

The FBI “Approved” List of Rifle Ammunition

If you'd like to know the absolute best 5.56 NATO/.223 Remington ammo to use in your AR-15 for self-defense then this short report will tell you exactly that.

The truth is that I've held off on writing this article because as far as priorities, choosing the "best" rifle self-defense ammo is just not as important a topic as choosing the best self-defense handgun ammunition.

Why?

Because rifles are typically much more effective when compared to handguns as it relates to stopping a threat.

In fact, most people shot with handguns live. It's somewhere in the neighborhood of 6 times out of 7 a person survives a handgun wound.

Rifles on the other hand are much more effective. And as much as I think using the "best" bullet possible is a smart idea in an AR-15, plenty of enemy soldiers have been killed in combat by American soldiers using the AR-15 and normal FMJ ball ammo.

Plus, because you are more likely to have your handgun with you when you might need to defend your life from a violent criminal, I felt the handgun ammunition info was way more important to get out there quickly.

That's why I wrote a three part series on handgun ammunition:

*** [The CRITICAL difference between self-defense & practice ammo \(Part 1 of 3\)](#)

*** [More on self-defense ammo & why the FBI is switching back to 9mm \(Part 2 of 3\)](#)

*** [The "approved" list of self-defense ammunition \(is your ammo on this list?\) pt 3 of 3](#)

And then, because of multiple reader requests I followed it up with a couple more articles on handgun ammunition that answered some common questions:

["Why your favorite self-defense ammo is not on 'the list'"](#) answers that important question when people ask me about the "latest and greatest" new self-defense handgun ammo.

It also goes a bit more into the extensive testing process that all the recommended self-defense ammo should have

And finally I wrote ["What's the best self-defense ammo for a .380 pocket pistol?"](#) because people kept asking that question.

So now we get to ...

What Is The Best AR-15 Self-Defense Ammunition?

Before we begin, I feel it is important to quote the respected Dr. Gary Roberts from FirearmsTactical.com again, because he is the one that has been leading the research on the best self-defense ammunition available and posting the information freely online. **Again, all credit for this list goes to Dr. Gary Roberts.**

In his list of 5.56 Duty Loads Dr. Roberts prefaces it first with this:

“Only after proper foundational and ongoing repetitive refresher training, cultivating warrior mind-set, and ensuring weapon system reliability do you need to worry about ammunition selection. Most folks would be far better off practicing with what they have, rather than worrying about what is “best”. As long as you know your what your weapon and ammo can realistically accomplish, it is all just a matter of training and shot placement. I would much rather go into battle with a guy who practices 15,000 rounds a year using generic 55 gr FMJ out of his old M16A1 than with some guy that has the latest state-of-the-art ammo and rifle, but only shoots 500 rounds a year. If you need to delve into the arcane subject of agency duty ammunition selection, below are the state of the art choices in 5.56 mm/.223:”

The Importance of Knowing Your Barrel Twist Rate

Because your twist rate will determine what the optimal ammunition for your rifle is. The most common AR-15 barrel twist rates are:

– **1/7 twist:** The fastest. This is the Mil-Spec standard and recommended, because you can use everything from 50 gr to 77+ gr weight bullets.

As an aside: may disintegrate high-velocity, light-weight, 40gr varmit rounds (but because we're not hunting varmits this is OK).

– **1/8 twist:** In between 1/7 and the common commercial 1/9 twist. Can stabilize most of the heavy bullets too.

– **1/9 twist:** A common commercial twist rate on commercially designed AR-15's (i.e. not Mil-Spec). May not stabilize 70+ gr projectiles.

– **1/12 twist:** The slowest twist rate. Can be used for 40gr varmit rounds, may not stabilize heavier weight projectiles.

Again, the Mil-Spec 1/7 twist is recommended (although 1/8 twist is acceptable) for simplicity's sake and to give you the option of using the greatest versatility of ammunition.

Barrier Blind Ammunition Is Preferred...

