

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

**The Importance of
Training First Responders**

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ABSTRACT

This researcher has chosen to research training the first responder because officers are responding to crisis situations more and more on a regular basis. It is imperative to train officers on how to handle a situation should they be the first unit to respond to a school shooting, a barricaded subject, or even a hostage situation. The first responder, in such a situation, can find themselves alone to handle a situation before assistance arrives or negotiating the first forty-five minutes to an hour just waiting on a trained negotiator or the Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) team to arrive on scene. Many agencies are ill prepared for a crisis incident, and this could be seen as a breaking point to an easily fixed problem. If agencies considered the cost effectiveness of training the first responder versus having to call out SWAT or other specialized units for all crisis incidents, they would find it to be cost efficient to train first responders. This researcher will survey other agencies to discover their process of training, if they do train, and how important they believe training is to the first responder. This researcher found other agencies have minimal training, but the majority agrees it is imperative to train first responders, so they can be better prepared for any crisis situation.

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INTRODUCTION

In law enforcement, an officer is expected to be ready for any situation on any given day. Many changes have taken place in the law enforcement field. There is no such activity as routine. Officers are dealing with more and more emergency crisis on a daily basis. First responders play a vital role in situations, arriving first on the scene of a crisis situation and attempting to assess and react to the situation at hand.

This research is intended for the purpose of identifying the necessity of training all officers as first responders to a crisis situation. It is important to evaluate if officers are ready to negotiate or ready to deal with a situation that does not end well. It may not be an officer's choice to be the first responder to arrive at the location. In some instances, however, they may be the only one responding because assistance is too far to respond quickly, or they may not even have any assistance available at all.

When a first responding officer arrives at the location and has no training or idea of how to handle a crisis onset, it can be detrimental to all persons involved as well as the community. From the very beginning, it is important to use active listening skills, not problem solving skills, which are used when responding to non-crisis calls. The average response time for Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) or negotiation teams is forty-five minutes to one hour. Therefore, it is essential for the first responding officer to initiate a dialogue with the subject to deescalate the situation or buy time for assistance from other officers, the crisis negotiation team, and/or SWAT.

This researcher incorporates information from various sources including: interviews, books, journals, the Internet, and periodicals. One method used in this research that is believed to be most beneficial is a survey. The survey will be

administered to departments that are known to have experienced crisis situations where first responders were vital in diffusing a crisis. The survey will also be administered to departments that have not experienced any crisis situations at all.

It is anticipated that all agencies will have slightly different ideas on the importance of educating first responders and the role they play. Through research and surveys with other agencies, it is predicted they will agree on the importance of sufficient training for first officers responding to crisis situations. Findings will demonstrate the need for the protection of all parties involved as well as protection and service to the community.

It is imperative that officers be at the top of their game. Police agencies are held to a high standard in the community. The public is entitled to the utmost service. If this researcher's outcome is as envisioned, the police department will benefit by having the support of the community. The community will reap the benefits of having the service and protection they deserve. The public is entitled to the protection of skilled and qualified law enforcement officers.

In order for first responders to receive the best training possible, they need support not only from the agencies but also from the communities and government. The agencies need to support the idea that first responder training is even necessary. Preparing for the cost of the end results for a crisis that affects not only the first responder but also all other responders involved as well as the general public directly or indirectly involved with the situation. Communities need to know how important it is not only for their safety but also for the safety of the officers. Lastly, the government needs to be able to financially support the officers and agencies and provide proper funding

and training on a regular basis. The government does this, and their training is helpful, but local areas must be trained as well. If both large and small departments are trained, they can work together.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

It is paramount that officers be trained as first responders, but first, why the training is important must be examined. Most sources stated that the first forty-five minutes to an hour could actually be the difference between success and failure. Mistakes that are made from the initial response can prevent the negotiators, SWAT, or even assisting officers from ever moving forward. This not only takes time away from resolving the issue itself, but it also could make the situation more dangerous (Greenstone, 2000).

While researching this issue, it was found that the communities which lack first responder training suffer severely. When officers are not trained to respond to critical situations, it takes a toll on everyone involved. Agencies should have plans/proper training in place for first responders. Agencies need to know that when a crisis or critical situation arises that they are ready.

Patrol officers are usually the first ones on scene. This is a critical time. In a crisis situation, time is of the essence. First responders want to resolve the issue in a timely manner while, at the same time, they are working for a positive outcome. One of the hardest skills for officers to conquer is restraint. Officers are constantly pushed for completing most tasks as quickly as possible, so the idea of "stalling" is one that is almost unheard of in the field of law enforcement (Davidson, 2006).

