

Scared Straight Programmes

EVIDENCE BRIEF

Scared Straight programmes take young people to visit prisons to help them understand the likely consequences of offending. There is clear international evidence that Scared Straight programmes make offending **more** likely.

OVERVIEW

- Scared Straight or 'Juvenile Awareness' programmes involve taking at-risk youth on tours of adult prisons to be warned off a life of crime.
- A meta-analysis based on seven randomised controlled trials shows that these programmes make offending more likely.
- Similar results are found more generally for deterrence-based or shock treatments for young people – these approaches are not typically effective.
- This result is consistent with broader evidence showing that minimising contact with the formal justice system reduces reoffending for young offenders.

EVIDENCE BRIEF SUMMARY

Evidence rating:	Harmful
Unit cost:	Not currently delivered in New Zealand
Effect size (number needed to treat):	For every 10 young people attending a Scared Straight programme, an average of one more would offend than otherwise
Current spend:	None
Unmet demand:	Not applicable

WHAT ARE SCARED STRAIGHT PROGRAMMES?

Scared Straight programmes involve organized visits to adult prisons for young offenders and youth at-risk of offending.

Scared Straight programmes were originally designed by a group of prisoners and are also known as Juvenile Awareness Programmes. While juvenile tours of prisons occurred earlier,ⁱ the recorded history of Scared Straight as it is currently understood starts in New Jersey's Rahway State Prison in 1975.ⁱⁱ

In this prison, a small group of prisoners serving sentences of more than 25 years formed the 'lifers group' and, through their own initiative, obtained the agreement of the prison superintendent, a local judge, and the local police chief, to begin bringing groups of young offenders into the prison.ⁱⁱⁱ

Once inside the prison, the young offenders were treated to a mix of intimidation, lecturing, personal histories and graphic descriptions of prison life by the prisoners.^{iv}

After these sessions were recorded and broadcast in a well-known Oscar-winning documentary (called Scared Straight), the programme gained fame across the U.S. and similar programmes were started in most states. Take-up outside the U.S. has been very limited.^v

Different programmes vary in exactly what they comprise. Not all involve direct contact with prisoners, for example, and some have a more threatening approach than others. The common basis for these programmes is a desire to communicate clearly to young offenders where their actions are likely to take them.^{vi}

DO SCARED STRAIGHT PROGRAMMES REDUCE CRIME?

International evidence

All reviews of Scared Straight programmes are consistent in showing they either make reoffending more likely or, at best, make no difference.

The main source for this conclusion is a Campbell Collaboration meta-analysis that has been regularly updated since 2002, most recently in 2013.^{vii}

Of the nine randomised studies underlying the Campbell Collaboration, none found Scared Straight reduced offending, with two finding a statistically significant increase in offending for programme participants. When combined in meta-analysis, the weighted average effect is for these programmes to increase reoffending.

This finding is supported by a meta-analysis by the Washington State Institute of Public Policy,^{viii} and several other literature reviews.^{ix}

This result tallies with meta-analyses of deterrence-based or shock treatments generally. Several reviews and meta-analyses demonstrate that this approach is ineffective at reducing crime by young offenders.^x

The range of estimated effect sizes is wide (see the appendix for details). For the most recent Campbell Collaboration review, the effect size implies that for every ten young people provided with the scared straight programme, one more would offend than if none were given the intervention.

WHEN ARE SCARED STRAIGHT PROGRAMMES MOST HARMFUL?

The available research evidence does not demonstrate which factors are associated with greater increases in offending, such as the level of intimidation offered, the characteristics of the young people offered the programme, and so forth.

What makes Scared Straight programmes harmful?

The research does not provide direct evidence on the reasons why these programme do not work. However, the broader literature suggests that it is unsurprising that these programmes are ineffective.

As summarised in meta-analyses and other reviews of the deterrence literature, there is no evidence that higher expected severity of punishment reduces the likelihood of offending.^{xi}

In general, it is the certainty of apprehension that produces the greatest deterrent effect. So if young offenders consider their odds of apprehension low, then the expected severity of punishment becomes largely irrelevant in their decision to offend.

CURRENT INVESTMENT IN NEW ZEALAND

Scared Straight programmes were for a time provided in Australia, but they are not offered in New Zealand.^{xii}

EVIDENCE RATING AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Each Evidence Brief provides an evidence rating between Harmful and Strong.

Harmful	Robust evidence that intervention increases crime
Poor	Robust evidence that intervention tends to have no effect
Inconclusive	Conflicting evidence that intervention can reduce crime
Fair	Some evidence that intervention can reduce crime
Promising	Robust international <i>or</i> local evidence that intervention tends to reduce crime
Strong	Robust international <i>and</i> local evidence that intervention tends to reduce crime

According to the standard criteria for all Evidence Briefs¹, the appropriate evidence rating for Scared Straight programmes is Harmful.