As noted in previous articles on self-defense ammo ...

Over the past years, there has been a switch not only from ball ammo (FMJ) to Hollow points (JHP) but now the new standard is "barrier blind" ammunition.

This is a reference to how the bullet performs in ballistic gelatin AFTER it has passed through an intermediate barrier. In other words, can it shoot through some type of barrier and still perform well in the ballistic gelatin.

This can greatly affect how the bullet performs in real life (because most criminals are NOT naked and many times are not standing straight in front of you giving you a perfect silhouette shot!)

Further, they may be behind car windows (or you may be stuck in your car and have to shoot through your own window). An intruder might be hiding behind your couch in your home.

Common testing of these bullets could be a three event IWBA (International Wound Ballistics Association) type test using bare gelatin, 4 layer denim, and auto windshield tests all at 10 feet.

In short, Barrier Blind ammunition represents the pinnacle of modern self-defense bullet performance whether we're talking rifles or handguns. Thus, in this following list Barrier Blind ammunition is recommended first, with other options discussed.

The list starts on the next page!

The Official Approved List of AR-15 Self-Defense/Duty Ammunition

The entire shooting world owes a lot of gratitude to one Dr. Gary Roberts (aka DocGKR) from FirearmsTactical.com. He is a subject matter expert (SME) on ammunition and terminal ballistics.

Dr. Roberts has an approved Duty 5.56 ammo list that is posted on online forums and is updated as new loads are tested of the “best list” of approved ammo, and all credit belongs to him for this list.

If you have 1/9 or faster twist rate barrel (so 1/9, 1/8, and 1/7 twist):

*** 5.56 mm Federal 62 gr Trophy Bonded Bear Claw (TBBC) bonded JSP (XM556FBIT3)

*** 5.56 mm Winchester 64 gr solid base bonded JSP (Q3313/RA556B)

*** [Black Hills 5.56 mm 50 gr TSX](#) loading.

*** The [Hornady 5.56 mm 55 gr GMX](#)

NOTE: that these are all true 5.56 mm loads that require a real milspec 5.56 mm chamber, not a SAAMI .223 chamber—be sure to check with an appropriate gauge or reamer.

Most other acceptable LE barrier blind loadings are at .223 pressures including the following ...

*** .223 55 & 62 gr Federal bonded JSP Tactical loads (LE223T1 & LE223T3)

*** Nosler 60 gr Partition JSP,

*** Remington 62 gr Core-Lokt Ultra Bonded JSP (PRC223R4)

*** .223 Federal 55 gr TSX (T223S)

*** .223 Hornady 55 gr GMX

*** [.223 Speer 64 gr Gold Dot JSP](#)’s (and identically constructed [Federal 62 gr Fusion JSP](#) and Federal XM223SP1 62gr Bonded JSP).

*** The Swift 75 gr Scirocco bonded PT is also good choice, but usually requires a 1/7 twist.

Note that the Barnes all copper TSX bullets are great projectiles and offer good penetration through barriers, however, when first hitting a laminated automobile windshield intermediate barrier, most TSX bullets exhibit less expansion than bonded

JSP's, as the Barnes jacket either collapses at the nose, the jacket "petals" fold back against the core, or the "petals" are torn off; this results in a caliber size projectile configured a lot like a full wadcutter, leading to deep penetration.

If you have a 1/12 twist barrel:

If running 1/12 twist barrels, stick with the [BH 50 gr TSX](#), Fed 55 gr TBBC, Fed 55 gr TSX, [Horn 55 gr GMX](#), or [Speer 55 gr Gold Dot](#).

NONE of the fragmenting 5.56 mm OTM bullets, even the heavy 75 – 100 gr loads, offer acceptable performance through automobile windshield glass. Contrary to what many believe, [M193](#) & [M855](#) FMJ are not very good against glass; the best military 5.56 mm load against glass is 52 gr M995 AP, followed by the 62 gr Mk318 Mod0 OTM and [70 gr Optimal "brown tip" OTM](#).

