

Scared Straight programmes

Organised visits to prison to deter children and young people from crime.

First published

19 February 2015

Effect scale	Quality of evidence				
	Effect Impact on crime	Mechanism How it works	Moderator Where it works	Implementation How to do it	Economic cost What it costs
 Overall rise	 Very strong	 Low	No information	 Low	No information

Focus of the intervention

Scared Straight programmes involve organised visits to prison facilities by juvenile delinquents or children at risk of becoming delinquent.

Programmes include confrontational rap sessions, where adult inmates share graphic stories about prison life with the juveniles.

Other less confrontational methods and more educational sessions include inmates sharing life stories and describing the choices they made that led to imprisonment.

The aim of these is to deter those at risk by showing them the reality of incarceration.

This review focuses on both types of delivery methods.

This narrative summary is mainly based on two systematic reviews, Review one (nine studies) and Review two (12 studies), with additional information on economic costs from a separate paper (10 studies).?

Effect – how effective is it?

Overall, the evidence suggests that the intervention has increased crime.

After accounting for bias, Review one estimated that reoffending was 68% higher among those juveniles who participated in the programme compared to those who did not. Participant reoffending was higher compared to offenders who did not receive the intervention in seven of the nine studies.

How strong is the evidence?

The overall evidence is taken from Review one (covering nine studies). The review was sufficiently systematic that most forms of bias that could influence the study outcomes could be ruled out.

The review did not quantify an overall effect for unanticipated outcomes caused by the intervention.

Mechanism – how does it work?

The reviews provide a general statement of the assumed theory of the possible mechanisms through which Scared Straight programmes might reduce crime.

Both reviews state that Scared Straight programmes might reduce crime by giving participants realistic depictions of life in prison and access to offenders' experiences. This may deter juvenile offenders or children at risk of becoming delinquent from further involvement with crime.

This is based on deterrence theory and the hypothesis is that if punishment is swift, severe and certain, it will deter criminal or delinquent behaviour.

Moderators – in which contexts does it work best?

There was no subgroup moderator analysis. Both reviews noted that there was insufficient data in the primary evaluations to examine under what conditions or for what populations Scared Straight programmes might work best.

All trials within both reviews were conducted in the USA.

None of the individual studies were conducted after 1992.

Implementation – what can be said about implementing this initiative?

The reviews provide some information on implementation.

Sessions varied in the amount of time they took, ranging from two hours to a whole day.

The session content also varied considerably. Some programmes included confrontational rap sessions. Others took a softer approach, using prison tours and discussions with inmates about life choices that led to incarceration.

Economic considerations – how much might it cost?

There is no economic analysis in the two primary reviews, but Review one mentions that the delivery of a Maryland program was estimated to cost less than \$1 per participant.

An additional study by Aos and others (2006) conducted a cost-benefit analysis of 10 studies of Scared Straight programmes in the USA.

The cost of participating in the programme was estimated to be \$50 per person (in 2006). However, after adding the estimated costs to society associated with the additional crimes committed by juveniles involved in the programme, the net cost to the tax-payer was estimated to be \$14,667 per participant (again in 2006).

General considerations

- Fear arousal tactics within the programmes either did not have a significant impact or had a negative impact on subsequent criminal behaviour.
- The studies within both reviews either followed up cohorts on single or multiple occasions, ranging from 3 to 24 months. This could affect the study findings, as longer follow-up periods may have different outcomes.

Summary

Overall, the evidence suggests that the intervention has increased juvenile offending.

In most studies reviewed, on average, more juveniles who participated in the program were found to commit offences, compared to juveniles who did not participate. This evidence suggests a backfire effect of the programme.

It is not clear why or how the programme encourages offending behaviour in juveniles.

Reviews

Review one

Quality of evidence			
Mechanism How it works	Moderator Where it works	Implementation How to do it	Economic cost What it costs
 Low	No information	 Low	No information

Reference

- Petrosino A, Turpin-Petrosino C, Hollis-Peel ME and Lavenberg JG. (2013) '[Scared Straight' and other juvenile awareness programs for preventing juvenile delinquency](#) (Review). Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 2013, Issue 4.

Review two

Quality of evidence			
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Mechanism How it works	Moderator Where it works	Implementation How to do it	Economic cost What it costs
 Low	No information	 Low	No information

Reference

- Klenowski PM, Bell KJ and Dodson KD. (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

Additional resources

Aos S, Miller M and Drake E. (2006) 'Evidence-Based Public Policy Options to Reduce Future Prison Construction, Criminal Justice Costs, and Crime Rates', Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy.

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.

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