

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

**Small Agencies Big Incidents: Adaption of Incident Command
Systems to Manage Crisis Incidents with Tactical and Combat
Inclusions**

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ABSTRACT

Regardless of size, law enforcement agencies are increasingly challenged with crises that range from natural disasters, mass casualty incidents, and simple calls for service that expand to the unexpected in a moment's notice. Leaders and officers of law enforcement agencies are expected to handle and resolve these challenges in a safe way. This mandate means that the small agency, rurally placed, without the benefit of a large budget and endless manpower faces unique issues in meeting crisis demands. Without manpower and with only limited resources, small agencies must think through bigger and more restrictive issues more carefully than their larger department counterparts who have more manpower and extensive budgets that allow for a specialized response.

Small agencies are forced to think their way through issues and work with only the management tools available. Thus, they must pre plan and consider how incidents can be responded to in a systematic way that will result in a proactive pathway to ensure safety and accountability. The practical application of the Incident Command System (ICS) to incidents with tactical or combat elements, when practiced from patrol officer to the top, as well as laterally, department to department, is a powerful tool that will assist in the organization of resources (manpower included) to save time and lives. Although law enforcement agencies receive training in ICS, many agencies, because of small size and limited budgets, fail to practice the day-to-day fundamental principles of the system. While small agencies may not be able to control or fund a large-scale event through to completion, they will be the initial responding agency and the one that must control the incident until assistance arrives.

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INTRODUCTION

Banks, Hendrix, Hickman, and Kyckelhahn (2016) assert that across the United States, the most common police agency employs ten or fewer officers and is situated in a small town, most likely strapped with an insufficient budget to handle incidents beyond the standard call for service. According to the Texas Association of Counties (2020), Galveston County covers 874 square miles and supports a total population of 335,036 for an average of 383 persons per square mile. A closer examination shows that the smallest close-knit communities in the county are Santa Fe with 13,000 population spread over 17 square miles, Dickinson's 20,359 people live in 10.27 square miles, Hitchcock covers an amazing 92.09 square miles but has only 7,900 citizens and is contingent with Santa Fe and with its neighboring city of LaMarque with 16,766 citizens covering 14.3 square miles (Texas Association of Counties, 2020). Viewing these cities in this manner drives home the observation that not every community can support an agency with extensive manpower and budgets that would allow an agency to deal with a complex response to an issue with novel tactical elements without assistance. Sadly, small and rural towns are not exempt from mass casualty incidents or looming natural disasters, and places with low crime and wide spaces suffer from lack of immediate resources and tight budgets.

Despite an agency's size, it must bear the burden of increased responsibilities and liability should a chaotic and tragic incident occur. The responsibility for handling an incident starts with the first responding police officer who must be prepared to go beyond the simple position of a police officer and step into a position to manage a scene that requires additional emergency responders than their department can supply.

In fact, the first officer on the scene is responsible to identify and coordinate any services required under the worst conditions or settle for dispatch-driven response that could limit effective police response (Gillham & Marx, 2018). Incidents such as the church shooting that killed 26 and injured 20 in Sutherland Springs (Vertuno, 2017), or the school shooting in Santa Fe, Texas that killed 10 and injured 13 (Lodhia, 2018) were clearly able to overextend the abilities of the jurisdictional law enforcement agency and first responders and required assistance from multiple agencies. Federal law enforcement, as well as additional local and state level officers responded to Sutherland Springs (Vertuno, 2017), and over 200 officers from various agencies responded to the Santa Fe High School shooting (Lodhia, 2018). Incidents that require multiagency responses serve to reinforce the need to preplan to control such an incident requires a more formal structure such as the Incident Command System (ICS) suggested by the National Incident Management System (NIMS) to manage scene control during the first critical moments (Bigley & Roberts, 2001).

Outside of weather events, most small and rural placed police agencies live with the knowledge that they need interdependent first responders and support. Banks et al. (2016) suggest that until a department reaches a baseline of about 100 sworn employees, specialized divisions are not adequately funded to support a dedicated response unit to deal with specific crimes or tragic events. Further, it generally takes an even larger department to handle an event identified as a terroristic incident or civil disorder (Banks et al., 2016; Reaves, 2015). Moynihan's (2009) 'no man is an island' theory indicates that only the largest departments can control a major crisis. However, when the incident is large enough, for example, incidents on the par of the magnitude of

9/11 or Boston's Marathon Bombing, resource and manpower requirements may outpace even the biggest department's abilities. Events of such magnitude often include collaboration with state and federal assistance.

