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**Management and Prevention of Critical Incident
Stress in Law Enforcement**

**A Policy Research Project
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**by
David Salazar**

**League City Police Department
League City, Texas
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ABSTRACT

This policy research paper is focusing on the care and treatment of law enforcement employees after they have experienced a critical incident and the subsequent effects of the trauma from the critical incident. On any given day, law enforcement employees may experience a myriad of incidents that can be classified as critical incidents. The effects of a critical incident can be devastating to the affected individual. They can affect job performance as well as the employee's health, both mental and physical. For this reason, it is important that law enforcement employees be afforded the opportunity to get professional assistance and treatment.

Information was gathered from many areas including magazines, textbooks, other law enforcement agencies, and through the Internet. This was done to find the effects of critical incidents on law enforcement employees and what options are available to assist the employees. After reviewing the information available, I have concluded that the effects of critical incident stress cannot be ignored. Therefore, law enforcement administrators must establish departmental policies governing the treatment of employees affected by the stress caused by critical incidents. This should include a psychological debriefing as well as follow-up counseling. The well being of the employee far outweighs the cost of the critical incident care.

Introduction

What is critical incident stress? In law enforcement, we can define critical incident stress as, unusually strong emotional reactions that have the potential to interfere with law enforcement personnel's ability to function, either at the scene or later, after having faced a critical incident (Mitchell, 11,. A critical incident includes, but is not limited to, an officer involved shooting, the death of an officer or a close friend, and witnessing the death of several people. A critical incident is a personal experience. This can include a perceived situation, e.g., if officers believe they killed someone, or dispatchers believe they are hearing an officer, or someone else, being killed. Too often, police administrators are not educated in critical incidents, or the stress that critical incidents cause. Some police administrators are, therefore, unprepared to help their employees cope with the stress and emotional turmoil experienced after having encountered a critical incident.

The purpose of this project is to explore some of the information available on critical incident stress and its management, and to determine the process best suitable for a medium sized police department to help police officers and police dispatchers manage the emotional problems related to this critical incident stress. The effects of a critical incident vary and are unpredictable (Blau, 168). There is a definite and strong need for guidelines to be established by police administrators to help these employees' emotional and psychological healing. In March of 1997, a League City Police Officer had an armed confrontation with an intoxicated male. The officer shot and killed the suspect who was armed with a shotgun. This officer, the back-up officer and the dispatcher on duty suffered from the effects of critical incident stress (Personal Interview, 1997). This author, without the benefit of experience or sufficient training, arranged for help through the healing process. In June of 1997, the same department responded to an attempted murder that resulted in the suspect committing suicide while a dispatcher listened on the telephone. The dispatcher spoke to one of the victims on the telephone while officer responded. Several shots were heard by the dispatcher on duty. She did not know whether he was killing anyone or not. This was quite stressful for her, especially when it was learned that he was there to kill everyone in the house (Personal Interview 2, 1997). The suspect did not kill anyone other than himself. Again, help was provided without guidelines to follow for critical incident stress management.

In this research project, we will examine information compiled from medical and psychological journals, books, surveys, personal interviews, as well as other available sources of information. This will be done to help administrators to establish the best procedure and policy for a medium size department to follow in order to assure its officers and dispatchers that they will receive the best possible care for critical incident stress.

Historical, Legal, or Theoretical Context

Though the theories and practices regarding law enforcement are constantly seeing changes, there is still at least one link between the modern law enforcement officer to law enforcement officers of the past. This is the potential to experience traumatic life events, or critical incidents, due to the nature of a law enforcement officer's job, regardless of whether the officer is from a large urban area, or from a rural area. Officers respond to assist in or control situations with grave consequences either to themselves or other on a routine bases. They have historically been expected to handle the situation without help in coping with the consequences. Though law enforcement officers have been called to duty to kill dangerous suspects, to attempt to save lives to no avail, to witness the aftermath of incidents with a large amount of death or serious injury (such as an airplane crash), or the hardest thing to handle, the effects of crime or accident on the now lifeless body of a young child. Officers have been expected to cope with the effects these type of incidents have on them with no assistance. It is part of the job.