According to our standard interpretation, this means that:

- There is robust evidence that interventions increase crime.
- This should be a priority for divestment.

Although Scared Straight programmes are not currently used in New Zealand, this evidence brief confirms that they should not be considered as a potential new investment to reduce crime.

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¹ Available at www.justice.govt.nz/justice-sector/what-works-to-reduce-crime/

FIND OUT MORE

Go to the website

www.justice.govt.nz/justice-sector/what-works-to-reduce-crime/

Email

whatworks@justice.govt.nz

Recommended reading

Klenowski, P., Bell, K. & Dodson, K. (2010). An empirical evaluation of juvenile awareness programs in the United States. Can juveniles be 'Scared Straight'? *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 49.

Lipsey, M. (2009). The primary factors that characterize effective interventions with juvenile offenders: A meta-analytic overview. *Victims and Offenders*, 4.

Petrosino, A., Turpin-Petrosino, C. & Buehler, J. (2013). Scared straight and other juvenile awareness programs for preventing juvenile delinquency. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 2004(2).

Citations and References

ⁱ Klenowski, P., Bell, K. & Dodson, K. (2010). An empirical evaluation of juvenile awareness programs in the United States. Can juveniles be 'Scared Straight'? *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 49.

ⁱⁱ Finckenauer, J. & Gavin, P. (1999). *Scared Straight: The Panacea Phenomenon Revisited*. Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid*

^{iv} *ibid*

^v *ibid*

^{vi} *ibid*

^{vii} Petrosino, A., Turpin-Petrosino, C. & Buehler, J. (2013). Scared straight and other juvenile awareness programs for preventing juvenile delinquency. *The Cochrane Library*, 2013(4).

^{viii} Aos, S., M. Miller, & E. Drake. (2006). *Evidence-Based Public Policy Options to Reduce Future Prison Construction, Criminal Justice Costs, and Crime Rates*. Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy, Document No. 06-10-1201.

^{ix} MacKenzie, D. (2002). Courts and corrections. In L. Sherman, D. Farrington, B. Welsh & D. MacKenzie (eds). *Evidence-Based Crime Prevention*. London: Routledge.

Sherman, L., Gottfredson, D., MacKenzie, D., Eck, J., Reuter, P. & Bushway, S. (1997). *Preventing Crime: What Works, What Doesn't, What's Promising. A Report to the United States Congress*. College Park, MD: University of Maryland, Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice.

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^x Farrington, D. & Welsh, B. (2005). Randomized experiments in criminology: what have we learned in the last two decades? *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 1.

Lipsey, M. & Wilson, D. (1998). Effective intervention for serious juvenile offenders. In R. Loeber & D. Farrington (eds). *Serious and Violent Juvenile Offenders*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Lipsey, M. (2009). The primary factors that characterize effective interventions with juvenile offenders: A meta-analytic overview. *Victims and Offenders*, 4.

^{xi} Pratt, T., Cullen, F., Blevins, K., Daigle, L. & Madensen, T. (2006). The empirical status of deterrence theory. In F. Cullen, J. Wright & K. Blevins (eds). *Taking Stock: The Status of Criminological Theory*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books

Nagin, D. (2013). Deterrence in the twenty-first century. In M. Tonry (ed). *Crime and Justice: An annual review of research*, 42. University of Chicago Press.

^{xii} O'Malley, P., Coventry, G., Walters, R. (1993). Victoria's day in prison program: An evaluation and critique. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, 26(2).

SUMMARY OF EFFECT SIZES FROM META-ANALYSES

Intervention type	Meta-analysis	Reported average effect size	Number of estimates meta-analysis based on	Percentage point reduction/increase in offending	Number needed to treat
Scared straight programmes	Petrosino et al (2013)	OR=1.72* (higher recidivism for treatment group)	7	-.10	-10
Scared straight/boot camp programmes	Farrington and Welsh (2005)	d=-0.13(NS)	6	-.04	-25
Scared straight programmes	Aos et al (2006)	RRR=+6.8%	10	-.01	-74
Deterrence programs for non-institutionalised juveniles	Lipsey and Wilson (1998)	d =-0.03(NS)	6	-.01	-113
Deterrence-based programmes	Lipsey (2009)	Φ =-0.009(NR)	15	-.01	-190

* Statistically significant at a 95% threshold

NS=Not significant at a 95% threshold

NR=Significance not reported

d= Cohen's d or equivalent (standardised mean difference)

OR=Odds ratio

RRR=relative risk ratio