After September 11th, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) adopted protocols, mandated by ICS, based on President George W. Bush's signature of the United States Homeland Security Presidential Directive 5 (House, 2003). The directive recognized that local, state, and federal emergency responders, as well as non-governmental and private sector partners, needed to have a management system that under which resources could be deployed both internationally and domestically (House, 2003). However, despite the mandated presidential directives, law enforcement has been slow to adopt and use effectively what is often considered fire department protocols (House, 2003). This is particularly true in rural and small-town departments where training budgets are limited, and departments depend on mandates being met in basic police officer training.

Weather events on the Gulf Coast are experienced every few years, and county wide emergency management along with FEMA assistance is set in place and managed through Incident Command System (ICS). As such, most agencies in this area are able to face a large-scale crisis or disaster successfully with the assistance of larger or similar agencies (Moynihan, 2009). ICS is not new to public service and was originally developed as part of the National Incident Management System (NIMS) in response to the mismanagement of the manpower and resources that resulted in a considerable loss of life of firefighters and property damage during the California wildfires in the 1970s (Bigley & Roberts, 2001). As the disaster grew, so did the number of first

responders, equipment and the ability to manage manpower. Decentralized management systems competed with ineffective communication systems, misinformation, rumor, exhaustion, internal strife, and friction.

In the end, the lessons learned indicated the importance of a centralized information source that could provide accurate facts as well as a failure to centrally plan and then carry out that plan effectively. Thus, the failure to efficiently move and make much needed equipment was available where it was needed or adequately move manpower to requested locations in a timely manner. Based on the careful and extensive review of what happened during the fires, it was noted that decentralized control, inability to communicate, a lack of trust, and even a simple difference in terminology stopped progress and created unnecessary confusion (Buck, Trainor, & Aguirre, 2006).

Bigley and Roberts (2001) define ICS as “a particular approach to assembly and control the highly reliable temporary organizations employed by many public safety professionals to manage diverse resources at emergency scenes” (p. 1281). Moynihan (2009) notes that ICS provides a singular command method when multiple agencies and response action is required and must be managed in the face of some ongoing crisis. In the best-case scenario, ICS provides the ability to coordinate the response and position multiple organizations under a central command designed in a hierarchical structure to control the actions of interdependent first responders efficiently under the worst conditions (Bigley & Roberts, 2001; Gillham & Marx, 2018; Phibbs & Snawder, 2014). In reality, command and management issues can arise based on organization mission, inexperienced officers, high levels of stress, personality clashes, frictions and

trust between agencies, and the time-consuming issue of who exactly is in command as the number of responding agencies increases. Lack of training and unfamiliarity with an issue are particularly an issue when small departments are attempting to control and mitigate issues under crisis conditions (Bigley & Roberts, 2001; Phibbs & Snawder, 2014; Tallen, 2008). The response taken by small law enforcement agencies to immediate critical incidents should be carefully preplanned and have an established response plan in place formulated on the ICS guidelines.

POSITION

Clearly, to smaller sized agencies, any method to coordinate and manage multiple agencies at a single scene is a logical choice because if the incident is intense and complex, it will be shared by neighboring agencies. No longer can agencies hope major incidents will not be experienced; it is no longer an 'if' it occurs; it is simply a when. Therefore, these agencies are going to bear the burden of at least the first critical moments and hour(s) of an incident when most chaotic and when the most fatalities occur. It is for these reasons that it is vital for smaller agencies to evaluate and preplan how crisis incidents within their jurisdiction could and will be managed and share that information with their mutual aid partners who will be the first to respond to their call for help. Simply stated, in small town and rural area crisis, law enforcement's management of incidents is often challenged not by a failure to know what to do, but a failure to get in control fast enough to put in place an incident command system that at least attempts to manage resources during the first critical responses and works against the successful conclusion of the law enforcement mission. Therefore, it is imperative that the response taken by small law enforcement agencies to immediate critical incidents should be

carefully preplanned, well known among mutual aid partners, and have an established response plan in place formulated on the ICS guidelines.

