

**THE BILL BLACKWOOD  
LAW ENFORCEMENT MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE OF TEXAS**

The Critical Incident and Its Damaging Effects

**A Policy Research Project Submitted in Partial  
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## **ABSTRACT**

**LAW ENFORCEMENT TODAY FACES MANY CHALLENGES. IF WE  
IGNORE E THE TOPIC OF THIS RESEARCH THEN WE FAIL THE PUBLIC  
WE SERVE BY FAILING THE PEOPLE WHO DO THIS SERVICE.**

**THE CRITICAL INCIDENT IS A PROBLEM THAT MUST BE ADDRESSED BY  
MANAGERS AND ADMINISTRATORS.**

**IT IS THIS RESEARCHER HOPE THAT THE MANAGERS AND COUNCIL OF  
THE CITY OF LONGVIEW WILL ACT ON THIS RESEARCHER  
RECOMMENDATIONS.**

## **Introduction**

Law enforcement administrators today spend million of dollars recruiting, hiring and training police personnel. We try to prepare them for the job that they will do through academies and in service training. We intend and expect them to give us a return of many years of service to the communities for which they serve.

The purpose of this research is to identify and document the existence of certain incidents that effect law enforcement officers in negative manner. These incidents are often called "critical incidents." The critical incident has been defined as any event that overwhelms the person's normal ability to cope. (Mitchell 1995) These events are normally easy to define because they are usually life shattering events. Officer involved shootings, officers killed in the line of duty, police suicide, and the violent death of a child are normally these type events. There is evidence to suggest that there are other events that can effect police personnel that are not always known or easily recognized. Some of these could be a death of a family member, marital problems, and financial difficulties.

The Longview Police Department currently has no policy in place to deal with critical incidents. On a daily basis police officers are not exposed to a life shattering events. Richard Conroy noted Mitchell's research showing that most emergency responders have a 90 percent chance of being involved in a critical incident. (Conroy 21) Research indicates that two thirds of the officers exposed will have mild to moderate reactions to critical incidents. One third of officers exposed to critical incidents will have a severe reaction to the event. (Soloman and Horn 389)

People who are exposed to critical incidents and are unable to resolve the events some times suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (P.T.S.D). People, suffering P.T.S.D., often can become problem employees. "An officer may act out his emotional difficulties with a critical incident and project anger at those around him; e.g., fellow officers, supervisors, the system, etc. Such recalcitrant behavior may have been totally absent in some officers prior to the shooting. However, weeks, months, or event years after the incident, they may surface and become more and more prominently visible as apparent "troublemakers"." (Solomon and Horn 385) They may suffer from alcoholism, marital

problems, absenteeism and in many cases leave the job. Some times they stay on the job and become a liability.

It is important that administrators and governing bodies have a clear understanding of these problems and understand their effect on personnel. It is also important to know that there are intervention techniques available. These techniques are being used in other occupations and are having success in the prevention of the long term debilitating effect of P.T.S.D.

For the research on the subject of critical incident debriefing, several sources will be examined. Historical accounts on P.T.S.D. and its cause will be reviewed in periodicals and journals. The researcher will also review and document articles written by administrators in the law enforcement field. Studies done by experts in the field of critical incident debriefing will be included in this research. This researcher will also refer to training conference attended that in 1995 and 1996 on the effects of critical incidents and the need for critical incidents debriefing. Practices and policy being employed by police managers for dealing with stress will also be researched.

It is the researcher's intent and hope that through this research the managers and administrators of the Longview Police Department will implement policy that addresses critical incidents debriefing.

## Historical and Theoretical

During and after the Vietnam conflict soldiers coming home began to suffer from a disorder that was diagnosed as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. This was not a new problem to war veterans. In World War II P.T.S.D. was called "shell shocked." In World War I P.T.S.D. was dubbed "battle fatigue." The symptoms of this problem were always similar. The individual would not be able to function in the world he had lived in before his exposure to war. The victims of these disorders would become withdrawn, anti-social, or angry. Veterans were unable to hold a job, became alcoholics, drug addicts and in worse cases committed suicide.

