

**The Bill Blackwood
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Critical Incident Stress Debriefing and Police Officers

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ABSTRACT

Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) is relevant to contemporary law enforcement because police officers are often involved in or witness extremely violent or traumatic incidents. CISD is a tool designed to assist emergency services personnel in understanding and coping with the stress resulting from critical incidents. It also provides education to participants regarding the stress that is a natural reaction to exposure to extreme trauma.

The purpose of this research is to determine the efficacy of CISD for use with law enforcement personnel. The researcher's hypothesis was that the use of CISD is of great benefit to police officers exposed to trauma. The anticipated recommendation was that agencies develop a mandatory CISD policy for officers exposed to extreme trauma.

The method of inquiry used by the researcher included: a review of books, journal articles, and internet sites. Personal interviews were conducted with a psychologist who formerly was on staff with a major city police department and the program director for the Dallas Area Crisis Response Team. A survey was distributed to 22 supervisors and managers from 20 Texas law enforcement agencies.

The researcher discovered that there are diverse opinions from mental health professionals on the benefits of CISD. There is, however, solid evidence that CISD assists in the relief of stress induced by traumatic events in emergency services personnel. The recommendation of this researcher is that departments make CISD a mandatory response to extremely traumatic events such as a line of duty death, mass casualty incident, or other critical incidents.

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INTRODUCTION

The nature of the law enforcement profession demands that police officers deal with difficult and, at times, violent situations. During a law enforcement career, it is likely that an officer may be exposed to a critical incident. Mitchell and Bray (1990) defined critical incident as events, “that have sufficient emotional power to overcome the usual coping abilities of people” (as cited in Plaxton-Hennings, 2004, p.53). Officers exposed to the violent death of a fellow officer, a child, multiple deaths, or other traumatic events may develop symptoms of post traumatic stress. These symptoms include anxiety, numbing, withdrawal, depression, and feelings of isolation.

Post traumatic stress can have a devastating effect on law enforcement personnel who are involved in or who witness a critical incident. Stress related symptoms that are not properly addressed can result in terrible consequences for an officer as well as for the agency. These symptoms can lead to poor job performance, missed time at work and potentially to the premature termination of an officer’s career.

This is vital information for police administrators, as officers who experience this stress often suffer from its symptoms without seeking necessary assistance with coping. Some officers develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) following critical incident exposure. Critical Incident Stress Debriefing is designed to educate and help the officer process the traumatic event so that he or she will be able to cope with the event and move forward.

The purpose of this research is to examine the effects of critical incident stress on police officers and the value of debriefings as a tool in assisting officers in recovering emotionally and psychologically following a critical incident. Some agencies do not have

a critical incident stress debriefing policy in place. This research will pursue the question of whether local police agencies should institute mandatory critical incident stress debriefings for officers who witness extreme trauma during the course of their duties.

The intended method of inquiry includes a review of journals and books that have been written on the subject of post traumatic stress and its effect on police officers. A survey will be utilized to determine the percentage of agencies that currently require mandatory post critical incident stress debriefings for involved and witness officers. Another purpose of the survey will be to determine the perception among supervisors and middle managers regarding the helpfulness of the debriefing process following a critical incident. Finally, personal interviews will be conducted with the program director of the Dallas Area Crisis Response Team and with a psychologist who deals with police stress.

The anticipated finding from this research is that critical incident stress debriefings play an integral role in the recovery of officers who are victims of post traumatic stress. Further, the recommendation will be that law enforcement agencies develop a policy wherein a critical incident stress debriefing will be mandatory for officers following their involvement or witnessing of a major traumatic event. This will benefit the field of law enforcement as agencies take an active role in protecting their officers from the devastating effects of post traumatic stress. Officers will be able to better function psychologically and emotionally in the aftermath of a critical incident.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The effects of Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) on law enforcement officers who have been exposed to critical incidents have been widely discussed in

books and articles. While there are differing thoughts on this subject, there has not been total consensus as to whether or not this methodology is effective in enabling the return of the officer to the mental and emotional state that he or she exhibited prior to the event.

