



● Police Critical Incident Checklist

This section contains a checklist to prepare police officials for responding to a critical incident that has the potential to result in controversy or conflict involving the police and a community. Because a critical incident typically requires a police department to quickly undertake a wide range of actions, straining the capacity of the department, a checklist can help to ensure that officials consider all potential options ahead of time, and that certain tasks do not “fall through the cracks” during an incident. This checklist is not meant to be a comprehensive list of steps or a rigid timeline for a police response, but rather is intended to serve as a guide to many of the issues that police should consider before, during, and after a critical incident that results in community tension.

The immediate response of a police executive can determine how the community will respond to an incident, and can set the tone for the department’s ongoing relationship with the community in the long-term. This checklist emphasizes actions that can help calm tensions and demonstrate good faith to the community.

Police Critical Incident Checklist

The Police Critical Incident Checklist is a planning resource for police executives to prepare them for responding to a potential controversial incident. This checklist can also be used to assist police executives during an incident. This checklist is not meant to be comprehensive list of steps or a rigid timeline for responding to a critical incident, but rather acts as a flexible resource, highlighting many important steps that police executives should consider.

Items to Consider Before a Critical Incident Occurs for the Police Executive

- Discuss notification and response protocols with the mayor, city manager, and any elected/appointed boards or commissions which have police oversight. Have a plan for incidents, including an agreement on what they want to be notified about and when these notifications should occur.
- Establish relationships and direct lines of communication with key community leaders. Have a list of these community leaders ready with cell phone numbers.
- Establish relationships and direct lines of communication with police union leaders, if applicable. Have a list of these union leaders ready with cell phone numbers.
- Once relationships have been established, consider forming an Advisory Board that reflects the diversity of the community. For example, the Advisory Board could include one or more representatives from each policing area (district, precinct, ward, etc.). The Advisory Board should meet regularly and can help determine the best ways to engage the community and de-escalate any tensions if an incident occurs.
- Ensure that you have a protocol for major incidents, including a media plan, and that investigators, supervisors, and command staff members know their roles and responsibilities.
- Top police officials should visit officer roll calls, meet with specialized department units, and establish relationships with key local news media personnel during non-crisis times. Maintain communication with them.

Items for the Chief Executive to Consider Immediately After a Critical Incident

Immediate Action Items (within approximately 2 hours of the incident)

- Ensure that a command-level staff member is on the scene and providing information directly to you as it is received.
- Notify key public officials and community leaders about the situation promptly.
 - Let them know that you are gathering additional information and that you will contact them as soon as you know more.
- Gather as much preliminary information as possible about the incident. If possible, go to the scene of the incident yourself.
- Contact your public information or media office or liaison and develop an initial plan for their role. Start planning a press gathering to release information as quickly as possible. This planning should include the use of various media to keep the public informed. Social media, particularly Twitter, increasingly is being used by police to share information directly with the public and the news media on a minute-to-minute basis during a critical incident. Address misinformation directly. If new information contradicts earlier department reports,

issue the correct information as soon as possible. As time allows, use translation services to address the language needs of the community's diverse stakeholder groups.

- Avoid “dueling” press conferences; try to engage all interested parties to share podium time so that the community can see unity among their local leaders.
 - If applicable, assign staff to begin watching social media and activity to assess what is being said about the incident and to gauge the mood of the community.
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Action Items (within approximately 8 hours of the incident)

- Provide the preliminary information you can to the public about the incident (i.e., what you know, what you don't know, what the department is doing about it); and if applicable, explain why you cannot provide additional information, and indicate when you will be able to share further information.
 - **Emphasize that this is preliminary information in every statement.** You are balancing the need for transparency with the reality that sometimes the first information about an incident may change as additional information emerges.¹
 - If applicable, avoid making any prejudgments about officers' conduct before you have complete information, unless your statement is clearly needed (e.g., if a publicly available video depicts overt police misconduct or criminal behavior by an officer).
 - Explain that it may also take longer for some information to be released if there is an ongoing police investigation.
 - Let the public know how often you will update them on the status of the incident or new information, and how these updates will be provided.
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Action Items (within 24 hours of the incident)

- Brief community leaders and ask for their help in defusing community tensions while getting accurate information to their constituencies. Ask for calm and patience as the incident unfolds. Be flexible in briefing various community organizations and advocates; some may want to meet in groups, others may prefer to meet individually. Other leaders may have a preference for meeting in-person rather than over the phone.
- Engage public officials and community leaders to agree on a unified message that presents a transparent and cooperative process. Create a plan to work together should the incident start to escalate. While there can be disagreement or differing perceptions early on as to what has occurred, all leaders should be in agreement about the need to keep the peace; conduct a thorough and impartial investigation, if applicable; and make a commitment to keep the community informed. Craft the unified message around these statements that all local leaders can support.
- If applicable, publicly explain the investigatory process and any related policies that impact the release of information or determination of findings. Clarify policies related to contentious issues. Explaining the rationale for policies or practices that the public may not understand may be helpful in maintaining the community's patience and deescalating tensions.

1. See, for example, St. Louis Metropolitan Police Chief Sam Dotson discussing an officer-involved shooting incident in the PERF report “Defining Moments for Police Chiefs,” pp. 7-8. <http://www.policeforum.org/assets/definingmoments.pdf>.

- When applicable, publicly clarify departmental policies governing the status of any officers who are involved in a controversy. This may include explaining laws that protect the rights of police officers (especially any requirements that prevent their names from being released), and any other policies that help explain administrative and investigatory actions taken that may not be immediately apparent to the public.
 - If applicable, announce publicly your willingness to cooperate with investigations of your department by other agencies (local, state, or federal).
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Action Items (within 1 week of the incident)

- Consider the circumstances of the incident. If appropriate, you may choose to visit involved individuals, and to provide an update on the investigation and what to expect from the department, to extend an offer to provide updates, or make a liaison from your agency available to them. **Based on the circumstances, you may consider moving up the timeline for this call/meeting to the first 24 hours of the incident.*
 - Anticipate and take precautions to prevent new incidents or confrontations. This includes giving supervisors guidance on how they should discuss the situation with officers at roll calls, closely monitoring unusual calls or activity, obtaining information from community leaders, and watching social media activity in the community.
 - Frequently attend community events to explain the department's handling of the incident, as well as department policies and practices.
 - Develop a strategy for releasing public information regularly, using social media, television, radio, or other forms of communication.
 - Engage with both sworn and civilian staff within the department to address any concerns resulting from the incident. Ensure that employees have access to counseling, if appropriate.
 - Issue a statement about the incident to all department employees and offer ample opportunities to discuss their concerns. Make sure this message is consistent with the message that you are delivering to the public.
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Action Items (long-term incident aftermath)

- Request the assistance of community groups or others that may be able to assist with inter-group conflict assessment and conciliation moving forward.
- Consider having an after-action review of the incident conducted by an outside review team. The after-action review should include lessons learned and should highlight promising practices. Share these findings and lessons learned department-wide. You may also consider making the findings from the after-action report public.
- Survey different community groups to learn about their concerns with the police or department operations.
- Consider opportunities for the community to provide additional input. Consider having third parties or community leaders host and facilitate the meetings.
- Consider conducting a review of any policies, accountability systems, or training protocols related to the incident.
- Consider establishing a public commission, task force, or other work group to develop recommendations for addressing specific concerns.
- Consider conducting an assessment of your department's community policing practices.
- Remember to continually update internal stakeholders in the aftermath of the event.