

# Cared Straight:

## Inmates Help Deter Youths from Crime

By June Werdlow Rogers and Jeffrey Allison

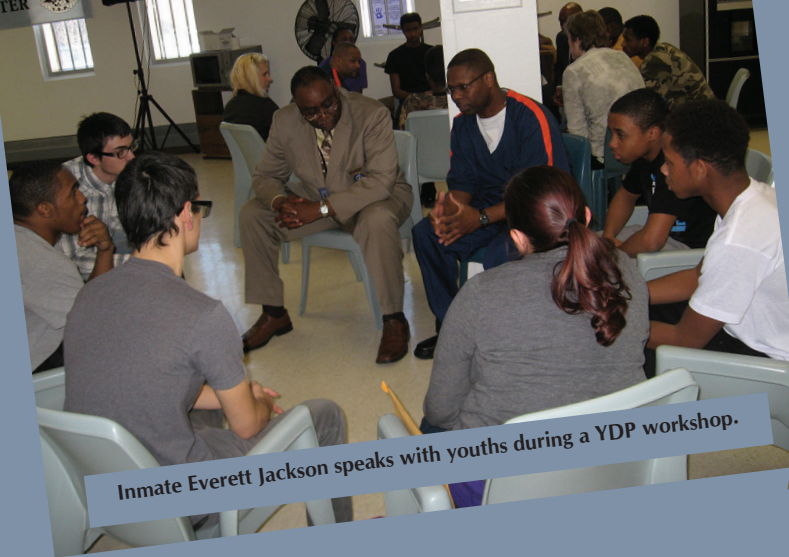
*Authors' Note: This article was extracted from a larger report submitted to the Michigan Department of Corrections.*

Since the 1970s, “scared straight” programs have been depended upon to suppress criminal offending in youths before development into habitual offending. These initiatives attempted to deter at-risk youths through inmate intimidation sessions in prisons. Though well-intentioned, this stern approach has not worked.

In fact, scared straight programs may have done more harm than good.<sup>1</sup> However, given the continual high-crime rate, effective interventions to break the cycle of offending from youth to adulthood are still needed. The results of a study by Paul M. Klenowski, et al. suggested that a better method is the use of techniques such as prison-life accounts and advice-giving by inmates.<sup>2</sup> Such an approach, which capitalizes on the value of an inmate’s lifelong lessons, was adopted by the Lifers Group Program, an organization of inmates typically serving 25-to-life sentences at the Rahway State Prison in Rahway, N.J. The intimidation- and counseling-structured juvenile program was exclusively run and funded by the inmates.<sup>3</sup> Such sacrifices would seem to yield results, yet this program was evaluated with mixed reviews.<sup>4</sup>

It takes more than good intentions to nudge youths away from a life of crime. A potential hurdle is the tendency to stereotype inmates’ demeanors as harsh, a characteristic readily sensationalized in scared straight televised programming. But could it be that inmates are capable of delivering a coercion-free message to at-risk juveniles?

Enter the Youth Deterrent Program (YDP) committee of inmates at the Detroit Reentry Center under the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC). Comparative to the Lifers Group Program, these inmates are also serving long prison sentences and the project was conceived by them. The YDP committee initiated its program exclusively using nonconfrontational techniques, but is it enough to reach troubled youths? Instilling fear may not work, but what of reasonable persuasion?



Inmate Everett Jackson speaks with youths during a YDP workshop.



Inmate Darryl Woods speaks with youths during a YDP workshop.

Photos by June Medlow Rogers and Jeffrey Allison

## The YDP Workshop

Once per month, the YDP committee hosts a workshop for young men ages 13 to 18 identified as engaging in delinquent or unlawful behavior or under the supervision of the criminal justice system, whether on probation or in detention. The young men attend the YDP workshops because they have been identified as “travelling on a wrong road” that could potentially lead to criminal offending. The young men are transported to the workshop by different people, including youth leaders of community organizations; police officers; probation officers; school guidance counselors; and parents. The session commences with the warden and YDP coordinator explaining MDOC’s commitment toward deterring criminal offending and incarceration. Next, the young men introduce themselves by stating their career aspirations and the troubling challenges that resulted in their presence at the workshop. Then, each YDP committee member addresses the group by highlighting the negative aspects of being in prison; a description of the crimes leading to his imprisonment; and words of encouragement. After this, a story, which is called a “dilemma tale,” is read about an incident resulting in a violent encounter. Participants are prompted to discuss the decisions made contributing to the devastating outcome — conversations that often continue into the next phase of small-group discussions. During these talks, participants discuss decisions that precipitate misconduct, and inmates provide advice on how to overcome undesirable attitudes, choices and behavior. The larger group then reconvenes with each participant declaring what he has learned; a closing prayer; and a group recital of The Peace Pledge, a vow of nonviolence, respect and education.

