HOW TO CONDUCT AN
After Action Review

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Recommended citation:

National Police Foundation. 2020. *How to Conduct an After Action Review*. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.

Published 2020

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Executive Summary

Some of the most significant changes to the law enforcement and public safety responses to incidents of mass violence and disasters have occurred as the result of thoughtful and post-incident critical reviews, including those following the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School in Jefferson County, Colorado, and the terrorist attacks in New York, Washington, D.C., and Stonycreek Township, Pennsylvania, on September 11, 2001. More recently, after action reviews (AAR) of large-scale mass violence incidents including those in San Bernardino, California, in 2015 and Orlando, Florida, in 2016 and mass demonstrations including those in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014 and Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017 have contributed to important national-level discussions about law enforcement strategies and tactics during these events.

Nationwide, law enforcement agencies and their public safety partners are increasingly challenged by complex crisis events. It is incumbent upon first responder agencies to use every available opportunity to identify promising practices and lessons learned to continue to enhance their ability to respond. Routine emergencies, large-scale public events, and training exercises provide opportunities for law enforcement agencies to develop and practice collaborative response protocols and identify lessons learned that help prepare them for crisis events that present novel, dynamic, and rapidly evolving challenges that test relationships and response protocols.

Conducting AARs following exercises, routine emergencies, and critical incidents provides observations and learning opportunities that can be applied to strengthen future responses and guide agencies as they prepare for future incidents. While many agencies already use an AAR process, this guide is designed to provide information to those who do not regularly engage in AARs as well as to assist those agencies that are interested in building on their current approach. The guide lays out evidence supporting the need to incorporate the AAR process into everyday activities and provides a solid framework and suggestions for undertaking this work in law enforcement agencies of all sizes.

Section 1 defines the AAR process and provides a brief history of AARs in a number of public safety and professional fields. It emphasizes the importance of conducting AARs in law enforcement agencies as a way to challenge participants to review their responses and adapt their tactics and thoughts to address ongoing challenges. AARs can range from an informal team debrief following a training exercise or a small-scale event to a large-scale, in-depth assessment that yields a comprehensive report published by an independent team of subject matter experts. AARs can also vary in scope, areas of focus, purpose, goals, and objectives. All AARs should answer the basic questions: What happened, what actions were taken, why were they taken, and what variables should be considered in future responses.

Section 2 provides a meta-analysis of 20 AARs—their findings, recommendations, lessons learned, and promising practices. Studying and implementing these elements provides chief executives and law enforcement personnel the opportunity to develop policies and strategies; create, adapt, and refine training curricula and scenarios; and implement practices based on the most recent information and

promising practices. The meta-analysis demonstrates how AARs regarding incidents of mass violence, mass demonstrations, and other incidents share common themes. These common themes and lessons demonstrate the importance of conducting, sharing, and learning from AARs to improve individual organization and the law enforcement profession's preparedness, response, and recovery from critical incidents.

Section 3 provides a detailed step-by-step guide for law enforcement agencies—and relevant stakeholders, if necessary—to conduct AARs. Each step includes an explanation of what is involved, how it is related to the preceding and following steps, and how it impacts the overall AAR. AARs require honest evaluation and challenge participants to question their previously held assumptions and beliefs, leading to critical thinking, better decision-making, and more effective execution. The steps in this section are important to achieving those goals. Beginning with a determination of the type of AAR that should be conducted, all AAR processes should engage key stakeholders, analyze relevant information, develop and communicate findings, among other essential steps. Ultimately, individual organizations and regional partners should incorporate lessons learned into training, policy, and procedure for future responses.

AARs are critical to organizational learning and to strengthen responses in an evolving and increasingly complex operating environment. By honestly reflecting on past experiences, organizations can anticipate emerging challenges, incorporate promising practices, and work collaboratively to evolve and prepare for future events. Instilling a culture that encourages continuous learning through the assessment and identification of promising practices and lessons learned is vital to ensuring first responder and community safety and building effective responses to major events such as incidents of mass violence.

1. After Action Reviews Defined

An after action review (AAR)[1] is a team-based process following a particular training exercise or an event that affords all participants the opportunity to reflect, provide their perceptions and observations, and identify promising practices and lessons learned that can be applied to enhance future responses to similar scenarios. An AAR "focuses on an event and allows participants to discover and review WHAT happened, WHY it happened, and HOW to sustain strengths and improve on weaknesses" (emphasis original).[2]

"After action reviews are aimed at improving American policing's response to similar critical incidents through changes in policy, practice, organizational culture, and an increased understanding of the nature of preventable error."

— Chief (ret.) James Bueermann, Past President
National Police Foundation

The AAR process is a learning opportunity that should not be overlooked by organizational leadership. AARs benefit individual organizations and serve as an opportunity to contribute to the body of knowledge available to policymakers, practitioners, and researchers when made public. Agencies that are committed to learning regularly conduct their own AARs and review those completed by other organizations to identify best practices and challenges to improve organizational preparedness, response, and recovery.

AARs can range in scope from less structured reviews or discussions—also referred to as a "debrief" or "hot wash"—to a comprehensive review that follows a rigorous process and a published report.[3] While many AARs are conducted after significant or traumatic events, some industries have scaled them to various levels and implemented AARs after less critical events or incidents and training sessions to ingrain the process in the culture and reinforce the importance of continued learning and improvement.[4] On an individual level, reviewing and reflecting on one's actions can help the individual to improve on them or build on their promising practices for future interactions. On an organizational level, conducting and reviewing AARs regularly can help the organization identify thematic areas for improvement or to build on promising practices.

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1. Throughout this guide, "after action review" (AAR) is used to encompass similar phrases including after-action assessment, incident review, critical incident review, and incident response analysis.
2. VCPI, *After-Action Review and Reporting*.
3. FEMA, "What is an After-Action Report (ARR)?;" Texas Division of Emergency Management, *After Action Report & Improvement Plan;* Heal, "Debriefings and After Action Reviews."
4. VCPI, *After-Action Review and Reporting*; IACP, "Small-Scale Special Event Preparedness."

AARs can also serve as case studies for classroom trainings and scenarios for tabletop exercises and reality-based training.[5] For example, many law enforcement organizations conduct in-depth reviews of officer-involved shootings, involving individuals from within and outside the department in the review of the incident to identify adjustments that should be made in policies, procedures, training, supervision, and discipline.[6] Using AARs as case studies is especially beneficial for reality-based training, drawing on real cases that first responders may encounter in their field. In a variety of professions, practicing the AAR process in a consistent manner that examines both promising practices and challenges helps to create learning organizations that improve the organization holistically.[7]

> *"There are so many different varieties of after action reports out there . . . the important piece is it has to become part of the organization's culture."*
>
> — Chief (ret.) Frank Straub, Director
> Center for Mass Violence Response Studies
> National Police Foundation

After action review history

The U.S. Army is recognized by many industries as the first to regularly conduct AARs.[8] Based on the successes of AARs, retired army leaders further adapted the principles and introduced AARs to other fields.[9] Public sector agencies outside of law enforcement have successfully leveraged the principles of AARs to continually improve training, enhance safety measures, and positively impact responses and practices. Government agencies from departments of health to departments of transportation have used AARs to inform future plans and training.[10] Private companies have also turned to AARs to capitalize on opportunities to learn and improve their products and services and maintain their relevance in dynamic and highly competitive environments.

U.S. Army after action reviews

In the late 1970s, following the Vietnam War, the U.S. Army believed it was necessary to reflect on and adjust its war fighting methods and training to provide more appropriate settings to test the combat readiness of individual units. AARs were conducted at the end of trainings to reflect on and quickly adopt critical analysis provided by observers.

5.   Ockershausen, *Special Report*.
6.   IACP, *Officer-Involved Shootings*.
7.   Sutton, "Learning from Success and Failure."
8.   Parry and Darling, "Emergent Learning in Action."
9.   Parry and Darling, "Emergent Learning in Action."
10.   Bureau of Community Preparedness, *Writing After Action Reports;* Operations Division, *Instructional and Informational Memorandum*.

Over time, the army adapted the model to become more focused on improving training and mission success, and the current AAR model was developed.[11] On August 1, 1985, the army formally established the Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL), which "drives change through the ALLP [Army Lessons Learned Program, Army Regulation 11-33] and identifies, collects, analyzes, disseminates, and archives lessons and best practices while maintaining global situational awareness to share knowledge and facilitate the army's and unified action partners' adaption to win wars."[12] The September 1990 Army Field Manual (FM) 25-101 "Battle Focused Training" includes a chapter and an appendix that describe the current model of assessments and AARs.[13] Since the 1990s, the army has leveraged the current AAR model as a structured approach for team and self-reflection and problem-solving through the identification of strengths and areas for improvement.[14] Army personnel regularly conduct informal and formal AARs during or immediately after each training event or mission. All of the AARs share common goals: to sustain strengths, identify lessons learned, and integrate the lessons learned into successful future operations.[15]

Aviation after action reviews

The public transportation industry—particularly aviation—also conducts AARs both after critical incidents and over the course of certain projects. The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) began conducting independent investigations following critical incidents including crashes and systems malfunctions, while the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) conducts reviews over the course of its projects. In both cases, the goal is to enhance the overall safety of the industry. Through the Independent Safety Board Act of 1974, the NTSB was mandated to investigate accidents to determine their probable causes, issue safety recommendations, and conduct research and studies on additional transportation safety issues.[16] According to federal regulations, the NTSB investigations "are fact-finding proceedings with no adverse parties . . . and are not conducted for the purpose of determining the rights, liabilities, or blame of any person or entity, as they are not adjudicatory proceedings."[17]

NASA adopted the army's model of Pause and Learn (PaL) AARs "to create a learning event at selected critical events in the life of a project."[18] These reviews provide opportunities for reflection and identification of individual lessons learned at critical junctures throughout projects and to understand what has happened, why, and what can be done to increase the likelihood of success. These AARs involve all team members sharing honest and open perceptions and promising practices and lessons learned and creating action steps to ensure progress.

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11. Parry and Darling, "Emergent Learning in Action."
12. Stenson, "Center for Army Lessons Learned."
13. U.S. Department of the Army, *FM 25-101: Battle Focused Training*.
14. U.S. Department of the Army, *Training Circular 25-20*.
15. U.S. Department of the Army, T*raining Circular 25-20*.
16. National Transportation Safety Board, "History of The National Transportation Safety Board."
17. 49 C.F.R. 831.4 – Nature of investigation.
18. Office of the Chief Knowledge Officer, *Pause and Learn Implementation Guide*.

Public health and emergency management after action reviews

Public health and emergency management agencies have also embraced and created formal procedures for conducting AARs. Public health and emergency management adapted the U.S. Army model of AARs to create a seven-step model that uses the acronym DEBRIEF (**d**efine rules, **e**xplain learning objectives, **b**enchmark performance standards, **r**eview what was supposed to happen, **i**dentify what actually occurred, **e**xamine why things went the way they did, and **f**ormalize learning).[19] Public health and emergency management AARs are based on the overarching philosophy that leveraging and learning from AARs "improves practice and minimizes avoidable deaths and negative economic and social consequences of disasters."[20]

Several agencies and organizations that fund and regulate aspects of public health and health care emergency preparedness and response—including the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)—require formal AARs under certain circumstances.[21] Furthermore, FEMA includes the identification of generalizable recommendations and lessons learned to improvement efforts as part of its Homeland Security Exercise Evaluation Program (HSEEP).[22] Between 2005 and 2011, at least 91 AARs following a public health system response to a real incident were submitted to the FEMA Lessons Learned Information Sharing (LLIS.gov) database.[23] These AARs have helped identify, document, and disseminate promising practices and lessons learned from responses to emergency situations and training exercises to enhance performance in each of these critical areas.

Fire service after action reviews

Fire departments have incorporated AARs into their standard practices to ensure occupational safety, continued learning, and provision of quality services to communities nationwide. According to the United States Fire Administration (USFA), "The fire service has a duty to its members and the community it serves to evaluate problematic incidents, as well as those that go extremely well, and communicate the findings (including the lessons learned), to all relevant emergency personnel."[24]

Fire service AARs are also used as an opportunity to provide closure to all involved parties after a particularly traumatic event and to be the instigator for identifying colleagues who may need additional emotional or psychological support. Some fire departments have included an informal trauma screening questionnaire (TSQ) into their AAR process to help identify whether a firefighter should seek help.[25] In addition, fire departments use previous AARs as training tools for newer firefighters. In response to

19.   Sawyer and Deering, "Adaptation of the U.S. Army's After-Action Review."
20.   Savoia, Agboola, and Biddinger, "Use of After Action Reports (AARs)."
21.   Savoia, Agboola, and Biddinger, "Use of After Action Reports (AARs)."
22.   U.S. Department of Homeland Security, *Homeland Security Exercise and Evaluation Program (HSEEP)*.
23.   Savoia, Agboola, and Biddinger, "Use of After Action Reports (AARs)."
24.   Ockershausen, *Special Report*.
25.   Carey, "A New Approach to After-Action Reports."

reductions in the need to respond to critical fire incidents and the retirements of senior personnel, fire departments have compiled and catalogued the problems encountered during various responses, identified promising practices and lessons learned, and created a repository of information to assist inexperienced firefighters with learning.

Learning Initiatives for Law Enforcement Organizations

The U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) and other national-level industry organizations have developed resources to help public safety organizations learn from a variety of incidents that first responders are likely to encounter. Incidents span from near misses—events that could have resulted in a serious injury, fatality, significant property damage, or crisis if not for a fortunate break in the chain of events—to responses to critical incidents:

- **LEO Near Miss.** Funded by the COPS Office, LEO Near Miss is a national near miss reporting system for law enforcement officers that allows for sharing of lessons learned and reminders that can be incorporated into training and policy to improve officer safety.

- **Averted School Violence (ASV) Near Miss.** Funded by the COPS Office, ASV Near Miss is a reporting system for law enforcement officers, school officials, and mental health professionals to share lessons learned to inform school policy and safety procedures and prevent future tragedies.

- **Center for Mass Violence Response Studies.** Developed by the National Police Foundation, the Center for Mass Violence Response Studies aims to conduct objective policy-relevant research, AARs, and initiate training and technical assistance programs to advise federal, state, and local public safety officials regarding the response to mass violence events.

Using such resources, law enforcement organizations can learn from on another and apply lessons before an incident occurs. In this manner, the learning initiatives help organizations to foster a culture of learning.