Adding to the stress is the differing thoughts and pressures being placed on law enforcement officers today. On one hand, you have the group of thought that states that officers should use whatever force is necessary to prevent crime from occurring. On the other, the belief is that officers use too much deadly force. The second group places a great deal of political pressure to reduce armed intervention. Adding to the possibility that an officer will be involved in an armed confrontation, and, therefore, the decision to use deadly force, is the fact that almost 1/2 of all major police departments require their officers to be armed and intervene if a felony occurs that they may be able to prevent, or apprehend the suspects while they are off duty. The other 1/2 of major police departments allow officer to carry guns off duty and "strongly urge" them to be available to intervene while in their own jurisdictions (Blau, 166). Still, officers

are expected to react appropriately to any given situation. An officer must make quick decisions that will be reviewed and scrutinized, not only by the public and court systems, but by the department. The officer should still take this in stride. This type of thinking was pervasive not only in the general public, but among law enforcement officers and administrators. Movies like Clint Eastwood's "The Gauntlet" had-officers believing that if it did not adversely affect Dirty Harry, it should not affect them. Not being able to handle a situation that we now know as a critical incident was a sign of weakness. It is this author's experience. I began in law enforcement in the early '80s and had an experience that affected me in a negative way, but never sought help in dealing with it. An accident occurred in which my supervisor ordered me not to make a rescue attempt because he felt there was no hope of saving the victim, and he wanted to preserve the crime scene. Later at the hospital, I heard the victim's husband say that he had seen his wife moving, but was not strong enough to lift the vehicle off her. The autopsy revealed that the victim had died of suffocation, not from the impact of the crash, and, therefore, there was a possibility that she could have been saved, along with the child she was carrying. She was pregnant. Of course, being a "real cop" meant that this did not affect me. Sometimes bad things happen, and we just go on to the next call.

Experiences such as these are not the only ones that fall into the "critical incident" category.

According to Dr. Macht, there are three types of situations that may result in critical incidents. They are: (1) incidents that involve the threatened loss of an important source of need satisfaction, whether psychological, sociocultural, or physical; (2) incidents that involve an actual loss; or (3) incidents that involve situations of challenge (Nicholi, 633).

The officers that experience a critical incident such as a shooting experience a combination of all the incidents listed by Macht above. The officer experiences the threatened loss of an important source of need satisfaction (job, freedom, or life), and actual loss (possibly the life of another), and a challenge (to stay alive). But officers are not the only ones that experience critical incidents. The law enforcement dispatcher that is sitting in a communications room unable to physically assist can experience it as well. Though the dispatcher is not on the scene, the dispatcher is experiencing the event through sound, without the benefit of seeing it occur. They experience the different types of crises, both through actual experience and through their perception of what is occurring. For example, in the shooting in League City discussed

earlier, the dispatcher was experiencing the event without the benefit of seeing what was occurring. There was an officer with whom she worked closely involved in the shooting. She heard the back-up officer say "shots fired" on the radio, and then request an ambulance. No mention was made as to who the ambulance was for. She had not heard from the primary officer. Because of this and the sense of panic heard on the back-up officer's voice, the dispatcher was afraid that the primary officer had been shot. Her perception was that she had just experienced a loss of a co-worker. Though the person shot was the suspect, her experience was unchanged. She still felt the effects of critical incident stress. There was a belief, mainly in officers and dispatchers that had been in law enforcement for a long time, that this was part of the job, and that she should take it in stride.

