Bureaucratic Structures and Mass Casualty Events
Joseph A. Schafer[1]

In the preceding chapter, Carl Jensen reviewed the final reports issued by

commissions investigating Pearl Harbor, the 9/11 attacks, and Hurricanes Katrina and

Rita. These inquiries paint a grave picture of the ability of government to consistently

recognize and understand looming threats and to respond to large-scale critical incidents.

We must, of course, recognize that all three documents he reviewed were produced by

political entities that may have been seeking to further various ends in the course of

investigating and reporting upon each incident. We must further recognize that while

governmental efforts were not optimal in these three cases, they may succeed in many

other situations. Unfortunately, society often judges government not on its many

successes, but upon its glaring failures.

Considering Jensen's analysis, I contend we can find another important message.

In all three circumstances he considers, we see that governmental responses (or failures to

respond) took place through the dense, bureaucratic structures that so often typify dealing

with large-scale problems. The involvement of varied personnel from varied levels of

government (local, county, state and federal) as well as disparate agencies creates

complex webs of personnel and resources. Bureaucracies are wonderful at providing

control and micro-managing employee performance; they are woefully inadequate in

dynamic circumstances that require flexibility, adaptability, and rapid decision making on

the part of organizations and employees. American government at all levels has typically

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[1] My description of police bureaucracies was influenced by an unpublished critique I co-authored with Dr. Clemens Bartollas; I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge his contributions to my thoughts on this subject.

embraced hierarchical bureaucratic structures, believing them to be the optimal and "safest" way to manage personnel and resources in these complex circumstances. In this chapter, I consider some of the problems with reliance on bureaucracy as an operational structure when large-scale events are taking place. Essays appearing later in this volume (particularly those by Olligschlaeger and Myers) will offer alternatives to the "business as usual" model that we often find to be so ineffective in American police agencies and government as a whole.

Police Departments as Bureaucratic Organizations

Bureaucracies were originally developed to help private businesses maximize profits and to regulate the actions of employees. By creating efficient and methodical social organizations, bureaucracies were supposed to streamline industrial production. The idea of bureaucracy is based on rationalism, the same principle that gave rise to modern science and greater understandings of the physical and biological worlds. If human social organization could approach the efficiency of a machine, theorists reasoned, profits and the acquisition of capital could be maximized. Bureaucracies focus on controlling employees and structuring organizations so that jobs are performed in a routine, orderly, and predictable fashion; discretion is minimized and decision-making authority is placed high within the organization. Advocates believe that when it is properly executed, a bureaucracy is the best way to achieve a high degree of organizational efficiency and accuracy (Gerth & Mills, 1958).

The origins of police agencies as bureaucratic organizations go back to the emergence of the police professionalism movement. Beginning in the 1880s and through

the mid-20th century, progressive police administrators sought bureaucratized and rationalized police departments. The professionalism movement began in response to an era of rampant patronage, corruption, and inefficacy in American government, particularly at the municipal level. Social reformers were seeking new ways to structure governmental services to ensure all citizens had equal access to the rights and services provided by their tax dollars. The progressive police leaders of this era believed bureaucracy would provide the control needed to eliminate the corruption and undue political influence that dominated policing at the time (Walker, 1977). Bureaucratic structures and processes would provide control over employees, ensure consistency in job performance and service delivery, and decouple officers and departments from undue community influences.

O.W. Wilson did as much as anyone to transform the structure and operation of American police organizations. Wilson worked with August Vollmer in Berkeley, California; he also served as Chief of Police in Wichita, Kansas, and Chicago, Illinois, and was Dean of the School of Criminology at the University of California, Berkeley. In the 1930s and 1940s, Wilson undertook a study of employees and organizations; at the time, the best minds and organizations were still advocating the use of bureaucratic models. Wilson's studies lead him to write *Police Administration,* a guide for how police organizations should be structured and should operate (Wilson, 1950). For decades, this text was one of the most influential works shaping how police leaders thought about their roles, responsibilities, and surroundings. Even today, the legacy of the text is evident through a simple examination of the organizational chart for virtually any American police department. Wilson was particularly focused on how police departments were

structured and how their internal operations were conducted; he emphasized command,

control, authority, and responsibility (Wilson, 1950). This bureaucratic model envisioned

the police as professional servants who were detached from the community they served

(Manning, 1997). Organizational structures were to be clearly defined and would control

the actions of employees. Hierarchy, span of control, chain of command, consistency in

rules, and the formulation of explicit policies and procedures all flowed from this

thinking. Discretion by low-level employees was tightly controlled. A central

communication center directed how and where officers were to be deployed. Formal

policies dictated officer responses to any given situation. The bureaucratic model

advocated by Wilson and others continues to dominate policing and government services

in the current era.

