Second responder interventions are not associated with reductions in repeat family abuse, though certain characteristics deserve further research.

What is the aim of this review?
This updated Campbell systematic review and meta-analysis examines the efficacy of second responder interventions for reducing repeat family abuse and increasing the use of victim services. It summarizes and synthesizes the results of 15 studies, mostly from the USA.

What studies are included?
Eligibility for this review was limited to experimental and non-equivalent control group quasi-experimental designs. Eligible studies had to include a treatment group that received the second response intervention and to report on at least one outcome measure of repeat family abuse, such as intimate partner violence, elder abuse, or general family abuse.

What are the main findings of this review?
In aggregate, second responder programs do not appear to impact either police or victim-reported repeat family abuse.

Rigorous experimental studies suggest that these programs may in fact lead to significant increases in police-reported repeat abuse.
More rigorous experimental studies, however, indicate that these programs significantly increase the likelihood of a police-reported repeat incident.

Evidence from a small number of studies suggests that victims may be significantly more likely to access services following contact with second responders.

Responses that occurred shortly after an incident led to decreases in victim-reported incidents, while delayed responses led to increases in victim-reported incidents. This finding is preliminary, however, and more research is needed.

Finally, evaluations of second responder programs appear more likely to report increased police-reported abuse when following the same household over time, as opposed to the same victim or victim/offender pairing more generally.

What do the findings of the review mean?
The findings of this review question the efficacy of second responder programs. However, the desirability of these findings, and the factors that may be responsible for them, are also subject to debate. Evidence of increased reporting to the police but not increased reporting on victim surveys may indicate improvement in victims’ confidence and willingness to contact police. While this is not the long-term goal of second responder programs, family abuse is frequently underreported and thus some may consider these findings to be favorable. It is also possible that an increased willingness to contact police in the short term may lead to long-term reductions in abuse, though this claim is speculative.

Additionally, the findings of this review point to specific characteristics of second responder programs that may moderate their effectiveness. Second responders may need to contact victims as quickly as possible after a domestic incident to reduce repeat victimization, or encourage long-term separation between the victim and abuser to reduce exposure.

Research is needed with specific focus on these underlying mechanisms. However, considering the tenuous nature of even our most optimistic findings, policymakers may need to seriously consider whether second responder programs are worthy of investment.