In the 1960's, 70's and 80's several mass casualty disasters occurred in the United States. These were commercial air crashes in Florida, California and Dallas. Emergency personnel that were involved in the response to these disasters began to suffer symptoms of P.T.S.D. Many of these emergency personnel were law enforcement officers. Large numbers of these personnel experienced difficulty in life after these events and many, as much as 70 percent, left the job.(Mitchell, Austin, 1995) This forced research into the cause of the problems emergency workers were suffering after these crashes. Most of these disasters involved emergency workers being exposed to mass death and injury.

The traumatic event that caused the workers' symptoms began to be called a critical incident. Jeffrey Mitchell (1995) described it as "people having normal reactions to abnormal circumstances." People having reactions to events that they cannot understand are many times inaccurately depicted as not being normal.

Through researchers, such as Jeffery Mitchell, work began to be done to determine the cause and effect of critical incidents. Researchers found that many of these workers were suffering similar problems. Relying on limited research done on war veterans as far back as World War n it was determined that early intervention helped. Debriefing rescue workers soon after the disaster or traumatic events dispelled misunderstood reactions. Critical Incident stress management teams were created and trained to conduct debriefings, after major disasters. Debriefers were also able to educate these workers on future reactions that they might have so they could expect them and not compound their trauma.

The debriefing process consist of training personnel in a multi-step process to let worker express what they felt as a result of their exposure to the traumatic event. This training was done by experts in the field of psychiatry. The debriefings are done either directly or indirectly under the supervision of a psychologist. As a result of this type peer debriefing most of these workers were able to return to their job with little long lasting effects of the traumatic event.

Organizations such as the International Critical Incident Stress Management Institute (I.C.I.S.M.I.) were founded in the late 1980's. Organizations such as I.C.I.S.M.I. began to educate companies and agencies across the United States and around the world about critical incident debriefing techniques.

Most of the critical incident stress intervention has surround the emergency medical and fire personnel. Law enforcement personnel officers often respond to these same critical incidents and suffer along with every person exposed. They have also in most cases benefited from the critical incident debriefing process done by organizations such as I.C.I.S.M.I. teams. As recently as the Oklahoma City Bombing of the Federal Building critical incident stress teams debriefed the workers at this tragedy.

The field of law enforcement has been slower to recognize the need for critical incident debriefing on a scale that fire, rescue and emergency medical crews have. Tom Pierson noted, "The law enforcement community has been rather slow to accept the fact that critical incident stress can seriously affect police officers in both their work and their private lives." (Pierson 33) There is a need for this type intervention to be put in place by policy. Police officer exposure to critical incident are not normally on the mass scale as fire, rescue and other emergency worker. As mentioned earlier they do not occur on a daily basis but when they do occur they are just as devastating. What makes the problem more acute is that police work autonomously for the most part which means they are normally alone when the event occurs or at least in small number.(Conroy 21) Many times they then are subjected to a criminal investigation. The police officer is subject to a law suit in many cases following a critical incident. In the end they are left to deal with the trauma alone unless department have put in place policy to insure that intervention techniques take place. (Solomon and Horn 385) Other factors that occur with the law enforcement officer is that image perception can cause them to withhold their emotions. (390)

Critical incident debriefing (C.I.S.D.) is a process that allows those exposed to a traumatic event to vent and express their feeling in a carefully guided meeting with peer members. These peer members should be trained the debriefing process so that what they do is constructive and not destructive. The debriefing should be under the guidance either directly or indirectly of a psychologist. This psychologist, ideally, should have experience and training in the area of C.I.S.D.. The research has shown that if workers are allowed to express their experience in the C.I.S.D. is a less than 10 percent chance that they will develop P.T.S.D.(Mitchell, Austin, Tx.,1995) This is not a critique of the operation or

how people performed under pressure this is strictly about the what they felt while they were exposed to the trauma.

