
This article is based on the Campbell Review:

Davis RC, Weisburd D & Taylor B: *Effects of second responder programs on repeat incidents of family abuse. A systematic review.* Campbell Collaboration, 2007.

This article is written by the Nordic Campbell Centre. The article has been approved by the authors of the review. Published December 2008

Follow-ups can bring family violence to the fore

Family violence can have serious and long-term consequences for all family members. However, combating family violence is often difficult, because this type of violence is seldom reported. Second responder programs are an attempt to prevent future incidents of family violence by providing follow-up interviews (second response) to victims immediately following incidents of violence. A Campbell systematic review shows that these follow-ups, however, do not reduce the incidents of violence, but that they do encourage more victims to report violence.

The cyclical nature of family violence

When a man beats his wife or children, the consequences are more serious and long-term than bruises and broken ribs. Family violence is often passed on from generation to generation. A child that grows up in a home of violence and insecurity will be at greater risk of ending up as a victim or as a perpetrator of family violence in his or her adult life as well.

However, it is difficult to stop violence that takes place in the home. The relationship between the perpetrator and the victim is often imbued with both fear and mutual dependence. The victim is therefore unlikely to end the relationship or report the repeated violence.

The initial police response to a family violence complaint is not enough to break the vicious circle. To obtain effective solutions, victims must be thoroughly informed of their opportunities for counselling and support. The US second responder program is such an attempt at providing support for victims through follow-up interviews (second response) immediately after victimization. The effect of these programs is the subject of a new Campbell systematic review.

More victims report violence after follow-ups

The authors behind the systematic review conclude that the follow-up interviews result in an increase, albeit a slight one, in the number of reported incidents of family violence. The authors believe the increased willingness of victims to report violence is due to greater confidence in the police after the follow-ups.

The follow-ups, however, do not seem to have an effect on the number of new incidents of family violence, according to a study among the victims. Despite the fact that police and social workers take time to visit and talk with the families in their homes, it seems to have no preventive effect on the perpetrator. The authors of the systematic review, however, rule out that such visits may have the opposite and undesirable effect of increasing the incidents of violence.

It appears that follow-up interviews can be of importance even though they do not meet the primary goal of preventing new violence. The 'dark figure' is considerable for family violence, i.e. there are

many incidents which are never reported and therefore do not appear in crime statistics. The increased willingness of victims to report violent incidents after a follow-up interview can therefore help reduce the 'dark figure' of unreported violence. The authors point out that decision-makers must measure this benefit against the costs of carrying out follow-ups.

What are follow-up interviews?

The follow-ups in the second responder programs are the focal point of the systematic review. As a rule, qualified professionals will conduct a follow-up interview with the victim immediately after the family violence complaint. Normally, the follow-up team will consist of a specially trained domestic violence police officer and a specialized professional, for example a social worker or a lawyer.

The team will visit the home within the first couple of hours or days following the violent incident and will provide information to the victim about rights and options. The team will also provide information about support centers and will offer counselling, job training and public assistance e.g. relocation assistance. They may also warn the perpetrator of the legal consequences of continued abuse.

The follow-ups are based on the theory that victims are most vulnerable and therefore likely to be especially receptive to help in the hours or days immediately following victimization.

The purpose of the follow-up interview is also to provide practical and legal assistance and enhance the victim's awareness that the violence is unjustified and wrong, as well as help the victim understand the cyclical nature of violence and possible future scenarios of a continued life together with the perpetrator.

About the systematic review

The systematic review is based on 10 US studies involving a total of more than 4,000 participants. In some cases, the follow-ups were conducted only hours after the violent incident, while in other cases, they were conducted after 5-7 days. Further follow-ups were made either six or 12 months after the violent incident.

The systematic review examines family violence in a broad sense. This includes husbands abusing their wife or children, violence committed against the elderly, or young people beating their parents.

All of the studies compare an intervention (treatment) group which received follow-up with a control group which did not receive follow-up. In half of the studies participants were randomly assigned to one or the other group. However, these randomized studies constitute the most reliable studies, providing the systematic review's most decisive outcomes.