

# The Pros And Cons Of The .40 S&W Caliber

A Smith & Wesson M&P 40 Shield Pistol and Speer LE 180 grain Gold Dot Hollow Point .40 S&W ammo.

Ah, [.40 Smith & Wesson](#), aka [.40 S&W](#), aka .40 Short & Weak. Once regarded as the “just right” caliber of the pistol world, due to it’s mass acceptance and deployment by professional users here in the US, it’s gradually been relegated to “red-headed stepchild” status, especially with the advent of more potent 9mm loads over the past 25 years. However, just because something better came along, does it mean .40 S&W is a bad choice?

Maybe not...

In the frenzy of [gun-buying because of the Chinese Flu/Engineered Virus/Winnie-The-Flu/COVID-19](#), we all saw the popular calibers, and even some of the “Plan B” calibers, fly off the shelves. 9mm ammo and [firearms](#) were nowhere to be found. Some of you may have stumbled across offerings in the .40 S&W caliber, with some big names such as [GLOCK](#), [H&K](#), and yes, Smith & Wesson, attached to it. So, why does it take a beating?

Let’s start with a little history on the caliber.

## An Informal History Of .40 S&W

Unlike 9mm Luger, and [.45 ACP](#), .40 S&W is a relatively new invention, having been [developed in the 1980s](#), specifically at the request of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Like a lot of inventions in the world of firearms, it was crisis and tragedy that spurred the FBI into action. [The 1986 Miami Shootout](#), where drug dealers killed two agents and wounded five, had the FBI on the hunt for a replacement firearm and cartridge to be the successor to it’s standard-issue .38 Special revolvers and [158-grain +P ammunition, aka the “FBI Load”](#). Yes, the FBI was still issuing revolvers to it’s armed personnel well into the 1980s. The new firearm had to be a semi-automatic pistol, and the cartridge had to be equal or superior to the .38 Special +P load. Plus, the weapon had to be usable by all agents. It was a pretty tall order.

At the time, 9mm loads wouldn’t cut it. They failed the tests cooked up by the FBI’s firearms training division. .45 ACP loads passed the tests, but the associated firearms were either lacking in capacity or too large for all but the biggest-handed agents to operate.

The agent in charge of the whole project, John Hall, then provided his own [10mm Colt Delta Elite](#) pistol for the tests. He was one of the rare “gun guys” in government service, and personally [handloaded his ammunition](#), reducing the power of the normally-beastly [10mm cartridge](#), to be more user-friendly to his whole Bureau. Hall’s cartridges passed the tests, but the

guns were still rather large, posing problems for some of the field agents, especially women, who were then making big moves in FBI fieldwork.

Smith & Wesson, along with [Winchester](#), took a look at Hall's handloads, and realized that there was a lot of empty space in the cartridge since some of the powder wasn't present as compared to a normal 10mm load. Thus they shorted the physical case, and kept the 180-grain hollowpoint projectile, and the .40 S&W was born. Performance was roughly identical to the reduced-power 10mm FBI loads, and gunmakers could adapt 9mm pistol frames to the caliber. Ironically, GLOCK beat Smith & Wesson to the punch and debuted their first .40 S&W pistol, the GLOCK 22, a week before Smith & Wesson got their gun, the 4006, out the door. Gaston beat Smith & Wesson to the market using Smith & Wesson's own caliber. Wow.

The FBI adopted the cartridge in 1990, and where the FBI goes, so does most of American law enforcement as a whole. GLOCK, who was pushing 9mm pistols on US police departments, rapidly pivoted and offered deep discounts and free exchanges where departments could turn in GLOCK 17s and get [GLOCK 22s and 23s](#) cheap or for free.

On the citizen side, the public, following the lead of law-enforcement professionals, got whatever they could get their hands on. Political considerations propelled their purchase decisions as well. The federal government had enacted the now thankfully-expired Assault Weapons Ban, which prohibited the sale of firearm magazines that could hold more than ten rounds. 9mm technology hadn't made it's renaissance yet, so people were looking for the most power possible in the eleven (10+1) rounds they were legally allowed to have in the weapon at one time. Gun magazines waxed eloquent, calling it the "ideal" defensive round.

