

# Critical Incident Definitions Project

The purpose of this project is to analyze different conceptions of what comprises a critical incident. We identify multiple definitions and establish an a priori set of attributes that *may* define a critical incident. We are then able to observe, for example, how subscribing to “Definition A” includes one set of incidents compared to “Definition B.”

Definition Attribute	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K
Caused Social Trauma	X	X		X		X	X			X	
Undermined Public Trust	X	X		X							X
Caused Fear	X				X	X	X		X		
Impacted Community Life / Changed Societal Norms	X	X		X			X			X	X
Impacted Practice of Democracy	X	X									
Relatively Brief Occurrence		X	X	X			X				
Injury or Loss of Life		X	X	X	X	X		X	X		X
Property / Financial Damage					X			X			X
Unexpected to Non-Perpetrators or Initiators			X	X			X				
Limited in Space			X								
Not a Condition, e.g. war, poverty, or pandemic			X				X				
Impact Dependant on Actions of Managers (or Government Organizations)			X		X			X			
Impact Dependant on Stability of Community			X	X							
Change of Significant Proportion									X	X	
Positive Event Initiating Historic Consequents				X							
Attracts Significant Media Coverage								X			

**Definition A:** An event that has the potential for causing social trauma and undermining social trust, creating fear that may have impact on community life and even on the practice of democracy (Critical Incident Analysis Group at the University of Virginia).

**Definition B:** A relatively brief occurrence involving injury, loss, or conflict of significant proportion, with the potential to change existing societal norms. Critical incidents are usually traumatic, threatening the bonds of trust that bind democracies (National Center for Critical Incident Analysis at the National Defense University).

**Definition C:** The event is unexpected, at least by those who are not perpetrators or initiators. There is a consequential impact on many at the time of occurrence. The event and its immediate impact are limited in time and space, making it an incident or episode rather than a condition -- such as war or poverty or pandemic. There is potential for much larger gain or loss or change, depending upon the event itself, the actions of those accountable for managing such incidents, and other important variables, such as the stability or fragility of the community in which the event occurs (Academy for Critical Incident Analysis at John Jay College) .

**Definition D:** A relatively brief occurrence involving injury, loss, conflict, discovery or change of significant proportion, usually unscripted and unanticipated, with the potential to alter existing societal norms. Critical incidents are usually traumatic, threatening the bonds of trust that bind communities, but may be positive, initiating historic consequents (Dr. Frank Ochberg).

**Definition E:** Any manmade or natural event or situation that threatens people, property, business, or the community and occurs outside the normal scope of routine business operations. Typically requires coordination of numerous resources (Jones et al., 2000, “Critical Incident Protocol”).

**Definition F:** A traumatic event, or the threat of such [within or outside Australia], which causes extreme stress, fear or injury (Australian National Code).

**Definition G:** A turning point event. Often called a crisis event. A critical incident is any event which has a stressful impact sufficient enough to overwhelm the usually effective coping skills of either an individual or a group. Critical incidents are typically sudden, powerful events which are outside of the range of ordinary human experiences. Because they are so sudden and unusual, they can have a strong emotional effect even on well trained, experienced people (Santa Cruz County, California, “Emergency Response and Recover Plan,” 2002).

**Definition H:** Include acts of terrorism, hostage situations, and natural disasters. Typically, these events involve one or more of the following factors (although the presence of one factor by itself does not automatically mean that an incident is critical).

- Involves threats or acts of violence against government or social institutions.
- Involves significant loss of life, significant injuries, or significant damage to property.
- Demands use of substantial resources. Requires ongoing communication with upper-level personnel at the Department.
- Requires coordination among federal law enforcement agencies (more so than usual), state or local law enforcement agencies, local or state prosecutors, emergency relief services, or emergency response services.
- Attracts close public scrutiny through the media (U.S. Department of Justice).

**Definition I:** An extraordinary event or series of events that is sudden, overwhelming and often dangerous to oneself or to a significant other (San Antonio Office of Emergency Management).

**Definition J:** An extraordinary event that shocks our systems, challenges our usual ways of coping, and thrusts us into a period in which we search for ways to adjust to the harsh reality that has touched our lives (Cohen Associates, P.A., a crisis management services firm).

**Definition K:** Situations that have the potential to cause injury or loss of life...major disruptions of regular activities, or property or environmental damage or loss, or that can threaten the financial standing or public image of the University. The following are examples of events that may be designated as a critical incidents.

- Fire, explosion, hazardous substance spill or other damage to University property, which may require closing the site temporarily or permanently.
- An incident resulting in or with the potential for fatality or major injuries.
- A major demonstration that disrupts the University’s regular functions (University of Virginia).