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Incident Command System: Researching the benefits and
overall effectiveness of ICS for policy development

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ABSTRACT

The challenges for law enforcement today are many. The threat of domestic disorder and terrorism has never been greater. Law enforcement administrators have an immense responsibility to meet these challenges in the most productive and efficient manner. The primary method that is recommended in responding to critical incidents is the Incident Command System (ICS).

The scope of this research project is to perform a comprehensive study of ICS and its effectiveness within law enforcement. The inquiry will also address the need for training, policy development and implementation relating to ICS.

The research methods included publication, magazine articles, the authors' knowledge and experience of law enforcement response to critical incidents, as well as personal interviews and a survey conducted relating to ICS. The research overwhelmingly supported the effectiveness of ICS. Furthermore, the inquiry revealed the need for law enforcement agencies to establish an ICS policy or standard operating procedure, and provide training to personnel in the use of ICS.

It is concluded that society expects and deserves law enforcement to have the capability to respond, and do so effectively, to all situations. ICS is an effective tool for law enforcement in addressing critical incident response. In addition, a sound policy along with ICS training will provide a greater opportunity for each situation to result in a successful resolution when employed, as well as providing individual agencies with a more positive and professional image within the community they serve.

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Introduction

Law enforcement agencies face many challenges today. Critical incident response by law enforcement agencies are becoming more commonplace than ever before, and as such this requires individual agencies to review their current and future procedures in addressing these issues. Society today expects and even demands that law enforcement officers responding to any and all types of critical incidents be effective and bring these types of situations to a successful resolution.

This places a large responsibility on law enforcement administrators to implement the best system or practice available in addressing critical incident response, for many reasons. First and foremost, the safety of everyone involved is of great concern. There is also the issue of civil liability. Lawsuits filed against police agencies and individual police officers have always been a concern, and the likelihood of a lawsuit arising from incidents under these circumstances increase greatly. More and more law enforcement agencies are joining fire departments across the nation in implementing the Incident Command System to address these concerns.

The Incident Command System (ICS) is known as the model tool to be used by public safety agencies to maintain control, command, and coordination of a critical incident situation. Departments that utilize ICS, normally have an ICS policy in place to enable personnel responding to critical incidents to be more effective. Some agencies have purchased vehicles to be used as command vehicles at a critical incident scene. These vehicles

are outfitted with equipment and necessary forms, maps, etc. Although very helpful, ICS can be managed from the trunk of a police vehicle.

This paper will focus on whether or not the use of the Incident Command System (ICS) is effective for law enforcement agencies. If so, should agencies that actively utilize the Incident Command System develop a policy or standard operating procedure, and train their members in the use and functions of ICS?

For many years, law enforcement agencies have been operating without a policy or procedure in place relating to the Incident Command System, or have been inconsistent in it's use. Not having an ICS policy, or standard operating procedure, can lead to poorly managed incidents. This in turn creates a situation that may result in a negative, or less than desired outcome.

The purpose of this project is to conduct thorough research into the effectiveness of the Incident Command System, and the implementation of policy or standard operating procedures relating to ICS. The scope of this project will include the benefits of ICS as it relates to citizens, patrol officers, supervisors, and other departments, agencies, or organizations that are affected by critical incident response or major events.

This project will also address issues involving the implementation of a written ICS policy into law enforcement agencies, and will include proper training of personnel. ICS training should include all supervisors, police officers, and dispatch personnel. Training should also be considered for other

department employees within the municipality/agency. Development of an ICS policy, in a municipality, should include discussions between law enforcement and fire department administrators. Each department works very closely when responding to critical incidents, although performing different duties. Discussions between police and fire officials should improve communications between the two, and provide a better understanding of each departments responsibilities and capabilities.

If a sound ICS policy is adopted and practiced, and the proper training of personnel is adhered to, law enforcement agencies should notice a more effective response, control, and successful resolution to incidents requiring the use of ICS. This in turn will result in fewer lawsuits, less likelihood of injuries and/or deaths, and a better image of the law enforcement agency and it's members.

The research for this project will be obtained from numerous resources. These resources will include periodicals, training material, publications, surveys, and personal interviews with police supervisors from other agencies. As a police officer, the author will also be applying personal experiences gained during 20 years of service in the law enforcement profession.

The benefit of this research will provide a comprehensive look at the effectiveness of the Incident Command System. This will assist in the development of an ICS policy, which can be adopted and designed to meet the needs of any police agency regardless of size or structure. As stated previously, with the increasing challenges facing law enforcement involving critical

incident response, and the heightened threat of terrorism today, ICS can be invaluable to police agencies, if used and put into practice as situations require.

