







# Boot camps

Military-style boot camps for young people or adult offenders as an alternative to prison or probation.

First published

4 June 2015

| Effect scale   | Quality of evidence   |   |   |   |  |
|--|---|---|---|---|--|
|  | Effect<br>Impact on<br>crime  | Mechanism<br>How it works   | Moderator<br>Where it<br>works  | Implementation<br>How to do it  | Economic<br>cost<br>What it costs  |
| <br>Mixed<br>findings | <br>Very<br>strong | <br>Moderate | <br>Moderate | <br>Strong | <br>Low |

## Focus of the intervention

Boot camps are programmes for juvenile or adult offenders as an alternative to punishments such as prison or probation. They are modelled on military boot camps and involve activities such as drills, ceremony and physical training. Strict daily schedules are followed and punishments for misbehaviour often involve physical activities, such as push-ups.

Programmes differ based on content and delivery of physical and therapeutic aspects, which could include education, substance abuse treatment and improvement of cognitive skills.

This narrative summarises the findings of three systematic reviews. Review one was based on 32 studies, Review two was based on 44 studies and Review three was based on 16 studies. The conclusions on effect size are taken from Review one only.

All boot camp studies included in the reviews were conducted in the USA.

## Effect – how effective is it?

There is some evidence that the intervention has either increased or reduced crime, but overall the intervention has not had a statistically significant effect on crime.

In Review one, while individual studies found both statistically significant positive and negative effects on crime, the overall analysis showed that boot camps had no overall effect on rates of reoffending by participants. This result was consistent across all three reviews.

## How strong is the evidence?

The overall evidence is taken from Review one (based on a meta-analysis of 32 studies). The review was sufficiently systematic that most forms of bias that could influence the study conclusions can be ruled out.

It had a well-designed search strategy, included unpublished literature and risks of bias by the reviewers were minimised.

However, biases remain within the primary studies, including the difficulties of comparing boot camps to one another due to differences in treatments, the use of different outcome measures by researchers, and the problem of drop-out rates and how to take these into consideration when calculating effect sizes.

## Mechanism – how does it work?

The authors of review two provided the most comprehensive attempt at explaining how boot camps work to reduce reoffending.

By ensuring strict discipline and demanding physical exercise and labour, participants are encouraged to behave respectfully and obediently, hopefully making them more likely to comply with rules or laws upon programme completion.

Adherence to daily routines and interactions with camp staff should teach participants skills to help them control their behaviour.

Prosocial behaviours such as respect are also taught and practised, with close supervision allowing positive behaviours to be reinforced and negative behaviours to be punished immediately.

Review three also mentioned increasing self-esteem and promoting physical fitness as life skills.

## Moderators – in which contexts does it work best?

The reviews noted a number of potential moderators, including offender characteristics (age and gender), programme characteristics (focus on rehabilitative or physical elements), treatments (drug treatment, vocational education and aftercare components), whether the programme was voluntary or mandated, and the presence of counselling sessions as part of the programme.

None of the three reviews explained why or how these contextual differences might influence the outcome.

Review one found that participants in boot camps with a strong therapeutic component including treatments such as education, drug treatment and counselling had lower rates of reoffending than those in camps with a stronger focus on physical elements. It also found that juvenile boot camps without a counselling component had a statistically significant negative effect upon reoffending rates of participants.

Review two found that participants in voluntary boot camps had reduced rates of reoffending compared to mandatory boot camps. Review two also discovered that voluntary boot camps for young people significantly reduced the participants' odds of reoffending (based on only three primary studies).

While no moderator analysis was conducted on race, review three noted that up to 80% of boot camp participants were ethnic minority youths, despite boot camps being originally designed for white, working class participants.

## Implementation – what can be said about implementing this initiative?

Boot camps are structured programmes that generally last between 90 and 180 days.

There is a graduation ceremony attended by family and friends for those who successfully complete the programme.

Participants are housed in dormitories resembling military barracks, are placed in squads or platoons, and wear uniforms. Programme staff function as drill instructors and are often addressed

by military titles. Punishment for misbehaviour is immediate and usually takes the form of physical activities, such as push-ups.

All three reviews note that studies evaluating boot camps with a strong therapeutic element seemed to have a higher chance of a successful outcome than those with a weaker or no therapeutic focus. Review three noted that programmes vary widely in the application and duration of therapeutic elements. Review two suggested that aftercare services with therapeutic content are important and therefore should not be short term in duration.

## Economic considerations – how much might it cost?

While none of the reviews conducted a full cost benefit analysis, some mention of costs was reported in the primary studies.

Review two cited one study, which found that in 1997, the cost per boot camp participant was \$31,752 less per year in California, compared to the cost of incarceration.

Another study reported a similar comparison and found that in 2001, boot camps were \$78,700 cheaper than prison per participant per year.

Review three stated that the Alabama boot camp cost a total of between \$779,229 and \$1,676,880 less than participants being in prison.

Three studies within review three found that boot camps were cheaper than prison, while four studies found no difference.

## General considerations




- Boot camps differ substantially in content – some camps focus on physical training and hard labour, while others emphasise delivering therapeutic programming such as academic education, drug treatment or cognitive skills.
- Boot camps with an evidence-based therapeutic focus see the largest reductions in recidivism among participants.

## Summary

There is some evidence that the intervention has either increased or reduced crime, but overall the intervention has not had a statistically significant effect on crime. Those boot camps that have seen the greatest reduction in participant reoffending, especially with juvenile populations, have focused upon therapeutic elements within the programmes.

## Reviews

### Review one





| Quality of evidence  |   |   |                                |
|--|---|---|--------------------------------|
| Mechanism<br>How it works  | Moderator<br>Where it works   | Implementation<br>How to do it  | Economic cost<br>What it costs |
| <br>Low | <br>Moderate | <br>Strong | No information                 |

### Reference

- Wilson, D.B., MacKenzie, D.L., Mitchell, F.N. (2003) '[Effects of correctional boot camps on offending](#)' Campbell Systematic Reviews 2003:1, DOI:10.4073/ csr.2003.1

### Review two





| Quality of evidence       |                             |                                |                                |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Mechanism<br>How it works | Moderator<br>Where it works | Implementation<br>How to do it | Economic cost<br>What it costs |
|                           |                             |                                |                                |

|   |   |   |  |
|---|---|---|--|
| <br>Moderate | <br>Moderate | <br>Strong | <br>Low |
|---|---|---|--|

## Reference

- Meade, B. and Steiner, B. (2010) '[The total effects of boot camps that house juveniles: A systematic review of the evidence](#)', Journal of Criminal Justice, 38, 841-853

## Review three

| Quality of evidence  |  |   |  |
|--|--|---|--|
| Mechanism<br>How it works  | Moderator<br>Where it works  | Implementation<br>How to do it  | Economic cost<br>What it costs   |
| <br>Low | <br>Low | <br>Moderate | <br>Low |

## Reference

- Riphagen, R. C. (2010) 'Effectiveness of Male Juvenile Boot Camps in the United States: A Critical Review of the Literature', Doctoral Dissertation, Azusa Pacific University.

## Summary prepared by

This narrative was prepared by UCL Jill Dando Institute and was co-funded by the College of Policing and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). ESRC grant title: 'University Consortium for Evidence-Based Crime Reduction'. Grant reference: ES/L007223/1.

[Return to the toolkit](#)

<https://production.copweb.aws.college.police.uk/research/crime-reduction-toolkit/boot-camps>

## Tags

- [Crime reduction](#)