Problems with Police Bureaucracies in Action

The preceding section describes how bureaucratic police organizations operated,

at least on paper. The application of bureaucratic principles to policing offers some

important virtues, particularly in terms of control over decision making and employee

discretion.[2] These virtues, however, generate a number of consequences that influence

police operations, personnel, and community relations, perhaps in negative ways. In

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[2] This point could, of course, be argued to the contrary. Bureaucracy does grant
command and control in structured, spatially finite work places (e.g., factories). The
level of direct supervision in policing has always been quite low compared to the direct
supervision in the military and private-sector production facilities. Because of this, some
have suggested that while police organizations appear to control the discretion and
decision-making of their employees, the reality is that officers have considerable freedom
in deciding when and how to perform their duties. See generally, Michael Brown,
Working the Streets (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1988).

order to understand the problems police bureaucracies generate in responding to mass casualty events, it is first necessary to discuss some of the general problems bureaucracy creates in normal police operations.

First, police organizations are highly bureaucratic and formalized. Despite the emergence of alternative views on how to structure and operate police departments, agencies still tend to use variations on O.W. Wilson's model for police administration. Except in the smallest of police departments, there is a marked distance between front-line personnel and supervisors; there are extensive policies and procedures governing officer behavior and conduct; officers must often seek approval before they can make very basic decisions; and the emphasis is on organizational control rather than organizational efficacy. While these characteristics might work well in routine, predictable, and fixed work environments, policing work environments would rarely be described in such terms.

Second, police organizations tend to have poor internal and external communications, particularly as they become larger. Routing information via the chain of command means that messages and requests are delayed, lost, misplaced, and ignored. It takes considerable time for officers to receive feedback on their requests. External communication also suffers because too often we place police in the role of experts on matters of crime and community order (Manning, 1978). Consequently, agencies sometimes restrict the information that they give to the public.[3] These restrictions are

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[3] At times, such restrictions can extend to denying access to public information maintained by the police, such as records of concealed weapons permits, police incident records, and documents detailing the expenditure of public funds by police departments. See "Open Records Check by Iowa Newspapers Finds Some Improvement, Some Backsliding" *Associated Press State & Local Wire* (March 19, 2005).

usually intended to protect on-going investigations. The tendency to hoard information can, however, permeate a police agency, resulting in citizens not being provided adequate information to protect themselves and their families. In a mass casualty event, restricting the information flow to the public can create hysteria, fear, looting, panic, or inappropriate responses (e.g., failing to evacuate) on the part of the public.

Third, police organizations tend to make decisions and changes very slowly. Bureaucratic organizations are meant to be rigid and predictable, not flexible and adaptable to changing circumstances. Unfortunately, police organizations exist in highly dynamic environments: law, community structures, public expectations, department personnel, departmental budgets, and beliefs about the best way to police communities are subject to constant change. In order to be effective, police departments need to be able to adapt to these and other changes. Unfortunately, police departments have been historically poor at adapting to changes. Some have likened the process of changing police departments to "bending granite" (Guyot, 1979).

Fourth, police organizations tend to operate with inefficiency and redundancy. Bureaucracies work well in highly predictable and routine organizational environments; police work does not fit these criteria. Problems arise when bureaucracies are applied in dynamic and chaotic environments. For example, the author is familiar with an agency in which street-level drug markets were independently investigated and targeted by patrol officers, the agency's vice unit, officers assigned to a multi-jurisdictional drug task force, and detectives (homicide and crimes against persons) whose investigations intersected with the community's drug market. All of these groups were attempting to resolve the same problem, but none of them were coordinating their efforts. As a result, different

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units had different pieces of the puzzle; regrettably, they were unable to put these pieces together to develop a comprehensive understanding and response to that area's crime and drug problem. Such situations are common in bureaucratic police organizations and are reminiscent of the "failure to connect the dots" criticisms surrounding the lead-up to the 9/11 attacks.

