

Support programmes for perpetrators of domestic abuse are controversial, but new research finds they bring benefits

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

[Domestic abuse](#) is a major health and social issue that affects the lives of millions of people, most of them women, across the world. Our recent [research](#) shows that programmes to help abusers are proving to be [effective in helping men](#) recognise and change their abusive behaviour –

and are also value for money. We found that for every £1 spent delivering such a programme, the value to society was £1.40.

Domestic [abuse](#), usually by a partner, includes shouting, name calling, hitting, beating, forced sex and controlling the other person's life. It causes injuries, stress, anxiety, depression, [substance abuse](#) and [mental health problems](#).

One in three women experience some form of abuse in their lifetime. The [Crime Survey of England and Wales](#) reported that approximately 1.2m women (7.5%) and 0.7m men (4.3%) reported experiencing [domestic abuse](#) in the year ending March 2017. Men are the most common domestic abusers against their female partners.

Traditionally, domestic abuse support services are aimed at victims and not those who perpetrate abuse. Such services are essential to support victims and survivors and to identify abusers. Yet [research](#) has shown that a focus on helping women and children is not enough to prevent future violence. It's also important to offer help to abusers via domestic violence perpetrator programmes, which help people to understand and reduce abusive behaviours.

Poor understanding of the value of these services and what works for whom and in what circumstances means that they are rare in Britain. Where there is support for abusers to change their behaviour, interventions are often too late and only happen after the involvement of the police. Such programmes are often provided to domestic abuse perpetrators who are ordered by a criminal court to attend as part of their sentence. But some programmes are also offered to people who voluntarily seek support, or are referred by social services, child services, or someone else.

Value to society

For two years between 2015 and 2017, we evaluated one such programme in Doncaster, in the north of England. It offered both individual and structured group sessions and flexible drop-in support to domestic abuse perpetrators who either referred themselves or were referred by other services. It aimed to help perpetrators understand their behaviour, what affects their behaviour and what impact it has on their partners and children. They learned about ways to manage their emotions constructively and deal with conflict without using violence.

Spending money on programmes such as these to help abusers is [controversial](#) and many campaigners and organisations believe that money would be better spent on services for victims as it is difficult to accept that abusers can improve their behaviour. A recent promotional campaign by Essex police encouraging people to seek support [was criticised](#) for encouraging women to stay in abusive relationships.

But [our research](#) shows that such programmes are value for money. We found evidence that abusers who recognise their behaviour, would like to modify their behaviour, and voluntarily decide to join a programme, improved their their behaviour towards their partners. Some clients reported wanting to change after considering the impact their behaviour has on others and putting into practice ways of improving it.

Our [Social Return on Investment Analysis](#) showed that for every £1 spent, the return to society by changing perpetrator behaviour was £1.40. We measured this by placing a value on a range of outcomes linked to an in-depth understanding of how the programme might bring about change. For instance, clients reported that the programme helped them to reduce drinking and substance abuse because they recognised its influence on their abusive behaviour. Evidence for this was gained from a variety of sources, including case notes, interviews and surveys.

Motivation to change

The programme also helped the perpetrators become better parents, as it increased their awareness of the impact their abusive behaviour had on their children. [Our findings](#), along with [recent research](#) suggest that a desire to become a better parent and protect children from the impact of abusive [behaviour](#) is a big motivation for perpetrators to change their actions. The programme also helped people to improve relationships with their partner and therefore reduce the need for separate refuge housing.

Domestic violence [perpetrator](#) programmes are notoriously difficult to evaluate, and we also encountered problems in measuring important outcomes. It was difficult to assess whether incidences of abuse were reduced as a result of the programme, as access to clients' partners was difficult. A survey we did of clients was also limited in its usefulness as most clients stopped responding and completing surveys once their time on the programme finished. Future research should address some of these problems.

Our research also shows the importance of using an approach where different public services and agencies work together to benefit individuals and families. Such an approach ensures that different agencies are not working in isolation and that they share important and pertinent information to ensure the safety and interests of victims as well as their children.

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