## Methods

The coordinator of YDP requested that the primary researcher conduct a study to determine the overall effectiveness of the program to include tracking participants’ progress. However, given that it would be substantially overreaching to attribute ultimate delinquency exclusively based on a YDP workshop, the researcher considered other evaluation methods based on the goals of deterrence.

**Considerations.** Criminology distinguishes between specific and general deterrence. The goals of specific deterrence are to certainly, swiftly and severely correct an offender’s behavior such that he or she will refrain from future crime to avoid facing similar consequences. Conversely, the goal of general deterrence is to dissuade others from engaging in criminal behavior based on observing the correction of someone else’s behavior. For a general deterrence effect to be possible, people must be made aware of the details of punishment and be able to relate this to their lives. Merely hearing that another is incarcerated absent relatable experiences is not expected to produce a deterrent effect, especially among an at-risk population of young men that may have already engaged in criminal offenses without being detected or punished, thus lacking specific deterrence. The goals of YDP are based on general deterrence theory, including interaction with inmates serving long sentences. Since the way people behave is substantially influenced by their attitudes, gauging changes in mindset could help identify deterrent effects.

**Study design, data collection and sampling.** Based on the aforementioned considerations, the researcher was persuaded that in addition to observations of live workshops, a pre- and post-test questionnaire format could be used to conduct this evaluation. Data was collected during scheduled workshops occurring in spring 2014. The primary researcher and student interns or volunteers of



Baker College (Allen Park and Clinton Township campuses) conducted pre- and post-test interviews of a representative sample of about 20 percent of the total participants for each workshop. A confidentiality assurance was reinforced by interviewers assigning a unique number to respondents. A total of 28 workshop participants ranging from age 10 to 18 provided responses to oral interviews. This was a diverse group of which eight were Caucasian, 12 were African American, two were Latino and six were biracial.

## Results and Objectives Discussion

This section will match the YDP goals and objectives with results from the study. Six pre-test baseline questions (TQ) and a corresponding post-workshop question (PTQ) were designed to measure changes in attitudes consistent with the goals of YDP. The attitudes measured are as follows:

**TQ1: going to prison.** Going to prison was designed to determine if respondents were better informed or adopted more socially acceptable reasons for how people end up in prison after participating in a YDP workshop.

**TQ2: lifestyle.** Lifestyle was constructed in an attempt to gauge how introspective respondents were about their detrimental lifestyle choices upon arrival to the YDP workshop compared to its conclusion.

**TQ3: committing crimes.** Committing crimes was designed to identify if respondents' attitudes about committing crimes changed after engaging in the YDP workshop.

**TQ4: avoiding incarceration.** Avoiding incarceration sought to determine if respondents felt more strongly about avoiding prison after the YDP workshop.

**TQ5: gravity of the prison experience.** Gravity of the prison experience was designed to identify if after the YDP workshop respondents viewed prison in a more serious manner and a more severe experience.

**TQ6: expectations versus reality.** Expectations versus reality were designed to determine the extent to which respondents' expectations were met when comparing what they hoped to learn (pre-test) and their opinions after.

In each objective, the various TQs and PTQ are examined and discussed.

**Objective 1: deterring youths from criminal thinking and behavior.** Deterring youths from criminal thinking and behavior is the overriding goal of YDP. If youths can be deterred from criminal behavior, ultimately they will not be imprisoned. The efforts undertaken in furtherance of objectives 2 through 7 are, in fact, deterring youths from criminal thinking, and behavior can be regarded as constructs towards deterrence. In addition to the study results, TQ3, which discussed attitudes about committing crimes, was designed to evaluate YDP from the standpoint of deterring young men from engaging in criminal offenses.