Sources: National Police Foundation, "LEO Near Miss;" National Police Foundation, "Averted School Violence;" National Police Foundation, "Center for Mass Violence Response Studies."

Private sector after action reviews

Private companies have leveraged AARs to identify opportunities to streamline processes, to enhance communication and collaboration in the development of products and services, and to continuously improve client and customer experiences. The director of manufacturing projects at Harley-Davidson implemented an AAR process to determine what is needed to launch a new product. After each pre-build, the director conducts a series of AARs to match actual performance against initial assumptions to refine assumptions and raise standards. In addition to these outcomes, Harley-Davidson found that employees were excited to learn about the entire operation and increase their planning and data-gathering skills.[26] Similarly, Jump Associates—a strategy-consulting firm—holds AARs following each meeting and interaction with a client. The informal debriefs are intended to provide employees at all levels with

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26. Parry and Darling, "Emergent Learning in Action."

feedback and concrete recommendations for improvement. The debriefings provide pointers that senior executives rarely received before and have helped improve their processes.[27] The J.M. Huber Corporation uses AARs following every planned project and significant unplanned event. Employees post their lessons learned to an intranet database, which allows other employees to search the database and find AARs on similar topics and learn from previous experiences.[28]

> ## "We need to play chess, not checkers."
>
> — Chief (ret.) Rick Braziel, Sacramento County (California) Inspector General
>   Former Chief, Sacramento Police Department

Why after action reviews in law enforcement?

As in other fields, law enforcement agencies can benefit significantly from conducting AARs. There are a variety of responses and incidents—from everyday operations to large-scale incidents—that law enforcement agencies can learn from by conducting an AAR. These include officer use of force, officer injury, citizen complaints, fatal motor vehicle accidents, active shooter and mass violence incidents, mass demonstrations, and major crisis events such as manmade or natural disasters.

Preparing for future incidents

Developing the habit of conducting AARs and reviewing incident response to the point where they become a regular practice and part of the culture of department operations can help law enforcement agencies better prepare for future incidents.[29] Michigan State Police (MSP) Order 43 established a multidisciplinary Critical Incident Response Review Team (CIRRT) "for the purpose of identifying changes in training, policy, operations, and resources that may lead to improved outcomes for subsequent critical incidents."[30] Because of their experience conducting and learning from critical incidents, the MSP knew that keeping lanes open for ambulances to access the site of an incident was important for life-saving efforts—so when a mass shooting occurred in Kalamazoo, an MSP sergeant recognized the potential problem caused by officers responding to the scene and directed officers to keep access open for emergency vehicles.[31]

AARs—large and small—challenge participants to question their previously held assumptions and beliefs, which leads to smarter thinking and therefore more effective execution.[32] AARs also encourage creative thinking to address emerging challenges. For example, in preparation for hosting the 2016 Republican and Democratic National Conventions, the Cleveland (Ohio) Division of Police (CPD) and the Philadelphia

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27.   Wharton at Work, "After Action Reviews."
28.   Wharton at Work, "After Action Reviews."
29.   Sutton, "Learning from Success and Failure."
30.   Michigan State Police, *Official Order: Critical Incident After-Action Review Team*.
31.   Straub et al., *Managing the Response to a Mobile Mass Shooting*.
32.   Boss, "Don't Skimp on the After Action Review."

(Pennsylvania) Police Department (PPD) studied the best practices and lessons learned from AARs of the 2012 conventions[33] and other recent law enforcement responses to mass demonstrations.[34] As a result, the CPD and the PPD implemented newer strategies that emphasized softer responses to potentially volatile situations, flexibility in allocating resources and personnel, and positive interactions with demonstrators.[35] The two departments were able to prevent large-scale chaos and mass arrests and were praised for their ability to balance First Amendment rights with community safety. Other agencies have also publicly shared their experiences and challenges in responding to mass demonstrations by publishing AARs completed by independent organizations and the COPS Office.[36]

Adaptation to the evolving threat environment

An ever-changing and increasingly complex threat environment requires constant review and adaptation of tactics, training, policies, and procedures for the public safety community. Law enforcement agencies nationwide have had to reevaluate their active shooter response protocols following events such as the Columbine High School shooting in Jefferson County, Colorado, in 1999 and other active shooter and terrorist attacks in the United States and overseas. The AARs that were conducted following many of these events provided invaluable insights to inform preparedness, response, and recovery.

Many of the AARs conducted following critical incidents have emphasized the importance of practicing National Incident Management System (NIMS) and Incident Command System (ICS) principles as part of everyday operations. NIMS and ICS help law enforcement agencies to manage incidents and NIMS includes requirements for agencies to complete AARs following incidents, ensuring that lessons are identified and incorporated back into operations.[37] The National Police Foundation (NPF) AAR following the law enforcement response to the 2013 attacks on police in southern California noted that while individual agencies established field command posts and command structures in accordance with their policies, "when events required multiagency collaboration, the use of formal command and control systems, such as NIMS, was limited."[38] Two years later, when many of the same agencies were involved in the response to the terrorist attack at the Inland Regional Center in San Bernardino, the use of incident command—particularly NIMS—was significantly improved.[39]

33. CNA Analysis & Solutions, *Managing Large-Scale Security Events*.
34. Castor et al., *The Philadelphia Police Department Protection of the 2016 Democratic National Convention;* Straub et al., *The Cleveland Division of Police Protection of the 2016 Republican National Convention*.
35. Castor et al., *The Philadelphia Police Department Protection of the 2016 Democratic National Convention;* Straub et al., *The Cleveland Division of Police Protection of the 2016 Republican National Convention*.
36. Institute for Intergovernmental Research, *After-Action Assessment of the Police Response to the August 2014 Demonstrations in Ferguson, Missouri;* Hunton & Williams, LLP, *Independent Review of the 2017 Protest Events in Charlottesville, Virginia;* Straub et al., *Maintaining First Amendment Rights and Public Safety in North Minneapolis;* Straub et al., *Advancing Charlotte;* National Police Foundation, *2017 Presidential Inauguration First Amendment Assembly Independent Law Enforcement Review*.
37. NIMS documents are cited in the following references: FEMA, "NIMS Doctrine;" FEMA, *ICS-402*; FEMA, *National Incident Management System*.
38. National Police Foundation, *Police Under Attack*.
39. Braziel et al., *Bringing Calm to Chaos*.

> **National Incident Management System (NIMS)**
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> Following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the U.S. government became concerned about a lack of nationwide guidelines for managing large or small emergency incidents. In February 2003, Presidential Directive HSPD-5 established the National Incident Management System (NIMS). Most recently refreshed in 2017, NIMS provides all stakeholders—including all levels of government, nongovernmental organizations, and the private sector—with shared vocabulary, systems, and processes to be able to work together to manage incidents of any cause, size, location, or complexity. NIMS applies to all incident personnel and defines operational systems including the Incident Command System (ICS), Emergency Operations Center (EOC) structures, and Multiagency Coordination Groups (MAC Groups).
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> Sources: TriData Division, *Aurora Century 16 Theater Shooting;* FEMA, *National Incident Management System*, Third Edition.

"In 2013, we completed an after action review of a large-scale manhunt which led to a nationally televised lethal force encounter, and we studied AARs from other incidents to see where we could improve. We had no idea that two years later we'd respond to a terrorist attack with many other allied agencies across our county. The lessons we all learned significantly enhanced our coordination, teamwork, and overall response. All of our law enforcement and fire partners continually work together to learn, train, and improve."

— Sheriff John McMahon
San Bernardino County (California) Sheriff's Department

Agencies that are committed to learning review AARs on a regular basis and implement many of the promising practices while also training to avoid repeating the lessons learned. Many of the officers that led the Orlando (Florida) Police Department (OPD) response to the attack at Pulse Nightclub in 2016 indicated that their training—which was based, in part, on AAR scenarios derived from incidents as far

back as Columbine—kicked in immediately and guided their actions throughout the incident.[40] Thoughtful examinations of AARs encourage law enforcement and community stakeholders to collaborate to develop responses that enhance community safety, response, and resilience.

Helping responding units or systems communicate with each other

Including all department divisions in the AAR process can enhance communication and create opportunities to share information that ultimately impacts the overall effectiveness and efficiency of the department. Conducting and reviewing AARs demonstrates the importance of creating an open, nonpunitive learning environment in which changes in response protocols, policies, procedures, and training are made based on promising practices and agency-wide dialogue. For example, when Orlando police executives met with hospital and emergency room personnel to discuss the Pulse Nightclub attack, they learned that while rapid victim transportation in police vehicles undoubtedly saved lives, the trauma center was quickly overwhelmed because they did not know the victims were en route. As a result of this exchange, the OPD and trauma center were able to create communication protocols in the event that a similar incident occurs in the Orlando area in the future. Opening lines of communication and engaging in honest inter-organization AARs creates an opportunity to learn from critical incidents and advance protocols that improve operations and save lives.

"The after action review of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting was an integral part of beginning the healing process for the agency and the community. While it will always be hard to think back to the tragedy, the AAR helped some of our folks move forward, and just as important has contributed to enhanced officer wellness practices and policies in other jurisdictions following their responses to critical incidents. The worthwhile effectiveness of after action reviews cannot be understated and is a must for all agencies experiencing critical incidents."

— Chief (ret.) Michael Kehoe
Newtown (Connecticut) Police Department

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40. Straub et al., *Rescue, Response, and Resilience*.

Bringing closure

Many law enforcement personnel who have responded to a major incident reported that AARs provided an opportunity for debrief and closure regarding their experiences. One group of public safety employees who have expressed the importance of the AAR process are E911 Communications Center employees— including call-takers and dispatchers, who answer many of the calls for assistance and provide important information to first responders on scene during major events but rarely experience the resolution of an incident. During the AAR of the Pulse Nightclub shooting, OPD call-takers and dispatchers reported that the AAR process was valuable in preparing for future incidents, learning that the incident was successfully resolved, and understanding how their efforts contributed to the event. Many of the personnel interviewed by NPF assessment team members advised that the AAR process helped bring closure to those working on large-scale events.

After-Action Review versus Critical Incident Stress Debriefing

It is important to note that, while there are similarities between the two, AARs and critical incident stress debriefings (CISD) are not the same process. Therefore, one should not be held in lieu of the other and, to the extent possible, the two should not be combined. Although holding a CISD may involve individuals or units explaining their perspectives and perceptions, it is not intended to identify promising practices and lessons learned. Likewise, while the AAR process may focus on mental wellness following the response to a critical incident, it is not intended to identify individuals who should be referred to resources or treatment.

An AAR is meant to provide participants an opportunity to reflect and identify tactical and operational promising practices and lessons learned. The focus on collective learning enables the entire group or organization to focus on applications for future responses, not on identifying individuals or assigning blame.

CISD is a formal process used to support one or more individuals following a traumatic event. CISDs involve a formal one-on-one or group discussion conducted in a specific format by a trained mental health professional. The debriefs are specifically designed to support individuals in understanding their emotions and strengthening coping mechanisms following a critical incident. CISDs and other officer wellness–specific services provide unique opportunities to support the individuals involved as they manage stress.

Source: IACP, "Critical Incident Stress Management."

Fostering transparency and accountability

AARs can increase department transparency and accountability. Law enforcement agencies that participate in AARs that provide a comprehensive understanding of the response from the perspectives of the public safety agencies, emergency medical stakeholders, and government officials can better communicate the implications of their actions on scene. This expanded view creates more effective training and policies and engages new partners in the response to critical incidents. In addition, when agencies include community organizations and members in the process, they can identify opportunities to strengthen relationships with the goal of co-producing community safety. Chief Eric Jones of the Stockton (California) Police Department (SPD) requested an independent review immediately following a 2014 incident in which Stockton police officers inadvertently killed a hostage while responding to a robbery at a Bank of the West.[41] Chief Jones's intent was to provide a transparent process to hold himself and his agency accountable. The process dissected what happened during the incident response so that the SPD could make the necessary changes and communicate them publicly to their community.

As section 2 discusses, jurisdictions nationwide that have conducted AARs have identified important promising practices and lessons learned. Law enforcement and emergency responders, government officials, and community stakeholders can all learn from the process in responses to a variety of major incidents. As the AARs demonstrate, reviews have examined a wide range of areas that have enriched the public safety field. Establishing an organization that thinks smarter—by conducting and learning from AARs—is critical to ensuring effective and efficient responses that prioritize community and officer safety.

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41. Braziel, Bell, and Watson, *A Heist Gone Bad*.

The Role of After Action Reviews in Law Enforcement Organizations

"This is an opportunity for professional development to make your department stronger—to think more strategically about what is happening going forward based on what has happened in the past."

— Blake Norton, Senior Vice President
National Police Foundation

As the national standard for incident management, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) National Incident Management System (NIMS) recommends that after action reviews (AAR) following emergency training exercises and incidents identify areas of improvement and learn from the response. FEMA defines the Critical Incident Response report and Critical Incident Response report/improvement plan as follows:

> **"Critical Incident Response Report (CIRR):** A document intended to capture observations of an exercise and make recommendations for post-exercise improvements. The final CIRR and Improvement Plan (IP) are printed and distributed jointly as a single CIRR/IP following an exercise. See Critical Incident Response Report/Improvement Plan.
>
> **Critical Incident Response Report/Improvement Plan (CIRR/IP):** The main product of the Evaluation and Improvement Planning process. The Critical Incident Response Report/ Improvement Plan (CIRR/IP) has two components: a Critical Incident Response Report (CIRR), which captures observations of an exercise and makes recommendations for post-exercise improvements; and an Improvement Plan (IP), which identifies specific corrective actions, assigns them to responsible parties, and establishes targets for their completion."[42]

After Action reviews in law enforcement organizations over the years

Since the late 1990s, law enforcement agencies and relevant stakeholder organizations have increasingly moved to incorporate AARs—formally and informally—into everyday operations. Building and sustaining a culture of reflection and learning, AARs have become much more commonplace to the benefit of individual agencies and partners. As these organizations have been challenged to respond to a wide variety of critical and high-profile incidents, they have increasingly used comprehensive AARs to identify promising practices and lessons learned to build on for future responses, create and enhance trainings, and

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42. FEMA, "Glossary."

inform the field more generally. AARs conducted following mass violence incidents, mass demonstrations, hostage situations, officer ambushes, and officer-involved shootings have informed law enforcement agencies and communities in their preparation for, mitigation of, and response to future incidents.