Kureczka (1996) pointed out the need for law enforcement agencies to mandate assistance for officers involved in critical incidents when he stated the following: "The most important aspect of managing critical incident recovery is for the administration to understand that police duties can result in psychological injury" (p. 2). Kureczka (1996) went on to claim that "Departments should be proactive and develop a critical incident response that addresses the likelihood of psychological injury with the same intention and concern as the likelihood of physical injury" (p. 2). He further addressed the need for law enforcement agencies to develop written guidelines to include intervention for officers exposed to traumatic events. The implementation of these policies will result in a healthier working environment. Mandated assistance to officers exposed to critical incidents would serve multiple purposes. These include educating officers on stress and its effects on the human body and allowing officers an opportunity to discuss the event in a safe environment. It would also provide an opportunity for a mental health professional to interact with and observe involved and witnessing officers who may require further mental or emotional treatment or assistance.

Anderson, Litzenberger, and Plecas (2002) conducted a study of police officer stress in which they found that officers who are involved in a critical incident experience an increased heart rate throughout the remainder of the shift. The authors found that this was indicative of an inability on the part of the officers to adequately cope with the

stress induced by the incident. As a result, they advocated conducting a debriefing either immediately at the conclusion of the event or before the end of the shift. Barboza (2002) examined several studies in an effort to either validate or deny the efficacy of utilizing CISD. Several cases were reviewed in which positive outcomes were experienced by emergency service employees who participated in debriefings. Barboza (2002) also looked at incidents, which suggested that CISD may not be helpful in reducing stress related symptoms and could potentially be harmful. She believed that CISD should not be utilized to treat Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome until further research is conducted. Barboza (2002) held that future study must be able to overcome the “methodological limitations” of prior studies, which should result in a better analysis of the effect of CISD on those who have experienced or witnessed trauma (p. 68).

Hammond and Brooks (2001) suggested that studies which challenge the efficacy of CISD may be flawed. They cited several factors that caused them concern. Hammond and Brooks (2001) questioned whether the debriefings were conducted properly and whether clear methodology was utilized in measuring results. They also questioned the structure and timing of the debriefings. Hammond and Brooks (2001) advocated the use of CISD and stated:

CISD has been successfully used with emergency and pre-hospital providers such as the Emergency Medical Service (EMS), police and fire-rescue, as well with soldiers, prisoners of war, hostages and disaster workers. (p. 316)

They cautioned that those conducting debriefings should be well trained and that both peers and mental health professionals should be present during the debriefings.

Hockanson and Wirth (2000), reported results of a survey of the Los Angeles County Fire Department's use of CISD. This survey indicated that a majority of Los Angeles County Fire Fighters who participated in CISD following critical incidents found the process to be helpful. This study also indicated that those who participated in CISD were more likely to report a quicker reduction in stress related symptoms than those who had not participated.

An interview was conducted with Dr. James Greenstone who was formerly the director of psychology for a large police department. Dr. Greenstone stated that CISD can be helpful to an extent in relieving the symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress for an individual who has been screened and found to be a candidate. An officer who has had direct contact with trauma would be one who would be a possible candidate. Dr. Greenstone did qualify his remarks by stating that some officers may not need debriefing while others may need other treatment (J. Greenstone, personal communication, July 28, 2008).

An interview was conducted with Lucy Detamble, RN., Program Director for the Dallas Area Crisis Response Team. Ms. Detamble is a strong proponent for conducting Critical Incident Stress Debriefings with emergency services personnel following critical incident exposure or involvement. Ms. Detamble stated that personnel who have participated in debriefings in which she has assisted were more relaxed afterward. She noted that this could be observed through the changes in body language following the debriefing. She stated that after a debriefing, officers "accepted the event and let it go." Ms. Detamble stated that part of the debriefing process involves looking for and

identifying those officers who need further follow-up or treatment (L. Detamble, personal communication, January 28, 2009).

METHODOLOGY

The research question to be examined considers whether or not police agencies should institute mandatory Critical Incident Stress Debriefings for officers who have been exposed to extreme trauma. The research will examine the effects of critical incident stress on law enforcement officers. It will also examine what role Critical Incident Stress Debriefing might play in allowing officers to recover emotionally and mentally from traumatic incidents.

The researcher hypothesizes that Critical Incident Stress Debriefings are beneficial for officers who have been exposed to a critical incident. Further, a failure to provide necessary follow-up to these officers exposes them to greater risks of stress related problems. The utilization of CISD will benefit both the officers and the law enforcement agencies involved.

The method of inquiry will include: a review of journals, articles, books, personal interviews, and a survey to be distributed to 22 survey participants. The internet will also be utilized to gather information. Information gathered from these sources will be utilized to determine the efficacy of the utilization of CISD by police agencies.