Fortunately, beliefs and practices are changing. It was some time ago that a renowned expert in psychology by the name of Freud stated that the response to traumatic events had a psychological impact on people (Yehuda, 3). It was not until 1980 that post traumatic stress disorder was defined (Briere, I). However, it was not law enforcement officers that caused study of post traumatic stress disorder. Most of the studies found on the subject dealt with other professions, such as rescue workers, nurses, war veterans, and bank tellers. Officers were not the subject of critical incident stress research or post traumatic stress disorder because officers were considered to be "tough", and "time would heal" (Reiser, 317). In the mid '80s, research started to focus some effort on police officers. As a result of this research and attention, officers are now being viewed as people that because of their repeated exposure to carnage and mayhem may be especially at risk for the development of symptoms caused by critical incident stress (Bohl, 170). It is from these studies that plans to manage the effects of critical incidents have been established.

Critical incidents that are experienced by police personnel can be broken down into two major categories. The first is the "multi-casualty" incident. This type of incident. e.g. a plane crash, is easier for police personnel to deal with because they normally generate community support (Lewis, 16). The second type, and the most difficult for police personnel to deal with, is the "single victim" incident (Lewis, 16). This is the type of incident that a police officer tends to attempt to handle on his own. Types of single victim incidents in their order of severity are listed below (Lewis, 16):

Line of duty death of fellow officer
Death of a child
Serious injury to a child
Death of an adult (dependent of circumstances)
Threat of violence and/or personal injury to the police officer
Inability to intervene or perform duties
Injury to fellow police officers
Suicide

Review of Literature or Practice

Before we can establish a plan for the treatment of critical incident stress, we must outline the first phases of critical incident trauma. The first phase is when the "situation explodes" (Solomon, 2). This is when the incident is actually experienced, e.g., when an officer kills someone. There is an adrenaline burst and the officer's total focal point is on the action at hand. The officer may experience time distortion (usually slow motion), auditory distortion, and visual distortion (usually "tunnel vision"). Immediately after, the officer may be stunned, and/or confused. This could last for a few minutes or a few days (Solomon, 2). When law enforcement personnel experience critical incidents such as these, the experience is not over once the action is. Law enforcement personnel have a myriad of experiences. They may experience a "pattern of hyper arousal alternating with numbing" as has been noticed following a vast array of different traumas (van der Kolk, 359). However, the effects of the traumatic incident are dependent on their personality and previous experiences (Wells, 70). The type of threat, its severity, how long the threat lasts, and the suddenness of the threat are other effects of a traumatic incident (Canadian, 1). The third phase is the "Emotional Impact" phase. This is usually experienced within two days and may last for three weeks or longer, depending on several factors, including the individual's ability to cope and his support system. During the second and/or the third phase is when the department must intervene.

According to Blau, a psychologist and former police officer, "If you let a critical incident go beyond the first 24 hours, the forces of repression and suppression begin to work" (Hibberd, 2). If law enforcement personnel are not treated for critical incident stress, the symptoms could progress into post traumatic stress disorder. This is supported by a study completed by Dr. Ogden Rogers in 1993. He states that 72% of emergency personnel who received debriefings reported lowered stress symptoms after the debriefing (Rogers, 71). It is recommended that administrative leave be granted after the critical incident

(Solomon, R., 40). A formal incident debriefing should be held. This should include the law enforcement professional's peers (Pierson, 33). This will facilitate the affected officers involvement. It is this author's experience that law enforcement personnel do not readily open up to non-law enforcement personnel. The presence of other law enforcement personnel should allow them to reach a comfort level suitable for the debriefing process to begin. It is important that all participants in the debriefing team be screened and educated in the process (Anderson, 257). Research has identified the following as symptoms of critical incident stress (Bohl, 172):

| <u>Immediate reactions</u> | <u>Delayed reactions (within several days or weeks)</u> | |
|----------------------------|---|-------------------------------|
| muscular tremors | grief | intrusive thoughts |
| faintness | flashbacks | nightmares/sleep disturbances |
| sweating | headaches | stomach aches |
| shock/fear | depression | emotional withdrawal |
| anger/denial | anxiety | paranoia |
| numbing | guilt | sexual dysfunction |

