

**The Bill Blackwood  
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**

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**Texas Universities Preparedness for  
Critical Incidents**

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**An Administrative Research Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
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**By  
David Anthony**

**Sam Houston State University Police Department  
Huntsville, Texas  
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## **ABSTRACT**

The preparedness of university police departments to handle critical incidents is relevant to contemporary law enforcement because it determines their ability to effectively manage a crisis while providing protection to those they serve. The purpose of this research is to examine multiple Texas university police departments and determine if they have made the transition to a proactive police department with up-to-date training to give them the ability to adequately protect their community. The method of inquiry used by the researcher included a review of articles, internet sites, periodicals, four personal telephone surveys, and a survey distributed to 30 survey participants.

The researcher discovered that 93% of departments polled have emergency response plans in place. Sixty percent of departments polled have immediate access to surveillance cameras on campus. One hundred percent of polled departments have already received first responder or crisis intervention training; however, everyone agreed more training is needed. A common theme developed during the telephone interviews is that most critical incidents should be turned over to surrounding agencies through mutual aid agreements instead of preparing the individual agency's officers for managing these incidents. The researcher discovered that departments are taking the necessary steps to prepare themselves to handle critical incidents independently.

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## INTRODUCTION

In years past, universities have been safe havens for those seeking higher education. For this reason, most universities have created a university police department to provide security for its buildings, faculty, staff, and students. Traditionally, the officers of these departments have assumed the role of armed security guards in charge of enforcing university parking regulations, working assigned sporting events, and dealing with the occasional drunk student. In today's ever-changing environment, university police departments are expected to provide a broad range of police services to the communities they serve. Due to recent school shootings, many focus on an active shooter scenario when critical incidents and universities are mentioned in relation to each other; however, university police departments must broaden their views and prepare for critical incidents involving natural disasters, fire, student crises, and many other scenarios.

The problem or issue to be examined considers whether Texas university police departments have made the transition from a security guard mentality to a progressive police department qualified to adequately protect the community as it is sworn to do. The relevance of whether or not Texas' university police departments are prepared for critical incidents will be shown by comparing various Texas university police departments and their level of preparation for immediately handling critical incidents as they occur. This research answers the question of whether Texas university police departments are prepared for these critical incidents in comparison to other departments.

The intended method of inquiry includes conclusions drawn from books, state sponsored review panels of critical incidents, national government sponsored programs, and confidential surveys taken by police officers currently employed at universities across the state. In addition, four personal telephone interviews with employees of the police department will be conducted. Only university police departments will be contacted and asked to participate in the survey because of the unique dynamics and pressures a university police department faces.

The anticipated findings of the research are that a huge discrepancy will be revealed in the preparation of university police departments across the state, regardless of school size or region. It is also believed that many departments are in crisis mode, attempting to make the progressive transition, while many are facing internal obstacles that prevent change. The purpose of this research is to focus on whether or not a progressive university police department is essential to secure the community it is sworn to protect. The field of law enforcement will benefit from the research because it will provide a comparison of other university police departments in the same state. By comparing similar departments, it may break through the old security guard mentality and see that a progressive and well-prepared department is the norm, not the exception.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

A critical incident involving an active shooter occurred on August 1, 1966, when a mentally ill student, Charles Joseph Whitman, assembled several long guns, positioned himself atop of the University of Texas' clock tower, and began to fire upon the

pedestrians. Before two Austin police officers shot him to death, Whitman was able to kill 15 and wound 31 with his high-powered arsenal of rifles (Glick, 2001).

The Columbine High School shooting, which occurred on April 20, 1999, changed the standard operating procedures for police departments around the world overnight. The Columbine Review Commission recommended that “law enforcement policy should emphasize that the highest priority of law enforcement officers, after arriving at the scene of a crisis, is to stop any ongoing assault” (Erickson, Archuleta, Epp, Mencer, Miller, Norton, Peper, Ritter, Suckla, & Wintersmith, 2001, P. X). The Columbine panel discussed, in detail, the importance of specialized training for first responders and the necessity of providing those responders with access to specialized weapons. The panel also recommended that first responders who will be the on duty patrol officers need access to protective equipment, which has traditionally only been available to Special Weapons and Tactics teams.