Because the majority of police departments are small and inadequately funded for nonroutine calls, it is not difficult to understand how an agency's manpower can be out paced by the size of an incident. Based on this factor alone, it becomes imperative that these agencies have a pre-plan in place that defines what and how an incident that occurs immediately and without warning will be managed and controlled. Preplanned response and Incident Command systems (ICS) should be considered as a vital part of a small agency's operating philosophy (Gillham & Marx, 2018; Phibbs & Snawder, 2014). Bigley and Roberts (2001) assert that the NIMS/ICS is an effective management tool regardless of the size of the incident and can be used by the single patrol officer, so this method of incident control would seem a must for smaller agencies that will work together.

Regardless of a department's size, the Incident Command System can be used to respond and recover from static incidents usually restricted to major weather events. In fact, weather threats, emergency plans and policies are considered, practiced, and in place. Across the United States law enforcement agencies respond to seven classifications of critical incidents usually defined as natural disasters, man-made disasters, law enforcement specific, fire department specific, EMS specific, public health emergencies and planned events. (United States Coast Guard Incident Management Handbook; 2014 Edition, Chapter 1). The above listed classifications of incidents are very different, and all present a specific set of challenges; however, all can be managed the same way using basic ICS principals. While each incident could require different

types of equipment resources, the most important asset, however, are the people. Agencies that have experience with major weather events, are familiar, and work together toward a common resolution.

While larger agencies may have the ability to dedicate training, manpower, and resources to deal with incidents with potential tactical problems (terrorist, active shooter, and SWAT units), the small agency has only wit and preplanning. However, even the earliest deployment of ICS may still be difficult because of the inherent problems of an immediate novel incident, coupled with the multitude of responding agencies, and self-deployed officers working against the ability to direct resources and to establish a hierarchical command system (Phibbs & Snawder, 2014). The smaller agency faces a multitude of issues not considered or recognized in the larger agency, but smaller does not mean inferior. ICS, if thoughtfully considered and practiced, can be used more effectively by small and rural agencies to manage a scene, starting with the arrival of the first responder (Phibbs & Snawder, 2014). The best practices have proven that through collaboration, planning, and practice, ICS can be used by small and rural local law enforcement agencies to improve and enhance police performance at critical incidents that require tactical and self-deployed officers.

COUNTER ARGUMENTS

One issue with the directive is the prohibition of self-deployment, which is characteristic of police officers who often respond without call or direction to work independently, therefore resulting in a lack of officer safety and heavy criticism (Martin, Sargent & Edwards, 2013). In any police initiative, unauthorized officer self-deployment can be a major issue, especially when the structured hierarchy required in ICS can no

longer “relegate or delegate people” where they are needed (Martin et al., 2013, para. 26).

Gillham and Marx (2018) assert that a historical lack of operational planning on the part of law enforcement still exists, despite a vast amount of information or intelligence available to police. Thus, law enforcement, even in 2020, may remain dispatch-driven instead of having plans and operating procedures in place for various incidents.

Gillham and Marx (2018) assert that shared plans between commands hasten a department’s abilities to gain assistance from other agencies and that the response can be more controlled as adjoining agencies follow their plan to assist and by having officers self-deploy based on agreements, thus reducing chaotic response and scenes. Small or rural agencies will depend on neighboring agencies in times of crisis and calls for assistance will be made. ICS, through preplanning, could have eliminated or at least attempted to control some of the issues observed during the Boston Marathon bombings. Small or rural agencies are not exempt from liability from the actions of officers. Leonard, Cole, Howitt, and Heymann (2014) state that “there were many self-deployments or self-reassignments in the sense that the movement was initiated by the individual rather than as the result of a mutual assistance request transmitted between agencies and then affirmatively or systematically from a dispatcher to a unit” (p. 26). However, Leonard et al. (2014) assert that restraint should be used to guard against the idea that the self-deployed officers are rogue officers. While self-deployed officers might clog traffic, or act outside of protocols, in the final review of most incidents the findings on these matters were ambiguous at best. The implication here was that self-deploying

officers are impulsive and respond without regard for protocol. Typically, this description was portrayed through photographs of abandoned police cars parked haphazardly, blocking access to or egress from a crisis scene; the results of self-deployed officers were ambiguous because it also described heroic officers. The most notable example was the self-deployed officers who responded to the shooting event at the Century Theater. These self-deployed officers worked together to transport victims to the hospital in private cars (Leonard et al., 2014) .