Review of Literature

The concept of the Incident Command System (ICS) has only been in existence since the 1970's as a result of a series of wildfires in California (FEMA,1998). It was during that time when emergency personnel felt the need for a unified command system to coordinate a more effective response to critical incidents by multiple agencies. ICS has been labeled as a model tool relating to command, control, and coordination of an orderly response to critical incidents, as well as the protection of life, property, and the environment (FEMA, 1998). Since that time ICS has been a tool primarily used by fire departments.

Law enforcement agencies, over the years, have slowly begun to implement the system into their procedures when responding to critical incidents. Fire departments, as well as those police departments utilizing ICS, have found the system to be very effective in managing a scene. This is because ICS is a process that assists in tracking personnel and resources, and brings organization to the overall event.

Today, more than ever the threat of terrorism to the United States has never been greater. Even as early as 1976 the National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals saw the need for pre-planed responses and preventative measures to be taken by law enforcement in an attempt to address domestic disorders and terrorism in the United States (MacKenna, 1989). The report submitted by the task force called for police planning to better shield communities in the U.S. from terrorism or other forms of mass violence (MacKenna, 1989).

Most law enforcement agencies today have specialized tactical units trained and ready to respond to different types of critical incidents. Although tactical units are vital to a critical incident response, they cannot be effective without the support of other police units or departments (Kaiser, 1990). Achieving this level of teamwork may be difficult, therefore, agencies should implement a policy or standard operating procedure, and training that fosters teamwork (Kaiser, 1990).

Responding to critical incidents normally involves personnel from different agencies or from departments within the same municipality. This can cause a breakdown in the total effort because of overlapping responsibilities. Proper management of an incident begins with establishing a good line of communications between the different agencies or personnel within the same municipality. In a municipality, personnel from the police and fire departments work very closely together. Since police and fire have very different responsibilities, communication between the two is a must. This can begin by representatives from each department collaborating to develop an ICS policy.

In a critical incident response, Major Robert Snow of the Indianapolis Police Department cited communication as being the real key (Spurlock, 1991). According to Chief Donald R. Fry of the Franklin (Ohio) Police Department, cooperation between emergency rescue workers and police personnel cannot be overemphasized (Spurlock, 1991). ICS can be employed in responding to a number of different types of incidents such as:

- Hazardous materials incidents.

- Planned events (celebrations, parades, etc.).

- Fires.

- Major accidents involving motor vehicles.

- Searches for missing person(s).

- Incidents involving mass casualties.

- Natural disasters.

ICS has been proven effective when utilized during these and many other incidents (FEMA, 1998). At one time public safety agencies responded to these and other types of emergencies on a case-by-case basis (Conner, 1997). This method of response can be very ineffective and may result in a disastrous outcome. Critical incidents are more easily managed when ICS is employed (Conner, 1997).

One of the many reasons an incident becomes more manageable under ICS, is because a single individual is the designated incident commander. During a critical incident response the individual who activates the ICS will normally assume command of the incident. This individual will remain as the on-scene commander unless formally relieved. Having one person in charge of the overall operation provides a single point of contact. This will help avoid confusion and/or conflicting orders when one person is responsible for making decisions, personnel assignment etc. All communications are funneled through the incident commander stationed at the designated command post. The incident commander has the ability to manage the operation by maintaining his/her span of control through the use of sectors or branches

(Conner, 1997). Designated sectors can then expand or collapse as needed during the incident (Conner, 1997).

The on-scene incident commander should have supervisory responsibility of any rank. The incident commander will be tasked with many responsibilities during a critical incident such as making critical decisions. In most law enforcement agencies members of supervisory rank are provided with training that will better equip them to perform in this capacity. The individual designated as incident commander does not relegate command of the incident, should a ranking member arrive at the scene, unless formally relieved. The police chief, although playing an important role, may or may not automatically assume command of an incident (Wargo, 1989). If the police chief does respond to the scene it should be made clear what his/her role is to be. Although the chief's presence at the incident scene may produce a more effective outcome, it can also inhibit the decision making process by supervisory staff at the scene (Wargo, 1989). If the police chief does not assume command of the incident he/she should be careful not to inhibit the designated incident commander's ability to manage the incident (Wargo, 1989). Proper training of the Incident Command System for the agencies employees should alleviate role ambiguity, while addressing many other areas of concern as well.

Law enforcement administrators who implement ICS into their agency should provide training to their employees. Because police officers are generally the first responders to a critical incident, it is crucial that employees have some knowledge of how

to respond. The action of the first officer to arrive at the scene should be to ensure their safety through a cautious approach, then attempt to evaluate, isolate, and contain the incident (Dolan, 1989). Employees must have the knowledge to be able to work within the guidelines of ICS. These types of issues should be included in awareness training as well to ensure the individual officers' understanding of ICS (Gates, 1991). As stated previously, training should include individual role responsibility, as well as proper communications procedures, and common terminology.