The role of progressive university police departments changed across the nation virtually overnight to defend against a new type of threat; however, many university police departments are facing great resistance to change. For some departments, the resistance to change is coming from within the department; but, for the vast majority of departments, the resistance is coming from outside sources. The common reasons for the resistance includes perceptions, power, traditions, and, of course, financial restrictions.

On April 16, 2007, the country was reminded of just how important preparation truly is when faced with a critical incident. Craig (2007) stated that Governor Kaine ordered an independent review of the Virginia Tech shooting and the responses of

everyone involved. This report revealed that the university police and other emergency responders were well prepared and had regularly trained with local agencies for tactical situations. A key finding in this review was that the university did not have a specific plan for a shooting scenario. Additionally, the review discovered that the police officials were not placed high enough in the university's chain of command structure when it came to critical incidents. Another common problem among universities that this panel noted was that the protocol for sending an emergency message was typically time consuming and complex, which made it difficult to provide accurate information. University policies usually limit its police department's ability to send timely emergency messages by requiring administrative approval. The report stated, "The police had to await the deliberation of the policy group, of which they were not a member, even when minutes counted" (Massengill, Martin, Davies, Depue, Ellis, Ridge, Sood, Strickland, 2007, p. 21). This type of organizational structure and bureaucracy was prevalent after reviewing the emergency response plans of several universities online and speaking to officers of various university police departments. This is one area of concern that can be easily corrected and would give the university police departments the ability to convey timely information in critical incidents.

Universities, by building design, are open and free, and this creates a unique problem for first responders in critical incidents. A large university building typically has four to six main entrances with upwards of eight other access points. Additionally, because universities develop over time, emergency responders are usually left with a geographic maze that restricts or eliminates the ability for emergency vehicles to approach. Once emergency personnel make it to the building, the ever-changing layout

becomes a factor. Universities must maintain and share updated building layouts to formulate an effective plan.

If the need is to evacuate a building during a fire or another emergency, university building designs are sufficient; however, it needs to be known if a large number of people are needed to secure these buildings or if there is an ability to lock down a building remotely. Universities must prepare a plan to notify the appropriate departments to assist first responders and not trust that everyone will simply leave when a fire alarm is sounded. People may overreact or panic during disaster, and without leadership training, problems may occur (Griffith & Vulpitta, 1999). The possibility of personal injury or damage to property, equipment, and facilities increases without proper leadership training. All emergency response plans state that it is imperative to have a designated competent leader who has the ultimate authority to make real time decisions.

Traditionally, universities are exceptional at assisting students who have experienced a crisis. Some universities notify university officials when a student needs help, and they contact a crisis team that is already in place. As prepared as universities seem to be, the Virginia Tech Review stated, “the specialized departments do not communicate because they misunderstand federal privacy guidelines relating to the sharing of information” (Massengill et al., 2007, p. 2). University officials involved in the Virginia Tech crisis team explained that their failure to communicate with one another was due to their belief that certain information is restricted by federal laws regarding the privacy of health and education records. After reviewing federal laws and state laws, it became apparent that there was actually plenty of leeway for sharing information during



a crisis. Universities must develop guidelines that meet federal standards for the sharing of personal information without violating federal laws. While doing research, it was discovered that the federal government will assist states who are declared presciently declared disasters through the “The “Crisis Counseling Assistance and Training Program (CCP), which is authorized by §416 of the Stafford Act. This is designed to provide supplemental funding to states (Federal Emergency Management Agency, n.d.). Universities who undergo massive natural disasters or terroristic attacks would typically be covered.

Training, cooperation, and preparation are key components to successfully surviving critical incidents in a university setting. Universities must designate money and take time to prepare for critical incidents because it is only a matter of time before the efforts will pay off. Key components will be the sharing of information and cooperation amongst departments under the umbrella of the university.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The research question to be examined considers whether or not Texas university police departments are prepared to handle critical incidents. The purpose of this study is to determine if universities provide their police departments the training and assistance needed to adequately respond to critical incidents. This study also seeks to determine if there is any correlation between the size of the university and its preparation. The researcher hypothesizes that the research will show that although many advances have been made since the Columbine shooting, there is vast room for improvement. The author believes that larger universities will be better prepared to handle critical incidents.

