

Introduction and types of critical incidents

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First published 23 October 2013 Updated 21 January 2021

Written by College of Policing

11 mins read

A wide range of incidents or operations have the capability to become a critical incident, including anti-social behaviour or hate crime, pre-planned events or internal incidents.

A critical incident (CI) is defined as:

any incident where the effectiveness of the police response is likely to have a significant impact on the confidence of the victim, their family and/or the community.

Background

The [public inquiry \(Macpherson, W. \(1999\) The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry\)](#) following the investigation into the murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993 resulted in the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) acknowledging that some incidents, even if managed properly, can have a significant negative impact on the confidence of the victim, their family and the community.

The inquiry also found that institutional racism was apparent in several aspects of the investigation. To address this and other shortcomings, the MPS developed guidance to help officers deal with similar cases, which they termed 'critical incidents'. They adopted the definition used today.

Principles

Critical incident management (CIM) is intended to provide a response which satisfies the needs of the victim, their family and the community, but also provides an effective and proportionate outcome to an incident.

The definition is deliberately broad and should ensure that incidents which are likely to escalate into a CI are not missed. It recognises the fundamental importance of community confidence and trust in the police response to CIs, and applies equally to serious, less serious and internal incidents.

Although high-profile and/or large-scale incidents are more likely to develop into or contain multiple CIs, less serious incidents and internal incidents can, and do, escalate. A CI may appear to come from nowhere, but usually there are warning signs.

The incident may be part of a wider multi-agency response and have far reaching consequences, in which case partners will follow the Joint Emergency Service Interoperability Principles. Further information can be found at [JESIP](#).

Keywords

- Effectiveness – this is a measure of the professionalism, competence and integrity evident in the police response to an incident.
- Significant impact – significant should be interpreted as being particular to each incident but critically relates to the impact on the individual, family or community.
- Confidence – this is a reference to the long-term confidence of victims, families and communities in policing.
- Likely – all incidents that the police deal with could have a significant impact on confidence, but are they likely to?

Three phases of critical incident management

An incident which has the likelihood to escalate into a critical incident should be addressed promptly and efficiently. Reassuring and maintaining confidence is fundamental to managing a CI, as is restoring confidence where it has been lost. A three-phased approach is set out in this module.

When managing a CI, this advice should be read in conjunction with other relevant advice and guidance.

Phases of critical incident management

Phase one: Preparing for critical incidents

This requires chief officers to consider current management structures ensuring, where possible, that:

- staff are trained effectively
- resources are available
- the overall quality of the police response reflects a competent and accountable standard of incident management

Phase two: Managing critical incidents

This considers how to identify critical incidents early on. It includes processes to ensure incidents are notified to the most appropriate person, and that they are managed effectively.

Phase three: Restoring public confidence

This considers incidents that have had a significant impact on public confidence but were not identified when the incident was live, and how confidence may be rebuilt through community engagement, resolution or a public inquiry.

Characteristics of critical incidents

Thousands of incidents happen every year. Many are dealt with well but some are not. In the [2010–11 British Crime Survey](#), 70% of victims were 'very' or 'fairly satisfied' with the response they received. Although this is an improvement on previous years, 30% of victims were less than 'fairly satisfied'.

Police response

An incident can escalate to a CI when the police response to crime, disorder or anti-social behaviour (ASB) fails to meet the expectations of the victim, their family and/or the community.

Community impact

A CI may have a significant and potentially long-term impact on community engagement and neighbourhood policing. It may also generate insecurity among vulnerable members of the community and increase fear of crime and disorder. There is an additional risk that by failing to provide an effective response, the police may cause repeat victimisation.

Review of critical incidents

A [review](#) in 2007 looked at a number of cases which, although not labelled as critical at the time, displayed characteristics that mean they would now be declared a CI.

These characteristics can be divided into five broad areas. They usually develop because of several factors which separately may have little or no impact, but have a significant impact when compounded.

Matrix for critical incident management

Decision making

The findings of that review are still applicable today. Crucially, in all cases, the review found that the central theme to preventing or managing a critical incident is effective decision making in difficult situations (see the [National Decision Model](#)). This includes acknowledging decisions, errors and avoiding decisions.

In the event of a multi-agency response, partners will also refer to the [Joint Decision Model](#) (JDM).

Decisions, errors and avoiding decisions

There is a growing body of research which focuses on police decision making during critical incident management. This suggests that cognitive bias (a person's pre-determined and unconscious thought process) affects decision making. It tries to shed light on how people might make mistakes when assessing difficult situations, and how this can lead incident commanders to pursue a course of action that might hinder the successful management of an incident.

In addition, there is fresh understanding about why some commanders might excessively delay or avoid making a decision even when it is clear, both at the time and later, that a decision was needed.

Incorporating learning

Chief officers need to be aware of the findings of this research and ensure that their critical incident commanders at operational, tactical and strategic levels understand the factors involved in effective decision making. An experienced commander who is aware of these factors can be alert to them

during the response to an incident (in themselves or in others) and can take steps to limit their negative impact.

Improving accountability

Understanding the factors affecting decision making will help officers to account more clearly for the decisions they make, and to identify what was done to mitigate common errors. This will reduce the fear of excessive accountability, which may prevent officers from making a decision at all.

Types of critical incidents

The cases used in the review could suggest that critical incidents are usually high profile, serious or related to homicide. It is important to remember that this is not always the case and some involve incidents such as missing persons or bullying.

Anti-social behaviour

The deaths of Fiona Pilkington and her daughter Francecca in October 2007 and the death of David Askew in March 2010 demonstrate that critical incidents are still occurring and that they can have their origins in a wide range of incidents. These cases were both linked to repeated and persistent anti-social behaviour (ASB).

