

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

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Critical Incident Debriefing

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**An Administrative Research Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Required for Graduation from the
Leadership Command College**

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November-2004**

ABSTRACT

Law Enforcement officers are exposed to stress and trauma both directly and indirectly more than any other segment of our society during any definable time period. While a number of researchers have completed studies on the effects of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) on the private sector, no studies have been directed in showing the effects of PTSD on law enforcement. This researcher, through personal experience, believes the numbers for the law enforcement community are higher than for the civilian populace. All law enforcement officers are affected by PTSD at some time in their carrier. The majority of officers may never be involved in a shooting, but as this author can attest to, will be involved daily in other types of incidents that can and will have effects surface from PTSD. While agencies recognize the potential harm an officer can suffer from a shooting incident none seem to recognize the potential problems for an officer who is continually subjected to mankind's inhumanity to each other. While there are no specific studies as to how an officer deals with the day-to-day onslaught of emotions faced it is clear they eventually affect him/her. The minimal data that is available does not support any conclusion as to the effect officers, suffering from PTSD, has on an agency. Agencies need to ensure their officers know of the services available to them and encourage their use for the law enforcement profession to begin to combat this problem. If these steps are not taken there is no definable way to determine the impact PTSD is having on agencies, individual officers, and the families\communities they serve.

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INTRODUCTION

Law Enforcement officers are exposed to stress and trauma both directly and indirectly more than any other segment of our society during any definable time period. The law enforcement community by an undocumented tradition instills the belief in officers from the time they enter an academy that they must be able to remain emotionally detached from incidents around them. Officers are also made to believe that if they cannot detach themselves from these incidents they are not worthy to be police officers dealing with the crime on the streets. (Kureczka 1996) Only recently have law enforcement agencies realized the effects PTSD can have on officers involved in shooting incidents. Many agencies provide some type of Critical Incident Debriefing (CID) for officer involved shootings. Rarely has the debriefing been mandatory for the officer/officers involved. Most agencies do not have written criteria defining a "Critical Incident", (other than for a shooting), or policies mandating the procedures to follow if an officer is involved in a critical incident.

There is no way to measure the impact a critical incident will have on every officer. Some officers handle incidents differently and can recover from PTSD relating to an incident within two to three days. Others will carry the symptoms for months, even years never realizing what they are suffering from. Without proper training of administrators, supervisors, and officers to recognize the symptoms experienced, qualified personnel may be lost. If an agency were to implement a mandatory policy for all officers to attend a debriefing session after being involved in a critical incident officers as well as the agency would benefit. Of course the biggest benefactors would be the individual officer and their family.

This researcher will look at the need for Critical Incident Debriefing becoming a part of day to day operations within the law enforcement community. The method of inquiry that will be used will include studying written/published materials, personal interviews, Policy reviews, and personal experience. Costs associated with PTSD can be found to be enormous in dollar amounts, productivity, alcohol/substance abuse, experienced personnel losses, and sick time abuse for an agency. Agencies should be able to see the need for making Critical Incident Debriefings mandatory not optional for all officers involved in a critical incident for humane as well as liability issues. (Pierson, 1989)

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

While a number of researchers have completed studies on the effects of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) on the private sector, no studies have been directed in showing the effects of PTSD on law enforcement. This researcher, through personal experience, believes the numbers for the law enforcement community are higher than for the civilian populace. All law enforcement officers are affected by PTSD at some time in their carrier.

“Researchers have found that 13 to 35 percent of all police officers suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as it is defined by the American Psychiatric Association - far greater than the 1 percent found in the general population. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, (PTSD), is an extreme form of stress disorder that can occur as a result of a threatening event, which provokes fear, helplessness, or horror” (Brosnan 1999). The resulting physical and emotional impact on the

individual officer, the officer's family, the agency, and the public they serve can be hard if not impossible to measure if administrators, supervisors, and officers are not taught to recognize the symptoms of PTSD.

Law enforcement agencies do not have to or keep statistics showing why officers have left the agency. No statistics are documented concerning officers abusing sick time or the reasons why it is being abused. No statistics are kept for officers' involvement in critical incidents, so no direct correlation can be made.

Randy Dickson, a noted trainer in the area of Critical Incident Stress Management, stated that while there has been some formal research on the topic of PTSD and its effects on police officers, the data is currently highly disputed. In Mr. Dickson's inquiries of authors who have published articles on the subject he was unable to obtain documentation from them regarding proof of the statistics they quoted in their articles (Personal Interview, August 2004). This backs the belief of this researcher that there is insufficient data for a valid conclusion to be made as to the effects PTSD on law enforcement personnel. Mr. Dickson felt, as this researcher does, that part of the lack of a documented study may be in part to law enforcement officers reluctance to speak to others outside the profession.