> *"In today's world, with numerous lessons learned from prior active assailant events, failure to train appropriately and consistently and properly equip all personnel is simply wrong and unacceptable."*
>
> — Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Commission[43]

One of the first incidents of mass violence in which an AAR was conducted in part to identify recommendations related to the law enforcement response was the Columbine High School shooting that occurred in Jefferson County, Colorado, on April 20, 1999. Some of the recommendations for law enforcement that were included in this AAR contributed to overarching changes in law enforcement training and practices and continue to be applicable to law enforcement critical incident responses today. Areas include the following:

- Policy and training on responding to an active shooter

- Crisis communication with other agencies

- Media relations during a critical incident

- Incident command

- Regular interagency planning and development of relationships

- Protocols for reuniting survivors and family members[44]

Most notably, after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, Congress and then President George W. Bush created the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (the 9/11 Commission). The 9/11 Commission was mandated to conduct a comprehensive investigation of all aspects of the attack, which included federal law enforcement, the role of state and local law enforcement agencies in counterterrorism, and the response to the attacks.[45]

In the years since, incorporating lessons from previous public safety responses has had evolutionary effects in a myriad of focus areas for law enforcement agencies and other public safety personnel. AARs have addressed topics such as internal and external communications, leadership and relationships, training and equipment, and command and control. They have also addressed all phases of responding to

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43.   Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Commission, Initial Report.
44.   Erickson, *The Report of Governor Bill Owens' Columbine Review Commission*.
45.   National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 911 Commission Report*.

an incident, including the groundwork that must be in place before an incident, the initial response to an incident, the levels of chaos that need to be covered during an incident, and recovery and resilience after an incident.

> *"I think every agency hopes and prays that nothing major will happen in their area—that they won't have that kind of trauma in their community—but conducting after action reviews on a regular basis on smaller incidents can help prepare them for being able to do it in larger incidents should those incidents occur."*
>
> — Jennifer Zeunik, Director of Local Programs
> National Police Foundation

These lessons have helped inform individual agencies, relevant community and government stakeholders, and public safety more generally. Therefore, emphasizing learning and improvement continues to be important as public safety threats evolve.

Meta-analysis of 20 after action reviews examined by the National Police Foundation

National Police Foundation (NPF) staff reviewed 20 AARs from incidents of mass violence, mass demonstrations, and other critical incidents that occurred between 1999 and 2017. One international AAR—assessing the response to the coordinated terrorist attacks throughout Paris, France, in 2015—was included for comparison with 19 domestic incidents. Approximately 700 findings, recommendations, lessons learned, and promising practices from each of these AARs were analyzed and added to a master database. While each incident was unique and presented challenges for responding public safety agencies, many similar themes were identified across the AARs.[46] NPF staff members identified 13 thematic areas of findings, recommendations, lessons learned, and promising practices that appeared across the AARs examined. Findings, recommendations, lessons learned, and promising practices from the master database were then coded into one of the 13 categories.[47] Table 1 on page 16 displays the 20 AARs and the 13

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46. A theme area that is not detailed in a listed AAR and therefore not highlighted in the list may be due to the specific scope of the AAR and does not imply that related issues or promising practices were not present during the event and public safety response.
47. The 13 areas are (1) planning, preparation, policy, and procedure; (2) leadership, coordination, and collaboration; (3) training; (4) command and control; (5) self-deployment; (6) emergency medical care; (7) internal communications, situational awareness, and intelligence; (8) external communications, public relations, and traditional and social media; (9) dignitaries and elected officials; (10) officer safety and equipment; (11) first responder wellness and mental health; (12) victims and witnesses; and (13) community relations, partnerships, and resilience.

thematic areas most pertinent to the law enforcement response to the actual incidents examined. The sections following table 1 also provide more detail on the areas of findings, recommendations, lessons learned, and promising practices, including specific examples from some of the AARs.

Table 1. Lessons learned in major after action reviews

AAR		Areas of Findings, Recommendations, Lessons Learned, and Promising Practices												
Date of incident	AAR title	Planning, preparation, policy, and procedure	Leadership, coordination, and collaboration	Training	Command and control	Self-deployment	Emergency medical care	Internal communications, situational awareness, and intelligence	External communications, public relations, and traditional and social media	Dignitaries and elected officials	Officer safety and equipment	First responder wellness and mental health	Victims and witnesses	Community relations, partnerships, and resilience
October 1, 2017	1 October After-Action Report	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
May 13–14, July 8, and August 11–12, 2017	Independent Review of the 2017 Protest Events in Charlottesville, Virginia	x	x	x	x			x	x	x	x			x
January 20, 2017	2017 Presidential Inauguration First Amendment Assembly Independent Law Enforcement Review	x		x	x				x		x			
January 6, 2017	Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport Active Shooter Incident and Post-Event Response January 6, 2017: After-Action Report	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x		x	
September 20–27, 2016	Advancing Charlotte: A Police Foundation Assessment of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department Response to the September 2016 Demonstrations	x	x	x	x			x	x	x	x			x
June 12, 2016	Rescue, Response, and Resilience: A Critical Incident Review of the Orlando Public Safety Response to the Attack on the Pulse Nightclub	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
February 20, 2016	Managing the Response to a Mobile Mass Shooting: A Critical Incident Review of the Kalamazoo, Michigan, Public Safety Response to the February 20, 2016, Mass Shooting Incident	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x

Continued from p. 16

Date of incident	AAR title	Planning, preparation, policy, and procedure	Leadership, coordination, and collaboration	Training	Command and control	Self-deployment	Emergency medical care	Internal communications, situational awareness, and intelligence	External communications, public relations, and traditional and social media	Dignitaries and elected officials	Officer safety and equipment	First responder wellness and mental health	Victims and witnesses	Community relations, partnerships, and resilience
	AAR													
	Areas of Findings, Recommendations, Lessons Learned, and Promising Practices													
December 2, 2015	Bringing Calm to Chaos: A Critical Incident Review of the San Bernardino Public Safety Response to the December 2, 2015, Terrorist Shooting Incident at the Inland Regional Center	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
November 15–December 3, 2015	Maintaining First Amendment Rights and Public Safety in North Minneapolis: An After-Action Assessment of the Police Response to Protests, Demonstrations, and Occupation of the Minneapolis Police Department's Fourth Precinct	x	x	x	x				x	x	x	x		x
November 13, 2015	The Attacks on Paris: Lessons Learned	x		x	x	x	x	x	x			x	x	x
August 9–25, 2014	An Assessment of the St. Louis County Police Department	x	x	x	x	x		x	x		x	x		x
August 9–25, 2014	After-Action Assessment of the Police Response to the August 2014 Demonstrations in Ferguson, Missouri	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x		x
July 16, 2014	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	x	x	x	x	x		x	x		x	x	x	x
June 8, 2014	Las Vegas After-Action Assessment: Lessons Learned from the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department's Ambush Incident	x	x	x	x	x		x	x		x	x		
September 16, 2013	After Action Report Washington Navy Yard September 16, 2013: Internal Review of the Metropolitan Police Department	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	
April 15, 2013	After Action Report for the Response to the 2013 Boston Marathon Bombings	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x
February 3–14, 2013	Police Under Attack: Southern California Law Enforcement Response to the Attacks by Christopher Dorner	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x			
December 14, 2012	Final Report of the Sandy Hook Advisory Commission	x		x	x	x				x			x	x

Continued from p. 17

	AAR	Areas of Findings, Recommendations, Lessons Learned, and Promising Practices												
Date of incident	AAR title	Planning, preparation, policy, and procedure	Leadership, coordination, and collaboration	Training	Command and control	Self-deployment	Emergency medical care	Internal communications, situational awareness, and intelligence	External communications, public relations, and traditional and social media	Dignitaries and elected officials	Officer safety and equipment	First responder wellness and mental health	Victims and witnesses	Community relations, partnerships, and resilience
July 20, 2012	Aurora Century 16 Theater Shooting: After Action Report for the City of Aurora	X		X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
April 16, 2007	Mass Shootings at Virginia Tech April 16, 2007: Report of the Review Panel	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X			X	X
April 20, 1999	The Report of Governor Bill Owens' Columbine Review Commission	X		X	X		X	X	X		X		X	

Common after action review areas of findings, recommendations, lessons learned, and promising practices

Planning, preparation, policy, and procedure

All the AARs examined by NPF staff emphasized the importance of planning and preparation in advance of a major incident. The AARs pointed to the importance of planning for identifying and effectively deploying resources and personnel to an incident. This planning includes anticipating multiple phases and transitions that occur within the context of an event as well as the likely investigation that will follow. As the San Bernardino AAR notes, "Agencies should anticipate and plan a timely transition from the somewhat chaotic active shooter response to a more methodical search for possible suspects, triage of victims, and victim and witness extrication."[48]

AARs following mass demonstrations also display the importance of agencies reviewing and updating policies and procedures regularly. Incorporating community feedback into the policy review process, especially for policies likely to substantially impact community members or be of particular interest to them, can further support police-community relations and build trust through transparency.[49] AARs

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48. Braziel et al., *Bringing Calm to Chaos*.
49. Quattlebaum, Meares, and Tyler, *Principles of Procedurally Just Policing*.

following demonstrations in Ferguson, Missouri; Minneapolis, Minnesota; and Charlotte, North Carolina, highlight the importance of departmental policies for balancing mobile field force (MFF) equipment, use, and training; identification and officer safety; and use of force with community perceptions.[50]

> *"The more prepared you are with your planning, the more you can be prepared when a crisis comes to your front door step."*
>
> – Chief Daniel Linskey (ret.), Boston (Massachusetts) Police Department[51]

Leadership, coordination, and collaboration

A significant majority of the AARs identified leadership—both internal and public-facing—as vital to developing and implementing an effective response to a critical incident and reducing chaos and saving lives.[52] Regardless of rank or title, leadership requires composure and decision-making under less than ideal circumstances.

Multiple AARs, including those of incidents in San Bernardino, California, and Orlando, Florida, as well as at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia, recognize that "[R]esponse to and management of critical incidents are greatly enhanced when pre-existing relationships exist between leaders and supervisors from all potential first responder agencies."[53] Similarly, the Kalamazoo, Michigan, AAR identified that major incidents can quickly exhaust individual agency resources, making collaboration and coordination among leaders particularly important.[54] As the San Bernardino and Orlando AARs recommend, agency leaders should publicly demonstrate and recognize collaboration and support from others[55] and build mutual trust and respect with each other—throughout the ranks—to ensure a collaborative response.[56] The importance of coordinated leadership was also included as a lesson learned in the AARs from Charlottesville, Virginia; Minneapolis; and Charlotte.

50. Straub et al., *Maintaining First Amendment Rights and Public Safety in North Minneapolis;* Institute for Intergovernmental Research, *After-Action Assessment of the Police Response to the August 2014 Demonstrations in Ferguson, Missouri;* Straub et al., *Advancing Charlotte.*
51. Groppe, "Leadership Lessons Learned from the Boston Marathon Bombing."
52. Straub et al., *Rescue, Response, and Resilience.*
53. Braziel et al., *Bringing Calm to Chaos;* Straub et al., *Rescue, Response, and Resilience.*
54. Straub et al., *Managing the Response to a Mobile Mass Shooting.*
55. Braziel et al., *Bringing Calm to Chaos.*
56. Straub et al., *Rescue, Response, and Resilience.*

Training

All the AARs reviewed by NPF staff emphasize the importance of continued training using tabletop and practical exercises that incorporate recognized promising practices and lessons learned from previous AARs.[57]

In response to the threat of terrorism, agencies should improve counterterrorism training; pay increased attention to policies, procedures, and training regarding the law enforcement response to suicide bombers, secondary devices, and multisite attacks; and consider transitions, phases, and additional risks posed by terrorists.[58] In particular, considering the high levels of stress responding to major incident situations such as an incident of mass violence, the AARs of the incidents in San Bernardino and Orlando note that training should attempt to create as much sensory deprivation or as many stimuli as possible to simulate real-world scenarios.[59] Physical and environmental issues can present significant barriers to a response. AARs like those of the incidents at the Washington, D.C., Navy Yard recommend that agencies should also plan and train for timely access to information like building diagrams or evaluations of buildings and facilities, particularly for critical infrastructure and areas where large numbers of persons gather on a regular basis.[60] In addition, given the chaotic nature of critical events, the appropriate responder might not be available at a needed moment, therefore cross-training can be crucial. Law enforcement agencies should train all officers in tactical emergency medical care.[61] Cross-training and multiagency inclusion should be part of training exercises. The Washington Navy Yard AAR highlighted the importance of also including 911 call-takers and dispatchers in training exercises.[62]

> *"Using after action reviews to inform training creates an ability to make your agency a learning environment that is constantly using its own and others' experiences to train, practice, and learn."*
>
> — Jennifer Zeunik, Director of Local Programs
> National Police Foundation

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57. Straub et al., *Rescue, Response, and Resilience*.
58. Straub et al., *Rescue, Response, and Resilience*.
59. Braziel et al., *Bringing Calm to Chaos;* Straub et al., *Rescue, Response, and Resilience*.
60. Metropolitan Police Department, *After Action Report Washington Navy Yard*; Braziel et al., *Bringing Calm to Chaos*.
61. Straub et al., *Managing the Response to a Mobile Mass Shooting,* Braziel et al., *Bringing Calm to Chaos;* IACP, "Tactical Emergency Medical Training for Law Enforcement Personnel."
62. Metropolitan Police Department, *After Action Report Washington Navy Yard*.

