



SCARED STRAIGHT & JAIL TOUR PROGRAMS

Myths vs. Facts

(Updated: October 2014)

Myth: *“Scared Straight” programs can help troubled kids from entering the juvenile justice system*

Fact: Research has repeatedly shown that so-called “Scared Straight” programs are ineffective and can actually be harmful to some youth. The Florida Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) does not support and will not fund such initiatives.

Several widely used programs intended to reduce antisocial and illegal behavior have been proven ineffective. Prison visitation, jail tours, and “Scared Straight”-type programs are included in this group (Lipsey et al., 2010). These programs bring young offenders to prisons or jails in order to “shock” them with threats, intimidation, or persuasion, in attempts to literally scare them straight. These programs are aimed at deterrence through the fear of the consequences of bad behavior (Lipsey, 2009). Early evaluations of these programs generally produced negative effects, where subjected youth actually had worse outcomes than youth who did not go through the programs (Buckner and Chesney-Lind, 1983; Finckenauer and Gavin, 1999; Lewis, 1983; Petrosino et al., 2000; Sherman et al., 1997). The Sherman and colleagues “What Works” report to the U.S. Congress reviewed over 500 crime prevention evaluations and listed Scared Straight under their “what does not work” category.

More recent meta-analyses of deterrence-oriented approaches, including Scared Straight and jail tours, with juvenile offenders have found between a 2% and a 6.1% *increase* in recidivism for participating youth (Drake et al., 2009; Lipsey, 2009; Petrosino et al., 2002, 2003). Results show Scared Straight and similar programs increase the odds of offending between 1.6 to 1.7 times (60% to 70% more likely). The Drake and colleagues (2009) cost-benefit analysis indicated not only do Scared Straight-type programs increase recidivism by 6.1%, but they do so at a net *cost* of \$17,470 per participant in terms of costs to future crime victims and taxpayers. These findings held “despite the variability in the type of intervention used, ranging from harsh, confrontational interactions to tours of the facility converge on the same result: an increase in criminality in the experimental group when compared to a no-treatment control...doing nothing would have been better than exposing juveniles to the program” (Petrosino, 2003:25-26).

These and additional results led to conclusions that “Those jurisdictions already using Scared Straight-type programs should reevaluate the approach; otherwise, they are at risk for causing harm to the very citizens they aim to help” (Petrosino et al., 2014).



The Florida Department of Juvenile Justice is the designated State agency responsible to monitor for compliance with the four core requirements of the federal Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 2002 (previously the Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974, as amended). These four requirements are Deinstitutionalization of Status Offenders, Separation of Juveniles from Adult Offenders, Removal of Juveniles from Adult Jails and Lockups, and Reduction of Disproportionate Minority Confinement.

In 2002, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention in Washington informed all states that “Scared Straight” programs (or similar programs) may violate the Separation Requirement of the JJDP Act. The Act requires that juvenile offenders (accused or adjudicated) and non-offenders (juveniles in the system due to abuse, neglect, or mental health needs) not be detained or confined in any institution in which they have sight or sound contact with adult offenders. “Adult Offenders” includes those who are incarcerated because they have been convicted of a crime and those awaiting trial on criminal charges. Contact is defined as clear visual contact between the adult and the juvenile within close proximity to each other; or direct oral communication between the adult and juvenile.

As a result of these programs’ known ineffectiveness as well as their conflict with Federal law, the 2014 Legislature removed jail tour programs from Florida Statute.

The research findings remind us that even while programs are operating with the best intentions, and are intuitively appropriate, we must continue to evaluate services and treatment provided to youth in the most empirically and methodologically sound way possible, to ensure our good intentions are in keeping with our goals and mission.

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