Fifth, police culture and informal working relationships are extremely important. Following the chain of command and designated channels for acquiring information and receiving permission are time-consuming, frustrating, and inefficient. Experienced officers will rely on contacts they have developed throughout their organization (police academy classmates, former partners, etc.), as well as other organizations (police and otherwise), to circumvent the chain of command and formal communication channels. This does serve the ultimate objective of "getting the job done," it also raises a new set of concerns. In particular, police organizations do not operate in a manner that is as coordinated, controlled, rational, and predictable as their organizational structure would imply. Informal relationships can be highly functional, but they are not institutionalized or formally evident; their operation can be haphazard, random, and result in myriad problems.

Sixth, the first-line supervisors (sergeants and lieutenants) play a crucial role within the organization. The nature of policing (working around-the-clock, on weekends and holidays, and across large geographic areas) means the chief executive must rely on these first-line supervisors to ensure that policies and procedures are being followed. The police chief is ultimately responsible for their organization, but cannot be everywhere at all times. As a result, sergeants and lieutenants play in an extremely influential role in

dictating how units within the organization actually operate (Trojanowicz, 1980). All too often, this situation is overlooked. Front-line supervisors can be a powerful resource for initiating organizational change, while overlooking their role can lead to critical failures.

Seventh, police bureaucracy is a source of stress and aggravation for police officers. *Stress research in policing suggests officers are more stressed by their organization than they are by the dangers of their job or the difficulties their job creates for their personal life.* Because bureaucracies tend to ignore the needs, motivations, and ambitions of employees, bureaucracies are notorious for generating employee dissatisfaction (Baker, 1997; Buzawa, 1984; Zhao, Thurman, & Hi, 1996). In the context of mass casualty events, this dissatisfaction exacerbates the stresses and personal complications officers are already enduring (see Gardner's chapter later in this volume).

Bureaucracy in Mass Casualty Events

In many ways, bureaucratic approaches to policing were once highly rational and desirable. Bureaucracy provided the perceptions of control over police agencies, employees, and services, a commodity that was vital during the early 20th century. As these approaches became institutionalized, police leaders became conditioned (beginning as rookie police officers) to see bureaucracy as necessary, if not virtuous, in American policing. Beginning in the 1960s, civil litigation rights were expanded, providing prospective plaintiffs with clear, legal paths to sue officers and departments. This development further motivated many police leaders and city administrators to embrace bureaucracy. For these and other reasons, bureaucratic principles and approaches continue to dominate American policing, despite a number of prominent limitations and

shortcomings. This section considers some of the more prominent concerns surrounding the application of bureaucratic principles in policing critical incidents and responding to mass casualty events.

First, flexibility, adaptability, customized responses, innovation, and situationally-derived outcomes are not encouraged under the theory of police bureaucracy, yet these are all typically positive attributes in critical situations the police confront. Following detailed rules and procedures is not always the best way for officers to "get the job done".[4] Clear lines of command, control, and authority are often needed to organize a safe and effective resolution. Problems arise, however, when the nature of a situation hampers communication between supervisor and subordinate. Employees accustomed to following explicit orders and policies become dependent on external input. These employees end up with limited skills and experiences in developing and implementing appropriate solutions in the absence of direction and guidance; officers are conditioned to do as they are told.

To be sure, some officers are quite adept at working independently in situations of duress; however, when there is a widespread communication failure, responses are likely to vary in nature and efficacy. When communication lines are interrupted, action can flounder. The Hurricane Katrina response is a prime example of how officers may struggle to cope when cut off from communications and command information. Media

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[4] To be clear, this is not to imply officers need to break the law to perform their duties. Rather, agency policies and procedures may be decidedly ill suited for guiding an officer toward the quick, efficient, and appropriate performance of their duties. At the very least, this can cause frustration and delays (for officers and citizens) in providing vital services. In extreme situations, this can compromise an officer's ability to protect persons and property.

accounts of the police response to this disaster do not paint glowing pictures.[5] Beyond

possible problems in the New Orleans Police Department, there are clear and consistent

reports of problems in the overall Katrina response across all levels of government.[6] This

should not be viewed as an indictment of all officers, agencies, or responses. Many

officers stayed on duty and performed admirably under the circumstances. The failures

of Katrina were more about the inadequacies of structures and systems than about failures

of individual responders.