AARs following mass demonstrations and large-scale security events also include the importance of training. Tabletop and practical exercises should be conducted to incorporate promising practices and address lessons learned from AARs of previous responses to similar incidents. Tabletops generally involve a meeting to discuss a simulated emergency situation, which help to refine the roles and responsibilities of those involved and identify areas for improvement in the existing emergency plan.[63] While their frequency depends on their focus and the needs of the organizations, as the Charlotte AAR identified, tabletops and other similar training exercises can be valuable tools to collaborate with stakeholders from a variety of organizations, including other public safety organizations and local media outlets.[64]

Another critical area of focus for training is the implementation of the NIMS and the Incident Command System (ICS). As the Ferguson AAR recommended, regional mutual aid organizations should prioritize joint training and ICS-based tabletop exercises to practice coordinated responses among the various agencies.[65] Position-specific training, including specific training for all potential incident commanders and trainings that incorporate special units like special weapons and tactics (SWAT) or hazardous device teams should also be included in regular planning and training exercises so that leadership and tactical teams are familiar with one another's command and control and tactical protocols. Ensuring this understanding throughout an individual department and across likely mutual aid partners is an important training component as well.[66]

NIMS and ICS principles should also be understood throughout the public safety system—directing specific assignments[67]—and practiced as part of everyday operations.[68] The Orlando, Washington Navy Yard, Boston Marathon, and Stockton AARs clearly state that agency roles and responsibilities should be made clear in advance.[69] Likewise, the AARs on the St. Louis County (Missouri) Police Department and the Aurora, Colorado, movie theater shooting state that the incident commander must be clearly identified.[70]

63. University of Wisconsin Police, *What is a Tabletop Exercise?*
64. Straub et al., *Advancing Charlotte*.
65. Institute for Intergovernmental Research, *After-Action Assessment of the Police Response to the August 2014 Demonstrations in Ferguson, Missouri*.
66. Straub et al., *Rescue, Response, and Resilience*.
67. TriData Division, *Aurora Century 16 Theater Shooting*.
68. Braziel et al., *A Heist Gone Bad; National Police Foundation, Police Under Attack*; Straub et al., *Maintaining First Amendment Rights and Public Safety in North Minneapolis;* TriData Division, *Aurora Century 16 Theater Shooting*.
69. Metropolitan Police Department, *After Action Report Washington Navy Yard;* National Police Foundation, *After Action Report for the Response to the 2013 Boston Marathon Bombings;* Braziel et al., A Heist Gone Bad; Broward County Aviation Department, Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport Active Shooter Incident.
70. Norton et al., *An Assessment of the St. Louis County Police Department;* TriData Division, *Aurora Century 16 Theater Shooting*.

Active Shooter Training

Lessons learned from the response to the shooting at Columbine High School in 1999 fundamentally changed the tactical response to future active shooter scenarios. Instead of holding the perimeter and calling SWAT, law enforcement has since modified their response to actively find the shooter(s) and stop the threat in a group formation or with a single officer if necessary. Training on responding to active shooter scenarios in this way helped to better prepare officers responding to the 2015 San Bernardino terrorist attacks and 2016 Orlando Pulse Nightclub attack.

Source: Straub et al., *Rescue, Response, and Resilience.*

After-Action Review and Reporting eLearning Program

With funding from the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office), the Virginia Center for Policing Innovation is developing an After Action Review and Reporting eLearning Program (AAR Online) designed to train law enforcement agency personnel in their efforts to conduct meaningful after-action reviews and prepare written reports. Meant to provide an interactive, engaging tutorial experience, AAR Online will offer training on conducting an AAR process that can be used to review major incidents or more simple reviews conducted after more routine incidents that reinforce the importance of continued learning and improvement.

Source: VCPI, *After-Action Review and Reporting.*

Command and control

A key theme that strengthens the response to any incident is organized and established command and control.

When a major incident occurs, incident command should be established as soon as possible and practical at individual scenes and to manage the overall event.[71] Multiple AARs have emphasized the need for a well-planned, unified command center and process, especially one based on NIMS and ICS principles. In many of the critical incidents reviewed by NPF staff, inexperience with NIMS and ICS impacted incident command and the creation of a unified command center. In Aurora, authorities learned that not establishing a unified command with police and fire commanders in the first hour of the response hampered coordination that could have eased the victim transport process.[72] As the Aurora, Minneapolis, Kalamazoo, and Orlando AARs identified, agencies should establish a unified command center with leaders from public safety partners, mutual aid agencies, and relevant government officials. In addition, officers should establish incident command as soon as practical to be able to coordinate the deployment of resources as the response unfolds. Multiple AARs recommend that public safety partners versed in NIMS and ICS procedures regularly plan and exercise unified incident command for critical incidents.[73]

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71. TriData Division, *Aurora Century 16 Theater Shooting;* Straub et al., *Maintaining First Amendment Rights and Public Safety in North Minneapolis;* Straub et al., *Managing the Response to a Mobile Mass Shooting;* Straub et al., *Rescue, Response, and Resilience.*
72. TriData Division, *Aurora Century 16 Theater Shooting.*
73. Straub et al., *Managing the Response to a Mobile Mass Shooting;* Straub et al., *Maintaining First Amendment Rights and Public Safety in North Minneapolis.*

Another aspect of command and control during the response to a critical incident is ensuring the safety and security of the scene. Many AARs recommend that during an incident, responders constantly evaluate the security risks of command post, victim and witness triage, and personnel locations and make appropriate adjustments as necessary.[74]

As the Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood, Florida, International Airport and Orlando AARs identified, after adequate personnel are on scene additional personnel should be directed to staging areas for assignments, and as soon as practical a supervisor should be designated as the scene safety officer to direct personnel and resources to staging areas and coordinate assignments.[75]

Self-deployment

While it is appropriate for officers who are able to take immediate action to respond to the scene, "self-deployment" is the independent action of an individual to an incident without the ability to immediately intervene in an ongoing situation or without a request from the jurisdiction in command.[76] Multiple AARs have found that uncoordinated self-deployment can add to the chaos of a response, create challenges for officer safety, and deplete the pool of available officers to respond to other areas of the city.[77] In addition, rapidly responding law enforcement personnel to a scene has contributed to challenges in maintaining ingress and egress routes.

As personnel deploy to the scene, AARs like the ones conducted in St. Louis County and Aurora recommend that agencies have a plan for managing public safety in the rest of the city, including considering how to handle other calls for service[78] and designating an individual or partner organization to be responsible for continuity of response to calls for service.[79]

Emergency medical care

Slightly more than half of the AARs examined—and virtually all the AARs that involved responding to an incident of mass violence—discuss promising practices and lessons learned related to emergency medical care. Emergency medical care emerged as a significant topic of discussion for law enforcement following the movie theater shooting in Aurora. To get victims to treatment, police officers improvised, transporting victims in their own vehicles—at the time an unprecedented move that undoubtedly saved lives.[80]

As a critical component of the response to incidents with multiple casualties, many law enforcement agencies have provided individual tactical first aid kits to officers and trained officers on basic life support. Public safety leaders across police, fire, and emergency medical services (EMS) have also begun

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74. Braziel et al., *Bringing Calm to Chaos;* Straub et al., *Rescue, Response, and Resilience.*
75. Broward County Aviation Department, *Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport;* Straub et al., *Rescue, Response, and Resilience.*
76. Straub et al., *Rescue, Response, and Resilience.*
77. Braziel et al., *Bringing Calm to Chaos;* Straub et al., *Rescue, Response, and Resilience.*
78. Norton et al., *An Assessment of the St. Louis County Police Department.*
79. TriData Division, *Aurora Century 16 Theater Shooting.*
80. TriData Division, *Aurora Century 16 Theater Shooting.*

to create and deploy rescue task forces and tactical rescue units to triage, treat, and transport victims to hospitals. The AAR of the November 2013 terrorist attack in Paris and the AAR of the Kalamazoo mass mobile shooter similarly identified that law enforcement personnel should receive emergency medical and tactical emergency medical training and be equipped to render aid to severely injured victims and colleagues.[81] The importance of immediate emergency medical care was also demonstrated in the 2017 shooting at a concert in Las Vegas, Nevada. Hundreds of patients were transported by the fire department and private ambulances as well as private cars, pickup trucks, and taxicabs.[82]

Internal communications, situational awareness, and intelligence

Reliable and consistent communication between responding agencies is critical for effective operations during any major incident. Therefore, it is extremely important that agencies have plans in place regarding internal communication and communication with mutual aid and responding agencies before a major incident occurs.

A clear communication strategy within an agency is particularly important during the response to mass demonstrations. As exemplified in the AAR of Minneapolis, "decisions, directives, and instructions should be clearly communicated to all relevant personnel . . . through the chain of command, using clearly delineated communication protocol to ensure personnel are fully aware and to avoid distortion or lack of clarity."[83]

AARs of Boston and San Bernardino recommend ensuring real-time connectivity and information-sharing for situational awareness and a coordinated response. Other AARs have noted that agencies should consider how investments in a secure, encrypted communications system can improve internal communication without jeopardizing officer and community safety. Similarly, the desire to avoid unnecessary chatter must be balanced with the need to share important information with all involved in the response.[84]

In addition, multiple AARs like those of Stockton and Kalamazoo have found that co-location or other regional integration of critical functions like 911 and dispatch support efficiency during responses to critical incidents. The Aurora AAR also found that increased integration of planning and exercises among public safety communications, fire, and police should be conducted to address inadequate joint training on the interoperability of the communications system.[85]

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81.   Straub et al., *Managing the Response to a Mobile Mass Shooting;* Homeland Security Advisory Council, *The Attacks on Paris.*
82.   FEMA, *1 October After-Action Report.*
83.   Straub et al., *Maintaining First Amendment Rights and Public Safety in North Minneapolis.*
84.   Straub et al., *Rescue, Response, and Resilience.*
85.   TriData Division, *Aurora Century 16 Theater Shooting.*

External communications, public relations, and traditional and social media

Law enforcement agencies regularly balance the need to inform and update the public, protect victims and officers, and ensure the integrity of their response. This balancing act is particularly challenging in light of the modern 24-hour news environment, proliferation of online outlets, and ease of spreading rumors.[86] In responding both to incidents of mass violence and to mass demonstrations, social media can be leveraged to release timely and accurate information to the public and traditional media and be monitored for any information received from the public. Nearly all the AARs examined provided promising practices and lessons learned on managing external communications, including with social media and the internet.

Agencies should establish a Joint Information Center (JIC) for consistency and accuracy of a unified message[87] and identify one information source for the press and public.[88] As the Aurora, Charlotte, and Fort Lauderdale AARs found, a JIC can provide consistent, accurate, and unified messages from all agencies involved in the response.[89] During an event, AARs also recommend that agencies should include public information officers (PIO) from city and state stakeholders in command-level briefings and strategy sessions to determine the appropriate media strategy, increase coordination, and project one voice.[90] Agencies should continue to use social media to disseminate accurate information and correct erroneous information.[91]

The law enforcement response to the bombings at the 2013 Boston Marathon was one of the first critical incidents in which law enforcement effectively leveraged social media. The Boston Police Department (BPD) leveraged social media to "keep the public informed about the status of the investigation, to calm nerves and request assistance, to correct mistaken information reported by the press, and to ask for public restraint in the tweeting of information from police scanners."[92] Over the course of the response, investigation, and recovery, BPD social media accounts quickly became the most reliable source of information and were used to communicate with the public.[93]

While social media has become the most immediate way for many people to get news and information, AARs from Aurora, Minneapolis, Orlando, and Charlotte found that it is equally important for law enforcement agencies to build and maintain relationships with local media prior to a critical incident. These AARs note that should an incident occur that draws national and international media attention,

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86. Straub et al., *Rescue, Response, and Resilience.*
87. TriData Division, *Aurora Century 16 Theater Shooting;* National Police Foundation, *After Action Report for the Response to the 2013 Boston Marathon Bombings;* Straub et al., *Rescue, Response, and Resilience.*
88. Metropolitan Police Department, *After Action Report Washington Navy Yard.*
89. TriData Division, *Aurora Century 16 Theater Shooting.*
90. Straub et al., *Maintaining First Amendment Rights and Public Safety in North Minneapolis;* Straub et al., *Rescue, Response, and Resilience.*
91. Braziel et al., *Bringing Calm to Chaos;* Straub et al., *Maintaining First Amendment Rights and Public Safety in North Minneapolis;* Homeland Security Advisory Council, *The Attacks on Paris;* Straub et al., *Rescue, Response, and Resilience;* Straub et al., Advancing Charlotte.
92. Davis, Alves, and Sklansky, *Social Media and Police Leadership.*
93. Davis, Alves, and Sklansky, S*ocial Media and Police Leadership.*

agencies should prioritize these local relationships and provide unique opportunities to the outlets most familiar with the city that will continue to provide coverage long after the incident is over.[94] For example, as a result of the preexisting relationships between the Minneapolis Police Department (MPD) PIO and the local media, the MPD was afforded an opportunity to provide a quote or respond to each of the stories produced during the 18-day mass gathering and demonstration in 2015. The MPD was given the opportunity to provide updates about the status of the occupation, details of any arrests made, the accessibility of the precinct to citizens, and notable events during the occupation.[95]

Dignitaries and elected leaders

In addition to members of the press and the public, dignitaries and elected leaders are likely to arrive at the scene of a major incident. Elected officials understand that often their response to an incident is an important component of building resilience and in ensuring public trust and confidence in the government.[96] Some elected leaders may also come to the scene of a major incident—looking for information for constituents or to show support for law enforcement. AARs recommend that local government and law enforcement agency officials collaborate ahead of an incident to determine the roles and responsibilities of elected officials in managing critical incidents.

> *"The after action process provided us with an opportunity to take an honest and balanced look at what we did well, and what we needed to improve, so that we could better prepare our public safety personnel, elected officials, and the community to prepare for, respond to, and resolve critical incidents."*
>
> — Chief Jeff Hadley, Chatham County (Georgia) Police Department
> Former Chief, Kalamazoo (Michigan) Department of Public Safety

In response to an incident of mass violence or natural disaster, elected leaders can quickly and effectively activate the fullest extent of the resources and personnel to contribute to the response. During a critical incident, it may be necessary to transport large numbers of victims and witnesses from the scene to a safe area where they can be interviewed and provided assistance. Government officials can leverage public transportation resources or school buses. Moreover, elected leaders may be aware of processes needed to secure additional funding and resources for the response and recovery. In San Bernardino, the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department employed a legislative liaison who could support efforts on scene, helping officials stay focused on predesignated duties and responsibilities.[97]

94. Straub et al., *Maintaining First Amendment Rights and Public Safety in North Minneapolis*, TriData Division, *Aurora Century 16 Theater Shooting*; Straub et al., *Rescue, Response, and Resilience*; Straub et al., *Advancing Charlotte*.
95. Straub et al., *Maintaining First Amendment Rights and Public Safety in North Minneapolis*.
96. Kirby, "A Conceptual Model."
97. Braziel et al., *Bringing Calm to Chaos*.

