

Second responder programmes to prevent domestic abuse

A second visit to the home of domestic abuse victims (after the initial police response) to support victims and reduce reoffending. This summary is part of the [Crime Reduction Toolkit](#), which presents the best available evidence on what works to reduce crime.

First published

16 December 2015

Updated

7 July 2025

Effect scale	Quality of evidence				
	Effect Impact on crime	Mechanism How it works	Moderator Where it works	Implementation How to do it	Economic cost What it costs
 Mixed findings	 Very strong	 Low	 Low	 Low	No information

Focus of the intervention

Second responder programmes involve a 'second response' visit to victims of domestic abuse at home. A team, typically comprised of a police officer and a domestic abuse specialist, attend with the aim of educating victims, and sometimes the offender, about the cyclical nature of abuse, helping with safety planning and creating referrals to support services. Second responder programmes aim to prevent further violence and find long-term solutions to the problem, assuming that victims of abuse will be more receptive to crime prevention opportunities in the period immediately after the abuse has occurred.

What research is this summary based on?

This Crime Reduction Toolkit summary is based on one meta-analytic review covering 15 studies. 14 of the primary studies in the review were based on evidence from the USA and one was based on evidence from the UK.

Effect – how effective is it?

The research suggests that second responder programmes have had no impact on either police recorded or victim reported repeat family abuse overall. However, individual studies have shown both increases and decreases in police recorded repeat abuse, which were statistically significant.

The review looked separately at the effect of second responder programmes in studies with experimental designs, which would have enabled stronger statements about impact. These studies found a statistically significant increase in the likelihood that repeat incidents would be reported to the police. The authors note that the increase in police-recorded repeat abuse in these experimental studies could have indicated either an increase in abuse or increased willingness of victims to report to the police. Further research is needed to understand the reason for increased reporting.

In terms of non-crime outcomes, the review examined four studies to see whether the use of second responder programmes had increased the uptake of victim services. Overall, there was a statistically significant increase in the use of such services.

How robust is the review evidence?

The quality of review methods used to assess the impact of second responder programmes was very strong.

The review was sufficiently systematic that most forms of bias that could influence the review's conclusions can be ruled out. The review considered many elements of validity, using a well-designed search strategy. The authors assessed the potential for risk of bias and considered the influence of study design factors, such as study type, outcome measures and the follow-up period.

To meet the requirements of the review, studies needed to meet the following criteria:

- Have either an experimental or non-equivalent control group quasi-experimental design.
- Have a treatment group that received a second responder programme.
- Report on repeat family abuse, such as intimate partner violence, elder abuse or general family abuse.

The authors identified a risk of bias within some of the primary studies, including statistically significant differences between the treatment and control group populations, intervention implementation variability within primary studies and low survey response rates.

Mechanism – how does it work?

The quality of review methods used to assess how second responder programmes work was low.

Several mechanisms were suggested through which the programmes might work, however, the review did not empirically test these mechanisms. Second responders work with victims to help them to understand the cyclical nature of family abuse, with the hope that increasing their knowledge helps them to leave their abuser or increase personal safety. They also work to establish greater independence for victims through initiatives like counselling, job training, public assistance or social service referrals, which can provide accommodation relocation.

The review discussed other mechanisms directly affecting perpetrators. This includes second responders talking to them to make them understand the legal consequences of assault and that further abuse will result in additional sanctions. It was suggested that increased knowledge and fear of sanctions should help to reduce repeated incidents of violence.

Moderators – in which contexts does it work best?

The quality of review methods used to assess the contexts where second responder programmes might work best was low.

There is some evidence that the effectiveness of second responder programmes vary by context.

Second responses that occurred shortly after an incident (within 72 hours) led to decreases in victim-reported incidents, while later responses (more than a week later) led to increases in victim-reported incidents. Analysis of police-recorded abuse showed no significant relationship.

- Studies that included only intimate partner violence were more likely to see a decrease in victim-reported incidents, while studies that included a more general measure of family abuse were more likely to see an increase in reporting.
- Studies that followed the same households or couple over time were more likely to see an increase in victim-reported and police-recorded repeat abuse as opposed to studies that followed a victim or a suspect more generally, which saw a reduction in repeat abuse.

Implementation – what can be said about implementing this initiative?

The quality of review methods used to assess how to implement second responder programmes was low.

The review noted that second responder programmes were carried out primarily face-to-face with victims by police officers, victim advocates, counsellors or social service workers.

The victims, and sometimes offenders, were offered a range of services and support, including information on legal options for victims and warnings to perpetrators about the potential legal consequences of their actions. Victims may be given information about obtaining a restraining order, sheltered accommodation or relocation assistance. They may also be offered counselling, job training, mental health support or referrals to social services.

Economic considerations – how much might it cost?

The review provided insufficient information to assess how much second responder programmes cost. There was no mention of costs in the review, and no cost benefit analysis was conducted.

General considerations

- One primary study was conducted in the UK and the remainder of the studies were conducted in the USA, so care must be taken when transferring these findings to the UK context.
- It is unclear whether higher levels of reported abuse to police within experimental studies means that victims have more confidence to report abuse where they previously would have stayed silent, or whether more abuse is occurring.

- There is little understanding of the mechanisms behind second responder programmes achieving the observed effects in the review. More research is needed to investigate this.

Summary

The evidence suggests overall that second responder programmes have not had a statistically significant effect on either victim reported or police recorded crime. There is some evidence that second responder programmes have increased reporting of repeat family abuse to the police. There is also evidence that second responder programmes have increased the uptake of victim services.

It was suggested that second responder programmes might work by helping victims to understand the cyclical nature of family violence and providing them with services and support, therefore empowering them to take steps to increase their personal safety and establish greater independence. In addition, conversations with abusers are intended to ensure they understand any ramifications of further abuse.

Second responder programmes were found to be more effective in reducing reports of repeat family abuse when:

- the second response took place within 72 hours of the initial incident (victim and police recorded)
- the initial incident was an intimate partner violence case (victim reported)
- the primary studies followed the same victim or offender more generally, not specific households or victim/offender pairings (police recorded)

There was no mention of costs in the review and no cost benefit analysis was conducted.

Related Crime Reduction Toolkit summaries

Other Crime Reduction Toolkit summaries of relevance to second responder programmes include [cognitive behavioural therapy \(CBT\) for domestic violence](#), [criminal sanctions to prevent domestic violence](#) and [educational interventions to prevent relationship violence](#). The Crime Reduction Toolkit can be filtered by problem area to see [all interventions related to domestic abuse](#).

Reviews

Review one

Reference

- Petersen K and others. 2022. '[Effects of second responder programs on repeat incidents of family abuse: An updated systematic review and meta-analysis](#)', Campbell Systematic Reviews, 18(1), e1217.

[Return to the toolkit](#)

Tags

- [Domestic violence](#)