Airsoft Guns

Airsoft Guns - The Basics

Airsoft guns are best compared to BB or pellet guns that are often manufactured to look just like real machine guns, rifles, and hand guns. Airsoft guns usually fire pellets via gas, spring, or electrical systems, and are used for paintball-style gaming, target practice, firearms training, and as movie props. Although they are often marketed as game-playing devices intended to simulate real combat with automatic or semi-automatic weapons, the use of Airsoft guns by children and grownups in other arenas appears to be growing.

Because of Airsoft guns' sometimes uncanny resemblance to real firearms and the resulting potentially disastrous consequences, many laws and regulations affect the manufacture, importation, and ownership of Airsoft guns.

Airsoft Guns - Safety Concerns

While Airsoft guns are often considered toys, the reality is that they are projectile weapons capable of inflicting harm. According to one study done by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in 2005 approximately 19,675 non-powder gun injuries were treated in United States emergency rooms. Of these injuries, 71 percent involved individuals 20 or under.

Although that study was not limited to Airsoft guns, Airsoft guns fire their BBs at speeds of hundreds of feet per second, creating a real risk of serious eye injury. In fact, hospitals and healthcare professionals throughout the country have reported a significant rise in Airsoft-related eye injuries in recent years.

Of greater concern, Airsoft gun ownership and use sometimes has deadly consequences. There have been numerous instances in which individuals (often youths) holding realistic-looking Airsoft guns were shot by police who thought the weapons were real. Because Airsoft guns are often viewed as toys, young people owning the weapons sometimes do not realize (or adequately evaluate) the risks posed by simply holding such a "toy."

A 2003 Government Accountability Office report concluded "that scant data exist on the incidence of crimes, injuries, or deaths involving toy guns and on the long-term effects that childhood play with toy guns may have." Further, whatever incidents of toy gun injuries or fatalities were reported "probably do not represent an accurate or comprehensive reporting."

However, AirSoft gun injuries, their use in committing crimes, or their mistaken identification by the public and police, all occur on an almost weekly basis.

Airsoft Guns - Laws and Regulations

The risks and consequences of Airsoft gun use have not gone unnoticed by the law. Airsoft is considered illegal in various countries such as Korea, Malaysia, Thailand, and Singapore, and some countries like Canada prohibit the importation of "replica" Airsoft guns. However, federal importation laws in the United States simply require that all Airsoft guns transported within or imported into the country have barrels with a minimum 6mm wide blaze orange tip, so as to avoid confusion with real firearms. Most retailers of Airsoft guns have disclaimers stating that their Airsoft guns are sold with an orange tip, and that it is illegal to remove the orange tip.

Furthermore, individuals in the U.S. must be 18 years of age or older to purchase an Airsoft gun. On the other hand, Airsoft guns are not classified as firearms and are legal for use by all ages under federal law. However, some municipalities and states place restrictions on Airsoft guns. New York City, Washington, D.C., Chicago, San Francisco, and parts of Michigan outlaw Airsoft guns entirely.

Some countries have specific restrictions on Airsoft guns, such as maximum muzzle velocity standards, restrictions on use of trademarks of real firearms, and required use of 'unrealistic' coloring to distinguish Airsoft guns from actual firearms.

Finally, states such as California have laws that make it a crime to brandish a look-alike gun in public. Furthermore, individuals using an Airsoft or replica gun to commit crimes will invariably be treated as though they had used an actual firearm.
Airsoft Guns - the Bottom Line

Extreme care should be used at all times with Airsoft guns, and it is best to treat Airsoft guns as a real firearm while handling and transporting them. As noted above, reckless handling of these guns can lead to various ranges of criminal consequences, and worse, physical injury or death. If minors are to be involved with Airsoft gun use, adult supervision and protective gear are an absolute necessity. Finally, Airsoft guns should not be used in unenclosed, public areas.

From a legal standpoint, before anyone purchases an Airsoft gun they should first look into their local and state laws governing the ownership and use of the guns. Knowledgeable and reputable local dealers of the guns will provide this information, but it is important for the consumer to always doublecheck with their local law enforcement agencies and/or a local consumer products attorney.
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