

Scared straight programs result in more crime



Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Charles Rivezzo

Scared straight interventions cause more harm than doing nothing

What is the aim of this review?

This Campbell systematic review assesses the effect of scared straight and similar programs on criminal behaviours by juvenile delinquents or children at risk of committing crime. The review summarises findings from nine studies conducted in the United States. Participants include juveniles and young adults between the ages 14-20. A total of 946 juveniles or young adults participated in all 9 experimental studies.

Scared straight awareness programs aim to deter crime and criminal behaviour by providing first-hand experience of prison life and interaction with adult inmate to juvenile delinquents or children at risk of becoming delinquent. Contrary to their purpose, scared straight programs fail to deter crime, leading to more offending behaviour not less.

What did the review study?

Scared straight programs involve organised visits to prison by juvenile delinquents or children at risk of committing crime, also called pre-delinquents.

Scared straight and similar programs are promoted as a crime prevention strategy, identifying children at risk of committing crime to discourage them from any future criminal conduct. This review assesses the effect of these programs on criminal behaviours by juvenile delinquents or pre-delinquents.

What studies are included?

Included studies tested the effects of any program involving the organized visits of juvenile delinquents or pre-delinquents to prisons with juveniles and young adults between the ages of 14-20 as participants. Only studies that had used a random or quasi-random experimental design with no-treatment control condition, and at least one outcome measure of "post-visit" criminal behaviour were considered.

All studies were conducted in eight different states in the USA, with two of the studies taking place in the state of Michigan.

A total of 9 studies were included in the systematic review. The nine studies were conducted in eight different states in the United States, with no set of researchers conducting more than one experiment.



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How up-to-date is this review?

The review authors searched for studies published until December 2011. This Campbell Systematic Review was published in May 2013.

What is the Campbell Collaboration?

The Campbell Collaboration is an international, voluntary, non-profit research network that publishes systematic reviews. We summarise and evaluate the quality of evidence about programmes in the social and behavioural sciences. Our aim is to help people make better choices and better policy decisions.

About this summary

This summary was prepared by Ada Chukwudozie and Howard White (Campbell Collaboration) based on the Campbell Systematic Review 2013:5 Scared Straight and Other Juvenile Awareness Programs for Preventing Juvenile Delinquency: A Systematic Review by Anthony Petrosino, Carolyn Turpin-Petrosino, Meghan E Hollis-Peel, Julia G. Lavenberg (DOI 10.4073/csr.2013:5). Tanya Kristiansen redesigned and edited the summary. Financial support from the American Institutes for Research for the production of this summary is gratefully acknowledged.



What are the main results in this review?

Scared straight interventions cause more harm than doing nothing. The nine studies provided no evidence for the effectiveness of scared straight or similar programs on subsequent delinquency.

Furthermore, analysis of seven studies reporting reoffending rates showed that the intervention significantly increased the odds of offending on the part of both the juveniles and pre-delinquents.

What do the findings in this review mean?

Scared straight and similar programs are likely to have a harmful effect and increase delinquency compared to doing nothing.

Although three of the studies reported methodological problems, two of which had implications for statistical analysis, this did not significantly affect the overall findings. Thus scared straight interventions and similar programs cannot be recommended as a crime prevention strategy. However, should agencies continue to permit such programs, rigorous evaluations of them is recommended to ensure that at the very least, they do not cause more harm than good.