Administrators and supervisors should familiarize themselves with these symptoms because some law enforcement personnel may not request crisis intervention. The second column above titled "Delayed reactions" are signs of post traumatic stress disorder. If a debriefing is not held, and treatment not provided, post traumatic stress disorder may manifest itself. The symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder are divided into three categories: 1. The re-experiencing of the traumatic event [flashbacks], 2. Avoidance of trauma relevant stimuli [avoiding upsetting thoughts, feelings, memories of people or locations that remind the subject of the traumatic event], 3. Persistent hyperarousal [sleep disturbances, irritability, easily startled, or concentration/attention difficulties] (Briere, 29).

After speaking to several officers from different departments, it seems that most departments either do not have a policy covering critical incident stress management, or officers are not aware the policy exists. Several different officers each from a different agency were interviewed. Only 20% knew of a departmental policy regarding critical incidents. Some, like the League City Police Department, have experienced critical incidents and have provided assistance without written guidelines. The trend has begun 'to change though as is evidenced by the agencies that have policies. The agencies surveyed with written policies are following the outline set out the research cited in this research paper. The first step is to see to the employee's concerns. The employee is being removed from the scene to give the employee a

psychological break. The process is then explained to the employee. If possible, the employee is then sent for psychological debriefing on the same day. The psychological debriefing consists of a discussion with the employee about the incident and the feelings the employee is experiencing due to the incident. Also discussed are the feelings and possible physical effects that the critical incident can have on the officer so that he does not become confused about what he experiences. Other agencies, do not have debriefings. This is not due to opinions expressed by detractors of critical incident debriefings such as Dr. Gist. Dr. Gist's opinion is that debriefings held after a critical incident are not effective and may even be harmful. In 1996, he stated that patients following a traumatic event show "no preventive effect from debriefing, no differential ill effect from its absence, an equally consistent (but generally discounted) finding which seem to suggest that those who most seek this intervention show poorer longer term resolutions (Gist, 1, 2)." Though one may need to read this information and weigh its implications, this type of statement is refuted by research cited previously. This having been established, it is my opinion that the lack of critical incident debriefings being held is due mostly to the lack of training which in turn is a direct result of the lack of a written policy. This can be corrected by the use of written policies.

The debriefing team should consist of a mental health professional with law enforcement experience, and trained peer counselors (Wells, 76). The peer counselors will make it easier for the employee to relate his experience and feelings. The debriefing should be introduced by the chief or ranking officer of the department. All personnel present in the debriefing team should be introduced if there is anyone that employees are not familiar with. A statement regarding the confidentiality of the meeting should be made by the chief or ranking officer as well. The chief or ranking officer should then leave the meeting. This will let the affected employee know that since the chief or ranking officer was present and made these statements that this process is endorsed by the department and, therefore, the department cares for the employee's well being. Further, by leaving, there is reassurance that everything said in the debriefing is private and confidential (Lewis, 90).

According to Dr. James T. Reese and James Horn, the step after debriefing is psychological counseling. They state that the debriefing is not meant to take the place of psychological counseling (Reese, 5). Even if the employee show no signs of post traumatic stress disorder, fellow officers or administrators

5). Even if the employee show no signs of post traumatic stress disorder, fellow officers or administrators are not normally qualified to make an assessment. Therefore, the employee should meet with a psychologist. As with anything else, a specialist should be used. Effort should be made to send the affected officer to a psychologist with experience treating police officers who have experienced critical incident stress, or at a minimum, one with experience treating victims of critical incident stress in general.

Discussion of Relevant Issues

People in general suffer from critical incident stress syndrome during and after being faced with a critical incident. Each person experiences incidents differently depending on his or her previous experience and coping skills and the unexpectedness of the experience. Law enforcement personnel are no exception. Due to the uncertainty of the occupation, they may be more susceptible to critical incidents and the stress that accompanies them. It is expected that an officer would experience problems dealing with a shooting in which an innocent bystander is injured or killed. However, officers also experience the effects of critical incident stress when they kill a criminal and are justified in doing so. The following quote from an unnamed police officer taken from the book COPS: Their Lives in Their Own Words expresses this well.