The instrument that will be used to measure the researcher's findings regarding the subject of Critical Incident Stress Debriefing will be a survey. This survey will seek to determine the level of mental health assistance that is provided to officers by their agencies following a critical incident. It will also seek to gauge the importance that supervisors place on Critical Incident Stress Debriefing. The size of the survey will

consist of seven questions. It will be distributed to 22 survey participants from Texas. The participants will include supervisors and middle managers from 20 different law enforcement agencies.

The response rate to the survey instrument resulted in 100% returned. Many of the participants also made comments relating to their thoughts on the helpfulness of CISD. Responses were gathered from a diverse representation of small to mid-size police agencies. The information obtained from the survey will be analyzed by comparing the number of agencies who have policies that deal with critical incident exposure, with those who have no policies in place. It will also examine numbers of police departments that participate in CISD or provide access to mental health professionals and or chaplains. The numbers of supervisors and managers who participate in the survey who affirm the efficacy of CISD will be compared with those who do not. This will be graphically represented.

FINDINGS

Critical Incident Stress is of major concern to the law enforcement profession. A survey was distributed to supervisors and managers who serve in 20 law enforcement agencies from throughout the state of Texas. These agencies included 15 municipal police departments, four county sheriff's departments, and one hospital district police department. Departments ranged in size from 5 officers to 590 sworn officers. Survey participants answered questions regarding their departments' response to officers who had been involved in a highly traumatic experience. These respondents were asked if their agencies provide employee access to mental health professionals and chaplains.

They were also asked whether they believe CISD is helpful to those officers who participate.

The majority of respondents indicated that their department has a policy in effect that addresses officers who have been exposed to a critical incident. Most departments surveyed also included CISD as part of their policies. These findings are represented in Figure 1.

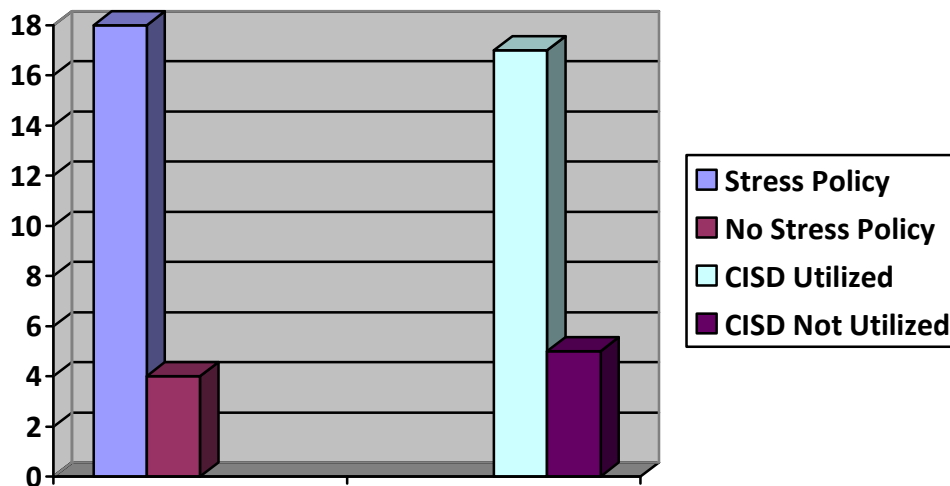


Figure 1. This chart represents a comparison of agencies surveyed that have traumatic event stress policies in place and/or conduct CISD versus those that do not.

Survey participants were also asked whether or not their agencies provided employee access to mental health professionals and chaplains. All departments surveyed indicated that they provide access to mental health professionals. Most indicated that they provide access to a chaplain. These results are demonstrated in Table I.

Survey participants were asked whether they believe that CISD is helpful to officers. Twenty-one out of twenty-two respondents answered that they believe that CISD is helpful. One respondent did not answer this question.

Table I. Agency Provided Access to Mental Health Professionals and Chaplain Services

Mental Health and Chaplain Services	Yes	No
Access to Mental Health Professional	22	0
Access to Chaplain Services	17	5

Many made comments indicating that they had participated in CISD and that it proved beneficial to officers who participated. Others commented that CISD gives officers an opportunity to talk about the incident and that it further gives supervisors an opportunity to observe officers who may need follow-up assistance beyond the initial debriefing. Two respondents commented that CISD should be mandatory, while another expressed concern that officers will not participate unless mandated to do so.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

The problem or issue examined by the researcher considered whether or not Critical Incident Stress Debriefing should be mandatory for law enforcement officers who are exposed to a traumatic event. Some agencies already have CISD as a mandatory response to critical incidents, while others allow officers to voluntarily participate. Other agencies do not utilize CISD, but they often have other means of assistance available for officers.

