



UNRAVELING THE KNOT:

Common mistakes during large-scale critical incidents and how to overcome them

By Travis Norton

You are a SWAT team leader responding to a hostage situation at a bank on a hot and sunny morning. You are in radio contact with your team's scout, who is already on scene. He has established a crisis entry team and containment around the bank. Although you are not on scene, the scout has provided enough information to make a preliminary assessment that appears straightforward.

A single suspect reportedly armed with a handgun has taken hostages in the bank and several of the hostages have secreted themselves in the bank's vault. The suspect has shown hostile intent with his statements, but no gun has been seen by bank security cameras or anyone on scene. Based on this, you assess the suspect has not yet demonstrated the ability to harm the hostages, and a direct intervention, immediate or otherwise, is not yet necessary.

When you arrive, the scene is chaotic. Police cars are parked haphazardly and civilian traffic is not being diverted. The main traffic control point officer is sitting in his car oblivious to his contribution to the confusion. Officers from neighboring agencies are driving into the area of operations at high rates of speed. Police vehicles are blocking primary ingress and egress routes and some officers appear to be self-deploying. The incident commander appears to be overwhelmed by events and is not delegating tasks to subordinates.

Many of the described problems are common in almost every large-scale critical incident involving law enforcement response. So how do we fix issues such as improper parking, inappropriate self-deployment and lack of adequate command?

There are commonsense solutions that can be applied when your department experiences a large-scale critical incident. In these times, no department, regardless of size or activity level, can assume “It won’t happen here.” Those days are gone. We are all facing the potential for large-scale, complex incidents that involve a myriad of factors and potential problems.

IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM

For years, law enforcement has repeated the same mistakes at large-scale critical incidents. These mistakes should be avoidable, but because they occur during high-risk/low frequency events, their impact and the lessons learned are quickly forgotten.

Think about your own involvement in a critical incident. Post incident, there is ordinarily a department debrief followed by an after-action report (AAR). These processes almost always yield lessons that should be learned so mistakes are not repeated. Why aren’t they implemented or worked into standing response plans? According to Odie Odenthal, a retired Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department captain and former commander of the Emergency Operations Bureau, many times these lessons learned are implemented only when there is dramatic change that needs to be made.

Because these incidents occupy only a small percentage of an agency’s time and effort, law enforcement managers often argue that training and preparation for these events should only require a small amount of time. The relevance of an incident can be overlooked, or when the lessons from another department are shared, we think, “It won’t happen here.” Distance in both time and space aggravates the problem; as an event gets further in the past, it becomes easy to ignore.

Four issues are continually repeated during large-scale critical incidents: indiscriminate parking, self-deployment, no pre-incident response plans or lack of updated plans, and command/leadership issues.

WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SHOW?

The following four recent incidents provide a volume of useful data. To diagnose the problem, each incident will be briefly reviewed and the issues listed. While the data drawn from these after-action reports focus on the lessons learned, many things were done correctly. Readers are highly encouraged to read these after-action reports in their entirety and apply the lessons learned to their own tactical planning and critical incident response protocols. All of them are available on the CATO website under the electronic library portion of the site.

Aurora, Colorado — Active shooter: On July 20, 2012, the Aurora Police Department responded to an active shooter at the Century 16 movie theater. In the AAR drafted by the public safety consulting firm TriData, the following issues were listed:

Parking: Ambulances could not get through to several patient triage and treatment locations because of traffic and pedestrian congestion in the parking lots. This was made worse by unattended police vehicles.

Planning: The AAR suggested that while Aurora had standing pre-incident response plans, they needed to revise them based on the lessons learned. Additionally, they cautioned departments, big and small, to plan in advance for large-scale incidents.

Command: It was suggested that incident commanders clearly identify themselves to eliminate confusion about who is in charge. This will also help establish unity of command and ensure that everyone’s efforts are focused on a common goal.