Analysis of results for TQ3 suggests that most of the subjects participating in the YDP workshops during the test period were deterred from engaging in future criminal behavior that was either motivated or reinforced by the program. Incidentally, when the youths have shown a commitment toward positive change, often an antecedent to their insights is how much the inmates seem to care. One hundred percent of the respondents during the post-test reported that they felt that the YDP committee inmates cared about them. The high level of empathy and compassion exhibited by the YDP committee inmates, and subsequently felt by the participants, is viewed as a significant factor in program success.

**Objective 2: deterrence through education about prison life.** Objective 2 supports the overall mission of deterrence by educating youths about prison life and its consequences. It is reasoned that if youths are educated about the disadvantages and unpleasantness associated with being incarcerated, they will be deterred. Several of the test questions yielded responses that support this objective is being met, such as TQ4, which discussed feelings about incarceration. Since almost one-third of the respondents appeared more determined to avoid prison after the workshop compared to when they arrived, this suggests the intended message of educating about prison life is getting through. Additional evidence emerged from the results of TQ5, which discussed severity of prison. This question showed that about two-thirds of the respondents viewed imprisonment as a worse experience after the workshop than they initially perceived it to be. The ensuing attitude many young men exhibit is "things just got real." Perhaps the strongest support that Objective 2 is being achieved came from the results of PTQ, which asked the respondents, "After your visit here, which one of the following best fits your feelings?:"

- I feel exactly the same about going to prison as I did when I arrived;
- I feel a little different about going to prison [than] I did when I arrived; or
- I feel [very] different about going to prison [than] I did when I arrived.

About 81 percent of the respondents left the workshop with more adverse feelings about prison than when they arrived. It is also noteworthy that one respondent whose expectations were exceeded told the interviewer in the pretest that he wanted to know what jail was really like because his recently released brother spoke like it was “a vacation.” Given that approximately 21 percent of the sample had actually visited someone in prison, providing young men with the realities seems to be a worthwhile goal.

**Objective 3: reinforcing the importance of education.** The rationale of encouraging and reinforcing education is supported from the idea that high school graduates experience a lower likelihood of criminal offending.<sup>5</sup> Thus, pointing young men to education is a way to deter them from crime and incarceration. In open discussion and the small groups, participants often bring up impediments to learning, which are met with inmates encouraging and giving them concrete advice so they overcome obstacles to obtain a quality education. The Peace Pledge’s clause of promising to do everything one can to educate one’s self, as well as to develop and maintain good study habits, is also consistent with Objective 3.

**Objective 4: encourage positive life choices.** Decisions are the antecedent of law-abiding or unlawful behavior. Consequently, YDP’s objective to encourage appropriate life choices is essential if the overall mission to deter criminal offending is to be realized. A realistic view of how people become incarcerated is a step in deterrence. In that regard, this evaluation examined participants’ views of how people become incarcerated before and after the workshop, as discussed in TQ1. Although the results suggested no real change in the respondents’ viewpoints on this issue, based on the totality of data collected, it is most likely that the workshop had the neutral effect of reinforcing participants’ already incisive perceptions about how people end up going to prison.

The other way this study sought to determine if YDP was meeting Objective 4 was through TQ2, which discussed lifestyle choices. TQ2 attempted to determine if respondents were more aware of detrimental lifestyle choices after the workshop; and the fact that all of the respondents were able to express a change they needed to make to avoid future incarceration suggests that Objective 4 is being met. Among the more than three-quarters of responses viewed as more introspective was the need to change associations or stop using drugs.

**Objective 5: provide alternatives to criminal behavior.** True change agents go beyond lecturing and provide alternatives consistent with YDP’s techniques of storytelling and small group discussions. In these activities, inmates facilitate participants’ search for the “right answers” and alternative ways of handling simulated and real-world provoking situations often leading to criminal behavior. The best evidence that demonstrate YDP’s achievement of this goal is the positive interaction between the young men and the inmates during the workshop. Moreover, individual comments typically made by young men at the conclusion of the YDP workshop affirm that they can learn from the workshop how to avoid crime and violence. Inmates readily offer specific relevant conflict management advice to participants about how to deescalate and resolve disputes rather than fighting, which many said they plan to use in diffusing future hostile encounters.

Another indication that Objective 5 is being met results from analysis of PTQ responses. This question was posed to determine if respondents felt that the difficulties they identified prior to the workshop seemed larger or smaller. More than half of the respondents reported viewing their difficulties as smaller and provided responses suggesting that after the workshop, they felt better able to cope.