The purpose of this research was to determine whether the literature available supports CISD as being helpful to the emotional and mental recovery of law enforcement personnel following a traumatic event or experience. The research included an examination of literature detailing the experience of first responders who participated in post traumatic event CISD. The research was also intended to determine whether those who have participated in CISD believe the process is helpful in alleviating symptoms of post traumatic stress.

The research question that was examined focused on whether CISD is efficacious to law enforcement officers. The research examined the effectiveness of CISD as a means of relieving post traumatic stress. These questions were examined through journal articles, books, personal interviews with a mental health professional and a crisis team member, and a survey given to law enforcement supervisors.

The researcher hypothesized that CISD would be found to be beneficial in the reduction of symptoms of post traumatic stress for exposed officers. It would also assist the officers in returning to normal emotional and mental states. This, in turn, would result in healthier officers who would greatly improve the quality of service that agencies are able to provide following traumatic events.

The researcher concluded from the findings that Critical Incident Stress Debriefing plays an important role in the emotional and mental recovery of first responders who have been exposed to or were involved in critical incidents. It is of great importance that law enforcement agencies recognize the need to implement policies to address the aftermath of critical incidents. A mandatory CISD program would be an important component of the follow-up that agencies offer following incidents of extreme

trauma. This would give officers the opportunity to vent while expressing their feelings and give supervisors and mental health professionals the opportunity to observe those who might need further assistance or evaluation.

The findings of the research did support the hypothesis. The reason why the findings did support the hypothesis is probably due to the fact that CISD has been utilized for several years by many police and fire departments throughout the nation. There has been much anecdotal evidence supporting CISD. Police officers and firefighters who have participated in CISD stated that the process is helpful in improving the way they feel. Respondents to the survey indicated that they believe that CISD is beneficial to participants. Hockanson and Wirth (2000) found that a majority of surveyed Los Angeles County Firefighters share this belief. There is also indication that the stress related symptoms of first responders are reduced at a quicker rate when CISD is utilized.

Limitations that might have hindered this study resulted because the literature on CISD did not reflect universal acceptance of its benefits. Further testing of CISD being utilized with emergency services personnel could shed additional light on the benefits of CISD. To date, there is no consensus among mental health practitioners regarding the use of CISD.

The study of Critical Incident Stress Debriefing is relevant to contemporary law enforcement because officers are exposed, at times, to extremely violent and traumatic events. Law enforcement agencies may fail to recognize that officers are experiencing difficulty coping until they begin missing work or the symptoms of post traumatic stress become severe. By developing a mental health program that includes the use of CISD,

the departments provide an opportunity for officers to talk about the event. CISD also offers education to participants, focusing on what is a “normal reaction” to a critical incident.

Law enforcement personnel and agencies both stand to benefit from the results of this research as more agencies begin to emphasize the mental and emotional health of employees who have been involved in or who have witnessed traumatic events. This emphasis will result in improved mental and emotional health of these officers. Agencies will benefit as officers recover sooner, which will result in increased productivity and decreased missed work time following traumatic events.

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APPENDIX

Critical Incident Stress Debriefing Survey

1) Number of Sworn Officers in agency: _____

2) Does your agency have a policy dealing with officers' exposure to critical incidents (trauma)
Yes_____ No_____

If answer to question 2 is yes, please answer questions 3-5. If answer to question 2 is no go to question 6.

3. Does your department conduct Critical Incident Stress Debriefings (CISDs)?
Yes_____ No_____

4. Who participates in the CISDs?
Involved Officers _____ Witness Officers_____

5. Who facilitates the CISDs? (check all that apply)
Peer Counselors_____ Supervisors_____ Mental Health Professionals_____

6. Do you believe that CISD's are helpful to officers?

Yes_____ No_____

Please Comment_____

6. Does your agency provide officers with access to mental health professionals?

Yes_____ No_____

7. Does your agency provide officers with access to a chaplain?

Yes_____ No_____ If yes, is the chaplain on staff or volunteer?_____