Today, it is apparent that the first-responder plays an important role, if not the most important role, in the community because of the increase of school shootings and rage killings. Rage killings are those such as domestic violence, violence in the workplace, the schools, and in churches. The patrol officer's role is adapting to this increase in violence. These changes are often motivated by the parents of murdered children and the loved ones of the slain workers and churchgoers (Baker, 2005). According to Baker (2005), today's patrol personnel have been gravely tasked. They must rapidly deploy; they must take aggressive and immediate action. Baker points out that new training has been put in place; however, it should not be the only response. This is not the only instance where the training has been questioned. Essentially, it comes down to the fact that critical situations are not going away, and training is a necessary tool for the first responder.

Oklahoma City, Columbine, Nickel Mine, and 9/11 are all very well known incidents that directed negative attention by the media towards first responders. These tragedies, for a brief period of time, focused on how communities and law enforcement agencies can better first responder training. Unfortunately, the attraction was short lived. Although certain programs have been implemented, they have been placed on the back burner until the next tragedy strikes. Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training (ALERRT) (2007) has pointed out the fact that until the media and the communities get involved on this issue together, it will not be addressed. ALERRT has also stated that it is necessary to have updated strategies and philosophies. Most first responder trainers understand that this is an issue of trial and error, and producing new strategies for training must continue. However, if law enforcement agencies will not

attempt to train their first responders or update their philosophies and first responding tactics, they will always be outdated.

Take the Columbine shooting for an example. The first responding officers were not prepared for such a critical incident, especially for one of that magnitude. Even though there was an officer on the scene, the response of the officer was unprepared and unorganized. The officer approached the scene with little caution, thinking it was a vehicular/pedestrian accident. The officer began retrieving several different details from different sources about the unknown horror at hand. The first responding patrol officers established a perimeter and called in the SWAT team. This gave active shooters forty-five minutes of free rein inside the school to kill several people and injure even more (ALERT, 2007). The Nickel Mine Amish School shooting on October 2, 2006 is another good example. While this situation could have been much worse, proper first responder training could have helped. According to Pennsylvania State Trooper Lt. Krawczel, the first responding officers were trained for active shooters such as the subjects in the Columbine shooting but not as first responders in a crisis situation. After reviewing the response of these officers, they did just as they had been trained in an active shooter situation. They ran directly to the school and placed themselves in immediate danger because that was the type of training they had received.

Another problem that surrounds this significant training is the issue of money. Many communities overlook this training due to the lack of financial assistance from state and national government. Unfortunately, everyone is at stake to be hit by a crisis situation. Often communities, small and large, are unprepared because “they lack funding” for training programs. Crisis situations occur everywhere, from massive cities

such as New York City, New York to small communities such as Littleton, Colorado. Post September 11, 2001 funding has become even more limited due to the placement of funds in other areas. With terrorism on the rise, the national budget has been directed towards possible major incidences and worldly issues, as opposed to possible domestic issues. With that said, it is the suburban communities that suffer the most, if they are even recognized at all as needing training to prepare for any future crisis. To draw attention to the need for training first responders, a New York State Senator brought attention to the need to train by putting up a generous donation of 2.5 million dollars for a Homeland Security and Public Safety Consortium, which will be built on a fourteen-acre site in Glenville, NY (Meaney, 2007). However, while this is a positive route towards better first responder training, this is not available for all communities, especially smaller communities that may not be able to send their officers to this facility. These types of institutions are needed for all officers, and only one will not get the job done. It is imperative that facilities be available for all officers.

METHODOLOGY

Texas, like any other state in the United States, upholds the highest standards in law enforcement. Yet, many communities, both big and small, do not place importance in first responder training. With the national attention of many major critical incidents, some of the final results of training, as well as the lack of training in some agencies, has been seen by the public. In order to get a better understanding, this researcher will survey supervisors, ranging from sergeant to Chief of Police as well as trained negotiators from different agencies from all over the state of Texas.

This researcher believes that with an emphasis on adequate training and support from all involved, there could truly be a huge difference on how crisis situations are handled from the first response, and it could change the initial outcome in a positive way. Successful first responders, in the past, have been fortunate enough to have sufficient training. Yet, first responders who have not had sufficient training have had to face unfortunate tragedies and experiences. Officers must be set up for success, and training them as first responders can help that happen. The method of inquiry will be supported by books, articles, Internet sites, and distributed surveys to various agencies. The question regarding why agencies should train all officers as first responders and why it is so important will finally be addressed in a serious manner.

The survey will ask respondents about their department size and how often they respond to crisis situations. They will be asked about their first responder training and how important they think first responder training is. These surveys will give an idea of what the agencies think about what the future may hold for them as far as a crisis occurring in their jurisdiction. Twenty-four agencies were polled with one hundred percent responding to the survey.