ICS, as a management tool, has demonstrated reliability in crisis management in various agencies for routine or non-routine situations (Bigley & Roberts, 2001). The formal rules, procedures, and instructions are made to order for responding bureaucracies that need linear, step-by-step procedures to operate based on specialized jobs and require particularized training.

Furin and Goldstein (2017) assert that some advantages of working with ICS would be the establishment of a common terminology. Speaking a common language is essential so that miscommunication and misunderstandings are eliminated when multiple organizations with varying structures attempt to coordinate their efforts (Furin & Goldstein, 2017). ICS is modular and can be adapted depending on the size and type of incident (Furin & Goldstein, 2017). Management of the incident is based on clear, measurable objectives (Bigley & Roberts, 2001). Incident action planning and the writing of a formal incident action plan (IAP) are fundamental during responses. Input from each section is taken into account during the planning process, and the IAP is finalized and approved by the incident commander (Furin & Goldstein, 2017).

According to Bigley and Roberts (2001), the advantages of ICS facilitates

command, operations, planning, logistics, and finance, of which each can be reduced to the following 14 actions. Bigley and Roberts (2001) and Buck et al (2006) support the commonality of terms and elimination of jargon specific to a single department to help avoid confusion and to enhance interoperability. Other actions include the establishment and transfer of command, as well as clearly outlined chains of command and unity of effort, unified command, management by objectives, modular organization, incident action planning, a manageable span of control, incident location and facilities, comprehensive resource management, integrated communications, information and intelligence management, accountability, dispatch and development. Thus, each of these actions support the primary goal of law enforcement's response, even in small and rural cities, to promote a safe response to any incident. Gillham and Marx (2018) assert that calm and control can be accomplished by establishing command, management by objectives, and reliance on an incident action plan.

Gillham and Marx (2018) assert that a historical lack of operational planning on the part of law enforcement still exists, despite a vast amount of information or intelligence available to police. Thus, law enforcement, even in 2020, may remain dispatch-driven instead of having plans and operating procedures in place for various incidents. Gillham and Marx (2018) assert that shared plans between commands hasten a department's abilities to gain assistance from other agencies and that the response can be more controlled as adjoining agencies follow their plan to assist and by having officers self-deploy based on agreements, thus reducing chaotic response and scenes.

Some researchers assert that ICS may not be the most effective management tool for police operations despite being a reliable method of firefighting command (Buck

et al., 2006; Klein, 1999; Rosegrant, 2001). Fire might be a living, breathing thing, but it is always fire and does not fundamentally change year to year. According to Klein (1999), "The people fighting forest fires have plenty of firsthand experience...They are fighting an adversary that does not change tactics or add new weapons, so the experience gained one year applies the next" (p. 237). Klein (1999) asserted that ICS might present a command system that is too rigid and structured when used by first responding law enforcement officers who may not be familiar with the type or method of the crisis at hand. Klein's idea has been supported by researchers, including Buck et al. (2006), who assert that ICS is successful in limited incidents and firefighting because of the number of absolute certainties foreknown in those disaster responses. This luxury is not shared in chaotic incidents that are tactical or combat in nature, such as an ongoing active shooter situation.

Buck et al. (2006) note that the effectiveness of ICS is based on the incident, which might define the type of management system required. Thus, a chaotic incident that is unknown and unexperienced previously might not fit nicely into an organized response design of NIMS/ICS where attention is demanded from the responder group at hand. Clearly, it is the event that acts as a major determinant of whether ICS can adequately and efficiently manage the incident (Buck et al., 2006).

