
3. preparation of medical and alarm safeguards (first-aid kit, designated first-contact personnel, evacuation plan, contact with the facility's medical staff);
4. risk analysis related to individual characteristics of participants (experience, psychophysical condition, possible medical contraindications).

In the case of mixed groups with varying levels of proficiency, the instructor should:

- introduce an individualized lesson program and initial familiarization exercises;
- divide participants into subgroups according to skill level and training objectives;
- provide additional instructional staff or assistants for beginner groups.

Procedures for unloading firearms and depositing ammunition before activities

Prior to the commencement of activities, particularly tactical training conducted outside a specialized shooting range, the instructor must order the mandatory deposit of ammunition (and, if necessary, personal firearms) in a secure location (safe, armoured cabinet) under the supervision of a designated person.

Practical guidelines:

- Instructor's commands when collecting ammunition: "Unload the weapon and magazines," "Deposit ammunition – to the safe." Magazines must be unloaded. Fig. 1.

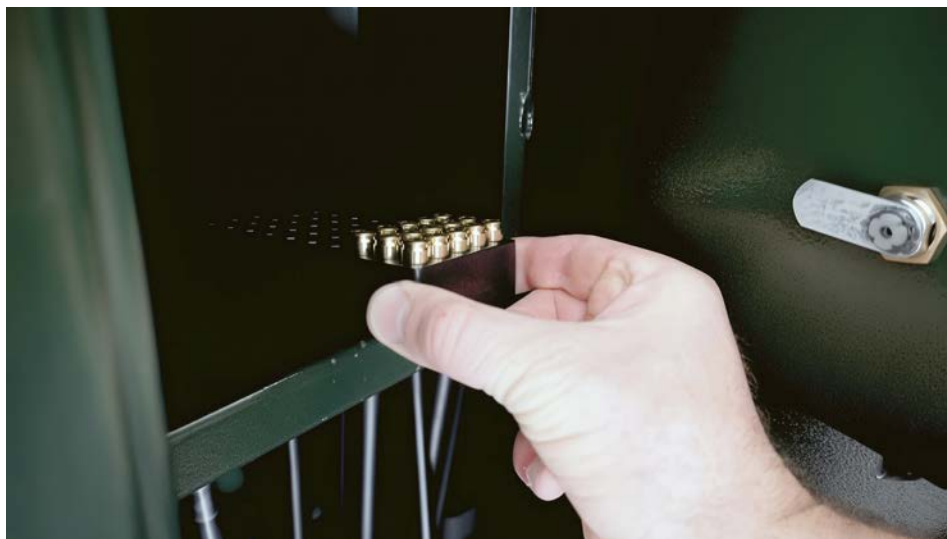
Fig. 1. Unloading a magazine.



Source: own elaboration

- Place loose ammunition in a bag/container or in an ammunition “basket” and deposit it in the safe. Figs. 2, 3, 4.

Fig. 2. Placing ammunition in an ammunition “basket.”



Source: own elaboration

Fig. 3. Placing loose ammunition in a bag.



Source: own elaboration.

Fig. 4. Depositing ammunition in the safe.



Source: own elaboration.

- “Unloading” ammunition is understood as the removal of all rounds from each magazine; it does not merely mean detaching the magazine from the firearm.

Three-stage weapon check – procedure and commands

To ensure maximal safety, a three-stage weapon-check system is proposed.

Stage I – Self-check by the participant (“self-check”)

Procedure

1. The instructor issues the command: “Inspect your weapon.” The participant inspects the magazines (to verify they contain no rounds and are not damaged), Fig. 5. Empty magazines are placed in the designated area.

Fig. 5. Magazine prepared for inspection.



Source: own elaboration.

2. The participant draws the firearm from the holster, points the muzzle toward a safe direction, and keeps the index finger aligned along the slide (safe finger position). Fig.6.

Fig. 6. Safe finger position on the firearm.



Source: own elaboration.

3. The participant disengages the safety (if an external safety is fitted), retracts the slide to its rearward position, visually verifies that the chamber is empty (holding the slide open for 2–3 s), and then releases the slide. Fig. 7.

Fig. 7. Disengaging the safety.



Source: own elaboration.

4. The participant fires a control shot toward a designated safe backstop (an instructor command is required if the object for the control shot has been designated).
Fig. 8.

Fig. 8. Performing a control shot.



Source: own elaboration.

5. The participant secures the firearm and returns it to the holster.

Notes: throughout the entire procedure the muzzle must remain pointed in a safe direction; the instructor supervises and corrects any irregularities.

Stage II – Instructor check (“unload for inspection”)

Procedure

1. The instructor issues the command: “Unload for inspection.”
2. Designated persons (or all participants simultaneously) check the magazine and the firearm, lock the slide to the rear (using the slide-stop lever). Fig. 9.