But alas, the .40 S&W wasn't to have the professional longevity of more storied loads. By the early 2000s, 9mm loads were catching up. [More reliable +P rounds](#) and improved hollow-point designs had people "going back" to 9mm. Though the .40 S&W offered increased capacity over most [.45 ACP pistols](#), and of course any wheelgun out there, 9mm still reigned supreme as capacity king. The sunset of the AWB in 2004 further solidified the situation as now US citizens could rightfully own new standard-capacity firearms legally once again.

But does the phasing out of .40 S&W mean it's a bad choice, on it's own? Not at all. It still works.

## Advantages Of .40 S&W

.40 S&W - it still works and gets the job done.

- More power in a guns that are usually around the same size as comparable 9mm pistols. Generally, to equal the velocity and ballistics of .40 S&W, 9mm designers have to do some tricks to get there, which can drive up ammunition costs. An effective .40 S&W round is usually easier to find, and cheaper.
- Proven track record. This was the standard for law enforcement for a few decades in our nation. It worked, and stopped many a gunfight in the favor of our sworn LE gunslingers.

Government gun training might be lacking, but they at least usually pick [decent equipment](#).

- Easier to handle than full-power 10mm. You're in the "class" but without a blast that could prove hard to handle.
- LE is mostly a 9mm world nowadays, so that means there's a large pool of used guns out there in .40 S&W. You could get yourself a proven design, cheap. Most police weapons are hardly used. A little cleaning and TLC, and you've got yourself a great gun.
- There exists conversion kits to some other interesting calibers such as [.357 SIG](#), which warrants a future blog post, actually.

## Disadvantages Of .40 S&W

Most pistol calibers are a compromise. .40 S&W is no different.

- Some .40 S&W guns are literally just retrofitted 9mm pistols. They'll swap out the barrel and some other parts and call it a day. Sometimes some of the associated components aren't up to the abuse of .40 S&W - and will fail. Check your gun in detail.
- Less room for manufacturing error. The shortened cartridge and less airspace means that if there's a misfeed and your bullet gets nudged inward just enough, there could be a nasty ka-boom. Less airspace means the pressure builds higher and faster and the gun can't take it. The easiest way out of this is to only use quality ammunition, and not Brand X gun-show reloads.
- There is more of a pronounced "snap", which doesn't translate as well into a smaller pistol. Yes, one can train around it, but shooting .40 S&W well out of a smaller gun takes more work. Most will end up just carrying a larger duty-sized pistol. Not ideal for some situations.
- Baseline ammo cost is a little more. Your training will be costlier.
- Specific accessories can be hard to find sometimes.

## My Verdict

I like all things ballistic, and .40 S&W is no exception. It's not my preferred caliber, but I can't dismiss it entirely. At the minimum, it could be a good "Plan B" caliber for some. Or it could be one of those "just to have" purchases, i.e. if one happens across a good police trade-in. .40 occupies a weird space between "gotta have it", and "avoid". It's there, it works, but there's more suitable options for most shooters. That being said, I'm not ditching any .40 S&W in my inventory.

## A Quick Word On Police Trade-Ins

As I noted above, most forces have or are in the process of transitioning to 9mm. Some of those departments are able to, for economic and political reasons, to send their .40 S&W guns back to the distributors, who then may be able to push them out for sale to the general public. It's

actually a grand opportunity for a collector, especially because some police weapons are engraved with the department's logo, that sort of thing. Basically über-gun-geek stuff. But anyways, the guns are usually priced to move, and lightly used, as most cops don't fire their weapons outside of required training. That being said, neglect is a bad thing, and you will want to verify the condition of any potential police trade-in purchase. It might have the logo of your state trooper agency engraved on the side, but the internals could be rusted all to hell, and outside of gunsmithing, the gun could be quite a mission to get to 100%.

TL:DR - buyer beware.