Elected officials can also help defuse community tensions and ask for calm and patience as information is gathered and provided.[98] Even if there is disagreement or differing perceptions, a plan should be developed to keep messaging coordinated and focused on community safety and peace.[99] In the AAR following demonstrations in Charlotte, community stakeholders noted that the lack of a unified message from the mayor, city council, and chief of police contributed to their perception that there was division in the City's response.[100] This can add another hurdle to the law enforcement response to an incident. Likewise, the AAR following the 2017 demonstrations in Charlottesville notes the city council's—rather than law enforcement and the city attorney—decision to determine the location of the "Unite The Right" rally was "a dangerous overreach with lasting consequences."[101]

Officer safety and equipment

Protecting the safety and wellness of officers—both during and in the aftermath of an incident—is critical. Agencies must care for the safety of their officers, particularly in situations where personnel may be targeted. In addition, while the public safety culture has historically not embraced the need to address the mental health of its personnel, time, attention, and support are necessary to support resiliency.[102] Organizations should consider the resources available to them and their personnel to develop their support program.[103] Support should begin at the academy and continue throughout an officer's career. Public safety organizations can and should support their personnel with professional and peer support, training, and specialized support protocols that are written into policy to minimize undesirable effects of stressful incidents and, particularly, critical incidents.[104] It is important that such policies be in place before they are required.

The Orlando AAR found that during a major incident, agencies should assign an incident safety officer, responsible for identifying, communicating, and mitigating on-scene responder safety risks such as regarding potential explosive devices and need for decontamination.[105] Agencies should consider how mobile field force (MFF) or tactical personal protective equipment (PPE) supports officer safety in responses to incidents.[106] Other AARs examined also recognized the role that specialized equipment can have in providing tactical advantages and helping to protect victims, public safety personnel, and the community.

98. Community Relations Service, *Police Critical Incident Checklist*.
99. Community Relations Service, *Police Critical Incident Checklist*.
100. Straub et al., *Advancing Charlotte*.
101. Hunton & Williams, LLP, *Independent Review of the 2017 Protest Events in Charlottesville, Virginia*.
102. Straub et al., *Managing the Response to a Mobile Mass Shooting*.
103. Digliani, *Law Enforcement Critical Incident Handbook;* NAMI, *Preparing for the Unimaginable*.
104. Digliani, *Law Enforcement Critical Incident Handbook*.
105. Straub et al., *Rescue, Response, and Resilience*.
106. Straub et al., *Rescue, Response, and Resilience*.

As reviews from Ferguson, Washington, Charlotte, and Minneapolis recommended, when responding to mass demonstrations, law enforcement agencies must consider the balance between the need for protection and the image presented by line officers clad in MFF or PPE.[107] These AARs noted that, in some cases, demonstrators perceived that they were exercising their First Amendment rights and were further upset by the fact that officers responded in "riot gear" and weapons.

> *"The after action review process allows for open feedback in a constructive way and leads us all closer to the ultimate goal of developing best practices for dealing with high-risk incidents in our changing world."*
>
> — Sheriff John Mina, Orange County (Florida) Sheriff's Office
> Former Chief, Orlando (Florida) Police Department

First responder wellness and mental health

First responder wellness and mental health must be cared for with resources in place before, during, and after any incident. Law enforcement personnel—primarily first responders—are often expected to be tough and resilient and able to bounce back from trauma without much if any mental health treatment or professional attention.[108] In addition, call-takers, dispatchers, and support staff—who are not at the scene of a critical incident but also play important roles in the response to a critical incident—can be affected mentally and emotionally. Therefore, it is important that agencies acknowledge and provide mental health support to all personnel.

A large majority of the AARs examined by NPF staff—including all the AARs of incidents of mass violence conducted by the NPF—have acknowledged the importance of first responder mental health and wellness. A National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) report drawing on lessons from Aurora and Newtown also recommended designating a mental health or officer wellness incident commander to oversee officer mental health and coordinate services among participating agencies.[109] In the days following the shooting at the Aurora movie theater, the Aurora Police Department psychologist and staff met with all the officers who responded to the incident to provide information about what they might expect to feel and offer them an opportunity to receive additional assistance. The recommendation "If possible, do not require first responders who worked at a traumatic incident to work their immediate next shift, especially if those become 12-hour shifts," was included to afford those involved the opportunity to rest and unwind.[110]

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107. Institute for Intergovernmental Research, *After-Action Assessment of the Police Response to the August 2014 Demonstrations in Ferguson, Missouri;* Metropolitan Police Department, *After Action Report Washington Navy Yard;* Straub et al., *Advancing Charlotte;* Straub et al., *Maintaining First Amendment Rights and Public Safety in North Minneapolis.*
108. Straub et al., *Rescue, Response, and Resilience.*
109. NAMI, *Preparing for the Unimaginable.*
110. TriData Division, *Aurora Century 16 Theater Shooting.*

AARs from incidents of mass violence in San Bernardino, Kalamazoo, and Orlando and a mass demonstration in Minneapolis also recommended that agencies should have a policy for mental health support following a major incident and a process for communicating the policy to the entire department.[111] The AARs recommend that the policy include that agencies compel at least attendance at—and ideally participation in—critical incident debriefings or post-incident counseling for victims and civilian and commissioned staff[112] and provide follow-up counseling as post-traumatic stress may arise several weeks or months after an event.[113] The AAR of the Minneapolis Police Department response to demonstrations in the city similarly recommended assigning a wellness coordinator, specifying that it should be assigned to an existing ICS position.[114]

In recognition of the fact that many agency critical incident stress management or employee assistance program (EAP) policies do not include deviations for critical incidents, the AAR following the public safety response to the Orlando Pulse Nightclub shooting recommended that jurisdictions examine whether their traditional EAP is sufficient.[115] Most first responders perceive talking to colleagues as a less formal method of receiving support.[116] In addition, some first responders in Orlando indicated that they preferred to receive support from chaplains.[117] Therefore, consideration should be given to addressing the extent to which peer support programs can complement EAP, in-house treatment programs, and psychological services and resources to provide both day-to-day emotional support and participate in the comprehensive response to critical incidents.[118] It is important to note that trauma from critical incidents, if left untreated, can hinder the healing of the entire community and create officer safety and work performance issues in police departments.[119]

Victims and witnesses

In addition to the immediate response to critical incidents, law enforcement and public safety organizations—in coordination with elected officials, the Red Cross, and other community mental health providers—must plan to address the short- and long-term needs of a community. Multiple AARs have recognized the importance of staging and conducting victim and witness interviews; protecting survivors, victims, and families from the media; and having processes planned for family reunification and assistance. Actions taken to support victims, witnesses, and the community generally can set the stage for building community resilience and healing in the aftermath of an incident.

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111. Braziel et al., *Bringing Calm to Chaos;* Straub et al., *Managing the Response to a Mobile Mass Shooting.*
112. Braziel et al., *Bringing Calm to Chaos;* Straub et al., *Managing the Response to a Mobile Mass Shooting;* Metropolitan Police Department, *After Action Report Washington Navy Yard.*
113. Braziel et al., *Bringing Calm to Chaos;* Straub et al., *Managing the Response to a Mobile Mass Shooting,* Straub et al., *Maintaining First Amendment Rights and Public Safety in North Minneapolis.*
114. Straub et al., *Maintaining First Amendment Rights and Public Safety in North Minneapolis.*
115. Straub et al., *Rescue, Response, and Resilience.*
116. Nicoletti, Garrido, and Kirschner, "Supporting the Psychological Recovery."
117. Straub et al., *Rescue, Response, and Resilience.*
118. IACP, *Peer Support Guidelines.*
119. NAMI, *Preparing for the Unimaginable.*

Community Resilience

Community resilience is "a measure of the sustained ability of a community to use available resources to respond to, withstand, and recover from adverse situations."* Many factors have been found to contribute to community resilience, including community cohesion and collaboration and a shared responsibility and vision. In some cases, trained community members can even effectively assist in emergency responses to incidents to save lives as first care providers as they did in the 2017 shooting of a concert in Las Vegas (see "Emergency medical care" on page 28). As incidents occur that challenge communities, public safety organizations can contribute to and support the resilience of their communities by strengthening and sustaining community relationships before, during, and after an incident.

* RAND Corporation, "Community Resilience."

Sources: RAND Corporation, "Community Resilience;" Callaway et al., "Building Community Resilience to Dynamic Mass Casualty Incidents;" Spence, *Improving Law Enforcement Resilience.*

Following the 2015 San Bernardino attack, victims expressed concern and frustration about the length of time it took to be interviewed and contact family members. Learning from the AAR of that incident, in the response to the Pulse Nightclub shooting Orlando Police Department (OPD) leaders had plans that considered provisions like cell phone charging stations and access to counselors and clergy for victims and witnesses while awaiting interviews and victim notifications.[120] Both AARs recommended that agencies consider increasing staffing to expedite the interview process and request assistance from other agencies if appropriate as a lesson learned to alleviate the challenges posed by the need to identify and interview large numbers of victims and witnesses.[121]

In addition, multiple AARs have found that the establishment of a family reunification center (FRC) serves as an important place for the reunification of survivors and loved ones.[122] It is also important for the FRC to be a safe, stable, and comfortable facility near primary hospitals to accommodate family and friends of victims as they wait to receive information.[123] Clergy and counselors should made available on request to support victims, witnesses, and families and should be credentialed so that they are vetted, properly trained, and readily identifiable to prevent untrained persons from entering secured areas.[124] As the AAR following the movie theater shooting in Aurora found, without training even good-hearted volunteers may do harm.[125]

In Orlando, drawing on lessons learned from the AARs following the terrorist attacks in San Bernardino and Boston, a family assistance center (FAC) was opened at Camping World Stadium (see figure 1) based on the stadium's ability to accommodate the 956 individuals and 298 families that ended up coming as well as the 50 to 60 government, community, and business organizations that sent representatives to provide support.[126]

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120. Straub et al., *Rescue, Response, and Resilience.*
121. Straub et al., *Rescue, Response, and Resilience.*
122. Metropolitan Police Department, *After Action Report Washington Navy Yard;* Straub et al., *Rescue, Response, and Resilience;* Braziel et al., *Bringing Calm to Chaos.*
123. Straub et al., *Rescue, Response, and Resilience.*
124. Braziel et al., *Bringing Calm to Chaos.*
125. TriData Division, *Aurora Century 16 Theater Shooting.*
126. Straub et al., *Rescue, Response, and Resilience.*

Figure 1. Advertisement of family assistance center available following the 2016 Orlando Pulse Nightclub attack

Community relations, partnerships, and resilience

Fostering positive community relations and building police-community partnerships is immensely beneficial to law enforcement organizations, particularly after a critical incident. A large majority of the AARs examined by NPF staff discussed the importance of community relations and community resilience.

The AARs following mass demonstrations focus on the importance of police-community relations to enhance understanding and trust. All the agencies involved in the reviews had been conducting community policing efforts prior to their incidents, but the AARs reiterated the importance of targeted efforts and provided clear recommendations from the community members and organizations involved. As for incidents of mass violence, both before and after an incident, the strong pre-existing relationships law

enforcement agencies had with local communities helped with managing the chaos around the incident response and laid the groundwork for building community resilience in the aftermath. Primarily, the relationships between police and community stakeholder groups and community members is important to recovery and resilience.

Following the 2016 attack at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, in which the assailant claimed to be Muslim and inspired by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, local law enforcement collaborated with local community leaders and took steps to ensure that Muslim community members felt protected from retribution in the aftermath of the attack. They also publicly acknowledged the LGBTQ and Hispanic communities (both of which had been specifically targeted; Pulse was an LGBTQ gathering spot and the attack took place on Latin Night) as well as the Muslim population, emphasizing that the response would be community-driven and led by trust and unity.[127] In addition to protecting the community from retribution, these law enforcement actions supported the continued building of trusting relationships, which can help to reduce crime and prevent terrorism as communities take it upon themselves to report suspicious activity, share information, and become hardened against terrorist messaging.[128] Furthermore, the OPD has had longstanding relationships with the Orlando LGBTQ community. Building on their existing relationships, as LGBTQ community leaders reached out to OPD personnel about fear because they had been targeted, law enforcement made sure to provide security at numerous LGBTQ community gatherings and vigils in the days and weeks following the attack.

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127. Straub et al., *Rescue, Response, and Resilience*.
128. IACP, *Using Community Policing to Counter Violent Extremism*.

3. A Step-by-Step Guide to Conducting an After Action Review

"Don't wait for the big critical incident . . . the little things become part of the culture."

— Chief (ret.) Rick Braziel, Sacramento County (California) Inspector General
  Former Chief, Sacramento Police Department

Law enforcement agencies face the ever-increasing and real threat of major incidents every day. As a profession, law enforcement chief executives and their departments must continuously learn and evolve in their responses to incidents of all types. Conducting after action reviews (AAR), creating training and learning opportunities from previous and continuing internal AARs for their agencies and relevant partners, and sharing promising practices and lessons learned provides opportunities for learning and for adjustment and advancement in preparedness.[129] It also allows for agencies nationwide to implement promising practices based on the most recent information from a variety of resources.

Creating and Promoting a Culture of Learning

One main outcome of any AAR process is to support the creation and promotion of a culture of learning throughout the organization. By cultivating a culture of learning, law enforcement agencies can develop a circular process to learn from experiences. This means that as they encounter, reflect on, and learn from experiences in a way that continually informs adjustments to future actions, organizations can develop a process of learning. As it is continually used, the process should become more natural to the organization and all individuals involved in the reviews, eventually becoming a part of the organizational culture. Such a process will ultimately benefit the entire organization—and the law enforcement field.

Organizations should encourage reflection on both successes and challenges but focus on conducting the review for the purpose of learning rather than to place blame. By avoiding focus on penalizing those involved, AARs can gain honest reflection about the events that occurred. Learning from these experiences helps organizations build on promising practices and avoid repeating challenges to enhance the organization and the field.

Sources: Sutton, "Learning from Success and Failure;" Sid Heal, "Debriefings and After Action Reviews;" IACP, "Small-Scale Special Event Preparedness."

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129. IACP, "Small-Scale Special Event Preparedness."

The process of honestly reviewing and critiquing the response to an incident and using that critique as the foundation for organizational learning and training need not be a formal and taxing process. Nor should it be punitive. AARs should come from a place of learning and enhancing the department and the field. In some cases, conducting a critique is as simple as asking the following questions:

- What was our intended outcome?
- What was our actual outcome?
- What were the decisions, systems, and protocols that got us to that outcome?
- What is the gap analysis?