Stockton, California – Bank robbery and kidnapping: On July 16, 2014, the Stockton Police Department responded to a bank robbery that ultimately led to a kidnapping and high-speed traffic pursuit with one of the suspects engaging pursuing officers with an AK-47. This highly complex event was a watershed incident for law enforcement and presented unique tactical problems. In the AAR drafted by the Police Foundation, the following issues were listed under lessons learned:

Planning: Agencies should develop plans and training for heavily armed, mobile hostage situations. The most interesting suggestion was developing scenario-based training that involves highly innovative circumstances outside the normal response protocols.

Self-deployment: Other agencies did not self-deploy to the pursuit because it is not an accepted practice in the region. Officers from Stockton, however, self-deployed to the pursuit because this was an emotionally charged event in their jurisdiction.

Command: Agencies should develop command and control training exercises so officers develop the skills and abilities to assume leadership roles during critical incidents. Additionally, incident command must integrate into everyday operations so that it becomes the normal way of doing business.

City of Los Angeles/San Bernardino County, California — Christopher Dorner: The Dorner incident was another defining moment for law enforcement. For nine days in September 2013, police in Southern California actively searched

for Dorner, a former Los Angeles police officer wanted for murder. He ultimately was killed during a standoff with San Bernardino SED after barricading himself in a cabin in the San Bernardino Mountains. Unfortunately, four people lost their lives, including two law enforcement officers. The Police Foundation also conducted the AAR of this incident, which contains many lessons learned, including:

Command: Command and control problems “led to hundreds of officers converging on the scene of an active shooting, most with no understanding of what their role would be or how to interact with the command structure at the scene.”

Parking: Narrow, snow-lined roads leading to Dorner’s final hiding place were severely congested with responding police vehicles. This caused the delay of San Bernardino Sheriff’s Department SWAT equipment.

Self-deployment: One agency stated the self-deployment of “non-essential unrequested law enforcement personnel delayed their actions, diverted their attention, and put officers and deputies at risk.” There were also issues with some of the responding agencies’ commanders self-deploying. On-scene commanders reported they were hindered in establishing control because many of those gathered would not recognize the authority of another agency. As a reminder, the California State Law Enforcement Mutual Aid Plan states “unless otherwise expressly provided, or later agreed upon, the responsible local law enforcement official of the jurisdiction requesting mutual aid shall remain in charge. It is operationally essential that the local law enforcement official coordinate all actions with responding law enforcement agencies to ensure an effective application of forces.” It should be noted that the California Highway Patrol, Irvine Police Department and Corona Police Department showed strong leadership and maintained command and control by taking preventive steps against self-deployment by their officers.

Oakland, California — Officer-involved shooting: On March 21, 2009, the Oakland Police Department responded to the murder of two of their officers during a traffic stop. The subsequent SWAT operation resulted in the loss of two additional officers. The Independent Board of Inquiry cited the following issues:

Command: Responding supervisors and command officers failed to establish a command post and implement fundamental aspects of basic emergency management protocols. Additionally, there was failure to establish overall leadership as the incident “evolved in complexity.”

Command: No command officer at the scene established himself or herself as the incident commander. No one knew who was in charge, which added to the confusion and disorganization.

Command: The activities of those on scene were disorganized due to poor situational awareness and lack of command and control.

These examples serve as a snapshot of the issues at hand. There are many other incidents where one or all these issues manifest themselves, including the May Day 2007 protests, the San Bernardino terrorist attack, and Baltimore civil unrest in 2015. I have not included natural or mechanical crises in this article; however, it should be noted that after-action reports from Hurricane Katrina, the Columbia Shuttle explosion and the British Petroleum Deepwater Horizon oil spill all exhibited command and planning issues.

HOW DO WE OVERCOME THESE PROBLEMS?

While the issue of parking might not seem to be a serious problem, follow-on vehicles that are unable to reach the scene, such as ambulances or armor, make this a life or death issue.

- *Encourage field sergeants to train their patrol officers on how to deploy during critical incidents.* This includes parking discipline. This training is as simple as a short reminder to everyone during briefing several times a year to not park in a way that blocks primary access to the scene of any incidents, big or small. Also, explain the need to think ahead of the problem and its potential to escalate and to subordinate the need to park for enhanced personal convenience.