In those situations where intermediate barrier penetration is not a critical requirement, for example LE urban entries or long range shots in open conditions, then OTM, JHP, and standard JSP loads can offer acceptable performance.

For 1/7 twist barrels, the Hornady 75 gr OTM, Nosler 77 gr OTM, and Sierra 77 gr SMK OTM are all good choices. The experimental BH loaded 100 gr OTM exhibits impressive fragmentation, even at relatively low velocities, however while capable of shooting out to 600, it is optimized for 200 and under.

If stuck with 1/9 twist barrels, the heavy 70+ gr loads are not universally accurate in all rifles and the 69 gr SMK OTM, the 68 gr Hornady OTM, the Winchester 64 gr JSP (RA223R2), the Federal 64 gr TRU (T223L) JSP, Hornady 60 gr JSP, are likely to run accurately in the majority of 1/9 twist rifles.

Again it is critical to keep in mind that the above loads fail to offer adequate penetration through intermediate barriers.

For longer range engagements using precision weapons like the Mk12 SPR or DMR rifles with faster 1/8 or 1/7 twist barrels, one of the combat proven 5.56 mm (ie. 5.56 mm NATO pressure loads, not .223 SAAMI pressure loads which run about 200 f/s slower) heavy OTM loadings are a good choice:

- the [Barnes 70 gr TSX](#) (Optimized "browntip")
- Hornady 75 gr TAP (#8126N)

- Nosler 77 gr
- or the [Sierra 77 gr Match King \(Mk262 Mod1\)](#).

Short barreled 5.56 mm weapons, such as the Colt Commando, Mk18 CQBR, HK416, HK53, HK G36C, etc... offer advantages in confined spaces.

With SBR's it is best to stick with the barrier blind loads recommended above, although the heavy OTM's suggested for long distance shooting will also work. SBR's can run into rotational velocity issues with some loads, so it is generally best to select faster 1/7 twist barrels whenever possible. Remember, with SBR's, effective engagement distances are significantly reduced compared to the longer barreled carbines.

In Conclusion, 5.56/.223 Bullet Technology Has Vastly Improved

This list represents the state-of-the-art in bullet technology applied to the AR-15 platform...

Can these bullets really make such a difference?

I read an [interesting article](#) the other day attributed to a combat medic of 8 years who was technically a "combat advisor" for two tours in Afghanistan and said he recorded 371 gun shot wounds.

He basically spent an entire article bashing the 5.56 NATO, saying "at ranges from zero (negligent discharges) to 35 yards (my closest, and worst-placed, shot on a person) to 400 yards (our average initial engagement distance in Afghanistan) individuals shot with a single 5.56 NATO round had time to fire, maneuver, or both", before saying something very interesting (emphasis mine):

"As an aside, [Chris Kyle](#) (FWFS, brother) was a friend of mine, and while not so patiently listening to one of my Crown-induced rants on the 5.56 NATO, he suggested that it was not caliber I hated, but the bullet. He told me to load up the case as fast as I could, push a 64 grain or heavier soft point round and see what happens. So, I had Underground Tactical built me an AR in 5.56 which I swore I would never own, and built rounds ranging from 64 to 75 grains with it. I've taken 11 deer with them, and the wound tracks are nothing like I saw with the NATO round. I've never had to look for an animal, and a little Underground 5.5lb AR in 5.56 is my go-to hill country deer gun now, which is just crazy."

So, a combat vet who hated the 5.56 NATO round because he was using FMJ ball ammo, now uses it extensively because of a simple ammo change. In short, like handgun ammunition, the terminal effectiveness of 5.56/.223 can be greatly improved by choosing the right type of bullet.

If you anticipate using your AR-15 for self-defense, grab one of the rounds off this list, zero it in your rifle and then practice a lot with cheaper FMJ ball ammo and be confident in your rifle.