FINDINGS

When asked about the size of their department, most respondents stated they had a small department. Seventeen of the respondents stated they had some type of crisis situation. This revealed that even the smallest of departments are subject to a crisis situation. This researcher found that each agency differed not only in size, but also in the number of crisis situations they have had during a twelve-month period. The survey's first question asked about the size of the departments. The response showed a

range from a mere four officers to approximately 208 sworn officers out of 24 departments. The survey next questioned the number of patrol officers. The answers tended to be just as diverse as the first, ranging from four to approximately 100 patrol officers.

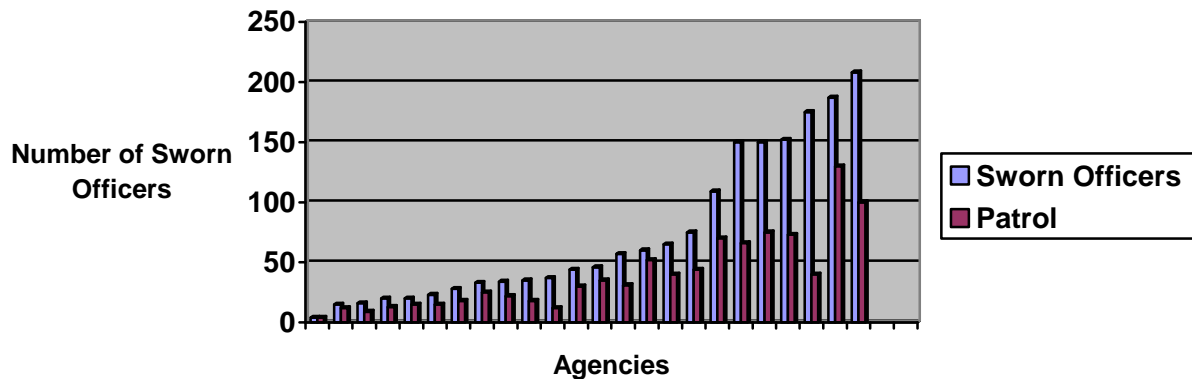


Figure 1. Number of sworn officers and patrol officers in the surveyed agencies.

The third question was a two-part question, asking first if the department had faced a crisis situation in the last 12 months. Of the 24 surveys, only seven stated that their department had not had a crisis situation in the last twelve months, which automatically eliminated the second half of the question. The 17 that stated they had encountered a crisis incident in the last twelve months had to answer how many situations to which they responded. Of the 17 departments, they had responded to a range of one to five incidences in the last twelve months. This survey was completed in the beginning quarter of 2007. The following shows that the smallest of departments can have many crisis situations, and larger department can have few crisis situations. The survey is only a minimal amount of municipalities compared to thousands out there with different results.

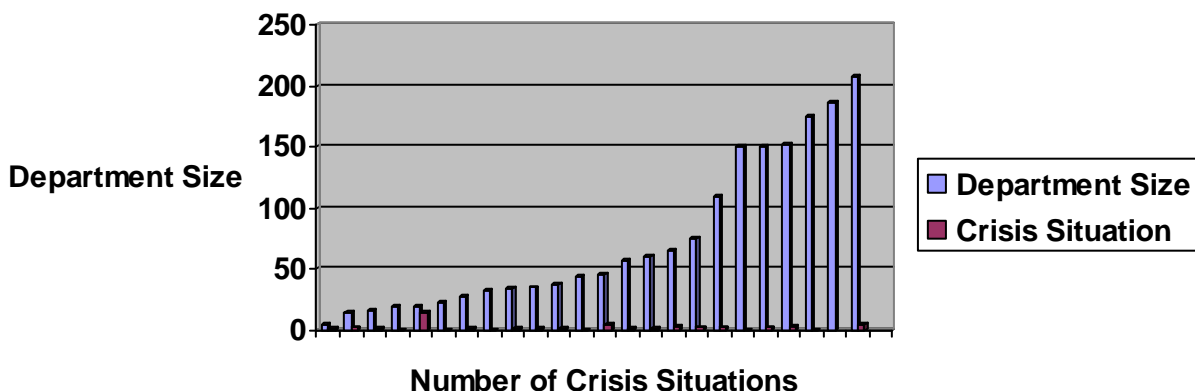


Figure 2. Department size and number of crisis situations dealt with by each agency.

The 17 who stated they had encountered crisis situations then had to answer whether the first responder handled the complete situation. Out of the 17 departments stating they had crisis situations, only seven first responders completed their mission from the beginning of the crisis to the end. There were 10 departments that had first responders that were relieved and did not participate as a primary unit in completing the final stages of the crisis situation. The responders were relieved by a supervisor because that is their policy, and some were relieved by back up, such as SWAT, because it was beyond their control. It was asked if the agencies felt it was important to train first responders, and of the seven departments that had not had any crisis situations within the last 12 months, only one did not receive departmental training for first responders.