Klein (1999) challenged ICS as a command management system for police tactical events and identified the differences in deciding the direction from which to address fire and attempting an unknown control of a tactical event by highly stressed first responding law enforcement. While ICS is an effective system to coordinate and manage the responding emergency personnel, when tactical decisions are required and

responders are self-deploying as authorized and unauthorized responders, stress and trust are the major components to controlling or losing control of the scene. During the review of the Columbine shooting, Rosegrant (2001) asserted that the “fast evolving demands of the situation, the number of responding officers” (p. 14) was significantly challenging to the single and rigidly structured ICS. Thus, as Buck et al. (2006) asserted, ICS is best applied when the incident is under control, thus in law enforcement incidents may be best “limited to allow an organized response to it, as well as to generate the sort of demands for which first responders train” (pp. 16–17).

The most powerful argument against ICS for law enforcement is supported by Hillyard's (2000) argument that NIMS and ICS was designed for the crisis that is of a low to moderate intensity/complexity for which the respondent is highly familiar (Buck et al., 2006; Hillyard, 2000). It was Hillyard (2000) that identified three variables that defined the typology of a crisis. A crisis' intensity is determined based on the number of problems in the same event; the number of agencies that are required to respond to the level of complexity; and the determination of familiarity (Buck et al., 2006). On the gulf coast of Texas, a weather event, no matter how major, is one that comes with a high level of experience, despite the number of first responders or after-the-fact responders. The weather event follows a relatively consistent path, so it is easily adapted to ICS. Sadly, incidents that require a tactical response come with an unknown and unpredictable quality that is high in all categories. According to Hillyard (2000), these are the least adaptable to ICS principles in the most critical hours.

Many agencies have preconceived notions that the training to qualify its members in ICS is too long and not cost effective. Phibbs and Snawder (2014) dispute

law enforcement's resistance to adopting NIMS/ICS procedures to deal with incidents. Administrators of law enforcement agencies feel that the training classes are taught as part of the basic peace officer training in the academy. However, administrators often overlook the value and effectiveness of implementing an ICS philosophy that can be used by a single officer or at least control a situation until it can be passed off to an outside agency because of asset limitations. The ICS process, if applied correctly, can be managed by an officer of any rank who sets priorities, outlines the objectives, and steps up to manage the incident (Phibbs & Snawder, 2014).

RECOMMENDATION

History has shown that small cities are not exempt from big novel incidents, and that the small city must, despite their limitations, handle crisis incidents. The research shows that law enforcement agencies often fail to understand ICS as a command and management system, and many choose not even to attempt to use it. For the small agency that is dependent upon immediate aid from similarly small agencies, ICS offers a flexible framework under which these agencies can join forces to present a united front. Small police agencies cannot disregard the reality that crime will invade their tranquility because that flawed logic will certainly result in conflicts and confusion at the scene of an incident when time is of the greatest importance. For these moments, it is imperative that small agencies have a practical and systematic approach to respond to incidents that will establish control in an upside-down world and reinforce the principles of safety for officers at all levels.

Based on all of the research, NIMS/ICS in its current form is the best method to deal with a novel critical incident, and may work to minimize unsafe conditions and

liability exposures. It would seem that as small agencies are left with no choice but to do their best to respond to incidents in their jurisdiction, ICS would be the best choice for a command structure. However, this indicates that small agencies must work together to solve incidents as they cannot wait until assistance from larger agencies arrives to start an attempt to control the situation. Therefore, it is imperative that small agencies work with their mutual aid providers to preplan and prepare for extraordinary incidents by working to establish a centralized command. As such, the following recommendations are made based on the following facts.

Small local agencies need to establish an open line of communication with neighboring departments who are most likely to respond to immediate incidents. Klein (1990) recommended that police administrators acknowledge the limitations of the department through open dialogues with officers. This means there needs to be an open acknowledgment that small agencies can no longer assume crime happens only in big cities. Agencies must take a hard look at the facts concerning the increase of active shooters and related tactical incidents that could occur. ICS, in small agencies, only works if everyone participates because anyone can be the first on the scene, so rank is not important, and incidents will not wait for rank. All officers, regardless of their shift assignment, must and should participate in performing risk assessments because they know locations.

Second, to understand the issues and formulate an adequate plan it is recommended that incidents in small or rural areas be reviewed thoroughly. Buck et al. (2006) asserted that the effectiveness of ICS was incident based, so what others have done in similar situations may reveal a great deal. This review of issues can, as Hillyard

(2000) noted, increase a sense of familiarity with the incident type. The Internet is a great source for information and after-studies of similar incidents. In addition, reviewing similar incidents will help officers visualize where risk might exist in their city, thus increase the ability to plan for a response.