The Galveston County Sheriff's Office Policy Manual lists a critical incident as an officer involved shooting incident. The policy discusses PTSD for officers involved in an on duty shooting incident and lists specific steps that are to be taken when an incident occurs. The policy makes it mandatory for officers to contact an agency-designated specialist for counseling and evaluation. It also makes mandatory for a specialist to make a report to the agency relating to the

officers status. No other “critical” incident an officer may encounter is described in the manual.

This author reviewed the Galveston Police Department’s Policy Manual and found that it is very vague in its description of a critical incident. It has mandatory procedures for officers to follow when involved in a shooting incident but is very vague for any other type of death or injury an officer may be forced to deal with.

The Texas City Police Department’s Policy Manual also gives specific procedures to follow when an officer is involved in a shooting incident. The policy does not make mention of any other type of incident an officer may become involved in. All three departments policies reviewed have mandatory procedures for supervisors and officers to follow if a shooting incident occurs.

In reviewing the Galveston County Sheriff’s Office policy it was found to state that the supervisors are to specifically monitor the officer and support personnel involved for PTSD. It also stated the office will provide training for personnel to be able to recognize officers who may be suffering from PTSD weeks after the incident as an officer may try to disguise the symptoms from an incident. This policy is one that has moved in the direction to assist their personnel

An overall picture can be put together to show that even today, with all the support systems available, the policies reviewed reflect heavily towards addressing only a slight or minute sector of a problem. The majority of officers may never be involved in shooting, but as this author can attest to, will be involved daily in other types of incidents that can and will have effects surface from PTSD. Some officers resign or retire prematurely; while others become

disciplinary problems for the departments they work for and/or develop an increase of absenteeism. (McNally and Solomon, 1999)

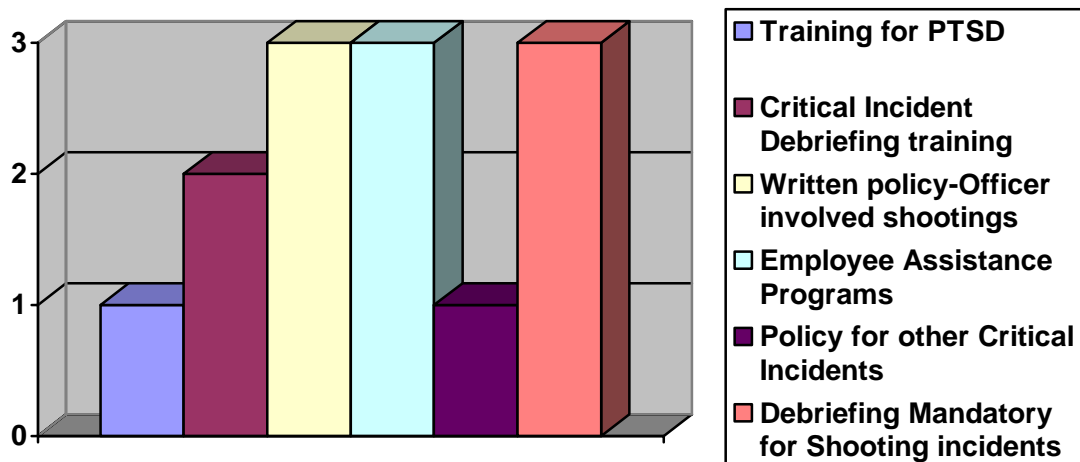
METHODOLOGY

Is there a need for enforcement agencies to have written policy that defines critical incidents, and what steps/actions are to be followed if an officer becomes involved in a critical incident? Sub-questions then surface as to the need to include a Critical Incident Debriefing team being available to officers, officers knowing how to contact or utilize this team and training. Departments that have a policy recognizing an officer involved shooting as a critical incident, and have some formal guidelines or procedures that will be implemented in that event only, do not define within that policy other types of critical incidents or cumulative incidents an officer may be involved in nor do they have guidelines or procedures to follow if it is recognized that an officer is exhibiting signs of PTSD. (Pierson, 1989) This writer will search to find if the officers in the respective agencies are familiar with the policy and, subsequently, would notify their supervisor if they are having difficulties or if are not coping well with a particular incident or situation. Agencies will be reviewed in regard to what, if any, type of training they provide for supervisors and administrative personnel to recognize when an officer may be struggling with an incident or cumulative incidents. Officers from agencies with 50 to 100 sworn personnel, agencies with 100 to 200 sworn personnel, and agencies with over 200 sworn personnel will be interviewed. The personnel interviewed have experience ranging in service of 1 to 5 years and over 5 years. Agencies training coordinators will be contacted to ascertain if any formal training

exists for supervisors and administrators. Officers from agencies within Galveston County will be contacted and interviewed. The training coordinators were also contacted and polled. The interviews will be evaluated and presented in this paper along with an interview from an officer trained in debriefing