This process (see figure 2) allows for self-reflection, analysis, and learning for all involved.

Figure 2. Process of after action reviews

Incident / Event / Training

Honest Review and Critique of Response to Incidents

Self-Reflection and Analysis

Learning for All Involved

Adjustments to Training, Policy, and Procedure for Future Responses

The NIMS Incident Command System ICS protocol—which serves as the public safety industry standard for responding to and managing emergency events—includes ensuring that AARs are completed as one of the primary functions of the incident commander or unified command in any incident.[130] Therefore, the industry standard for law enforcement agencies following major incidents is to develop an internal AAR process and to conduct AARs following incidents. NIMS protocol includes instructions and templates for completing AARs.[131] These instructions and templates can also be scaled as needed for AARs following

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130. FEMA, *National Incident Management System,* Third Edition.
131. FEMA, "Improvement Planning Templates."

other events that do not rise to the level of a major critical incident. Regardless of the incident, AARs should be conducted immediately following the incident and shared with responding agencies to communicate the identified promising practices, lessons learned, and areas for shared improvement.

Agencies may also find they are already practicing certain types of AARs on a regular basis, such as with regular internal reviews of incidents like officer use of force, officer injury, and community complaints. Regularly practiced at many agencies across the country, CompStat is like a weekly or bi-weekly AAR in which organizations have an opportunity to institutionalize organizational learning through analyses of strategies, activities, and results.[132] Agencies should ensure they are effectively using and building on these existing processes to develop a culture of learning throughout the organization.

The following sections provide a step-by-step guide to conducting an AAR. Steps listed may—and often should—occur fluidly or concurrently depending on the situation. Regardless, all must be met for a thorough AAR. A checklist of steps is included in appendix A.

Step 1. Determine the type(s) of after action review to conduct

The initial step in the AAR process should be to determine what type of review will be conducted. The type of AAR can vary in myriad ways—especially in terms of its scale, scope, and objectives. The decision on the type of AAR to be conducted should be made collaboratively by public safety and government officials and other relevant stakeholders. The decision will include the consideration of a multitude of factors and will help to guide the areas that the AAR examines such as policies and procedures, tactics, and strategy.

Factors to Consider When Determining the Type of After Action Review

Public safety organizations must consider multiple factors related to the incident and AAR that will influence the type of the review. These may include the following:

- Magnitude of incident

- Purpose and scope

- Impact of the incident on the community

- Learning opportunities

- Mutual aid, partner agencies, and stakeholders involved

- Impact on public consciousness of incident beyond the immediate community

- Resources (budget, time frame, staff, etc.)

- Other factors (ongoing criminal and civil investigations, changes in leadership, police–community relations, etc.)
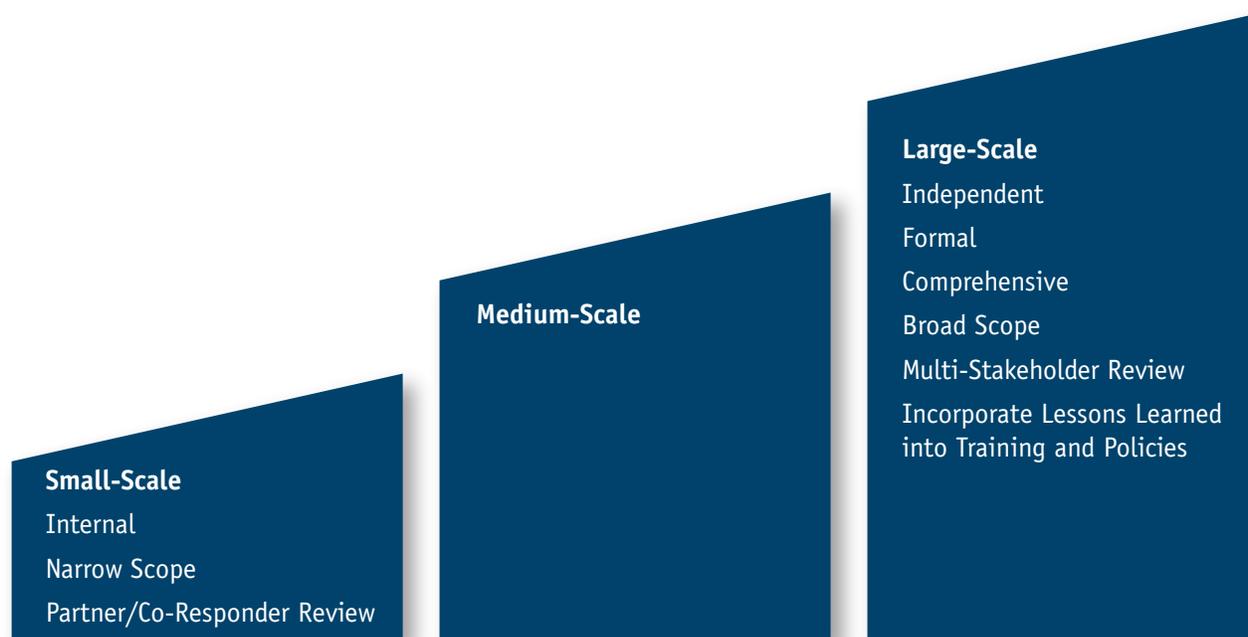
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132. PERF, *CompStat*.

Determine the scale of the after action review

The continuum of AAR options ranges from those for smaller-scale incidents—which are conducted internally, are informal, and have a narrow scope—to reviews for larger-scale, high-profile critical or crisis events—which are often conducted by independent organizations, are formal, and are more comprehensive and broader in scope.

The scale of an AAR is related to its size and implies the resources needed to complete the review (see figure 3). Considering factors related to the incident like its size, the number of agencies involved, and its level of profile, law enforcement agencies can assist decision-makers in determining the often proportional scale of the AAR. The scale of the AAR can also be influenced by the type of event and the likelihood that it will occur in the jurisdiction again. For example, a large-scale AAR of the public safety response to a natural disaster may be worthwhile in a jurisdiction where hurricanes are likely to occur with some frequency so that the lessons learned are documented and can be used in planning and preparation for a future occurrence. Regardless of the scale of the AAR, it is important that it is an honest evaluation of performance, undertaken to improve performance and the organization, as opposed to a punitive event or a guise for actual self-reflection.

Figure 3. Features of AARs of different sizes and scales

Large-Scale
Independent
Formal
Comprehensive
Broad Scope
Multi-Stakeholder Review
Incorporate Lessons Learned
into Training and Policies

Medium-Scale

Small-Scale
Internal
Narrow Scope
Partner/Co-Responder Review

Assessing the scale of the AAR can help to inform decision-makers as they define what the purpose and scope of their AAR should be.

Define the purpose and scope of the after action review

Once leaders have determined the scale of the AAR, it is necessary to clearly define the purpose and scope of the review(s). The scope of the AAR involves determining the areas of focus. Just as the type of AAR conducted can range in scale, so too can the focus of a review. Especially with complex incidents that include multiple phases and facets, some reviews may only focus on narrow aspects of the overall incident while others are broader. For example, following the 2018 mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, simultaneous AARs focused on specific pieces of the incident, including police services and routing of 911 calls, school safety and security, a psychological profile of the suspect, enhancing collaboration between the Florida Department of Children and Families and law enforcement to improve the coordination of behavioral health services for individuals in need, and general feedback from community members.

Even within law enforcement, the scope of AARs can vary considerably based on the event, resources, and the focus of the agency. A law enforcement AAR following a mass demonstration may only focus on the law enforcement response to a subset of demonstrators that allegedly caused havoc, as opposed to the overall response to the gathering. For example, an AAR following the 2017 Presidential Inauguration in Washington, D.C., focused primarily on the Metropolitan Police Department's (MPD) response to a particularly destructive group of demonstrators instead of all the demonstrations citywide.

On the other hand, law enforcement AARs can be broader and review the response to an incident and the role of leadership and relationships between leaders of all the agencies involved, the establishment of unified command and control, information sharing between responding law enforcement or public safety agencies, and coordination and communication on-scene. An AAR with an even broader scope can review the entire city or county government response, examining the public safety and public services system response to address how levels of local government were able to collaborate in the response as well as identifying gaps that may have occurred. The AAR can also include relevant information about the systems and processes preceding the incident that could potentially have led to successes and challenges in the response. Therefore, clearly defining the scope of the AAR before beginning it is imperative to informing the rest of the process.

Set initial objectives for the after action review

One of the primary objectives of an AAR is to identify promising practices and lessons learned from the response that can be implemented to enhance future responses. Like professional athletes watching game film, the AAR process is a tool for continual improvement. An initial set of objectives should be developed at the beginning of the AAR process to further inform the purpose and scope.

Identifying Objectives for the After-Action Review

Objectives can include the following:

- **Bringing your agency's policies and procedures, practices, and training in line with national or international promising practices.** Part of the solicitation for an AAR to assess the Washington (D.C.) Metropolitan Police Department's (MPD) response to demonstrations during the 2017 Presidential Inauguration centered on better aligning the MPD with statutory requirements and national promising practices related to policing mass demonstrations.

- **Developing a blueprint for your department and relevant stakeholders.** If identified as important at the beginning, the AAR process can be used to identify recommendations and strategies that can serve to build a blueprint for your department and relevant stakeholders. For example, through its involvement in the AAR process, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg (North Carolina) Police Department and city government officials used some of the recommendations to develop a blueprint for citywide crisis communications and engagement with community members and organizations on key issues.

- **Providing support for training and equipment needs.** AARs can be leveraged to support proposals for enhanced training or additional equipment needs.

- **Examining your agency's response to officer mental health during and after an incident.** AARs can examine how the agency has connected officers with mental health resources like an employee assistance program and help to develop strategies for the agency to improve on services in the continued aftermath of an incident or looking to future incidents.

- **Providing closure to first responders involved in the incident.** Orlando Fire Department firefighters, paramedics, and communications personnel indicated that conducting an AAR was important to address challenges faced by the department, identify lessons learned, and in the process bring closure to the event.

Define whether the after action review will be formal or informal

Understanding the type, scale, scope, and purpose of the AAR will assist decision-makers in determining whether the AAR should be informal or formal. An informal AAR may be beneficial for smaller incidents and responses where the promising practices and lessons learned are easier to identify and can quickly be addressed or for individual aspects of a larger incident. For example, a small department may conduct a review of an officer injury that results in a short report and informal review of training and equipment. A special weapons and tactics (SWAT) team may conduct an informal AAR regarding only their response to a larger incident to identify specific promising practices and lessons learned.

A more formal AAR is ideal for large-scale events including those that had a significant impact on the community. A formal AAR may also be more appropriate following large-scale incidents and events that are likely to reoccur, and a formal AAR can serve as a resource in future planning efforts. For example, public safety agencies and partners in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, conducted a formal AAR after hosting the World Meeting of Families and papal visit in September 2015 while planning to host the 2016 Democratic National Convention. The stakeholders could identify and implement improvements focused on having personnel with decision-making authority in the appropriate places to facilitate streamlined

decision-making; enhancing coordination and communication; and aligning planning, goals and objectives, and resources. In addition, the Bureau of Justice Assistance, through the National Training and Technical Assistance Center (NTTAC), has funded planning primers that identify best practices for managing large-scale security events with a focus on lessons learned from presidential conventions.[133]

> *"If we share information, we build stronger relationships, we have an opportunity to learn from one another, and that's really what community policing is about . . . coming together, solving problems, understanding difficulties, thinking through what makes our community safe and how do we do it and how do we do it together."*
>
> — Blake Norton, Senior Vice President
> National Police Foundation

Discuss whether the after action review will be made public, shared only with partner or stakeholder agencies, or for internal use only

Every AAR should identify promising practices and lessons learned, findings and recommendations, or opportunities to enhance future responses. Although not every AAR will result in the publication of a report, it is important to discuss if and how the findings of the AAR will be shared, whom they will be shared with, and when.

These decisions will likely be influenced by a number of factors similar to those that help determine what type of AAR to conduct, including the following:

- The type and magnitude of the incident being reviewed

- The impact of the incident on the community and police-community relations

- The level of external involvement in the AAR process

- Federal and state legislation related to open records and dissemination of publicly funded projects

- Ongoing criminal and civil litigation related to the incident

For example, an AAR conducted following the response to a First Amendment assembly or other large gathering should be released publicly, such as by posting it on the department's website. Especially in instances where community organization leaders and demonstrators were interviewed as part of the process, sharing the findings can be an important part of exhibiting transparency and commitment to repairing police-community relations.[134]

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133. BJA, "Law Enforcement Planning for Major Events."
134. National Police Foundation, *Law Enforcement Executive's Guide to Open Data*.

Meanwhile, an AAR that focuses on tactics and operations in specific responses or where individuals are clearly identified may remain for internal use only. In other cases, findings that should be kept internal will exist, as will others that should be shared more broadly.

Because one of the primary goals of an AAR is to contribute to the larger body of knowledge related to public safety response to various types of incidents, decision-makers should make every effort to ensure that at least some of the results are shared publicly. While a report is ideal, there are creative ways to share promising practices and lessons learned and findings and recommendations identified by conducting an AAR including: during roll call training; as part of town halls or community forums; as part of leadership meetings or conversations over coffee; PowerPoint presentations; and webinars, workshops, or trainings for other law enforcement agencies and relevant stakeholders.

Best Practice: Consider the Benefits of Sharing Lessons Learned from the After-Action Review Internally, with other Law Enforcement Agencies, and with the Public

Contributing to the larger body of knowledge is one of the primary goals of an AAR. Consider options, including the following, to share promising practices, lessons learned, findings, and recommendations from an AAR even if a document is not being produced:

- Town halls or community forums

- PowerPoint presentations at meetings

- Blog, social media, or website post

- Webinar, workshop, training for other public safety agencies and relevant stakeholders

- Homeland Security Information Network and other protected sites

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"The community is our greatest resource and our most valued partner. We wanted to be transparent regarding our response and needed to share what we found [from the AAR] with them. We knew going through the process and coming out the other side together would make us all better."