The intent of this essay is not to rehash the facts and allegations surrounding the

Katrina response. Nonetheless, a very brief consideration of the federal government's

self-critique is instructive. In the *Failure of Initiative* report, U.S. House of

Representatives officials noted:

> Response plans at all levels of government lacked flexibility and
> adaptability. Inflexible procedures often delayed the response. Officials
> at all levels seemed to be waiting for the disaster that fit their plans, rather
> than planning and building scalable capacities to meet whatever Mother
> Nature threw at them. We again encountered the risk-averse culture that
> pervades big government, and again recognized the need for organizations
> as agile and responsive as the 21st century world in which we live.[7]

> Command and control was impaired at all levels, delaying relief. Lack of
> communications and situational awareness paralyzed command and
> control.[8]

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[5] Such accounts should be taken with due skepticism. These stories may contain errors
that unfairly cast police in an unjustly negative (or positive) light. See Susannah
Rosenblatt and James Rainey (2005, Sept 27) "Katrina Rumors" *Los Angeles Times,*
http://www.latimes.com/news/printedition/asection/la-na-
rumors27sep27,0,5536446.story?page=1&track=hpmostemailedlink.

[6] See *A Failure of Initiative: The Final Report of the Select Bipartisan Committee to
Investigate the Preparation for the Response to Hurricane Katrina*,
http://katrina.house.gov/full_katrina_report.htm, which was released in February 2006.

[7] *Failure of Initiative*, pp. 1-2.

[8] *Failure of Initiative*, p. 3.

> The collapse of local law enforcement and lack of effective public communications led to civil unrest and further delayed relief. The New Orleans Police Department was ill-prepared for continuity of operations and lost almost all effectiveness.[9]

Despite recognizing that the existing and dominant disaster response paradigms were inflexible (i.e., waiting for a disaster that fits existing plans, rather than adapting plans to fit the disaster at hand), these same authors seem to believe the solution is "better" bureaucracy, rather than the exploration of alternative structural models. The report focuses extensively on how circumstances eroded "command and control" in New Orleans, without questioning whether operational command and control (in the bureaucratic sense) were truly necessary to enact an effective and efficient response.

Second, bureaucratic communication systems tend to function in a slow and inefficient manner. This is not a function of communication technology; rather, it is produced by the numerous mechanisms and steps associated with seeking and obtaining formal permission to act. Traditionally, the chain of command has to be obeyed to secure authorization for a wide range of actions. Frontline personnel are empowered with some rights, but more consequential actions typically require authorization from higher levels of the organization's command system. From a liability perspective, this is an important check on police conduct; authorization may have a positive effect by introducing a

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[9] *Failure of Initiative*, p. 4. To be clear, I do not provide this quote to be critical of NOPD, its leaders, or its personnel. Like virtually every American police agency has a bureaucratic structure and is beholden to external funding sources. Under such conditions, the agency and its officers, by and large, did a laudable job dealing with a disaster of historic proportions with inadequate resources, tools, training, and organizational structures. Any agency confronting a disaster of similar magnitude would suffer the same problems.

detached observer into a decision making cycle. From a pragmatic standpoint, important

opportunities can be missed as frontline officers await permission and instruction.[10]

In recent decades, agencies have ameliorated this problem with the establishment

of more formalized strategies for responding to common types of mass casualty events.

These plans often empower lower-level supervisors with the right to make critical

choices. At the same time, many agencies still lack plans that would provide officers

with guidance about their roles and responsibilities during more chaotic, wide-spread,

and long-term situations. Agencies have established plans, authority, and responsibility

for the "routine" situations confronted by tactical units. Many, however, may lack such

mechanisms to tell *all* employees where to go, what to do, how to do it, and what

authority they have to improvise responses when there is a widespread disruption of

command and communication channels. In New Orleans, this meant some officers

abandoned their duties while others continued to serve. Many officers improvised and

performed to the best of their abilities under seemingly impossible conditions; others

allegedly seized the opportunity to take part in widespread looting. Many officers

interviewed by the media expressed frustration, confusion, and uncertainty over basic

aspects of their responsibilities (who, what, where, why, when, and how). Regrettably,

New Orleans was simply the "poster child" for an ineffective and disorganized response;

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[10] The author directly observed a riot situation in a college community that involved
several thousand youth. Local departments quickly mobilized personnel and equipment
to regain control of a destructive situation. When a response effort was in place, the chief
of police vested with the final authority to deploy officers could not be located in the
midst of the chaos and did not answer contact efforts by radio. The response was delayed
30 minutes; during this time, assaults were taking place, property was being damaged,
and additional youth were joining the melee. Because no one else had the authority to
issue "marching orders," the response was delayed until the chief re-established contact
and officers might have confronted a more difficult situation.

similar results would likely be witnessed in most communities.[11] In future incidents, the criticisms leveled at the New Orleans Police Department might actually serve as a disincentive against creative, independent action by officers. Fearing their actions might generate criticism and possibly discipline, officers may be even further encouraged to await duty orders.

