Scared Straight Programs
Myths vs. Facts
(Updated July 2018)

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

Fact: Research has repeatedly shown that “Scared Straight” programs are ineffective and potentially harmful to public safety.

Low-cost interventions aimed at reducing antisocial behavior sometimes inadvertently amplify such behavior in the future, thereby making such interventions cost-inefficient. Scared Straight programs, an example of a low-cost intervention, seek to manipulate a youth’s behavior by temporarily placing them in prison or jail facilities to “scare” antisocial behaviors out of them. Inmates at such facilities use “fear, intimidation, and hostility” to deter antisocial behaviors from participating youth (Klenowski, Bell, & Dodson, 2010:257). Despite overwhelming research showing that Scared Straight programs are ineffective, such programs continue to exist through television shows documenting each youth’s unique experience.

Most research on Scared Straight programs occurred during the 1980s and 1990s, a period where get-tough approaches quickly began outweighing rehabilitative ideals (Bernard & Kurlychek, 2010). One experimental study in 1983 on Scared Straight programs found that there was no difference between treatment and control groups in recidivism at the 12-month follow up period.

Contemporary research on Scared Straight programs has been conducted using meta-analytic procedures. The results of these studies have been similar—essentially, Scared Straight programs are largely ineffective and potentially harmful. For example, Petrosino et al. (2003) found that Scared Straight programs increased recidivism up to 60 to 70%. Similarly, Kim et al. (2013) discovered that Scared Straight programs resulted in higher recidivism rates for treatment groups compared to control groups. Finally, Drake et al. (2009) reported that not only do Scared Straight programs increase recidivism up to 6.1%, but that they cost up to $17,470 in recidivism costs for each participating youth.

Contemporary research on Scared Straight programs exemplifies that well-intentioned and seemingly cost-efficient programs can have damaging consequences for youth, taxpayers, and society. Accordingly, the Department seeks to provide the most effective, evidence-based interventions to reduce delinquency while promoting public safety.