FINDINGS

Of the three agencies training coordinators polled one offered specific training for supervisors or administrative personnel in the recognition of officers who may be suffering specifically from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or “burn out.” Two of the agencies did have members who are trained in Critical Incident Debriefing. All three agencies did have an Employee Assistance Program in place for their officers. All three of the agencies had a written policy for procedures to be followed when an officer is involved in a shooting incident. One of the agencies polled had criteria listed for incidents outside of a shooting and but did not make mention of the type of incident. All three of the agencies made debriefing mandatory after an officer involved shooting.



It is important at this point to note that an initial debriefing is mandatory for all officers involved in a shooting, but only after the interview with a person trained in debriefing did this researcher learn the debriefing process was not what this researcher believed it to be. Deputy Clyde Batton, of the Galveston County Sheriff's Office, advised the name for the process inquired about was now called Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM). He explained the debriefing process was usually followed by all agencies, but had little to do with the stress of the officers involved in an incident. The debriefing process was only to analyze the actions taken by officers of the agency and what could be done differently or better in the next incident. He also states that the training for members of a "Stress Management" team was paid for by outside sources and not the individual agencies. It is Deputy Batton's opinion that Critical Incident Stress Management is sorely overlooked when officers are involved in critical incidents. When asked if he felt Critical Incident Stress Management should be made mandatory for officers involved in an incident, he stated the general opinion of people in the field is a resounding no. An inquiry was made to him regarding what cost an agency pays when a team or member of the team is called upon to assist an officer or group of officers. He related that at no time is an agency or individual officer charged for the services provided by any member of the CISM team. The only cost to an agency is the time spent by the CISM team members to speak with officers. He did not feel enough agencies provided officers the awareness of the team or how to contact team members if they were needed. He feels there is a definite stigma that officer's fear they will be 'branded' if they advise supervisors they need or want help with a bad situation.

Due the nature of this research, the individual officers who were interviewed will be numbered and referred to as such. This is to protect not only the officer from possible repercussions from his/her department but also to protect the family members of the same officers.

Officer #1 is a veteran officer with over 25 years law enforcement experience. He is divorced and has two grown children. Over the years he has suffered from and treated for alcoholism. He said he has been involved in numerous "bad" situations. He was taught or made to feel an officer is supposed to be able to deal with the problems society has and not be affected by them. He related that veteran officers who mentored him told him to block the incidents out. He said they tried to tell him you have to leave work at work and home at home. He feels police officers sometimes are expected to live a double life, one at work and one at home. He has had all types of problems as a result of doing the job the way they expect him to. When asked if his agency had any type of counseling or assistance for officers involved in critical incidents he advised they do for shooting situations and the counseling that is provided is mandatory debriefing sessions. He states there is no program or person he knows of for an individual officer to go to talk through problems he may be having aside from the Employee Assistance program. He strongly recommended an officer not use Employee Assistance because the administration would find out and he would lose his position or be labeled by other officers as unreliable. He said if an officer has a problem he should develop a close network of brother officers to go and have a drink with to blow off some steam, before going home. He felt seeing the things

police officers are forced to respond to and deal with on a day to day basis is just part of the job and a person learns to deal with it or doesn't.

Officer #2 is a 12-year veteran of law enforcement. He is currently married to his second wife and has one child with her. He has two children from his previous marriage. He told me he does not have a very good relationship with his two older children. He believes they view him as a "monster". He told me he drinks every day with the guys or at home. He said he has seen a lot over his tenure as a police officer and has at times had nightmares from the scenes he has visited. He feels they are part of the job and a young officer has to learn to develop a coping mechanism to survive. He said officers must develop a second skin if they are to survive on the streets. He related that the only way he made it through is to develop an attitude that everything he responds to can be justified. The people he deals with put themselves in these situations and brought the problems on themselves. He is very sensitive to the needs of children but again said an officer can't become emotionally involved with people's problems. He also stated the agency he works for is not concerned about the individual officer. He feels the agency only wants the job done and does not really care how it gets done. An officer is expected to deal with the problems and move on. He said the agency does have an Employee Assistance Program but he would not recommend an officer use it. He said other officers who find out would label you as unstable and would not want you on their scenes. He feels if a young officer needs to talk he has to rely on his peers not a doctor or counselor who doesn't have a clue about the streets. He said his agency does have a mandatory debriefing for shooting incidents but not for anything else. This researcher

inquired if he felt young officers would benefit from a program where an officer having a problem could go and talk to a peer in a one on one setting. He said he believed officers would benefit but would not use the person unless the process was mandatory for fear of what other officers would think of them. He thought his agency may have people an officer could talk to but did not know who they were or how to contact them.