- *Practice on the small incidents.* Ensure that officers are not parking in front of a hydrant during a fire, for instance. Observe how officers park during small incidents to prepare for control during large incidents. Additionally, remind officers that when an event occurs lives are at stake and an ambulance that can’t get to the scene could cost a life.

- *Continually remind officers about incident parking.* During the Boston bombing incident, efforts were made to keep roads open for ambulances. Boston PD made repeated radio broadcasts reminding responding officers to not block roads with their patrol vehicles. In contrast, several days later during the apprehension of the second bombing suspect in Watertown, many officers abandoned their vehicles at access points with their emergency lights activated and doors open. This hindered the progress of an ambulance carrying a critically wounded officer. The AAR suggested having dispatch remind officers to keep roads clear and park out of the way.

The commonsense answer to the self-deployment issue is that officers must be disciplined enough not to self-deploy. Unfortunately, emotion gets the better of many officers and it continues to happen. Like parking, countermeasures to this phenomenon are dependent upon strong leadership. Consider the following:

FEATURE

- Field sergeants can conduct short reviews in briefings on recent incidents where inappropriate self-deployment was an issue and remind officers why this is an important issue. Additionally, when this issue manifests itself during small incidents, review the issue during the debrief.

- Contact your training division and work with them on drafting a department-wide training bulletin addressing this issue. Include training in your academy for new recruits. Teach them early to make it part of your department's culture.

- When an incident occurs, ensure proper direction is given to officers by field sergeants.

- If you are an incident commander during an event requiring outside resources, ensure you or a designee is broadcasting the location of the staging area and that incoming resources respond to that location unless they are needed at the scene. Have an allied agency liaison respond to the command post for coordination of resources.

The lack of command and control at many of these incidents is a serious problem. Missteps such as failing to delegate can lead to a disorganized response that is a catalyst for

an event going awry. Solving this problem requires a serious and committed effort by those tasked with handling these situations to educate themselves about the factors and dynamics at play. Commanders should consider the following:

- Attend debriefs and read after-action reports.

- Conduct reviews of incidents you commanded and apply the lessons learned.

- Continue your education. Law enforcement is well-trained but poorly educated. Knowing how to do something isn't enough. You also need to know why it is done. If terms such as concept of operations, leverage points and tactical dilemmas are foreign to you, you are behind the curve. "Field Command" by Sid Heal is an excellent book that explains, in an easy to understand format, many of the tactical principles and concepts that all law enforcement leaders should comprehend.

- Attend quality training. We have heard this for years, but if you wait for your department to send you, it probably won't happen. Take matters into your own hands and attend training on your own dime if you must.



POWERFULL

THE NEW PROTAC® HANDHELDS ARE BRIGHTER & RECHARGE READY.

When you work in challenging conditions, you need your gear to punch above its weight. Introducing the 1,000 lumen Streamlight ProTac® HL-X and the 500 lumen Streamlight ProTac® 2L-X. They're built

battle-ready with tactical tailcap switches and a powerful strobe. Plus, dual-fueled capability makes them versatile and with extended runtime, you know your light won't punch out before you do.

STREAMLIGHT.COM



© 2017 Streamlight Inc.

- Establish a training program for your department's managers and supervisors. Creating and presenting a two-hour block on managing a dynamic tactical problem is a great place to start.

- Talk with subject matter experts. CATO is an excellent place to meet people who have been there and done that. They are more than willing to pass on what they have learned and the mistakes they have made.