"All the guys are patting you on the back and congratulating you...Taking bets about when [the criminal] is going to die over in ICU. I never told anybody, but I didn't feel good, I didn't feel proud. I was glad it was him and not me; otherwise all I felt was empty. It still makes me swallow hard to think about it (Baker, 172)."

This also serves as an example of how law enforcement personnel tend to keep their feeling to themselves. Without help, they may experience severe symptoms of critical incident stress. As stated before, these symptoms may be minor or severe. They could include muscular tremors, sweating, and faintness when the incident is first experienced, to sleep interruptions, paranoia about being watched, and sexual dysfunction after the incident. The more serious symptoms may be prolonged or may manifest themselves a long time after the incident and are, therefore, a sign of post traumatic stress disorder. These symptoms may be prevented if a policy is established and followed when critical incidents occur and when symptoms of critical incident stress are observed. The policy should include a trained peer support group to conduct a critical incident stress debriefing. It is important to utilize the affected law enforcement employee's peers in the group because law enforcement personnel tend to be more open and trusting of their peers. As

law enforcement personnel tend to gravitate towards keeping their feelings about their experiences to themselves. If a policy is established then they will not have a choice but to abide by it. They will then take the opportunity to accept the help available to express their feelings and begin the healing process. After the initial debriefing, which should not take the place of psychological counseling, the employee should be sent to a trained psychologist for counseling. The psychologist, preferably with experience dealing with the effects of critical incidents on law enforcement personnel, will decide how long the counseling should take place.

True, not all agencies have the ability to implement and follow a critical incident stress management policy by themselves. Trained law enforcement personnel are not present in all law enforcement agencies. Due to the fact that post traumatic stress syndrome was identified not too long ago, the opportunities for law enforcement agencies to establish policies by researching studies and other law enforcement agencies policies are relatively new. This may be seen by agency administrators as an obstacle. Crisis theory is based on the presumption that life holds both the opportunity for healthy personality development and the hazard of unhealthy personality change due to crisis (Nicholi, 632). The key word here being "opportunity." Agency administrators should attempt to understand this and take the opportunity to develop their personnel and their programs (policies) to assist in the dealing with critical incident stress and its effects on law enforcement personnel.

Constraints should be viewed as small obstacles allowing for the opportunity to surmount the obstacle and improve the quality of life for the law enforcement personnel. There are training centers through out the country that are willing and able to train personnel to hold critical incident debriefings. Using an agency's personnel for critical incident debriefing teams helps reduce the cost of debriefings to the agency and ensures a more comfortable environment for the affected employee. Training can be acquired from agencies such as the International Critical Incident Foundation. Sometimes the cost of the training or the psychological services seems prohibitive to law enforcement agencies or agency administrators. What greater investment does each agency have other than its employees? The entire cost of the effects of a critical incident and the related stress experienced by the affected employee cannot be totaled in dollars.

There are some costs which we can relate to dollars. As we have established, critical incident stress will affect many emergency service personnel, 87% by one account (Pierson, 32). Of these critical incidents, the one that comes to mind the most when speaking about law enforcement is a shooting incident.

Approximately 80% of law enforcement officers involved in a shooting will leave their department soon after the incident (Blau, 168). This alone translates into thousands of dollars for recruitment and training of a replacement officer. However, the experience level will likely not be duplicated. Employees receiving "immediate assistance" following critical incidents had a low rate of occurrence of permanent disability, saving the agency an average of \$37,000 over employees not receiving help in a timely fashion (Post, 4). It is important to note that the symptoms of post traumatic stress, such as confusion, paranoia and the inability to make decisions can drastically affect law enforcement employees' ability to perform their job (Pierson, 32). This can create a dangerous situation. The cost could conceivably be an officer's life or injury due to the indecision. This is a cost that should not be attempted to relate to dollars..

