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[Intervention Review]

# “Scared Straight” and other juvenile awareness programs for preventing juvenile delinquency

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## ABSTRACT

### Background

‘Scared Straight’ and other programmes involve organised visits to prison by juvenile delinquents or children at risk for criminal behavior. programmes are designed to deter participants from future offending through first-hand observation of prison life and interaction with adult inmates. These programmes remain in use world-wide despite studies and reviews questioning their effectiveness.

### Objectives

To assess the effects of programmes comprising organised visits to prisons by juvenile delinquents (officially adjudicated or convicted by a juvenile court) or pre-delinquents (children in trouble but not officially adjudicated as delinquents), aimed at deterring them from criminal activity.

### Search strategy

Handsearching by the first author in identifying randomised field trials 1945-1993 relevant to criminology was augmented by structured searches of 16 electronic data bases, including the Campbell SPECTR database of trials and the Cochrane CCTR. Experts in the field were consulted and relevant citations were followed up.

### Selection criteria

Studies that tested the effects of any program involving the organised visits of juvenile delinquents or children at-risk for delinquency to penal institutions were included. Studies that included overlapping samples of juvenile and young adults (e.g. ages 14-20) were included. We only considered studies that randomly or quasi-randomly (i.e. alternation) assigned participants to conditions. Each study had to have a no-treatment control condition with at least one outcome measure of “post-visit” criminal behavior.

### Data collection and analysis

We report narratively on the nine eligible trials. We conducted one meta-analysis of post-intervention offending rates using official data. Information from other sources (e.g. self-report) was either missing from some studies or critical information was omitted (e.g. standard deviations). We examined the immediate post-treatment effects (i.e. “first-effects”) by computing Odds Ratios (OR) for data on proportions of each group re-offending, and assumed both fixed and random effects models in our analyses.

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### **Main results**

The analysis show the intervention to be more harmful than doing nothing. The program effect, whether assuming a fixed or random effects model, was nearly identical and negative in direction, regardless of the meta-analytic strategy.

### **Authors' conclusions**

We conclude that programmes like 'Scared Straight' are likely to have a harmful effect and increase delinquency relative to doing nothing at all to the same youths. Given these results, agencies that permit such programmes must rigorously evaluate them not only to ensure that they are doing what they purport to do (prevent crime) - but at the very least they do not cause more harm than good.

## **PLAIN LANGUAGE SUMMARY**

### **Juvenile awareness programs for preventing juvenile delinquency**

Programs like 'Scared Straight' involve organised visits to prison facilities by juvenile delinquents or children at risk for becoming delinquent. The programs are designed to deter participants from future offending by providing first-hand observations of prison life and interaction with adult inmates. Results of this review indicate that not only does it fail to deter crime, but it actually leads to more offending behavior. Government officials permitting this program need to adopt rigorous evaluation to ensure that they are not causing more harm to the very citizens they pledge to protect.