

**Webinar Title**

The effectiveness of a Fraud Fighter counter-messaging campaign to reduce repeat mail fraud victimization

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**Citation (with Web link or DOI)**

<https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/308661.pdf>

**Summary of Research (500 word max)**

Approximately 1 in 10 U.S. adults are victims of fraud each year (Anderson, 2013), with research indicating that older adults face a greater risk of fraud victimization than younger adults (Lachs & Han, 2015). Mass marketing scams are some of the most common frauds striking older adults (FTC, 2018b; Lonsdale, Schweppenstedde, Strang, Stepanek, & Stewart, 2016). In mail scams, perpetrators convince susceptible targets that they have won bogus sweepstakes, merchandise, free vacations, and lotteries, but they first need to pay money to claim their winnings. Estimates suggest that the majority of mail mass marketing fraud victims are over 50 years old and that the likelihood of experiencing revictimization increases with age (DeLiema et al., 2024). This means that older victims account for a large portion of the billions of dollars of losses attributed to mail fraud from mass marketing.

In this webinar, Drs. Lynn Langton (RTI International) and Marti DeLiema (University of Minnesota) described partnering with the U.S. Postal Inspection Service (USPIS) to launch a randomized controlled trial of a national mail fraud prevention campaign. The goal of the field experiment was to educate and protect older adults who recently lost money in mail scams. Currently, when postal inspectors identify a PO Box or address that the fraudsters are using to collect victim payments, they detain the envelopes headed to those addresses for investigative purposes and victim protection. The payment envelopes are eventually returned to the victims with a yellow return-to-sender sticker but no other information about why the payment is being returned. Using return addresses on unopened victim mail detained by the USPIS, Drs. Langton and DeLiema tested the effectiveness of two versions of an intervention campaign designed to prevent victims from responding to subsequent scams. The presentation describes the process for developing the campaign materials and describes key design elements.

Victim return addresses were randomly assigned to one of three treatment groups and control groups. Treatment groups received (1) a letter from the USPIS with educational information on how to recognize scams, (2) regular and varied counter-marketing campaign mailings, sent over the course of several to reinforce the notion of being a fraud fighter. These interventions were designed to warn, educate, and empower victim households about mail scams. For the control group, it was business as usual, and these addresses just received the returned payment envelop with no other information.

The USPIS tracked these households' rates of revictimization in a naturalistic observation of the mail over a four-month period following delivery of the intervention materials. Compared to households in the control condition (no intervention), households that received the "Be a Fraud Fighter" counter-marketing materials experienced a 22% reduction in their risk of revictimization. This research offers empirical evidence that a simple, scalable, and cost-effective counter-marketing fraud prevention campaign can reduce revictimization among diverse older adults. Findings can be used by mail service organizations to launch larger scale campaigns to reduce losses from mail scams and be modified for other delivery channels and scam types.

This research summary is part of a series sponsored by the NAPSA Research to Practice Interest Group. The purpose of this research summary is to provide direct access to findings in order to enhance practice and clarify policy choices.

**Practice & Policy Implications (e.g.: How can this research inform the Adult Protective Services field? What additional data is needed? What may be possible next steps?) (500 word max)**

The ultimate goal of the study was to provide specific policy recommendations to the USPIS regarding the effectiveness of these interventions. The counter-marketing intervention successfully prevented some older adults from repeatedly falling victim to mass marketing scams, so the USPIS should consider implementing a similar practice on a wide-scale basis. Findings on the effectiveness of the fraud prevention messaging also have value for other agencies and organizations that engage in elder consumer fraud prevention and education. For example, similar to the language used in the counter-marketing campaign, APS workers should avoid using victim-blaming language when they interact with individuals who are targeted by scams. Instead, they should focus on explaining the risks of continued engagement with scam solicitations and empower the older adult to recognize and report future fraud attempts. APS workers must be firm and direct, but also empathetically communicate the powerful persuasion tactics used by scammers and remind individuals that they have the power to overcome victimization and even help others targeted by fraud.

Future research should assess whether a mailed CM approach is effective at preventing other types of mass marketing fraud perpetrated through other channels: websites, social media, text messages, and telemarketing. It is possible that CM campaigns are most effective when adapted and delivered through the same channel as the scam solicitations. Additional tailoring to these communication mediums may improve CM campaign effectiveness. Similarly, future research should further assess whether a CM campaign can effectively reduce the risk of victimization among those who have not previously responded to a scam solicitation and whether they could be used to reduce risk among younger populations who may have more exposure to web-based than mailed mass marketing scams.

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### Further Reading

1. Langton, L., DeLiema, M., Brannock, D., & Preble, E. (2025). Using scammers' data to estimate the impact and importance of preventing repeat mail fraud victimization. *British Journal of Criminology*, 65(1): 163-181. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azae033>
2. Langton, L., DeLiema, M., Preble, E., Brannock, D., Pitts, W., & Kennedy, E. (2023). Mass marketing elder fraud intervention study. U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice Final Report. NCJ 308661. Available at: <https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/mass-marketing-elder-fraud-intervention>.
3. DeLiema, M., Langton, L., Brannock, M. D., & Preble, E. A. (2024). Fraud victimization across the lifespan: Evidence on repeat victimization using perpetrator data. *Journal of Elder Abuse & Neglect*, 36(3), 227–250. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08946566.2024.2321923>

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