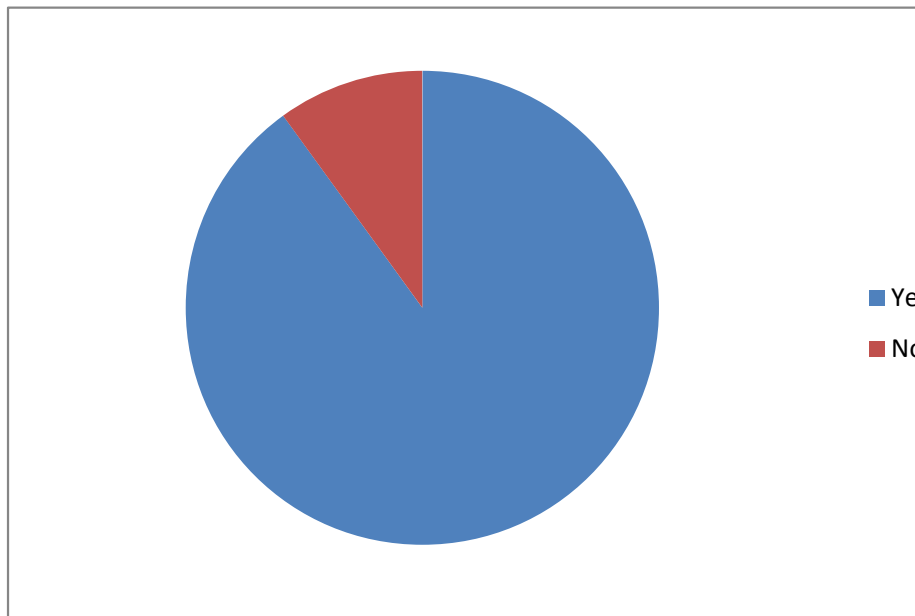
The method of inquiry will include conclusions drawn from books, state sponsored review panels of critical incidents, national government sponsored programs, and surveys of police officers currently employed at universities across the state. The instrument that will be used to measure the researcher's findings regarding the subject of whether or not Texas university police departments are ready for critical incidents will include four personal telephone interviews with employees of the police departments. Only university police departments will be contacted and asked to participate in the survey because of the unique dynamics and pressures a university police department faces.

Surveys will be sent via electronic mail. The size of the survey will consist of ten questions, distributed to 30 participants from supervisors at various university police departments across the state, and some of these surveys will be exchanged in person while attending training seminars. The response rate to the survey instrument resulted in 100% of the questionnaires being returned to the researcher. The information obtained from the survey will be analyzed by comparing results to determine whether there are any discrepancies.