Seventeen departments indicated they had put their first responder duties to the test. Three of the departments do not find it important enough to train officers as first responders. When questioning the surveyed on how important the department feels about training first responders, the answers were disappointing. Starting with the

departments that have not had any instances of crisis situations in the past 12 months, only four stated their department did find it important, and three stated they did not feel the same. Although the ratio of the 17 remaining departments who have had officers utilize their first responding skills were better, four representatives for the departments still felt their departments did not find it a priority. Finally, of all supervisors and/or negotiators that were surveyed, all but one said they had found it very important to train all officers as first responders.

This researcher, for the most part, found that the importance of training a first responder is not only seen by the departments that have crisis situations often, but also by departments and officers that almost never have them at all. Taking past situations into consideration, most officers that have had to deal with issues where the first few moments are the most crucial moments would rather be overly prepared for such situations, than not be prepared, at the cost of putting lives in danger. Many departments believe that this training is “very important” and that it “can be the difference between a peaceful resolution and the loss of lives” (survey).

DISCUSSIONS/CONCLUSIONS

The problem surrounding the lack of training for first responders is one of importance. This researcher asks why agencies should not at least consider training all officers as first responders. The question is brought upon by the frequency of the crisis situations and the importance of the issue. It is imperative that officers have the proper training and techniques when dealing with subjects in a crisis situation. They should not have to wait until a crisis occurs for it to be necessary, but they should be trained before a crisis should occur. Whether it is a barricaded subject or someone who has taken a

hostage, the first initial contact can make all the difference in the final outcome. Though the final outcome may not always be positive, some sort of training can improve the outcome. Training the first responder not only assists the officers with the response to a crisis situation, it can benefit them with other tasks they perform on a daily basis. The training can better prepare them to be more cognitive of their surroundings. This includes, but is not limited to, listening skills and reading people, victims and/or suspects, by watching their body language or listening to the tone of their voice. Some agencies do not have trained negotiators, and this leaves the first responder with the situation. Sometimes it is handed over to the supervisor when they arrive on scene. This does not change if that supervisor has not been trained anymore than the officer. This could place a strain on a supervisor because they are held at a higher standard.

This matter is perceived as important and serious enough to which the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) has implemented a Crisis Incident Response Team (CIRT). The FBI does train some local agencies on first responders. They train officers to reduce further violence through the use of “verbal containment.” They teach them to assess the situation and prepare for further action to be taken, like calling for additional units. These agencies are not going to be there when the crisis occurs in a municipality unless it is of a terrorist attack “or substantially large attack” and cannot be resolved immediately.

Due to the lack of information and references, one might wonder how the law enforcement community and/or the community itself take the seriousness of the first responder training. It appears agencies tend to use rationalization as to why they do not train their officers for first response such as manpower shortages, no money for

training, or even the excuse of not having crisis situations in their jurisdiction.

Unfortunately, agencies tend to show interest in training their first responders after a crisis incident has occurred in their community and there is an outcry from the citizens.

The study of first responders is relevant to all law enforcement from school officers to agencies as large as the FBI. A crisis can and will affect all communities large and small in some way eventually. All law enforcement agencies and the communities they protect and serve will benefit from having the officers trained in a manner of which they will know how to address the situation when faced with a crisis.

When all is said, there are many benefits in training the first responders for a crisis big or small. The agencies and communities can benefit financially in many ways if the first responding officers can handle the incident. The cost of calling in other resources, such as personnel and equipment, can take a toll on a budget. It is a financial burden when having to call in back up support within the department and that may result in calling in support on overtime or even assistance from another agency.

There will always be crisis situations, and there will always be a first responder placed in those situations. This is why it is important to have the first responders trained to better handle the crisis when they arrive on the scene. If the first responders are trained, a delayed reaction is less likely. Though not all departments have yet had a crisis situation, if they did have one occur, trained officers could be more comfortable knowing what action to take or which direction they need to go, so there is a better chance of a positive outcome.

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APPENDIX
CRISIS SITUATION
SURVEY

1. How many sworn officers does your department have?
2. How many are patrol officers?
3. Has your department had a crisis situation in the last 12 months? Yes No
If yes, how many? What type?
4. Did the first responder handle the complete situation? Yes No
If no, who took their place (negotiator, supervisor, etc.)?
5. Do your officers receive first responder training?
6. How important does your department think it is to train first responders for a crisis situation?
7. How important do **you** think it is to train first responders for a crisis situation?