



Summary

Programmes which use organised prison visits with the aim of deterring juvenile delinquents or children at risk of becoming delinquent from future offending not only fail to deter crime but actually lead to more offending behaviour.



What is a 'what works briefing'?

This briefing has been developed by researchers from the College of Policing to summarise the 'best available' evidence on the impacts of 'Scared Straight' and other juvenile awareness programmes on future offending, and to highlight the main implications of this evidence for police policy and practice.

This document briefly summarises a Campbell Collaboration Systematic Review, which trawls for all available evaluations of programmes designed to deter future offending by

providing young people with first-hand observations of prison life through organised visits to prison facilities. The Campbell Collaboration is an international research network that produces systematic reviews of the effects of social interventions, including those in the crime and justice field.

The review summarises findings from experimental studies which randomly assigned participants to either the treatment group (those who visited the prison) or a control group (who did not visit the prison). Nine of these randomised studies were identified, all of which were based in the USA .

**Read the full review:
click on link**



What are juvenile awareness programmes?

Juvenile awareness programmes involve organised visits to prison facilities by young offenders and those considered to be at risk of offending to give them an insight into what adult prison life is like. As part of the prison visit, the programmes often include:

- a presentation by inmates about life in prison, ranging from graphical to educational;
- interactive discussions between inmates and the juveniles;
- orientation sessions where the children live as inmates for several hours or;
- a tour of the prison.



What is 'Scared Straight'?

'Scared Straight' was an American initiative which began in the 1970s with 'at-risk' and delinquent juveniles visiting a prison in New Jersey (USA). As part of the visit, inmates serving life in prison would describe life in adult prisons in graphic detail often including exaggerated stories of rape and murder. The aim of the programme was to 'scare' or deter the children from a future life of crime.

Following media accounts of the success of the programme it was soon replicated across America and similar programmes have since been used in other countries. In the UK, the Garth Prison Inmate Encounter Scheme (GPIES) began in 1991 and like 'Scared Straight' involved a confrontational presentation about life inside prison by inmates (Lloyd 1995). Participants, typically young males, were shown prison kit, weapons, given graphic presentations about prison violence, suicide, drugs and rape.

Other juvenile awareness programmes involve presentations by inmates that are more educational than confrontational.

Juvenile awareness programmes like 'Scared Straight' and GPIES are thought to prevent crime by providing realistic depictions of prison life to juvenile offenders, thereby deterring them from further involvement in crime.



Does it work?

No, it doesn't. When all the data is considered together, the review found that 'Scared Straight' and other juvenile awareness programmes not only fail to deter crime but actually lead to more offending behaviour. Young people who go through such programmes are more likely to commit offences in the future than those who do not. In other words, doing nothing would have been better than exposing juveniles to these programmes.

From the nine trials identified in the review, there was no evidence that juvenile prison visits were effective. An evaluation of the New Jersey 'Scared Straight' programme found that those young people who participated in the trial were more likely to commit new offences and more serious offences compared to those who did not participate. Even non-confrontational, educational programmes were shown to have no significant effect on the frequency or severity of subsequent offences.

Seven of the studies in the review that report reoffending rates collectively show that juveniles who visited prisons were more likely to reoffend than those who did not. Despite variations in the programmes, ranging from harsh, confrontational interactions to tours of the facilities the overall result is the same – an increase in criminality in those exposed to the programme when compared to those who did not go through it.

There are many theories about why these programmes did not work, but the evaluations considered in the review do not provide the information necessary to be able to say definitively.



Conclusions

Programmes like 'Scared Straight' which take young offenders and those at risk from offending on a prison visit do not in fact deter them from a future life of crime.

Such programmes are in fact likely to have a harmful effect and increase offending relative to doing nothing at all. Not only are such programmes harmful to participants but also to ordinary citizens who are the victims of the increased crime.

Policy and Practice Implications

Avoid using programmes such as 'Scared Straight' as a crime prevention strategy. Juvenile awareness programmes have been shown to be harmful and are not recommended as a crime prevention strategy.

Evaluate current or proposed programmes.

Current or proposed juvenile awareness programmes should be different to the ones included in this review and should be rigorously evaluated to ensure no harm is being caused.



References

Lloyd, C. To scare straight or educate? The British experience of day visits to prison for young people. Home Office Research Study No. 149. London: Home Office. 1995.

<http://library.college.police.uk/docs/hors/hors149.pdf>

Full Reviews

Petrosino A, Turpin-Petrosino C, Hollis-Peel M, Lavenberg JG. Scared Straight and Other Juvenile Awareness Programs for Preventing Juvenile Delinquency: A Systematic Review. Campbell Systematic Reviews 2013:5

You can access the original review online at:

<http://library.college.police.uk/docs/Petrosino-scared-straight-2003.pdf>

The updated version can be found at:

<http://library.college.police.uk/docs/Petrosino-scared-straight-2012.pdf>