Case study – Fiona Pilkington

The Fiona Pilkington case had its origins in harassment and ASB. Fiona and her daughter suffered frequent and sustained local disorder, often directed at their home, over a period of several years. This was reported to the police, but 'incidents were too often dealt with by police officers in isolation and with an unstructured approach' (Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC), 2011). This and other factors, such as not identifying the family as vulnerable, and not recognising the ASB and harassment as targeted hate crime, caused frustration. Fiona eventually took her own life and that of her disabled daughter, Francecca.

Case study – David Askew

David Askew collapsed and died after an incident in which youths were reportedly causing a nuisance at his home in Hattersley. Greater Manchester Police had been in contact with Mr Askew and his relatives over a number of years in relation to repeated allegations of ASB. An [IPCC investigation](#) was subsequently undertaken and the findings published on 21 March 2011.

Hate crime

Other incidents, for example racism on Channel 4's Big Brother, which may not involve violence or threats of violence, can also develop into a critical incident if not managed appropriately.

Case study – Big Brother

In 2007, during the Channel 4 television show Celebrity Big Brother, Shilpa Shetty was subjected to racist comments from other housemates. The national and international media profile of this programme meant that Hertfordshire Constabulary were under intense pressure to act quickly and effectively. A failure to react quickly enough exposed the force to criticism, and undermined public confidence that the police were taking such behaviour seriously.

IPCC findings

An IPCC investigation has looked at the effectiveness of the police response to reports of harassment and ASB. It focused on the impact that the police response had on the confidence of the victim, the family and the local community.

See [IPCC report \(published 24 May 2011\)](#) for further information.

Pre-planned events

Sporting events or other public order operations are likely to develop one or more critical incidents if the effectiveness of the police response falls short of that required by the event, or does not take account of the needs of the community.

The potential for a pre-planned event, particularly where emotions are high, to develop into disorder or violence cannot be underestimated. If this happens, the quality of the police response will have a significant impact on public confidence.

This was the case when violent disorder broke out during student protests in London's Millbank area in November 2010. The response to events such as this may heighten community concerns and undermine confidence in the ability of the police to prevent disorder.

Factors to consider

CIM should be included in the planning for such events, particularly where:

- there may be a history of tension between the local community and visitors, such as the Appleby Horse Fair in Cumbria (see [situation awareness](#))
- there is [intelligence](#) which suggests disorder may be likely, for example prior to the English Defence League marches during the summer of 2010

The size of an event may also increase the likelihood that disorder, even in small pockets, will occur, such as at music festivals.

Internal incidents

Police officers and staff who work together may also be recognised as a community in their own right. A team may consider themselves to be a family (but at the same time also contain, or be part of, a number of other separate and distinct communities, such as special interest groups, federation or union groups).

Certain incidents may have a significant impact on the confidence of these internal communities. These are known as internal critical incidents and can include bullying, discrimination, corruption or other inappropriate behaviour, as well as the death or serious injury of a colleague. Extensive organisational upheavals, such as force restructuring or a review of pay and conditions, may also be considered as critical incidents.

Irrespective of who the victim or the community is, the police response to the critical incident should always be the same (see [managing critical incidents](#)).

Case study examples

The following case studies provide recent examples of internal critical incidents which have had a significant impact both internally and externally. In addition to these high-profile cases, there are many which do not come to public attention, such as professional conduct or disciplinary matters, but which also have an impact on police officers and staff during their careers.

Case study 1

During hot weather, two police dogs were left in a car during a heatwave and died. This incident not only had an impact on those immediately affected within the organisation, but also on the national

police community who, until this point, had a positive reputation for animal welfare issues. It also had an effect on the wider local community who, the previous year, had been involved in an appeal for puppies to be trained for police work.

Case study 2

In January 2011 an undercover officer offered to give evidence on behalf of the defence during a case against environmental activists. The publicity this case received not only raised concerns that the officer had 'gone native', but also that the police were carrying out unnecessary undercover operations. The officer had infiltrated the group, had been an active member of it for seven years and been involved in protests such as the G8 protest in Gleneagles in 2005. This case raised a number of questions internally and externally which undermined public and ministerial confidence in police undercover activities, their deployment, purpose and effectiveness. It also had a direct impact on officers and their families, who need to have confidence in the police service to appropriately deploy and manage such officers.

Case study 3

In January 2011 former police officer, Stephen Mitchell, was sentenced to life imprisonment after being found guilty of two counts of rape, three indecent assaults and six counts of abuse of public office. Between 1999 and 2007, the former police officer from Northumbria had committed sexual offences against vulnerable women he had come into contact with during the course of his duties. This case not only undermined the confidence of victims, their families and the local community, but also that of officers and staff in the police recruitment processes (which missed the fact that Mitchell had a history of sexual offending). Officers and staff need to have confidence in the integrity of the colleagues they work with. This case also generated widespread public concern because of the high-profile media response the case received.

A proactive response

Where there is a likelihood of a case escalating into a critical incident, early intervention has been shown to help prevent a significant loss of confidence.

For example, the police response to the murder of Damilola Taylor in London in 2000 was identified by the subsequent [MPS review](#) as an example of a proactive and preventive approach. Early recognition of this case as a critical incident led to several senior officers overseeing the

investigation from the outset. This timely intervention was commended by the review.

Operation Sumac (available to **authorised users** logged on to the restricted online College Learn) the Ipswich prostitute murders in 2006 was a case where early recognition of a critical incident helped the police to maintain community confidence.

More recently, the investigations into the deaths of **Mary Fox** in Bodmin in November 2009 and **Aamir Siddiqi** in Cardiff in April 2010 provide examples of proactive approaches to critical incident management and community engagement.

Tags

Critical incidents