### **Review of Literature or Practice**

The researcher found several articles and books had been written on the subject of critical incidents. Since choosing this topic for research the researcher also attended training for critical incident debriefing. (LC.I.S.M.L, Autin,Tx., 1995) While at this training seminar the researcher participated training conducted by Jeffrey Mitchell who talked about the history of critical incident debriefing. Mitchell has written several books and manual that are used by numerous emergency response personnel at all levels of government. Mitchell is considered to be one of the foremost experts in the field of critical incident debriefing.

While attending the LC.I.S.M.I training Mitchell talked about the history the debriefing process. Mitchell said that stress and P.T.S.T. could be traced back thousands of years to some of the earliest Wars. Some of the earliest intervention began around World War I. According to Mitchell it was found that if soldiers suffering battle fatigue were treated quickly and near the front lines they were able to return to battle. Those soldiers that were taken away from front had a much more difficult time. In world War II briefing conducted in and around the European invasion resulted in a reduction in what was then termed "shell shock."

The beginning of the process of C.I.S.D. began as a result of emergency crews in the United States suffering the affect of P.T.S.D. after exposure to mass casualties as a result of air disasters.(ibid.) The process consisted of training debriefers who work in a same or similar field. The training consisted of a set of steps to take workers through the emotions that they experienced when they experienced the critical incident. These trained workers are then available to conduct debriefing when a critical incident occurs.

This researcher believes research done by Roger Solomon and James Horn demonstrate a need for the C.I.S.D. in law enforcement. They documented that

approximately one third of the officers involved in a critical incident, such as a shooting, will suffer severe psychological reaction.(Solomon and Horn 389) In a 1986 pilot study done by these researchers it was stated, "a critical incident is an incident where one comes face to face with his own vulnerability in a life threatening situation." (390) The research also suggested that many problem employees were the result of exposure to a critical incident such as officer involved shootings.(385) Solomon and Horn clearly support a peer group type of debriefing shortly after the person exposure a critical incident.(392)

Solomon also wrote a 1988 article about post shooting trauma. In this article he discusses the fazes response to a critical incident and the need for early intervention. The article by Solomon contrast the properly handled critical incident verses the un-delt with. Solomon states that if early intervention take place and the officer resolves the event properly the he can become a better and stronger. An un-delt with critical incident could not only cost you an officer but a second event on top of it could almost assure P.T.S.D.(Solomon 42-44)

This researcher found several articles written by authors from the law enforcement field. These articles discussed establishing policy on C.I.S.D. in law enforcement agencies. In almost all these articles on Critical Incidents and P.T.S.D. the writers ideas followed the established guidelines for C.I.S.D.(Mashburn 5-6-7-8)(Well, Blau, Getman,70-71-72-76)

Much work has been done in the early 1990's to increase C.I.S.D. training in the law enforcement field. Still not allot a law enforcement agencies have established guidelines and policy on C.I.S.D. A survey conducted in 1993 by Terry Constant discovered that over 67 percent of police agencies had no established guidelines for line of duty deaths or the traumatic effect that this has on their department.(Constant 76) Constant information also stated that only 5.4 percent of police agencies had a peer counseling program in place.

This researcher found that the there were not allot of law enforcement agencies in this state doing C.I.S.D. as of this time. The Arlington police department was found to have a policy establishing a peer support group.(Arlington police 505.05) It is unknown what year this policy was enacted but it appears to follow the C.I.S.D. model. The Tyler police department in current very active in a critical incident stress management program in



conjunction with their fire department. They have conducted several C.I.S.D.s in the East Texas Area. (Interview) The department members got their training through state sponsored programs.

In comparing the research finding and the practices it was found that the research and the practice are consistent. The C.I.S.D programs that are in place follow the Historical guidelines set by the nationally recognized trainers. The current problem is that many department are unaware of the training and its value to law enforcement agencies

### **Relevant Issues**

The key issues of this research are critical incidents and critical incident stress management through C.I.S.D.s. It could be argued that a critical incident occur several time a day some where in law enforcement. When a traumatic event occurs they involve more than just one victim of critical incident stress. It might be just the one officer involved in a shooting but there will be other victims of the event. The dispatcher who took the phone call or got the frantic radio message. The back up officers who are in route or witnessed the events may be victimized. There is not always a clear list of what critical incidents are. A critical incident might be a bad accident, a child death, a long failed rescue attempt or any number traumatic events. A critical incident is the event that overwhelms the normal coping skills of a person. Just because you feel overcome by an event does not mean you are not normal.