The third recommendation to manage a potential incident is to do risk assessments and then be prepared. This means that training before the incident will result in flexible outlined incident action plans that can be reviewed and agreed on by the collaborating agencies. Gillham and Marx (2018) noted that ICS provides for mobilizing mutual aid partners and provides a framework for managing personnel during the early hours of the crisis. For example, officers need to be aware that for every five officers who respond to the assistance request, they will report to a preassigned team leader. This saves time when time is important. Officers can be directed to locations based on the assessment of the first officers on the scene and communicated directly to or relayed to responding officers.

Furin and Goldstein (2017) assert the most useful elements of ICS are that it can be fitted to law enforcement's needs to deal with tactical and combat inclusions because it provides for a manageable span of control of no more than seven. As such, it allows for clarity of the chain of command. Agencies should take time to establish incident command planning meetings that create open dialogues within the department and with mutual aid partners.

In addition, departments should share information on high-risk locations in their city (floor plans, photos, information on entries, and exits). Planned walk-throughs of locations should be conducted in locations where risk has been identified so that

participants can at least have a sense of familiarity with the location. Location books and facility emergency response plans should be constructed and made available to mutual aid partner communication personnel. Having some familiarity will reduce some stress of a real time event.

Agencies should create a rotating training schedule for mutual aid partners. Training can be short periods and include various shifts, on site, or tabletop. Training reduces stress at high-risk calls as officers are familiar with the location and who all might be there; thus, trust is increased.

Department members should be rotated through the preplanning meetings with mutual aid partners so that all members are involved. Shifts should consider key ICS positions and determine which staff are available and assign key ICS roles in advance of incidents but understand that the positions are flexible and subject to change. They should plan for deployment, know how many officers a mutual aid partner will send, and discuss self-deployment.

Response communications can be more effective when there is an assigned mutual aid communication method to identify officers who are deploying, who is there and when they will arrive. While it is not always possible, the most effective form of communication is face-to-face.

It is recommended that agencies implement ICS on any incidents that fit the protocols so that the skill set becomes second nature. Tallen (2008) asserts that the adoption of ICS, whenever possible for law enforcement, seems to be a critical consideration for small agency response to big incidents that include tactical and combat inclusions. The flexibility of ICS allows for law enforcement's chaotic response

to these types of events that precedes the more formal establishment of centralized command and control. Tallen (2008) asserts that departments need to focus on more training and preparation to be successful.

To meet training needs, there are internet training options if it meets the learning preference of the learner or the department's training budget. In this case, most ICS training is free or covered by Homeland Security Grants, so it is recommended that administrators allocate and schedule the necessary training time for their staff. Training is essential when the first officer on the scene could become the scene commander, directing manpower, and passing information. This fact raises the importance of training and practice. Deficiencies have been discovered during local exercises but will have greater importance when the incident is ongoing.

Buck et al. (2006) asserts that one of the issues of ICS, when used by police at novel tactical incidents, was the high number of unknowns compared with the deployment of ICS in static disasters. When participants work through the written Incident Action Plan (IAP) to sets goals and offer suggestions, tactics must be discussed. Officers should discuss what tactics might be deployed to manage an identified incident at a specific location. This open dialogue offers participants a chance to consider the issues, make an assessment of possibilities, identify gaps and duplications of work, thus, offering a chance for participants to work through conflicts. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (2018) notes the goal of the IAP is to set incident objectives and define possible issues. It is a flexible document that offers a starting point. These should be constructed based on location and anticipated incident and can be operationalized as a tabletop exercise to preplan and anticipate issues and

possible consequences.

The last recommendation is to train as it is part of preplanning and provides a great deal for the participants. Training is an important advantage when the incident is dynamic and has the potential for loss of life or significant property damage. This training can happen informally on shift, such as walking a location, or considering critical incident issues. Small agencies need to train separately and with their mutual aid partners as training and application of ICS protocols have proven that law enforcement officers who have practiced taking control of an incident by establishing command and instituting ICS have more favorable outcomes (Phibbs & Snawder, 2014).

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