— Chief Eric Jones, Stockton (California) Police Department

Determine whether the after action review will be conducted internally or by an external entity

One of the last decisions to make when determining what type of AAR to conduct should be whether the AAR will be conducted by internal employees or by an external individual or team. The incident being reviewed and the resources available are the two factors that will likely play the largest roles in determining whether the AAR will be conducted internally or externally. A mass gathering or First Amendment assembly in which demonstrators perceived an excessive use of force or an incident of mass violence are events where an AAR conducted by an external individual or agency may have the most impact. Likewise, the response to an incident of mass violence may be better suited to an external team that has subject matter expertise in multiple areas and can provide a more comprehensive review between all responding agencies. An external organization may also be better equipped to share the findings in a publicly appropriate format. On the other hand, an AAR following a natural disaster or the response to a smaller-scale incident that did not raise significant issues may be conducted internally.

In some cases, an agency may choose to have both an internal and external AAR conducted. Individual agencies may decide to conduct an internal AAR focusing on their response to an incident while also being involved in discussions with mutual aid agencies regarding having a larger-scale, external AAR done as well. Some public safety agencies in the Orlando, Florida, area conducted internal AARs following their response to the attack at Pulse Nightclub to identify their own promising practices and lessons learned. They then shared their AARs during the multijurisdictional, public, independent AAR to learn how their agencies' efforts contributed to the overall public safety response and to learn from the promising practices and lessons learned on a larger scale.

Step 2. Select a lead or team to conduct the after action review

Based on all the decisions made as part of determining what type of AAR to conduct, the next step involves selecting an individual or team to conduct the AAR. It is important to identify an individual or team who

- is committed to institutional learning and constant improvement;

- can take an unbiased view of the agency's response;

- can direct moving pieces into one cohesive learning product;

- is well respected and knowledgeable in public safety and agency response policy and protocol;

- understands the opportunities for collaboration with stakeholders outside of law enforcement;

- is aware of the potential impacts of their work on the individuals and community involved.

If the determination is made to have an internal review, it should be conducted by a mid- or senior-level member of the agency or team, depending on the type of incident. To the extent possible, the leader of the review should be someone who was not involved in the part of the response being reviewed and ideally should be someone who was not involved in the overall response to the incident. In addition, an internal leader must be someone who is trusted throughout the department and is capable of being objective and protecting the anonymity of the individuals who provide open and honest feedback, even if it is critical of the department. If the department elects to create a team to conduct the AAR, the team members should have the same qualifications and be a cross-disciplinary group that can review the response from varying perspectives.

In some cases, hiring an independent review team may be prudent. An outside organization may be better suited to provide an unbiased evidence- and standards-based review and provide a broader body of knowledge of national-level promising practices and research.

Best Practice: Key Qualifications for an Independent Review Team or Consultant

An independent review team or consultant should

- understand responses to critical incidents;

- be able to approach the review from a balanced position, identifying evidence-based lessons learned and promising practices;

- be able to bring all the responding agencies together to review promising practices and lessons learned and discuss recommended adjustments;

- be able to assist agencies with incorporating lessons learned back into their training, policy, and culture;

- be able to explore evidence about the response;

- have familiarity conducting interviews and focus groups with first responders, relevant stakeholders, victims and witnesses, and other community members with empathy and professionalism;

- understand the intricacies around pending criminal and civil legal proceedings;

- be experienced in having important and potentially difficult conversations with public safety and government officials throughout the AAR process.

Regardless of the incident being reviewed or whether the review is done internally or externally, the individual or team selected should understand the initial decisions regarding the scale, scope and purpose, and objectives of the AAR. The individual or team should also understand and preferably have experience developing the intended deliverable(s). Especially if the expectation is to develop a report, the individual or team selected to conduct the AAR should have or be supported by people who have experience in producing a report that provides critical analysis and explanations and actionable findings and recommendations or best practices and lessons learned.

Step 3. Conduct research on the incident, compile relevant materials, and review information

Research should be conducted throughout the AAR process and should span a variety of resources. Research that may not be readily available should be appropriately requested from parts of the organization that have the materials. The individual(s) conducting the review should maintain lines of communication with information sources to gain access to materials and potentially learn of more valuable sources not on the initial list.

Common Research Sources

Frequently valuable sources include the following:

- Open source media

- Social media

- Professional, trade, and academic journals

- Department-generated materials, such as policies, incident action plans (IAP), and incident audio and video recording

- Information from the community, such as business or personal camera footage

- AARs from similar incidents

- National standards and promising practices

Gain a foundational understanding of the incident and organization(s) involved

Research should initially be focused on providing a foundational understanding of the incident. Research should include reviewing available open source media and articles related to the incident and the public safety response. Having this information at the beginning will be instrumental in understanding the public's perception of an incident response timeline. Use of timestamped radio and computer-aided dispatch (CAD) transmissions can help verify or refute these timelines and can be used to identify gaps and inform the development of questions for interviews and focus groups.

Prior to interviews with responders, research should also focus on event-specific materials generated by the department(s) being reviewed. This information will provide context for the response and will provide insight into the department's intended response and outcome. Types of information that might be generated and should be requested and reviewed include the following:

- Incident Action Plans and other NIMS forms and reports

- Documentation (victim and witness statements, responding officer reports, crime scene documentation, and other relevant materials)

- Audio files (radio recordings, E911 dispatches, etc.)

- Video (body-worn and in-car camera footage, cell phone or private camera footage taken on scene)

- Specific incident data (time stamps, number of responders, units called out)

In addition to incident-specific information, an AAR should include a review of departmental policy and protocol related directly to the incident response. Information such as standard operating procedures, directives, general orders, and training curricula are also important to collect and review throughout the AAR process.

Research should be as specific as possible, providing timestamps and locations or landmarks, and should include measurements and specific numbers as applicable. This specificity will assist in being able to conduct an accurate analysis of various areas of the response. For example, knowing how many law enforcement officers were dispatched and how many were on scene will inform whether self-deployment was an issue that should be discussed in the AAR. Likewise, identifying the locations of key aspects of mass demonstrations can assist in determining if responders received adequate training in certain crowd management principles and if resources and personnel were effectively deployed.

Review similar incidents and national standards for insight into promising practices

Once on-site interviews, focus groups, and stakeholder roundtables begin, follow-up research should be conducted. This research should be conducted into similar incidents, professional and trade journals, academic journals, and other relevant materials. The information gathered should provide a foundation from which to conduct a gap analysis and identify potential additional questions and individuals or stakeholders to interview to address any areas left unexplored during the initial stages.

As the AAR progresses and clear topics or themes are identified, reviewing state and federal public safety resources, national and international trade association publications, and articles from academia can also provide a basis from which to conduct a gap analysis, and determine if departmental policy, protocol, and training are aligned with national standards. This research will also provide references for promising practices and actionable recommendations from the field that can be cited in the final report.

Continue research to support the after action review process

Just as the research conducted will inform the AAR's thematic areas and gap analysis, the analysis may inform areas where more background research is needed. Research should continue to support the analysis and development of findings and recommendations or lessons learned and promising practices. Continued awareness of local news or other current events that may have implications related to the AAR also serve as valuable insight for AAR development. Similarly, those conducting the AAR should maintain awareness of any significant changes in the department related to the AAR or its findings. For example, if a department is already addressing a perceived gap in their incident response, this can be noted in the AAR.

Step 4. Identify and engage key stakeholders

It is important that AARs not be conducted in a vacuum. The team or lead conducting an AAR should strive to incorporate as much knowledgeable input into the review as possible. The review should aim to ask stakeholders simply, "Tell us your story as it relates to this incident," to gather their perspective. This approach helps to provide a 360-degree view of the response, identify gaps, and has a better chance of acknowledging and addressing challenges.

Identify key stakeholders to engage

Identifying a comprehensive list of stakeholders to engage throughout the AAR process is critical. The list may include the following:

- First responders on scene

- Mutual aid or co-responders

- Organizational leaders from the department or departments involved in the response

- Medical staff

- Elected officials

- Community or nongovernmental organizations

- Victims and witnesses (as possible)

- Subject matter experts

Internal or external review teams have different strategies for engaging stakeholders given their nature as being part of the organization or an independent resource. An internal review team may already have a sense of how the organization operates and be able to easily identify stakeholders to engage and materials to request. However, they must be sure to keep an open mind and be willing to consider the views of additional people as they are identified through the process. On the other hand, an external or independent review team will likely be less familiar with organization operations and individuals. Still,

this can be an asset as external teams can assess focus areas from a different perspective. They can also provide a more neutral ground for diverse organizations and groups to come together to discuss findings and identify ways to improve future responses.

For either type of AAR team, reviewers may identify additional individuals they need to engage. Through the process of investigating the incident response, the AAR team may identify a lesson in the nexus between the work of law enforcement and other nontraditional but critical stakeholders in responses, such as the medical community. During the agency debrief of lessons learned, the AAR team would want to ensure that a representative from the medical response was incorporated so that the agencies could examine the issues identified and determine a strategy to rectify them.

Best Practice: Provide Confidentiality for Interviewee(s)

Providing as much confidentiality for interviews as possible can help to promote openness and honesty without fear of repercussions for the interviewee(s). Interviews based on trust are more likely to garner useful information and insight. Keeping interviews confidential emphasizes the focus of the AAR on collective learning rather than assigning blame. Although identifying individuals may be seen to provide more direct credibility to statements and findings, there are ways to cite statements and protect confidentiality. Depending on the sensitive nature of the statements, citing an interviewee based on their job title or role or their organization may be sufficient to protect their identity. Likewise, citing the focus group or roundtable where information was gained without identifying the speaker may be similarly sufficient. In addition to confidentiality, external reviewers in particular may have an increased ability to provide anonymity to interviewees given their nature as independent reviewers. This ability can further support an open and honest conversation.

Engage key stakeholders through individual interviews, focus groups, or roundtables as appropriate

Identified individuals should be interviewed one on one or during focus groups or roundtables. It is important to ensure that focus groups be limited to a size where everyone has the opportunity to provide feedback and individuals are appropriate to group together. A focus group for an AAR following an incident of mass violence should include officers from the same unit or who arrived on scene and got into a formation together but generally should not include supervisors or officers from other departments that may have opposing views. Likewise, focus groups of community members for an AAR following a mass demonstration should include representatives from multiple organizations only if those organizations are entirely aligned. Grouping demonstrators together because they were at the same event can lead to chaos and devolve from the goal of the focus group.

Best Practice: Use Open-Ended Questions During Interviews and Focus Groups

The purpose of interviews and focus groups during an AAR is to gather reflections, perceptions, and observations from individuals who were directly involved in the incident. To encourage participation and guide discussion, the interviewer should use open-ended questions and ask follow-up questions based on the responses. Starting with the statement, "tell us your story regarding the response to this incident," is a good lead and the response will likely assist in the development of a series of follow-up questions.

Some other examples of good open-ended questions to use during AAR interviews and focus groups include the following:

- Where were you when you got the call and what did you do?

- Why was that decision made?

- How did the department's response affect your actions?

- What did you learn from the event?

The individual or team conducting interviews should develop a protocol and identify goals and objectives for how each interview and focus group will contribute to the goals and objectives of the AAR. While the interviews and focus groups at the beginning of the process will be focused on gathering general information about the event and the response, the information gathered should play an important role in identifying additional individuals and groups to interview and additional research to conduct. Later interviews should focus on specific details and decisions made and addressing potential gaps or resolving any inconsistencies identified during the AAR process. Throughout the process, interviews should be used to get input as to who else should be interviewed and other areas that should be explored as part of the review. This approach to input can provide an additional level of perspective to gather promising practices and valuable lessons.

Establishing a protocol based on the goals and objectives of the AAR will also ensure that the interviews are conducted in an efficient, time sensitive, and focused manner. In some cases, while background information and perceptions regarding training, equipment, police-community relations, and other topics from various perspectives can provide context for the AAR it is important to keep the interviews focused. Especially in an AAR following a mass demonstration, it is important to keep questions targeted and ensure that follow-up questions focus on identifying potential solutions and recommendations for the AAR.

Best Practice: Be Sensitive to Potential Trauma

Interviewers must be sensitive to the trauma experienced by responders, witnesses, and survivors during interviews. Especially during an AAR following an incident of mass violence, natural disaster, or other large-scale incident, it is possible that recounting and providing specific details about the incident and their involvement will be difficult. The person or team conducting the AAR should create an environment in which persons being interviewed are comfortable and are aware that they can skip questions and conclude the interview at any time. Interviewers should also consider having resources—such as mental health practitioners—on site or readily available when discussing sensitive topics in environments where people are highly traumatized. Mental health practitioners are uniquely prepared to support individuals as they understand their emotions and manage stress during and following traumatic incidents.

Source: Halpern and Vermeulen, *Disaster Mental Health Interventions,* 167–178.

"Being an empathetic listener, being attentive to somebody who may be struggling and needs to be connected to services is very important."

— Chief (ret.) Frank Straub, Director
Center for Mass Violence Response Studies
National Police Foundation

Step 5. Conduct analysis

Gathering and analyzing all the responses from the various perspectives will serve as the foundation for the AAR and may serve as important for citations that lend authenticity and credibility to the AAR findings.

Analysis should also involve reviewing relevant policies and procedures, training curricula and other internal resources, and data. Comparing the actual results of the response to the intended results of the response to determine if policies and training are translating into appropriate practice is a key piece of an AAR. Reviewing these materials will also identify how decision points may have contributed to or deterred from the desired outcomes. In addition, comparing the information gathered from the materials reviewed and the interviews and focus groups conducted will be instrumental in identifying if policies, procedures, and training were followed and align with national standards and promising practices. This will help inform whether specific policy and training should be discussed in more detail in the AAR—including callout boxes on promising practices and case studies of effective implementation—and help provide specific examples for recommendations. As the analysis is conducted, organizing the gaps and strengths found around theme areas—such as those identified in section 2—may help to focus the analysis.

Step 6. Develop findings and recommendations or promising practices and lessons learned

Develop initial findings and recommendations or promising practices and lessons learned and organize the after action review

From the analysis, the individual or team conducting the AAR should develop an AAR that identifies themes, specific promising practices and lessons learned, and findings and recommendations. Many AARs are organized similarly, but the most important items to include are

- background and methodology;

- incident and response description;

- key areas of focus;

- promising practices, lessons learned, and recommendations.

The findings and recommendations and promising practices and lessons learned should be evidence-based and focus on the event and the law enforcement response and improving future responses to similar incidents, not on assigning blame. They should serve as the outline for developing the AAR. The AAR should provide context with specific details from the event and the response as well as relevant examples from other AARs and resources for each of the findings. An outline of a sample AAR is provided in appendix B.