Departmental policy must be adapted that creates the frame work for C.I.S.D.s This training and policy need to have just as priority as any other training that we give out police officer before we put them on the streets. Department managers and administrator are responsible for the public's safety. Part of that responsibility includes providing stress management tools for the people who must keep the public safe.

The importance of not waiting till a critical incident occurs cannot be stressed enough. Training department need to teach the recruits that these events are going to occur and that help by procedure and policy is going to be there. Pre-critical incident training is important but not the key. An F.B.I. study cited by one researcher pointed out the need

for debriefing. The researcher said that agents needing post incident assistance dropped by 90 percent after critical incident debriefing were done.

Time is a factor in dealing with critical incident. The experts recommend that within 72 hours that a debriefing take place. The closer a debriefing is conducted to a critical incident the better. Conducting a debriefing, of this time can cause man power and revenue problem for most agencies. Administrators would have to consider this when deciding what would be debriefed and what would not.

Policies would have to take in consideration for certain type criminal investigations also. Incidents involving officer involved shooting would have, to be conducted after the initial investigation is complete. These C.I.S.D policies would have to consider that the officer is also victim. Many times in our diligence to get the information and protect ourselves from civil liability we forget the victim/officer. Many investigations are conducted "by the book" and the officers get little human compassion. This occurs naturally because of the nature of the business we conduct. We can do more damage with the investigation than the incident did.

Law enforcement officers are human in a uniform that by the nature of there profession will deal with traumatic events. The public many times has this super human image of police officers. The police officer himself has a super human expectation of himself. The human in the uniform is no different than the public because he is the public. Critical incidents are going to affect them no worse or better than any other human. It must be recognized that the police officer can't walk up on the scene of death and carnage and fall apart. There is a job to do and it gets done no matter what has occurred.

It is what occurs after the exposure to a critical incident that the research address. The research has made it clear that there is one in three chance that a severe reaction will be experienced by police officer exposed to a critical incident. If the incident is left for the officer to deal with there is a 90 percent chance that he could suffer symptom of P.T.S.D.

Law enforcement agencies have been slow to recognize this as a hazard of the job. Instead we have chosen to just accept that these things occur and if you can take it get out of the job. Many officers have left this business because of the stress's and research into this subject has made this researcher wonder if it we couldn't have prevented it.

Police agencies across the United States invest so much time and revenue in personnel. The cost of losing them needs to be weighed against the cost of training for intervention through C.I.S.D. There are several options available in the training process. Department of larger size could probably afford to train and debrief their own personnel. Smaller agencies could share agency personnel and revenue.

## **Recommendations**

Law enforcement officers today face many challenges that officers of the past do not face. The future of this law enforcement depends on the talents and ability of these people to adapt and overcome these challenges. One of the most difficult challenges is the critical incident. A single critical incident can destroy an officer with years of training and valuable experience.

Police administrators today need to recognize that these incidents do occur. It is important for these administrators to know what these problems are and what they can do to prevent their long term effects. Not all can be done to predict what officers will face on daily basis. It is the nature of the job that forces us to place our personnel into harms way.

Critical incident claim an unknown number of our police personnel. Through the debriefing process this number can be greatly reduced. This process of C.I.S.D. has to be implemented by policy. It needs to be recognized at the highest level of management of a police agency.

By managers educating themselves in recognition of critical incidents they can act quicker to insure that the officers exposed get the assistance that they need. Through enacting policy to address this issue managers can save personnel from suffering the effect of P.T.S.D. In preventing these effects it can only save resources. The effects of untreated P.T.S.D. result in lost work time, medical cost, legal cost and moral. Worst of all it costs in valued workers who leave the job because they "just can't take it."

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