# Chapter 7
# First Responder Psychological Recovery Following a Mass Casualty Event

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## ABSTRACT

*Mass Casualty Events (MCE) have an extraordinary impact on an entire community. The impact on victims' families, survivors, and community members is often the subject of significant attention; however, rarely does the impact on first responders (law enforcement officers, firefighters, dispatchers, crime scene investigators/photographers, etc.) garner the same coverage. Additionally, agencies can quickly become overwhelmed by the magnitude of the response causing them to overlook the psychological impact of these incidents on their personnel. Serving as specialists in police and public safety psychology, crisis intervention, and trauma recovery, the authors reflect on lessons learned from their response to multiple MCEs, including the 1999 Columbine High School shooting and the 2012 Aurora Century 16 Theater shooting, and offer recommendations to agencies regarding crisis response and trauma recovery.*

## INTRODUCTION

At approximately 12:40am on July 20, 2012 members of the Aurora Police Department responded to the Century 16 Theater following the largest mass shooting in Colorado's history. Twelve were killed, including a six-year-old girl, and an additional 70 were wounded in the shooting. After 1,132 days, the shooter was sentenced to 12 life sentences without the possibility of parole for 1st Degree Murder and 3, 318 years for 64 counts of Attempted 1st Degree Murder, Attempted 2nd Degree Murder, and one count of Possession of Deadly Explosives. The investigation and prosecution involved nearly the entire Aurora Police Department, both sworn and civilian, as well as personnel from more than 40 additional local, state, and federal agencies. From emergency responders who carried victims from the theater rushing

them to local hospitals in the back of police vehicles, to crime lab personnel who sifted through blood and debris while processing the crime scene, to homicide detectives working tirelessly on the case for more than three years, the horrific nature of this incident and the prolonged exposure to it in preparing for trial left a tremendous psychological footprint. On August 26, 2015 during the last day of the sentencing hearing, Judge Samour spoke to the defendant saying, "You will never set foot in free society again… the defendant does not deserve any sympathy…Sheriff, get the defendant out of my courtroom please. (O'Neill, 2015, Paragraph 3)." Although there was a community wide sigh of relief at the conclusion of the trial and a great deal of discussion regarding closure being provided at long last, the psychological footprint remains and for many of the first responders, the wounds are still visible.

On December 2, 2015 at approximately 11am, Sayed Rizwan Farook and his wife, Tashfeen Malik, opened fire at a San Bernardino County, CA Department of Public Health training event and holiday party, of about 80 employees. The Public Health event began as semi-annual meeting and training, and was transitioning to the luncheon/holiday party when the shooting began (Lin & Winton, 2015). Farook and Malik entered the room armed with semi-automatic pistols and rifles, in black ski masks and tactical gear. They fired between 65 and 75 rounds (Aisch et al., 2015). In addition, the assailants left three explosive devices, which failed to explode, and likely were set to target first responders (Aisch, et al., 2015). The first police units were on scene within four minutes of the initial 911 emergency call (Lin & Winton, 2015). Two police officers arrived on the scene first, and another officer arrived several minutes later. Overall, approximately 300 officers and agents from the area responded to the active shooter event (Lin & Winton, 2015). The first responders entered a chaotic and unpredictable situation, knowing that initially they would not have cover (Jacobo, 2015). One officer, who entered the banquet room where the shooting took place, described it as "surreal" and "unspeakable carnage," adding that survivors had "pure panic" on their faces (Jacobo, 2015, Paragraph 7). Another officer reported, "My body went numb…It was overwhelming and surreal" (Jacobo, 2015, Paragraph 13). The suspects fled in a black SUV before police arrived. A witness was able to provide Farook's name to the police, who were then able to track Farook's vehicle (Lin & Winton, 2015). After the SUV was stopped, the couple exchanged fire with police and both were killed in the shootout (Aisch, et al., 2015). A total of seven police agencies were involved in the shootout (Lin & Winton, 2015). Overall, 14 civilians were killed in the mass shooting and 24 people, including two police officers, were injured. After an investigation by the FBI, the shooting was deemed an act of terrorism (Jacobo, 2015). The long-term psychological impact of this mass casualty event on the community and on first responders' remains to be seen.

This chapter is intended to emphasize for readers the impact MCEs have on first responders and the authors hope to educate readers on:

1.  The impact of trauma contamination on first responders following a MCE, and common symptoms of distress in first responders. Research is clear that because of an increased exposure to life threatening situations, first responders are also at an increased risk of experiencing trauma-related symptoms (Weiss et. al., 2010). Exposure is either direct when the responder is the victim (officer involved shooting) or vicarious when he or she is the responder (MCE). Whether the exposure is direct or vicarious, the distress involved in these types of incidents can be significant. Training first responders on the detection, prevention, and mitigation of vicarious trauma symptoms can mitigate symptom severity and duration following an incident. This section will include recommendations based on the training the authors provide to agencies around the state of Colorado and across the country on trauma response and recovery.

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