Officer #3 is a 10-year veteran of law enforcement. He is currently married to his third wife and has two stepchildren. He had no children from his previous marriages. He feels he has a very good relationship with his stepchildren. He said he had a drinking problem early in his carrier but was able to get it under control after being written up by his agency several times for various problems. He said he knows a lot of other officers who drink heavily after a shift and on their days off. He said the young ones are especially prone to binge drinking after a bad call. He told me he went to his supervisor and was able to receive help from the Employee Assistance Program his agency provides. He didn't feel the help was enough and personally paid for further assistance with his drinking problem. He said the Employee Assistance Program is the only avenue he knows of for an officer in need of help. He said he sees young officers all the time who are having trouble dealing with different scenes they respond to. He has tried to help the officers by giving them a person they can talk to about the problems. He said any incidents involving children who die are especially hard on the young troops. He felt a program needed to be in place where officers could go and talk. He knows of other agencies that have people that officers can go to and talk to without fear of reprisal. He did not believe his agency had anyone with that type of experience

or training. He said his agency did have a mandatory debriefing session for officers involved in a shooting. He felt officers need the same type of debriefing for a lot of other things they deal with throughout their career. He stated he did not believe the administration of the city or county would provide this type of assistance due to the cost for the individual agency.

Officer #4 has two years of law enforcement experience on the streets and three years experience in a correction setting. He is married to his first wife and has no children. He said he drinks often but does not let it affect his job performance. He has had several incidents where he has gone to a scene and had nightmares afterwards. He told me he has talked to several veteran officers about the incidents and been told of many ways to deal with the feelings he is having. One veteran officers tells him and all other rookie officers they have to understand all calls they make are bulls—t. He tells them as soon as they realize this then they won't have any problems leaving work at work. Officer #4 does not believe all the calls he responds to are that way and is trying hard to learn to cope with all the things he is exposed to. He also sated he feels if he tells veterans about a problem he is having they are quick to respond with technical assistance or expertise, but if the problem is dealing with his feelings about an incident he is told to just forget it and move on. One veteran told him if you want to make it on the streets you have to turn off your emotions. He stated he did not know if his agency had a person, program, or policy in place to help him. He did say he talks about the incidents with his friends at work, but is unable to talk to his wife or family members about the incidents, stating his family doesn't understand what police officers see everyday. He also stated he has considered leaving the

agency on two separate occasions after a “bad call” really got to him and also stated that if the agency had someone to talk to he would use them. He did not know if the agency had someone trained in debriefing, and if they did, how or who to contact to reach them. He related that it would be better for an officer if it were mandatory for them to speak with a counselor after a “bad call” so other officers would not view them as weak.

Officer #5 has four years law enforcement experience on the streets. He is single and has no children. He has not been involved in many bad situations. He told me the worst call he responded to was a house fire where the occupants were all trapped inside and burned to death. He states he did not have to do anything but an initial report because an outside agency was called in with investigators. He did say he still smells the fire and people he watched the fire department remove from the scene. He said it bothered him for a long time because two of the occupants were children. He stressed to me that after hearing some of the stories from officers with bigger agencies he realized his problem was not that big a deal. He said his agency did not have a policy for him to go to a counselor. They did offer an Employee Assistance Program, but he would not use that because all the other officers would know and not want to talk to him. He said he hears other officers from larger agencies talking and he has learned he may not have what it takes to make it on the streets. He is currently looking for an alternative to police work. He said he feels agencies should have a person or policy telling their officers it is okay to feel for victims of crime, accidents, or deaths and teach them how to deal with their feelings, not to just shut them out. He said his agency does not have a policy in place.

Officer #6 has one year of law enforcement experience. He is currently married to his second wife and has two children. He told me he has not been involved in an incident he would define as critical. He has had a prisoner die in custody while he was on duty, and seen several victims of a vehicle accident. He has also seen several suicides, one involving a young teenager. He said the suicides bothered him most. He has had nightmares about them but they went away after a few days. He described himself as a social drinker. He said he knows eventually he will be involved in a really bad situation. He is not sure of his agencies policy concerning the procedures he will have to follow. He said if he needed assistance with a problem he has heard the agency has an Employee Assistance Program. He said he would not use the program because officers have to deal with incidents they encounter or other officers will not want to work with them. He did not know of any other avenues he could take if he felt he needed to talk to someone. He stated the last vehicle accident he had worked involved the death of a 12-year-old girl. He said he was having a real problem with the incident because he is very close to his niece who is 11 years old. He was unsure how he would eventually come to grips with the incident, but was sure he would.