Third, problem- and community-oriented policing advocates have illustrated that agencies have relied too much on formal policies, procedures, and structures. Officers are expected to be obedient conformists; innovation, creativity, flexibility, and analysis are not encouraged. In reality, police officers have often excelled in developing situationally-appropriate responses to the problems they confront, even when such efforts were contrary to policy. The nature of policing allows and even encourages such innovation. The concern here is not that officers lack the ability to operate outside of rigid organizational structures and guidance (many can and will excel). The problem is that these skills are not formally encouraged, much less developed, within many police agencies. Some officers can improvise and innovate quite well; others have become conditioned to await and then execute orders from superiors. Large-scale critical incidents create problems for those in the latter grouping.

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[11] My intent here is not to vilify the New Orleans PD or its officers. Ample evidence suggests that most officers did the very best they could in the face of a terrible disaster that effected everyone, including officers and city leaders. My contention is that bureaucratic models for disaster response have inherent problems that can produce disastrous and fatal outcomes. The inadequate Katrina response is replete with examples of how red tape, disrupted chains of command, overly narrow role orientations (i.e., "that-is-not-my-responsibility" thinking), centralized decision making, and communication errors can exacerbate the myriad problems associated with a large-scale, prolonged disaster.

Adherence to bureaucratic principles has led to a number of complaints issued against police agencies. The examples Jensen provides, while describing atypical events, illustrate routine challenges that are issued against what are normal business practices in most American police agencies.   Police departments have been accused of failing to respond creatively to a changing social environment, of being unresponsive and closed to the citizens they serve, and of failing to develop the talents of the rank and file police officer. Right or wrong, bureaucracies are often viewed in a negative manner. Most of us have encountered the frustration of "red tape," the process by which a seemingly simple task cannot be accomplished without great effort. Although the average person may unfairly assume that *all* governmental bureaucracy is inefficient, impersonal, and cumbersome, these images are generally apt descriptions, particularly as agencies (not just police departments) become larger in size. On the other hand, despite the emergence of new ideas for how police organizations might operate and be structured, it is difficult to move away from some elements of the bureaucratic model (Maguire, 1997). Although we often hear complaints about bureaucracy, police departments have not developed better alternative organizational systems. Until another way of organizing the police is proven to be better, bureaucracy will continue to dominate American police organizations.

Conclusions

Despite their possible virtues, bureaucratic structures are fraught with serious limitations that make them decidedly less than ideal in police organizations and in governmental responses to mass casualty, large-scale, and protracted incidents. The problem has less to do with the theoretical viability of bureaucratic models and more to

do with their application in chaotic, unstable, evolving circumstances. Critiquing bureaucracy is well-traveled ground; established problems have been described *ad nauseam*, including in this chapter. Despite these circumstances, large organizations, especially those affiliated with government and public service, continue to cling to this problematic model. The reason for this unfortunate situation has to do with the preservation of order, control, deniability, and a false sense of predictability; it has very little to do with achieving effective outcomes.

Given this critique, what is the alternative? How can agencies structure personnel and resources in order to form the best response to chaos? The answer, regrettably, is unclear. We know other structural patterns work well in small and medium-sized agencies. Despite claiming to be bureaucratic, many smaller agencies have been operating in a more adaptable, informal, and effective manner for decades. Will these models work in larger agencies; can improved operations be achieved without compromising other concerns? If so, how? In the following chapters, Richard Myers, Thomas Cowper, and Andreas Olligschlaeger offer further insight to begin answering these questions.

We are finally in an era when technology, training, and experience may allow us to develop more effective ways of organizing large volumes of personnel and resources in uncertain environments. Networked structures have the capacity to improve response efforts by empowering personnel to make decisions and take action within their environments. The technological advances that can facilitate networked operations may also enable enhanced computer modeling and testing to better determine the viability of these approaches in actual operation. The challenge for government and emergency

service agencies is to devote the resources and energies to better determine how to effectively respond to the mass casualty events of the future. We cannot predict when, where, or what these events will look like, yet we can create empowered, educated, prepared responders who have the capacity to provide the care and intervention necessary to improve future responses.

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