Develop recommendations that are actionable

Recommendations should be actionable and, to the extent possible, be made with an understanding of the potential implications on budgets and feasibility of implementation. If there are recommendations that will have significant impacts on budgets or be more difficult to implement, an explanation detailing the steps that should be taken or relevant funding opportunities if available should be provided.

Developing a quality AAR that provides specific findings and actionable recommendations will help to provide a blueprint to assist in making any changes and improvements within the department, within a jurisdiction, and across the nation. For AARs conducted on smaller incidents, the AAR may serve to inform an individual organization of promising practices and lessons learned, enhancements that should be made to specific policies and procedures, training opportunities, and other needs. However, for those major high-profile incidents, the AAR could impact policy and practice across the nation or even internationally.

Vet the draft after action review

A powerful quality control measure is to vet the draft AAR with trusted stakeholders—including practitioners—who can add perspective to the findings and recommendations. Agencies should be encouraged to share the report with mutual aid agencies and other stakeholders or even publicly to maximize the exposure of the lessons. Once the AAR is complete and a draft report is compiled, including stakeholders and subject matter experts into the editing process is important to identify inaccurate, unclear, or unexplored areas.

> *"I knew that having an after action review would make us take a hard look at ourselves and the way we responded. We learned a tremendous amount from our after action study about our response and the responses of other agencies. It's our duty to continue to learn and to be honest with ourselves about the need for a smart after action analysis after every critical incident. We owe it to ourselves, to each other, and to our communities. We always need to be learning and striving to implement the best policies, practices and training methods that will enhance our response."*
>
> — Chief Daniel Oates, Miami Beach (Florida) Police Department
> Former Chief, Aurora (Colorado) Police Department

Step 7. Communicate findings

Because one of the primary goals of an AAR is to contribute to the larger body of knowledge related to law enforcement and larger public safety response to various events, a written report that can be shared publicly is the easiest way to communicate the findings to a broad audience. While a report is ideal, there are additional ways to share practices and lessons learned and findings and recommendations identified through the AAR. Decision-makers should make every effort to ensure that at least some of the results are shared publicly. Town halls, presentations for relevant stakeholders, and community meetings can be effective ways to communicate important parts of an AAR. A series of smaller informal AARs may be noted in aggregate on the department's website or documented as part of a larger annual report.

Step 8. Implement lessons learned and recommendations

Finally, an AAR does not achieve its intended purpose until the lessons learned and recommendations have been incorporated back into the organization or jurisdiction. It is important to ensure that department and jurisdictional leadership understand the importance of this step and champion the recommendations. The AAR can serve as a blueprint for implementing changes to department policy, protocol, culture, and training, including to identify which recommendations are priorities. Whether the changes are implemented directly by organization and jurisdiction leaders or an external organization is consulted to provide training and technical assistance based on promising practices, it is important to identify and implement some of the less-contentious or simpler lessons learned and recommendations as quickly as possible to demonstrate commitment to enhancing responses to similar events and to positively contribute to public safety.

> *"In our chosen profession of policing, we often cannot control what takes place on the ground that we have been commissioned to protect and serve. However, we always have control over how we respond in the aftermath. Taking a critical look at LVMPD's performance—so the agency and others in the profession can learn from how we responded—is a valuable exercise. A comprehensive review of our work can save lives, which is the ultimate goal of first responders."*

— Sheriff Joseph Lombardo, Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department[135]

Develop actionable steps to implement identified recommendations

Based on the completed AAR, organizations should develop a timeline with actionable steps to implement recommendations, the timeframes in which the implementation will occur, and—where applicable—relevant partners and stakeholders to engage in the process. If it does not already exist, leadership should work to gain buy-in from all staff so everyone understands the importance of making the recommended adjustments and to further this collective learning experience. Agencies should also identify priority recommendations and develop a faster implementation timeline with goals addressing those recommendations. Some recommendations may also be addressed as they occur or incorporated into a larger strategic plan.

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135. LVMPD, *1 October*.

Depending on the situation, agencies should also determine whether to designate one leader in charge of ensuring recommendations are implemented or to divide responsibility for implementing recommendations across the department. The nature of the recommendations and the scope and scale of the AAR will likely have an impact on this decision. For example, large-scale AARs may provide recommendations specific to command personnel, specialty units, and public information officers that are best implemented by each of those groups. In other cases, the chief and command staff will likely need to approve changes or allocate resources before changes can be made. In smaller-scale AARs, it may be beneficial to have an individual oversee the implementation of the lessons learned to ensure that it is completed in a timely manner.

After an event, agencies should also consider working with relevant stakeholders and community organizations to develop the action steps and implement recommendations. In some cases, community members may have already developed ideas or be willing to serve as resources for the department. As the Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina, AAR identified, community members co-developed a training with officials from the police department and serve as demonstrators in training exercises during the course.[136] After the Pulse shooting, the Orlando Police Department (OPD) connected with the local LGBTQ community to ensure that the community felt protected.[137] In addition, community organizations and law enforcement leadership can cooperatively seek support or funding as appropriate. In some cases, it may be appropriate to seek technical assistance to support the thorough implementation of recommendations and agencies and community organizations that demonstrate a joint willingness to achieve solutions can be attractive to funders.

Follow up on the implementation of recommendations

Agencies should provide updates on the status of their implementation of the recommendations and provide explanations for recommendations that were provided that they are not going to address. An organization may invite a reviewer back to assess progress in implementing recommendations a year after the initial review. If goals to implement recommendations have been missed, leaders should be held accountable for explaining why the deadline was missed and adjusting their plan as appropriate to more effectively reach their goals. Providing this open communication with relevant stakeholders is an important part of demonstrating commitment and transparency. Department priorities may also adjust the implementation plan over time, but the organization should not lose sight of their ultimate goals to learn from the experience and foster a culture of learning.

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136. Straub et al., *Advancing Charlotte.*
137. Straub et al., *Rescue, Response, and Resilience.*

Appendix A. After Action Review Checklist

This checklist is meant to supplement the step-by-step guide to conducting an after action review (AAR). Steps listed may—and often should—occur fluidly or concurrently depending on the situation. Regardless, all must be met in any thorough AAR.

☐ Step 1. Determine the type(s) of AAR to conduct.

- Determine the scale of the AAR.

- Define the purpose and scope of the AAR.

- Set initial objectives for the AAR.

- Define whether the AAR will be formal or informal.

- Discuss whether the AAR will be made public, shared only with partner or stakeholder agencies, or kept for internal use only.

- Determine whether the AAR will be conducted internally or by an external entity.

☐ Step 2. Select a lead or team to conduct the AAR.

☐ Step 3. Conduct research on the incident, compile relevant materials, and review information.

- Gain a foundational understanding of the incident and organization(s) involved.

- Review similar incidents and national standards for insight into promising practices.

- Continue research to support the AAR process.

☐ Step 4. Identify and engage key stakeholders.

- Identify key stakeholders to engage.

- Engage key stakeholders through individual interviews, focus groups, or roundtables as appropriate.

☐ Step 5. Conduct analysis.

☐ Step 6. Develop findings and recommendations or promising practices and lessons learned.

- Develop initial findings and recommendations or promising practices and lessons learned and organize the AAR.

- Develop recommendations that are actionable.

- Vet the draft AAR.

☐ Step 7. Communicate findings.

☐ Step 8. Implement lessons learned and recommendations.

- Develop actionable steps to implement identified recommendations.

- Follow up on the implementation of recommendations.

Appendix B. Outline for a Sample After Action Review

Organizations can organize their formal after action reviews (AAR) in many different ways,[138] but the most important items to include are

- background and methodology;

- incident and response description;

- key areas of focus;

- promising practices, lessons learned, and recommendations.

Key questions to consider for each are provided in this section to guide users in developing each section and should be added to or edited depending on the AAR.

Background and methodology

Any AAR should begin with a section that includes the AAR's background and methodology. The background should provide a brief overview of the incident and the agency or agencies involved in the response. Readers should also be able to comprehend the purpose and scope of the report and the goals and objectives of the AAR. The methodology should provide readers with an idea of the titles and organizations of individuals and groups that were interviewed, and the materials that were reviewed as part of the AAR.

Key questions to consider include the following:

- What happened in the incident?

- What is the focus of this AAR?

- What are the goals of this AAR?

- Who developed this AAR and what process was used?

- How were the findings and recommendations or promising practices and lessons learned developed?

- What research or interviews were conducted?

- What were the limitations of this AAR process?

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138. U.S. Department of Education, "After-Action Reports;" FEMA, *ICS-402;* U.S. Department of the Army, *Training Circular 25-20.*

Depending on the type of incident, questions to answer in this section may also include the following:

- What is the history of the city and police-community relations in the area?

- Have similar incidents happened before that the department(s) involved responded to? If so, what was learned from them and what impact have they had?

- What is the size and background of the responding organizations?

Incident and response description

The incident and response description should provide a detailed overview of the incident and related public safety response. Readers should be able to understand how the event unfolded and get a sense of some of the issues that will be discussed in the report. If there are multiple locations that are important to understand, consider including maps and pictures to complement the timeline.

Key questions to consider include the following:

- What happened and when?

- Where did the incident occur?

- Who was involved in the response and how and why were they involved?

- Who and what else was present at or around the incident location?

- How did the incident and response unfold?

- What equipment was used during the response?

- What complications occurred during the response?

Key areas of focus

The AAR should include key areas of focus, which can be used to organize the AAR. For example, the AAR of the Orlando, Florida, Pulse Nightclub shooting was organized into key areas, including community engagement and relationships, tactical response and command and control, and equipment and training. Shorter AAR reports—including those of incidents in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and Washington, D.C.—are structured with a single analysis chapter divided into subsections that provide the relevant examination. Readers should be able to understand why these key areas were selected and how findings, recommendations, lessons learned, and promising practices relate to these areas.

Key questions to consider include the following:

- How did the incident and response relate to this focus area?

- What national standards apply to the incident response in this focus area?

- What did the response do well or not well in this focus area?

Promising practices, lessons learned, and recommendations

Findings and recommendations or promising practices and lessons learned should identify areas of note and provide actionable steps to learn from the experience.

Key questions to consider include the following:

- What could have been improved upon in the response to the incident?

- What parts of the incident response went well and why?

- How do national standards suggest the incident response should have been handled?

- What resources do stakeholders have to best address findings, expand on promising practices, and align with national standards?

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About the National Police Foundation

The **National Police Foundation** is a national, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing innovation and science in policing. As the country's oldest police research organization, the National Police Foundation has learned that police practices should be based on scientific evidence about what works best, the paradigm of evidence-based policing.

Established in 1970, the foundation has conducted seminal research in police behavior, policy, and procedure and works to transfer to local agencies the best new information about practices for dealing effectively with a range of important police operational and administrative concerns. Motivating all of the foundation's efforts is the goal of efficient, humane policing that operates within the framework of democratic principles and the highest ideals of the nation.

National Police Foundation assessments and incident reviews include the following (for a full list of National Police Foundation publications, visit https://www.policefoundation.org/publications:

- _Critical Incident Response Review of the Orlando Fire Department Response to the Attack at Pulse Nightclub_

- _2017 Presidential Inauguration First Amendment Assembly Independent Law Enforcement Review_

- _Advancing Charlotte: A Police Foundation Assessment of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department Response to the September 2016 Demonstrations_

- _Rescue, Response, and Resilience: A Critical Incident Review of the Orlando Public Safety Response to the Attack on the Pulse Nightclub_

- _Engaging Communities One Step at a Time: Policing's Tradition of Foot Patrol as an Innovative Community Engagement Strategy_

- _An Assessment of the St. Louis County Police Department_

- _Maintaining First Amendment Rights and Public Safety in North Minneapolis: A Critical Incident Response Assessment of the Police Response to the Protests, Demonstrations, and Occupation of the Minneapolis Police Department's Fourth Precinct_

- _Bringing Calm to Chaos: A Critical Incident Review of the San Bernardino Public Safety Response to the December 2, 2015, Terrorist Shooting Incident at the Inland Regional Center_

To learn more, visit the National Police Foundation online at www.policefoundation.org.

About the COPS Office

The **Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office)** is the component of the U.S. Department of Justice responsible for advancing the practice of community policing by the nation's state, local, territorial, and tribal law enforcement agencies through information and grant resources.

Community policing begins with a commitment to building trust and mutual respect between police and communities. It supports public safety by encouraging all stakeholders to work together to address our nation's crime challenges. When police and communities collaborate, they more effectively address underlying issues, change negative behavioral patterns, and allocate resources.

Rather than simply responding to crime, community policing focuses on preventing it through strategic problem-solving approaches based on collaboration. The COPS Office awards grants to hire community policing officers and support the development and testing of innovative policing strategies. COPS Office funding also provides training and technical assistance to community members and local government leaders, as well as all levels of law enforcement.

Since 1994, the COPS Office has invested more than $14 billion to add community policing officers to the nation's streets, enhance crime fighting technology, support crime prevention initiatives, and provide training and technical assistance to help advance community policing. Other achievements include the following:

- To date, the COPS Office has funded the hiring of approximately 130,000 additional officers by more than 13,000 of the nation's 18,000 law enforcement agencies in both small and large jurisdictions.

- Nearly 700,000 law enforcement personnel, community members, and government leaders have been trained through COPS Office–funded training organizations.

- To date, the COPS Office has distributed more than eight million topic-specific publications, training curricula, white papers, and resource CDs and flash drives.

- The COPS Office also sponsors conferences, round tables, and other forums focused on issues critical to law enforcement.

COPS Office information resources, covering a wide range of community policing topics such as school and campus safety, violent crime, and officer safety and wellness, can be downloaded via the COPS Office's home page, www.cops.usdoj.gov. This website is also the grant application portal, providing access to online application forms.

An after action review (AAR) is conducted following a critical incident to allow teams to reflect on what happened, what did or did not work in the response and why, and how to improve weaknesses while sustaining and building on strengths. The National Police Foundation and the COPS Office offer this guide to provide a detailed step-by-step guide for law enforcement agencies and relevant stakeholders. By honestly reflecting on their responses to critical incidents, law enforcement can anticipate emerging challenges, incorporate promising practices, and work collaboratively to evolve and prepare for future events. This book defines the AAR process, offers a meta-analysis of 20 AARs, and describes a step-by-step guide for law enforcement agencies and others to conduct AARs.