In addition to providing training for employees, law enforcement agencies should implement an ICS policy or standard operating procedure. The implementation of an ICS policy or procedure demonstrates the importance police administrators place in the Incident Command System, and the confidence in its effectiveness. The most productive and difficult decisions made in managing critical incidents are those decisions made prior to the event ever taking place (Ijames, 1997).

A sound policy provides direction for all participants involved during a critical incident when ICS is activated. The incident commander does not have to rely on untested procedures or tactics when there is a policy or procedure in place for reference. In addition, the policy will provide for specific guidelines for all officers and civilian personnel participating in the operation.

Although ICS can be effective for any police department, regardless of size or structure, a policy relating to ICS should

be written with the individual department in mind. Writers of the policy should consider such things as available resources, personnel, and equipment. The policy should include definitions of common terms, operational and communications procedures, and role responsibilities or assignments. The policy should also identify several examples of when ICS should be employed.

Methodology

Is the use of the Incident Command System (ICS) effective for law enforcement agencies? If so, should agencies that actively utilize the Incident Command System develop a policy or standard operating procedure, and train their members in the use and functions of ICS?

The research literature relating to the effectiveness of the Incident Command System revealed numerous types of incidents when ICS can and should be employed. The need for ICS within law enforcement agencies is supported through the research conducted, along with the authors knowledge and experience in law enforcement response to critical incidents. The research further indicates the need for training and policy development relating to ICS.

The scope of this research was primarily limited to publications regarding ICS. One of the most valuable and current resource materials available was an independent study course regarding ICS by the Federal Emergency Management Agency. The methodology for this research also relied on interviews with public safety officials as well as personal knowledge. The author did conduct one survey of twenty-four (24) law enforcement agencies regarding ICS. A representative from each of the twenty-four agencies did respond to the survey.

Most new programs and/or procedures implemented by law enforcement agencies do not require any type of training or instruction other than a general understanding of the policy or procedure implemented. While researching this project, it became

apparent that merely implementing policy or procedure relating to ICS is not enough. The training of police department personnel is also essential to the implementation of ICS.

Findings

The law enforcement profession is extremely unpredictable. One never knows what to expect during their tour of duty. Police officers face many challenges and highly stressful situations each and every day. When involved in a traumatic event, police officers are still expected to be able to provide service to the community and protect lives and property (Corbin, 1999).

Critical incident response today has become even more of a concern for law enforcement officials with the growing threat of terrorism within the United States. One study sponsored by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) revealed that local and state law enforcement officials view the threat of terrorism as real (Bodrero, 1999). The response by these same agencies, however, vary widely depending on the nature of the threat in their community and the size and resources of the police agency (Bodrero, 1999). Unified efforts are essential in response to terrorist acts (Bodrero, 1999).

Perhaps the best example of a unified response to a critical incident occurred in the state of Oklahoma just a few years ago. Oklahoma City followed the Incident Command System in response to the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah building in 1995 (Pilant, 1996). Fortunately, for everyone involved or affected by this tragedy, officers in the Oklahoma Police Department had been trained in emergency response (Pilant, 1996). No one, however, expected a response to an incident of this magnitude (Pilant, 1996). It is said that the response of Oklahoma's police, fire, and emergency services during this tragedy set a new standard for

emergency response and cooperation between the agency and the community (Pilant, 1996).

Law enforcement administrators and decision-makers must understand the choices that are made during a crisis situation come under strict scrutiny (Noesner, 1999). All police actions taken are subject to a court of public opinion as well as a court of law (Noesner, 1999). This, along with the overall objective of protecting lives, property, and the environment, cannot be accomplished without training. Much of the research conducted, indicated the need for training of personnel related to ICS. Each individual involved in a critical incident response has a greater awareness of their role when proper training is provided. Training should include individual responsibilities from within the law enforcement agency, however, members should also be provided information regarding an incident that may necessitate a response from other departments or outside agencies (Miner, 1992).

For example, most cities do not have an airport within their jurisdictions, however, aircraft crashes generally occur outside the response range of airport emergency personnel. Therefore, members from the local agency will handle the initial response to the crash (Johnson, 1998). Being somewhat familiar of what to expect during a multi-agency response would allow members to be more aware of their changing role during these type of incidents (Johnson, 1998).