## **FINDINGS**

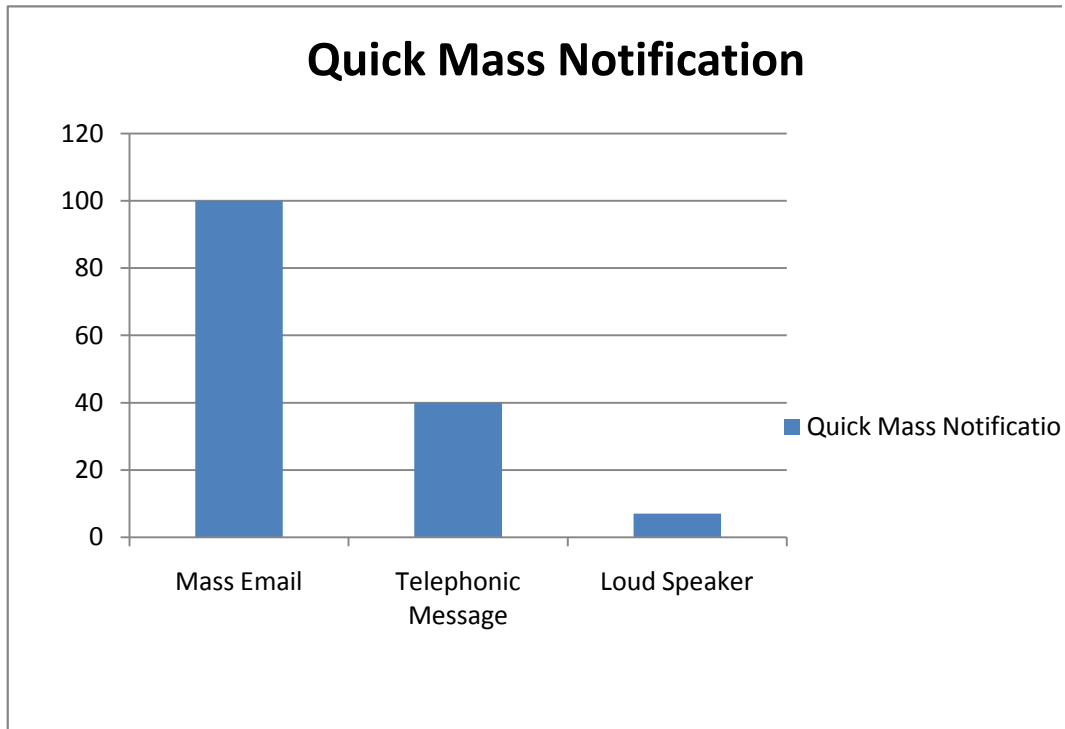
The information gained from review panels of school shootings clearly illustrated a need for more training and communication. When a university is victim to a critical incident involving intentional loss of life, it will inevitably result in a detailed review of the university setting, first responders, buildings, security campus alerting systems, and prepared emergency response plans (Massengill et al., 2007).

Of the 30 departments surveyed, the research indicated that the average number of sworn police officers was four per 1,000 students and less than one per 1,000 students for security personnel for universities with a student population that ranges from 2,500 to over 50,000. The low number of security personnel reflects that many departments indicated that they have no security personnel. It was found that 93% of the universities polled reported that they have a well known emergency response plan.



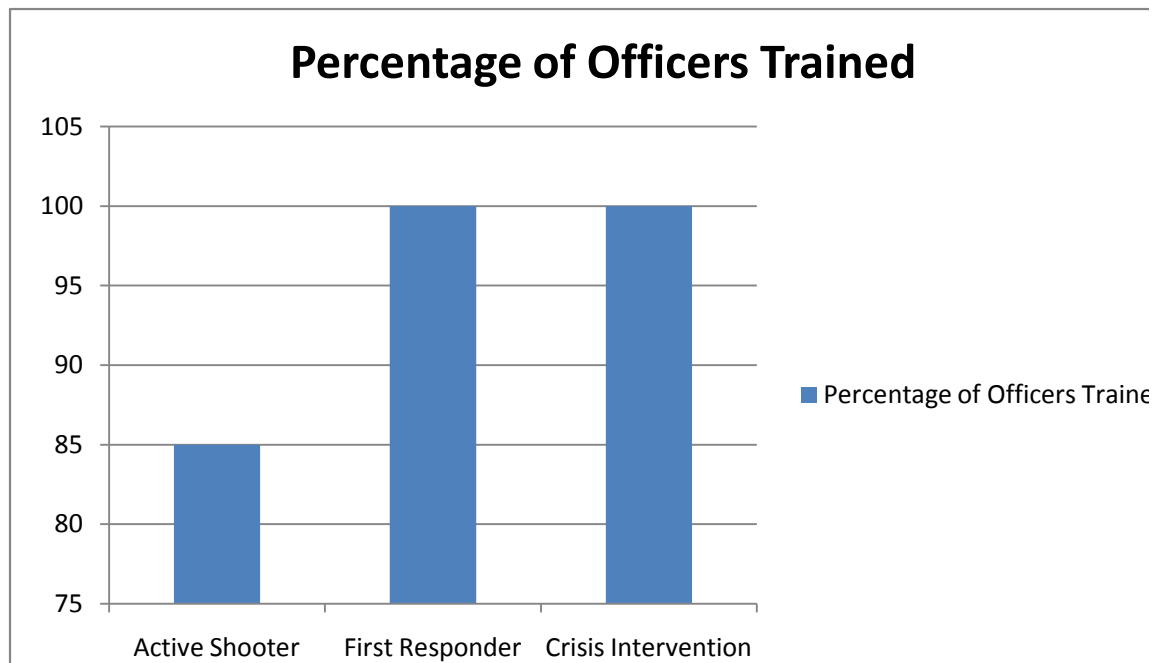
**Figure 1.** Participant responses for having a well known emergency response plan.