Fig. 9. Slide locked to the rear during firearm inspection.



Source: own elaboration.

3. They raise the firearm so the instructor standing behind them can visually inspect the chamber and magazines. Fig. 10.

Fig. 10. Positioning the firearm for magazine inspection.



Source: own elaboration.

4. The instructor inspects the firearm and magazines. After inspection, the instructor informs each inspected participant: "I have inspected the weapon" and signals the completion by touching the participant's shoulder (procedure used for groups arranged in a line).
5. The participant releases the slide-stop lever, fires a control shot toward a safe backstop, secures the firearm, returns it to the holster, and places magazines in pouches.

Stage III – Mutual inspection by fellow trainees

Procedure (Variant A – on-the-spot inspection):

1. The instructor issues the command: "Show your weapon for inspection to the person on your right/left" or "Unload and show the weapon for inspection."
2. Fellow trainees position themselves so they can safely inspect the adjacent participant's firearm (observing muzzle direction and finger-on-slide rules).
3. After inspection: release the slide, perform a control shot, secure and holster the firearm.

Procedure (Variant B – transfer for inspection):

1. The instructor issues the command: “Prepare the weapon for transfer for inspection,” followed by “Pass the weapon for inspection.” Participants pass the firearm holding it by the slide/frame (grip area free), while observing the highest safety precautions. Fig.11.

Fig. 11. Handing over a firearm for inspection.



Source: own elaboration.

2. After the weapon inspection, the instructor may issue the command “About-turn – inspect the handed-over weapon.” All participants then inspect their fellow trainee’s firearm and, upon the subsequent commands “About-turn – return the inspected weapon,” they return the inspected firearm while simultaneously reclaiming their own.

Remarks: the handing over of personal firearms to others for inspection should only be practiced with training or dummy weapons. When exercises are conducted using personal firearms, it is preferable to conduct mutual inspection under the owner’s supervision without physically transferring the weapon. The fellow trainee inspects the firearm in the same manner as previously performed by the instructor.

Specific instructor commands – standardized phrases

To maintain clarity and training discipline, it is advisable to use a consistent set of standardized commands:

- “Inspect your weapon” – instruction for the participant to conduct a self-check.
- “Unload for inspection” – instruction to prepare the firearm for instructor inspection (slide locked in the rearward position).
- “Show your weapon for inspection” / “Show your weapon for inspection to the person on your [right/left]” – instruction for mutual inspection of firearms.
- “Prepare to hand over your weapon for inspection” / “Hand over your weapon for inspection” – commands related to the transfer of firearms for inspection.
- “Weapon inspected” – instructor’s confirmation that the inspection has been completed.

Each command should be delivered clearly, concisely, and in a manner that leaves no ambiguity regarding the expected action.

Inspection of instructor weapons

Instructors are also subject to inspection. The first and second stages of the inspection procedure apply equally to the instructors’ firearms, and they should perform these checks simultaneously with the trainees. One or two participants should be designated to carry out the inspection of the instructor’s weapon. This procedure reinforces the principle of mutual responsibility and accountability.

Preventive and Protective Measures

1. Equipment and clothing – appropriate attire, protective eyewear, and hearing protection; absence of loose elements that could interfere with firearm handling.
2. Psychophysical condition of participants – the instructor must inquire about and monitor readiness (asking about fatigue, medication, or alcohol consumption).
3. Inspection of additional equipment – checking places where participants might conceal ammunition or tools (pockets, bags).
4. Principle of limited trust – regardless of participants’ experience, the instructor should maintain cautious supervision and monitor every deviation from established procedures.
5. Safe unloading zones – especially important during training outside the shooting range; such zones must be designated and clearly marked for unloading and firearm inspection.
6. Ammunition/firearm deposit – firearms and ammunition should be stored in a locked safe or secure cabinet during training, under the supervision of a designated person.

Elements enhancing participant safety

The safety of participants in firearms training depends not only on adherence to technical and organizational principles but also on numerous individual factors such as psychophysical condition, clothing, equipment, and experience level. Neglecting these elements may result in improper training progression, loss of concentration, and consequently – accidents or potentially hazardous situations.

Equipment and clothing

Appropriate clothing and equipment constitute a fundamental component of safety during firearms training. Attire should be suited to the nature of the exercises – comfortable, non-restrictive, and free from loose elements that could catch on the firearm or other equipment. For firearms-related activities, clothing that covers the body, footwear with a stable sole, protective eyewear, and hearing protection are mandatory.

Personal equipment (holster, magazine pouches, tactical belt, vest) should be arranged ergonomically and safely. Improper placement of equipment components may hinder access to the weapon or result in accidental contact with trigger mechanisms.

