

Justice Department Discourages the Use of "Scared Straight" Programs

Image source: A&E Web site



Established in the 1970s, Scared Straight programs are used throughout the United States as a means of deterring juvenile crime. They usually entail visits by at-risk youth to adult prisons, where youth hear about the harsh reality of prison life from inmates. The programs can involve tours of the facility, living the life of a prisoner for a full day, aggressive "in-your-face" presentations by inmates, and one-on-one counseling. However well intentioned these prison-visit programs may be, decades of research have shown that this approach is not only ineffective, but possibly harmful to youth.

A [study](#) by Anthony Petrosino and researchers at the Campbell Collaboration analyzed results from nine Scared Straight programs and found that such programs generally increased crime up to 28 percent in the experimental group when compared to a no-treatment control group. In another analysis of juvenile prevention and treatment programs, Mark Lipsey of the Vanderbilt Institute for Public Policy Studies found that youth who participate in Scared Straight and other similar deterrence programs have higher recidivism rates than youth in control groups.¹ And a [report](#) presented in 1997 to the U.S. Congress reviewed more than 500 crime prevention evaluations and placed Scared Straight programs in the "what does not work" category. Despite these findings, Scared Straight programs continue to be used throughout the United States and abroad.

On January 13, 2011, A&E Television Networks aired the first of a multi-episode series of reality shows called "Beyond Scared Straight." The original, award-winning documentary, "Scared Straight," aired in 1978. The A&E series elicited a strong response from the juvenile justice field and the U.S. Department of Justice. In an [op-ed](#) piece published January 31, 2011, in *The Baltimore Sun*, Assistant Attorney General for the Office of Justice Programs Laurie O. Robinson and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's Acting Administrator Jeff Slowikowski discussed how the use of Scared Straight programs to prevent delinquency is ineffective and can harm youth.

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—Laurie Robinson, Assistant Attorney General for the Office of Justice Programs

—Jeff Slowikowski, Acting Administrator, OJJDP

Citing the findings of the Campbell Collaboration [study](#), Robinson and Slowikowski emphasized that the U.S. Department of Justice does not support Scared Straight-style programs, and instead focuses on programs that research has proven effective, such as mentoring programs, which use positive relationships to modify youth's behavior. "The fact that [Scared Straight] programs are still being touted as effective, despite stark evidence to the contrary is troubling," they wrote. The op-ed piece was picked up by 165 media outlets throughout the country. Of the three states whose programs were featured in the "Beyond Scared Straight" series, two—Maryland and California—suspended their programs in January.

The Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974, as amended, prohibits court-involved youth from being detained, confined, or otherwise having contact with adult inmates in jails and prisons. In keeping with the Act, and supported by research, OJJDP does not fund Scared Straight programs, and cites such programs as potential violations of federal law.

"It is understandable why desperate parents hoping to divert their troubled children from further misbehavior would place their hopes in a program they see touted as effective on TV, and why in years past policymakers opted to fund what appeared to be an easy fix for juvenile offending," wrote Robinson and Slowikowski. "However, we have a responsibility—as both policymakers and parents—to follow evidence, not anecdote, in finding answers, especially when it comes to our children."

¹ Lipsey, M.W. 1992. Juvenile Delinquency Treatment: A Meta-Analytic Inquiry into the Variability of Effects. In *Meta-Analysis for Explanation: A Casebook*, edited by T.D. Cook, H. Cooper, D.S. Cordray, H. Hartmann, L.V. Hedges, R.J. Light, T.A. Louis, and F. Mosteller. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.