This researcher has served in law enforcement for the past 18 years and is divorced with two children. Over the course of this researcher's career there have been numerous types of incidents which this researcher has been involved in and over the course of time was taught, early on, to separate work from home life. This researcher learned if "you had a bad call you dealt with it and moved on". How to deal with the feelings has been totally up to the individual officer.

Encouragement was given over the years to talk to other officers, but most gave only recommendation to just put the incident in the past. After becoming a Field Training Officer (FTO) this researcher and a trainee were involved in a bad incident during a highly publicized event in the area. In answering a call that demanded a person needed to be restrained, after 18 minutes of being restrained the person expired. After the incident the trainee was experiencing difficulty with the incident. The researcher was unsure of how to help him and went to some of the more experienced officers in the agency; to be surprised to learn there were two officers within our agency trained to deal with this type of problem. This researcher was totally unaware fellow officers on the same department were trained in this capacity, even after knowing these officers for years no mention of having this type of training was ever made outwardly known. The trainee was referred to one of the officers for assistance and later told related to this researcher that the assistance he received really helped him deal with the problems he was experiencing. This researcher was under the false impression about the effects of the incident and did not realize it was going to have an affect on himself. After several months and several more bad incidents where victims had expired, this researcher's supervisor and friend confided that comments were being made by the researcher about the original incident and not wanting to make calls to the area. This researcher was still very skeptical and denied the incident was bothering, at anytime. One of the trained counselors met with this researcher and talked about the incident. This researcher came to realize, after talking with the counselor, that there were affects that were occurring and that; in fact, the researcher did have some problems with the incident. This researcher

went back and examined personal statistics for a time from three months prior to the incident to three months after the incident. There was a marked drop in statistics for the three-month period following the incident. This researcher also learned the day following the incident, that both he and trainee had been instructed to take off, had been taken from the sick time balance earned. After administration learned of this the time was credited back to each of us. The trainee confided to this researcher he had considered leaving the law enforcement profession after the incident. This researcher was extremely glad the trainee had talked with officers trained in helping him deal with the problem. This researcher feels that law enforcement would have lost a very good officer had the officer left law enforcement. This personal experience made this researcher realize the importance of having trained personnel to assist officers in coping with the day-to-day carnage they encounter.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

Is there a need for enforcement agencies to have written policy that defines critical incidents, and what steps/actions are to be followed if an officer becomes involved in a critical incident? After reviewing the policy manuals for the agencies polled it is clear the agencies are concerned for their officers mental well being after a shooting incident and list specific procedures to follow if this type of incident occurs. The agencies recognized the potential damage to an officer after such an incident. None of the agencies had a clearly\ definable definition for anything other than a shooting. None of the officers interviewed know if their agency had employee's capable of assisting them with dealing with

the stress of incidents officers encounter on a day-to-day basis. The Galveston County Sheriff's Office does provide training for supervisors, front line officers, and administrators. The training is not mandatory for any personnel and therefore not widely taken. Also, none of the agencies keep statistical data on reasons officers leave the agency or if there were problems with the officer. Much of this data may be found in personnel records but they are unreachable.

While all three agencies recognize the potential harm an officer can suffer from a shooting incident none seem to recognize the potential problems for an officer who is continually subjected to mankind's inhumanity to each other. While all three training coordinators are aware of the possible difficulties this type of problem can have for an agency, it is also clear that even when training is offered if it is not made mandatory and therefore, it will not be attended.

While there are no specific studies as to how an officer deals with the day-to-day onslaught of emotions faced it is clear they eventually affect him/her. The minimal data that is available does not support any conclusion as to the effect officers suffering from PTSD has on an agency. The lack of a study may be in part due to most officers' reluctance to speak outside of their circle of friends and confidants. They fear repercussions from other officers as well as administration for a perceived lack of ability to handle any situation and cope by just moving on. It is the opinion of this researcher that the full impact PTSD has on individual officers, their families, agencies, or communities will never be known until more in depth studies are conducted. It is clear officers will not use the counseling services of even their peers if they feel there will be any type of repercussions. Agencies need to ensure their officers know of the services available to them and

encourage their use for the law enforcement profession to begin to combat this problem. There is a definite need for further research into the subject.

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