One hundred percent of the universities indicated that they have the ability to send out mass e-mails to notify the university community of a critical incident. Forty percent of the universities have the ability to make contact by telephonic message. Only 7% have the ability to notify through loud speaker systems; however, many departments indicated that they are currently researching these systems.



**Figure 2.** Type of quick mass notification systems.

Of the departments noted, 100% indicated that they have received crisis intervention training due to the TCLEOSE mandate, and 100% indicated that they received first responder training. Eighty-five percent of the participants indicated that they have been through active shooter training. When four survey participants were contacted and questioned about the first responder training and active shooter training, they indicated recruits receive training in the police academy and receive little if any in-service training.



**Figure 3.** Officers receiving additional training.

Also, of the 30 universities polled, 60% indicated that they have immediate access to surveillance cameras on campus. Sixteen of the 30 surveys indicated that they have a policy to evaluate an officer's mental wellness following a critical incident. And, the survey revealed that 100% of the departments polled indicated that they have a mutual aid agreement with the other agencies in their community.

## **DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS**

The problem or issue examined by the researcher considered whether or not Texas university police departments have made the transition from a security guard mentality to a progressive police department qualified to adequately protect the community during critical incidents. The purpose of this research was to determine if Texas university police departments were prepared to handle critical incidents. The research question that was examined focused on the preparation levels of university police departments from across the state. It was anticipated that this research would

reveal a significant discrepancy in the preparation levels of university police departments across the state regardless of school size or region. The researcher hypothesized that many departments are in a crisis mode attempting to make the progressive transition while many are facing internal obstacles to change.

After analyzing the survey results and doing follow up telephone interviews, it was revealed that several departments have emergency response plans in place but do not provide the officers with the tools needed to safely perform their tasks. Additionally, a common theme is to turn many critical incidents over to surrounding agencies through mutual aid agreements instead of preparing the agency's own officers to follow through with the problem. Limitations that might have hindered this study resulted because of data including the number of officers per student population. This is due to the fact that one university was found to be a medical school that had 2,500 students enrolled and 120 officers. The university employed many more faculty/staff members than a typical university would.

The study of whether or not Texas university police departments are prepared for critical incidents is relevant to contemporary law enforcement because it aids in administrative decisions on where to spend their limited resources. Texas university police departments stand to benefit from the results of the research because it provides a window of comparison for other similar agencies that share common interest, problems, and goals. In conclusion, Texas universities are preparing for emergencies; however, there is room for improvement in communication and in understanding each department's roles and objectives.

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## APPENDIX

### University Preparedness for Critical Incidents Survey

1. How many students does your University Police Department provide security for? \_\_\_\_\_
2. How many sworn officers does your department employ? \_\_\_\_\_
3. Does your department employ security personnel? \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. If so how many? \_\_\_\_\_
4. Does your university have a well known emergency response plan? \_\_\_\_\_
5. Does your department have immediate access to surveillance video from your university? \_\_\_\_\_
6. Does your university have an emergency notification system in place? \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. If so how many? \_\_\_\_\_
7. What Percentage of your officers are trained on the following;
  - a. Active Shooter \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. First Responder \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. Crisis Intervention \_\_\_\_\_
8. Do you believe more training would be beneficial? \_\_\_\_\_
9. Does your department have mandatory mental evaluations for officers following a critical incident? \_\_\_\_\_
10. Does your department have "Mutual Aid Agreements" with surrounding agencies? \_\_\_\_\_