

**Principal  
Researcher(s):**  
Ed Moffat

**Advisor:**  
David Smulders

**Instructor:**  
Beth Larcombe

**Research Field:**  
Emergency  
Management Division

**Program:**  
Bachelor of  
Emergency and  
Security Management

**Course:**  
Capstone: ESMS  
4900

**Funding Sources**

N/A: Course-based  
Project.

## After-Action Reviews-Can they be used effectively for learning purposes?

After-Action Reviews have been in use for over 40 years, first by the US Military, and then adopted by many organizations or agencies to improve capabilities of emergency responders to reflect, act and learn in real time. The purpose of the after-action review is to determine what went well, what did not go well, where are the gaps? And what can be done differently next time to improve performance for response to real-incidents or exercises to minimize avoidable deaths or negative economic and social consequences.

The emergency Management Division (EMD) of the Justice Institute of BC is interested in determining how after-action reviews are conducted in Canada following disasters including the rationale for processes. The information gathered on after-action reviews will be utilized to support further research on this topic as well as support curriculum development in the JIBC Certificate of Emergency Management program.

Researching peer-reviewed publications that focused on the purpose of the after-action review determined that they are distinct from debriefs in that they begin with a clear comparison of intended versus actual results achieved (Dufty 2013). After-action reviews need to be effective in conveying the information from events and exercises to improve “best practice”, otherwise they become problematic and will reinforce a narrative that may not be accurate, and may lead to group think (Allen, Reiter-Palmon, Crowe & Scott, 2018).

After-action reviews are vital to the success of future events. The facilitating of the process in performing after-action reviews needs to be led by competent leaders who can lead participants through an open discussion that reflects the planned goals, and successes, as well as areas in need for improvement for future events responses. The performing of after-action reviews is not being utilized to its full extent as lessons learned and emergency management are doomed to repeat the same challenges over and over again; disaster after disaster. Further research is required on after-action reviews within emergency management to determine the best methods of conducting and reporting as well as when and how they should be performed to improve response to events.

# JIBC Research Brief

## Structured Abstract

**Introduction:** After action reviews, also known by other terms, are a detailed critical summary of a past event conducted and documented for the purpose of re-assessing decisions and considering alternatives for future reference. The usage of after-action reviews (AARs) began over 40 years by the US military, and are now being used by those responsible for emergency preparedness and response recovery to convey important lessons learned to promote individual and organizational learning post event(s). With the number of disaster events increasing along with the complexity and magnitude of such events, how can after-action reviews be performed in a timely fashion to convey lessons learned and implemented for improving response in the next event.

The Emergency Management Division (EMD) of the Justice Institute of BC is interested in determining how after action reviews are conducted in Canada following disasters including rationale for these processes. The information gathered on after action reviews in this study will be utilized to support further research on this topic as well as support curriculum development in the JIBC Certificate of Emergency Management program.

**Methods:** Literature selected for use within this research paper included peer-reviewed articles, thesis papers, actual after-action reviews and policies. Articles were selected for their focus on lessons learned and best practices encountered first within Canada, the United States and then Australia as they have similar experiences with emergency management. Additionally, literature on a variety of disaster events such as Hurricane Katrina (2005), BP Oil Spill (2010) and Wildland-Urban fires.

**Results/Findings:** The usage of after-action reviews are mandated by many governmental organizations such as the Canadian government, Homeland Security and FEMA in the United States, however, those responsible for responding to events do not always follow the requirement to submit documents for review. The terms after-action reviews as well as after-action reports are used interchangeably and may be causing confusion as after-action reviews need to be conducted as soon as possible following the event and attended by those who responded. The after-action report is the final report which encapsulates all of the incident data that is produced in a document for action by senior leadership. The after-action review needs to be conducted by a strong leader who can create an open, honest and safe environment in which people can speak honestly and with confidence.

# JIBC Research Brief

**Recommendations:** AARs need to be performed consistently after each event and as close to the event as possible to ensure that lessons learned are adopted for the next event. To be effective as a lessons learned approach for organizational readiness for future events standardized forms as well as a centralized repository need to be developed to ensure sharing of information across organizations to instill a learning environment. Further research needs to be conducted to determine how effective AARs are utilized within the Canadian context to determine best methods as well as when they should be performed to improve overall emergency management response to events so that the same issues are not re-occurring time and time again.

## References:

Allen, J.A., Reitman-Palmon, R., Crowe, J., and Scott, C. (2018) Debriefs:

Teams learning from doing in context. *American Psychologist* 73(4)

504-516. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/amp0000246>

Dufty, N. (2013). Evaluating emergency management after an event: gaps and suggestions.

*Australian Journal of Emergency Management* 28(4). 15-19 retrieved from

[https://works.bepress.com/neil\\_dufty/31/](https://works.bepress.com/neil_dufty/31/)