Before each session, the instructor should inspect participants' attire and equipment, paying attention to:

- correct attachment of holsters and magazine pouches,
- stability of tactical belts and vests,
- proper placement of spare ammunition,
- absence of decorative or hazardous elements (chains, keyrings, cords).

The instructor's role also includes advising on equipment and clothing selection – a practice particularly common in sport shooting, where the coach assists the athlete in adjusting gear to individual needs⁸.

Psychophysical condition of participants

The psychophysical condition of participants is crucial for ensuring safety. Fatigue, stress, lack of sleep, or decreased concentration significantly increase the risk of errors that may lead to firearm-related accidents⁹. Overworked individuals respond more slowly, exhibit reduced hand-eye coordination, and may misinterpret instructor commands.

Before beginning training, the instructor should observe participants, paying particular attention to:

- signs of fatigue, distraction, or emotional agitation,
- delayed responses to commands,
- difficulty maintaining proper posture or rhythm of work.

In case of signs of reduced psychophysical performance, the instructor should:

8 *Ogólne zasady bezpieczeństwa obowiązujące przy uprawianiu sportu strzeleckiego*, Polski Związek Strzelectwa Sportowego.

9 *Bezpieczeństwo na strzelnicy – podstawowe zasady*, Warszawa 2025.

- exclude the participant from active shooting,
- assign them to auxiliary tasks (e.g. “target handler”, “role player”),
- suggest rest or consultation with the training supervisor.

Participants should also be aware of their own limitations and report any indisposition to the instructor before starting the exercises.¹⁰

Level of experience and group diversity

A varied level of participant experience is one of the greatest challenges for an instructor. In groups where there is a wide range of skill levels, the pace and scope of exercises should be adjusted to the capabilities of the least advanced participants, without compromising safety.

It is recommended that:

- before training begins, the instructor conducts a short assessment of participants' skill levels (e.g. a brief dry-fire exercise),
- in large groups, additional instructors supervise specific firing lanes or training zones,
- the instructor positions themselves closest to the least experienced person or team,
- where possible, the level of difficulty of exercises is varied (basic and advanced variants).

Participants with lower skill levels require greater supervision regarding firearm handling, conduct on the range, and reaction to commands. An experienced instructor should continuously monitor the participants' pace, correct mistakes, and prevent any unauthorized changes in positioning or task execution.¹¹

Integration of safety factors

Safe training requires that all discussed elements – equipment, clothing, psychophysical condition, and experience – function as a connected system. Even the best-prepared exercise can become dangerous if a participant is fatigued, has an improperly secured holster, or misunderstands commands.

The instructor's responsibilities therefore include:

- maintaining discipline,
- enforcing compliance with safety rules,
- eliminating risk factors,
- conducting exercises at a pace that ensures control over the group.

A high level of safety results from synergy between the instructor's technical preparation, participants' awareness, and proper organization of activities.¹²

10 Szerzej: A. Kaczmarek, *Organizacja systemu szkoleń strzeleckich...*

11 Szerzej: Rozporządzenie Ministra Spraw Wewnętrznych i Administracji z dnia 26 sierpnia 2014 r. w sprawie szczegółowych zasad...

12 *Wybrane aspekty bezpieczeństwa podczas zajęć z użyciem broni palnej*, Szczytno 2022.

Training security – general principles

Ensuring the safety of firearms training requires strict adherence to safety rules to minimize the risk of accidents and hazards. The key elements include organization of the training area, control of hazardous materials, supervision of participants, and emergency response procedures.

Designating safe zones

The instructor issues the command: “Designate safe zones – no unauthorized persons may enter.” Safe zones include: areas for observers, instructor zones, storage areas for equipment, and evacuation corridors. Defining such zones minimizes accidental access to the line of fire and protects bystanders.¹³

Control of access to ammunition and firearms

The instructor issues the command: “Check access to ammunition and firearms – no unauthorized person may have access.”

Ammunition and firearms must be stored in locked, marked storage facilities. Issuing them to participants takes place only under supervision of an authorized person. Access control reduces the risk of accidents and theft.^{14, 15}

Appointing persons responsible for safety

The instructor issues the command: “Assign safety officers – each zone must have a supervisor.” Each training area must have a designated safety coordinator responsible for compliance with procedures and for responding in case of danger. This person monitors participants and can stop the exercise at any time if safety is compromised.¹⁶

Compliance with communication and emergency procedures

The instructor issues the command: “Communication and alert procedures apply to everyone – report any threat immediately.” Training should include clear communication rules: alarm signals, procedures for notifying emergency services, and immediate reporting to the instructor. Observing these procedures enables quick response and limits the effects of incidents.¹⁶

Effective training security requires precise organization, control of hazardous materials, supervision, and adherence to emergency protocols. Each element of security directly impacts participant safety and the overall effectiveness of training.