PRE-INCIDENT RESPONSE PLANS

Planning is technical and tedious work. However, several departments in California already have plans that can be tailored to your agency's needs. These pre-incident plans address a category such as an active shooter or an earthquake rather than an event. They are typically presented in mission-order format addressing the situation, mission, execution, administration and logistics, and command and signal (SMEAC). These plans lack the situational awareness for implementation. They are of enormous value in organizing thoughts, identifying assets, making arrangements for resources and developing contingencies. Keep in mind, conflicts and disasters don't follow scripts. If you strictly adhere to your department's plans and procedures, even when they are ineffective, you are bound for failure unless you adapt to the unique circumstances. The following suggestions are for your consideration:

- Identify emerging trends and draft plans for these types of events.
 - Plan for all hazards. Identify the natural and mechanical crises most likely to occur in your jurisdiction and plan for these types of events.
 - Collaborate with other departments such as fire, public works, allied agencies and your emergency planning coordinator when drafting these plans.
 - Update your plans annually.
 - Conduct training on plans such as your active shooter plan.

CONCLUSION

It is going to take a serious effort by all of us in the tactical arena to effectively address and improve how we handle the problems of inadequate command, inappropriate self-deployment and on-scene parking. If you are seeing these issues, it is imperative that you take steps to stop them from happening.

Be proactive and educate your people before the balloon goes up. Yes, it's a lot of work. Yes, you will encounter resistance from those who are satisfied with the status quo. The payoff for your agency, however, could be saving a citizen's life or the life of a fellow officer.

Never forget that our goal is to save lives, so prepare now because when it happens, it's already too late. Stay safe. ■

RESOURCES

- After-action report for the response to the Boston bombing. (2014). Retrieved from <http://catonews.org/files/2015/11/boston-marathon-bombing-aar.pdf>
- An examination of May Day 2007. (2007). Retrieved from http://assets.lapdonline.org/assets/pdf/Final_Report.pdf
- Aurora Century 16 Theatre shooting: After-action report for the city of Aurora. (2014). Tri-Data Division: System Planning Corporation, 2014
- Braziel, R, Devon Bell, D & Watson. G. (2015). A Heist Gone Bad, a Police Foundation Critical Incident Review of the Stockton Police Response to the Bank of the West Robbery and Hostage-Taking. Retrieved from <https://www.policefoundation.org/publication/a-heist-gone-bad/>
- California Office of Emergency Services. (2016). Law enforcement mutual aid plan (9th ed.). Retrieved from <http://www.caloes.ca.gov/LawEnforcementSite/Documents/1BlueBook.pdf>
- Donahue, A., & Tuohy, R. (2006). Lessons we don't learn: A study of the lessons of disasters, why we repeat them, and how we can learn from them. Homeland Security Affairs, Vol. II, No. 2
- Harrald, J. R. (2012). The system is tested: Response to the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill. In C. B. Rubin (Ed.), Emergency management: The American experience 1900-2010 (2nd ed., pp. 213-236). Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press
- Heal, C. (2012). Field Command. Brooklyn, NY: Lantern Books
- Heal, C. (2000). Sound Doctrine: A Tactical Primer. New York, NY: Lantern Books
- Police Executive Research Foundation. (2016). Lessons learned from the 2015 civil unrest in Baltimore. Retrieved from <http://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/2514212/independent-report-on-baltimore-police-response.pdf>
- Southern California Law Enforcement Response to the Attacks by Christopher Dorner. (2015). Retrieved from <https://www.policefoundation.org/critical-incident-review-library/police-foundation-regional-review-of-police-response-to-the-attacks-by-christopher-dorner/>
- Stewart, J. (2009). Independent board of inquiry into the Oakland Police Department March 21, 2009, incident. Retrieved from <http://www.aele.org/law/2010all02/BOI+Public+Report+PUBLICATION+COPY-31Dec09.pdf>
- Walker, T. (2016, January 7). Personal communication reference San Bernardino terrorist attack

This article was originally published in the Fall 2016 issue of *CATO News* and is reprinted with permission.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Travis Norton is an 18-year veteran with the Oceanside Police Department. He is a sergeant with 11 years on the SWAT team, serving the last five as a team leader. He is also the CATO Regional Representative for Region 9 and a member of the CATO After Action Review Team. He can be reached at tnorton@catonews.org



We want to know what you think. Email editor@ntoa.org with feedback or questions about this article.