

PREVENTING ACCIDENTAL FIREARM DISCHARGE

Background

Nationally, law enforcement accidental firearm discharges have more than doubled in two years, endangering bystanders and officers. More than half of the accidental discharges involved injuries, usually to an officer who was cleaning or disassembling a weapon, or handling the firearm in a non-enforcement or use-of-force function, including training exercises.

An accidental discharge may occur when the trigger of the firearm is deliberately pulled for a purpose other than the use of deadly force — dry-fire practice, demonstration, or function testing — where ammunition is unintentionally left in the chamber. Simply removing the magazine does not ensure that the firearm is unloaded, as a round may still be left in the chamber. Recent incidents have found that leaving a firearm loaded is more likely to occur when the individual handling the gun is not following gun safety protocols established by the department. Another common cause of an accidental discharge is when the officer places their finger on the trigger before they have decided to shoot. With the finger so positioned, many activities may cause the finger to compress the trigger unintentionally. For example, if one attempts to holster the firearm with their finger on the trigger, the holster edge will drive the finger onto the trigger, where discharge is likely. If one stumbles or struggles (with an adversary) with their finger on the trigger, the grasping motion of both hands will likely cause the trigger finger to compress the trigger.

A less common cause of accidental discharge is dropping a loaded weapon. Because of this possibility, most currently produced pistols are designed with a “drop-safety” or firing pin block — a mechanism inhibiting or isolating the firing pin, preventing accidental discharge if the firearm is dropped.

Several accidental discharges nationwide have resulted in officer injuries, as well as departmental liabilities when the incident is considered to be a negligent discharge. A negligent discharge is a discharge of a firearm involving culpable carelessness. In judicial terms, a negligent discharge is a chargeable offense when it can be proven that the weapon is fired due to either operator error or a lack of attention to basic safety rules.

Recommendations

CIRMA Risk Management is recommending that all Firearms Instructors review their departments’ Standard Operating Procedures for appropriate firearms safety trainings, including “make safe” protocols. It is recommended that Instructors include a firearm safety briefing prior to beginning any training where firearms are utilized.