13 A.Jha & Izaguirre, Mary & Adler, Amy, *Mindfulness Training in Military Settings: Emerging Evidence and Best-Practice Guidance*, Current Psychiatry Reports, 2025, pp 393-407.

14 D. Hemenway & Rausher, Steven & Violano, Pina & Raybould, Toby & Barber, Catherine. *Firearms training: What is actually taught?*, „Injury Prevention” 2027, no 25.

15 R. Renner, Cvetković, V. M., & Lieftenegger, N., *Dealing with High-Risk Police Activities and Enhancing Safety and Resilience: Qualitative Insights into Austrian Police Operations from a Risk and Group Dynamic Perspective*, „Safety” 2025, 11(3), 68.

16 J.R. Blalock, Black, R.A., Bourke, M.L. et al., *Emergency Communication Operators: Findings from the National Wellness Survey for Public Safety Personnel*, „Police Crim Psych” 2024, no 39, pp 34–43.

Medical support

All training activities – especially military, police, or firearms-related – must include comprehensive medical coverage to ensure participant safety and rapid response in case of an accident. Medical security includes both appropriate equipment and emergency procedures.¹⁷

Medical equipment

The instructor issues the command: “Check medical kits – ensure they contain first-aid supplies, dressings, AED defibrillators, and basic medications.”

Medical kits should include necessary first-aid items such as dressings, bandages, disinfectants, and AED defibrillators for immediate cardiac response. They should also contain basic medications such as adrenaline, glucagon, or painkillers for emergencies.

Communication with duty officer and emergency numbers

The instructor issues the command: “Ensure constant communication with the duty officer and know emergency numbers – report any incident immediately.”

Maintaining contact with the duty officer ensures quick information flow and coordination of rescue actions. Knowing emergency numbers is essential to summon help quickly when needed.

Accident response procedures

The instructor issues the command: “Recall accident response procedures – assess the victim, perform resuscitation, control bleeding, evacuate.”

In case of an accident, quick and effective action is essential. The first step is to assess the victim's condition (consciousness and breathing). If necessary, perform cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR). For bleeding, immediately apply direct pressure or compression dressings. Evacuation must be carried out safely, following immobilization and transport principles.

First-aid training

Regular first-aid training is necessary to ensure that all participants can provide effective help in emergencies. Such training should cover both theory and practice, including CPR, AED use, bleeding control, and casualty evacuation.

Recommendations for instructors and training leaders

Effective training, especially firearms-related, requires instructors to be well-prepared and continuously improve their competencies. The key recommendations include:

17 A. Martín-Rodríguez, A., Gostian-Ropotin, L. A., Beltrán-Velasco, A. I., Belando-Pedreño, N., Simón, J. A., López-Mora, C., Navarro-Jiménez, E., Tornero-Aguilera, J. F., & Clemente-Suárez, V. J., *Sporting Mind: The Interplay of Physical Activity and Psychological Health*, „Sports” 2024, no 12(1), p 37.

- **Thorough preparation of training outlines and equipment lists**
The instructor should carefully plan each part of the training, prepare detailed lesson plans, and list all necessary materials and equipment. Failing to ensure sufficient ammunition, missing magazine tools, or other oversights can cause interruptions and disorganization. Therefore, the principle “better one round too many than one too few” is often emphasized in practice.
- **Periodic updating of documentation and procedures**
After each training session, all lesson plans and documentation should be updated and supplemented. This allows instructors to learn from previous experiences, improve procedures, and share best practices with other trainers.
- **Training review and debriefing**
After completion, it is essential to analyze the course of training and conduct a debriefing. Instructors should evaluate the effectiveness of their methods, identify organizational and psychophysical issues among participants, and plan corrective actions.
- **Experience sharing among instructors**
Regular meetings and exchange of experiences in training techniques and safety practices enhance instructor competence, introduce innovations, and prevent repeating past mistakes.¹⁸
The instructor should also anticipate potential problems, monitor equipment condition and participant readiness. Organizational consistency of the entire course is as crucial as technical preparation – neglecting either reduces both quality and safety.
Effective training requires careful planning and post-session reflection. Analyzing the course, debriefing, and sharing experience all contribute to continuous improvement of training quality and participant safety.

Summary

Firearms, when handled properly and with respect for safety rules, can be used by individuals of varying experience levels. Modern firearm designs are equipped with safety mechanisms that minimize the risk of accidents and protect both users and bystanders. However, regardless of experience, firearms must always be treated with caution, and all safety procedures must be strictly followed.

An effective safety system for firearms training relies on:

- continuous updating of knowledge and procedures,
- control of equipment and gear condition,
- systematic training for participants and instructors,
- effective planning and post-training analysis.

¹⁸ A. Martín-Rodríguez, Gostian-Ropotin at all... p. 37.

Only through consistent application of these principles can training be conducted safely and effectively – developing participant skills while minimizing the risk of incidents and accidents.

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