To facilitate an organized response to a critical incident, agencies must train in the ICS. Whether responding to a hazardous

materials incident or a hostage situation, understanding the elements of ICS is crucial. Two of the most important aspects to ICS are education and training (Pilant, 1996). Education and training are vital components when implementing the Incident Command System into any agency.

Another important aspect to be considered when implementing ICS is establishing a policy, or standard operating procedure (Kaiser, 1990). There are many problems that arise during a critical incident response by law enforcement. An ICS policy or standard operating procedure establishes who has authority over the incident scene and eliminates many of the problems that may be encountered by managers (Kaiser, 1990.)

The policy or standard operating procedures should outline the different roles and responsibilities between divisions such as:

- Patrol Division
- Criminal Investigations Division
- Tactical Team (SWAT)

The response to a critical incident requires that everyone work as one and not as individuals. Specific responsibilities written in policy will allow for everyone to know and understand their primary role and how they fit into the entire plan (Kaiser, 1990).

In the survey, conducted by the author, of twenty-four (24) law enforcement agencies, sixteen (16) have an ICS policy, ten (10) provide training to all employees, five (5) provide limited training, and one agency has an ICS policy but provides no

training. The remaining eight (8) agencies responding to the survey stated that they felt ICS would be beneficial to their organization.

Law enforcement and fire administrators should work together in developing an ICS policy for their respective departments. There will be obvious differences between the two policies primarily because of each departments individual responsibilities. Working together will improve communications and help in understanding each departments responsibilities and capabilities (Spurlock, 1991).

When the Greek philosopher and historian Plutarch (46-119 AD) wrote, `the die is cast,' regarding entry into `dangerous and bold attempts,' he recognized that one no longer has the opportunity to prepare or develop skills necessary to solve the problem, once inserted into a crisis (Ijames, 1997). During a critical incident, the leadership and direction provided by commanders/supervisors is critical in determining the outcome of the event (Ijames, 1997). When tactical decisions are made, supporting policy should be the foundational basis of those decisions (Ijames, 1997).

An ICS policy, as a planning tool, designates in advance who will be in charge of the scene, and specific duties of all participants (Conner, 1997). The policy will provide guidelines in establishing a central point of command, which enhances the response of all elements and improves communications between personnel and different departments or outside agencies that may be assisting.

Discussions/Conclusions

Is the use of the Incident Command System (ICS) effective for law enforcement agencies? If so, should agencies that actively utilize the Incident Command System develop a policy or standard operating procedure, and train their members in the use and functions of ICS?

There has never been a time in the history of law enforcement where the propensity for violence and terrorism has been as present as it is today. Responding to critical incidents by police agencies are increasingly causing law enforcement administrators to implement new procedures and tactics in addressing these and other types of issues. The Incident Command System is a proven method for maintaining command, control, and coordination of an event necessitating a critical incident response.

The results of the research by this author were overwhelmingly in support of ICS being an effective tool for law enforcement agencies. The materials obtained during this inquiry consider ICS as being the model tool for managing critical incidents or major events. The research further supports the need for policy development and implementation, as well as training relating to ICS.

Fire departments across the nation have been operating under the Incident Command System since the 1970's. The system has been proven effective in the fire service, and for those police agencies that operate under the same system. The author proposes that all law enforcement agencies, not currently operating under

ICS guidelines, implement this procedure into their individual agency.

In addition, agencies should develop an ICS policy or standard operating procedure and provide ICS training to employees. The training should include all personnel that may be involved in an incident when ICS is employed. Personnel affected may include police supervisors, patrol officers, dispatchers, detectives/investigators, and other civilian employees within the agency/municipality. Each agency should also consider it a priority to ensure newly hired personnel receive this training during their orientation phase.

The authors personal experience in law enforcement's response to critical incidents, along with the research conducted, did support the hypothesis that ICS is a very effective and important element of law enforcement. Policy and training were also proved to be crucial in the implementation of ICS into individual agencies. ICS training, and having a policy in place will assist supervisors in managing an incident, and will provide all personnel with a better understanding of their role and responsibilities.

In conclusion, the Incident Command System is a win-win situation for law enforcement and society. One of the greatest challenges to law enforcement is their response to critical incidents such as domestic disorders, natural disasters, and incidents of terrorism. The likelihood of responding to a natural disaster or an act of terrorism within most jurisdictions is

remote, however, agencies have an obligation and responsibility to be prepared.

The Incident Command System is a very effective method when preparing for, and addressing these issues. ICS promotes a sense of confidence and professionalism within an agency when responding to a critical incident. The Incident Command System further reduces the likelihood of lawsuits, is more effective in protecting lives, property, and the environment, and will have a greater impact in working towards a successful resolution of any given situation.

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