

## Combatting juvenile crime – Do scare tactics work?

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### **The Bottom Line:**

In a systematic review published in the Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, the authors found that not only did participation in these programs not succeed in preventing or reducing the children's involvement in crime, in some cases it actually increased it. The interventions did more harm than good. The fact that many of these programs continue to be in use, despite the evidence that they cause harm, is a reflection on policy makers, practitioners and others who often latch on to quick, short-term and inexpensive cures, no matter how unproven they are, to solve difficult social problems.

### **What problem is being addressed?**

The problem of juvenile crime – how to prevent at-risk children and youth from becoming delinquent and/or deter juvenile offenders from becoming involved in further crime.

### **What intervention is being tested?**

Programs that attempt to “scare” young people into avoiding crime by exposing them to prison life and interaction with adult inmates. These programs often include graphic descriptions by the prisoners of their life experiences and the crimes they committed in the belief that a “get tough” approach is the surest way both to prevent at-risk youngsters from following a similar path and to encourage those who have already offended to turn their lives around.

The most famous of these programs is “Scared Straight”, first initiated at a New Jersey prison in the 1970s and later replicated in more than 30 jurisdictions across the U.S. The program involved taking teens into the prison to meet “lifers” and hear their first-hand accounts of the crimes they committed and the dangers of prison life. Other “kids visit prison” programs have gone so far as to lock up at-risk youth in a jail cell for over an hour with paroled felons. These and similar programs in Australia, the U.K., Norway, Germany and Canada have claimed positive results in keeping kids out of trouble and out of jail.

### **What is the *real scientific evidence*?**

Two separate television documentaries on “Scared Straight”, one in 1979 and one in 1999, deemed the program a success, reporting as many as 94% of delinquents remained law-abiding for 3 months after participating in the program. However, no data was given comparing those juveniles who participated to those who did not (as in a [randomized control trial](#), one of the strongest ways to judge the evidence).

The authors of this systematic review conducted a search for studies assessing the effects of “Scared Straight”-type programs and found 9 randomized control trials that were of sufficient quality for the evidence to be considered reliable. The studies were conducted over a 25-year period (1967-1992) in 8 different jurisdictions throughout the U.S. They yielded no evidence supporting the effectiveness of “Scared Straight” or other juvenile awareness programs. Indeed, the interventions were shown to increase crime and delinquency rates in all but one of the studies. In a study of “Scared Straight”, for example, 41% of the children and youth who participated committed new offenses while only 11% of the control group did.

The authors concluded that not only are such programs not effective as a stand-alone crime prevention strategy, they likely increase the odds that children exposed to them will commit offenses in the future.

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The preceding is a summary of:

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