If cost is a factor for the law-enforcement agency, an attempt can be made to utilize resources already available. For instance, a smaller department could form an agreement with a larger department that already has experienced critical incident stress debriefers (Wells, 76). When a critical incident occurs, the smaller law enforcement agency could utilize the debriefing team from the larger one. This plan could be used not only to provide necessary critical incident stress relief for the affected employee, but also to provide much needed training for the employees of the smaller department. An agreement may be drawn up in which the larger department allows employees of the smaller department to participate in the debriefing process. The employees of the smaller department would initially participate only as observers; then, as knowledge and experience progressed, as active participants. Policies and procedures could be implemented as needed. The important thing is to provide the debriefings. Policies and procedures will grow and change as the agency responds to critical incidents and begins to provide the necessary assistance to the employee (Lewis, 65).

After reviewing the cost of critical incident stress and its effects on a law enforcement employee, it can safely be said that the benefits of a stress management program far outweigh the cost. Every year thousands of dollars are spent on the employee's health care. As we all know, health care costs have risen,

as well as the cost to insure the law enforcement employee. This is a necessary expenditure. A critical incident stress management policy is much the same as medical insurance. It is a necessary cost for the psychological well being of the law enforcement professional. Just like insurance is a budget item each year, so should the cost of a critical incident stress management policy. The agency may not incur any cost in some years and some cost in others depending on the occurrence of critical incidents.

Conclusion/Recommendations

The purpose of this policy research project is to explore some of the information available on critical incident stress and its management, and to determine the process best suited for a medium sized police department to help law enforcement employees manage the effects of critical incident stress and its effects. This is important because, in today's society, law enforcement personnel are exposed to many stressful situations on a daily basis. As stated approximately 87% of all emergency personnel experience the effects of critical incident stress at least once in their careers. The effects of critical incidents are varied and can be devastating to a law enforcement employee. This has a direct effect on the agency itself as it has and impact on the employees ability to do the job properly and safely. Critical incidents do not occur only in larger departments. Medium and small sized departments cans also feel the effects of critical incidents as well. An officer involved shooting, an accident with severe injury or mass death, and the death of children are just some examples of incidents that can cause critical incident stress and its related symptoms.

Throughout my research, I have examined research conducted by specialists in the field also with the writing of psychologists and law enforcement personnel. This information was combined with the experience of law enforcement employees know to this author. It is my conclusion that the effects of critical incident stress on law enforcement personnel need to be addressed. The effects of critical incident stress are costly, not only monetarily, but emotionally. The law enforcement agency that employs the affected employee incurs the monetary cost of the necessary treatment of the employee. Though this cost may seem high due to the cost of psychological services, it is not compared to the cost due to the possible loss of valued employees. If the law enforcement agency's administrators do not care for their employee, the employee may not be able to continue his or her tenure with the agency due to an inability to perform the job duties.

It is recommended that all agencies adopt a critical incident stress management policy and program. The agency should establish a written policy, if possible. The policy outline should provide the affected employee of a critical incident with an opportunity to attend a critical incident debriefing, or post traumatic incident debriefing with peers as well as a mental health professional. The policy should also provide for counseling with a psychologist with experience in law enforcement critical incident stress and post traumatic stress syndrome. At a minimum, the psychologist should have experience and knowledge of post traumatic stress. The policy should provide for employees who are affected by critical incident stress, whether or not the agency feels that a critical incident has occurred. This is important because, as stated before, critical incidents are a personal experience. What may be traumatic to one person, may not to another. Each agency must protect its resources. The most important resource any agency has is the human resource, the employee. Following these guidelines will improve the chances of recovery from critical incident stress for employees, and save the agency the cost of replacing the employee.

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