**Objective 6: promote self-respect and respect for authority.** A lack of respect has been the catalyst for many violent encounters. YDP’s objective to promote self-respect and respect for authority is foundational in a fight against crime and incorporated in many workshop activities. Throughout the session, the YDP committee models and encourages self-confidence by urging participants to “sit up, wake up or speak up.” The Peace Pledge includes promises of self-respect, such as not using drugs or alcohol. Here again, the message is getting through, as evidenced by some of the respondents reporting future plans to stop using drugs. Additionally, the intake procedures into the facility serve as an exercise for learning about authority.

**Objective 7: encourage resistance to peer pressure.** Any crime deterrent effort must consider that teens are often pressured by their peers to break the law. Of the subjects that acknowledged getting into trouble with the police, most said it was usually “with others” as opposed to alone. The results of this study provide strong support that participants are accepting YDP’s advice on peer pressure resistance. Many in the sample pledged to change their associations, as discussed in TQ3. Moreover, many of the inmates’ testimonies include how negative associations contributed to their incarceration.

## Conclusion

While youths are not likely to be “scared straight,” they can be coached into straightening themselves out, especially when encouraged by caring and concerned men that show they are truly “their brothers’ keepers.” Moving from intimidation to empathetic approaches is a preferable strategy toward juvenile crime reduction. This evaluation of YDP has demonstrated that the initiative is working. The program is structured as a turning point to guide young men’s trajectories away from criminally offending. Several factors contribute to the success of the program, including actual inmates facilitating the workshops, the manner in which they discharge their duties and the substantial support provided to the program.

The “gentle giants” of the YDP committee demonstrate that inmates have more to offer than intimidation to deter young men from crime. The YDP committee’s commitment to “transforming one life at a time” is apparent.<sup>6</sup> As previously stated, 100 percent of the subjects of this study indicated that they felt the inmates cared for them. It’s the kind of caring that inspires, as evidenced in this assessment and also in remarks of an alumnus of the program. When he first attended a workshop he felt like an “outcast,” but considering the inmates as father figures caused him to take to heart their advice. “There is always a choice [in how you react],” he said.

The YDP committee is encouraged to keep up the good work, and the prison administrators are urged to ensure that the work can continue. Equally important and noteworthy are supporting entities. These timely mentoring partnerships with organizations ensure that participants receive the resources needed to remain crime free. Officials and community leaders continue to provide spiritual, occupational, educational and psychological aftercare guidance and services. Given the contagion of success, as this momentum grows, YDP needs to be prepared to expand and adopt relevant recommendations. MDOC has already demonstrated a commitment of continuous improvement by adding the eighth objective to YDP — connect youths to outside support services. The very future of young men within the program’s grasp depends upon it.

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Petrosino, A., C. Turpin-Petrosino, and J. Buehler. 2003. Scared straight and other juvenile awareness programs for preventing juvenile delinquency: A systematic review of the randomized experimental evidence. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 589:41-62. Sage Publications English Language: JSTOR Journals.

<sup>2</sup> Klenowski, P.M., K.J. Bell and K.D. Dodson. 2010. An empirical evaluation of juvenile awareness programs in the United States: Can juveniles be “scared straight?.” *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 49(4):254-272.

<sup>3</sup> Krajick, K. 1977. Lifers try to scare the crime out of juveniles. *Corrections Magazine*, 3(4):17-22. Retrieved from [www.ncjrs.gov/app/publications/abstract.aspx?id=50758](http://www.ncjrs.gov/app/publications/abstract.aspx?id=50758).

<sup>4</sup> Villamor, L. 1988. Scared straight study asked. *The New York Times* [serial online]. General Reference Center Gold, Ipswich, Mass.

<sup>5</sup> Liu, W. 2013. The adult offending and school dropout nexus: A life course analysis. *Reference and Research Book News* [serial online]. Academic OneFile, Ipswich, Mass.

<sup>6</sup> Gerritt, J. 2014. Inmates lift young lives in Toledo, Detroit. *The Blade*. Retrieved from [www.toledoblade.com/JeffGerritt/2014/07/27/Inmates-lift-young-lives-in-Toledo-Detroit.html](http://www.toledoblade.com/JeffGerritt/2014/07/27/Inmates-lift-young-lives-in-Toledo-Detroit.html).



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