

# **Scared Straight Programs: Jail and Detention Tours**

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## Foreword

In 1981, while serving as an Inspector General in the New York City Department of Correction, I visited the nationally recognized Scared Straight Program at Rahway State Prison in New Jersey. We were interested in replicating the program in the New York City Department of Correction. We had, I was told, a similar program in which children visited our department and received “tours” of the facilities. Our program was never evaluated and its outcome was never measured.

The night I visited Rahway and observed the Scared Straight Program, I had doubts about its potential and utility. The tears and the emotional roller coaster that the children experienced were driven by the inflated egos and the lack of empathy on the part of the inmates who were apparently using their new-found authority and power over their charges. I left Rahway with a deep sense of man’s inhumanity to man, and serious doubts about the use of these techniques with youth. I recalled Dostoevski’s claim, that “You judge a civilization by entering its prisons.” As I became more interested in Criminology and behavior management, I would later learn of a Prison Experiment conducted by Dr. Philip Zimbardo of Stanford University that began in August 1971.

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The Zimbardo Prison Experiment at Stanford University was a classic demonstration of the power of social situations to distort personal identities and long cherished values. Students recruited for a simulated prison experiment actually internalized identities as guards and prisoners with frighteningly real consequences. The result was so intense and abusive that the experiment had to be terminated after a few days. I drew a parallel to the roles of the prisoners and youth and their interaction in the situation I observed at Rahway State Prison. As a criminologist, over the years, my suspicion concerning the

wisdom and effectiveness of the Scared Straight Program and jail tours began to take shape.

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As Commissioner of the New York City Correction Department, I did not have a department devoted to research and program evaluation as I do now as Secretary of the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice. Here, it is my hope to bring

research, policy makers and practitioners together to raise the level of public debate about the current strategies in use on reducing juvenile crime. Scaring kids straight is one of the programs that warrants intense scrutiny under the light of research.

What does not work in crime prevention is just as important as what works. It is counterproductive to use scarce budget funds and waste the funding support on programs that do not work, or that may make things worse. “Throwing good money after bad” reduces the public's trust in their government. This White Paper on Scared Straight, Jail and Detention Tours is intended to foster that dialogue. It is the first of many, and is aimed at getting us to rethink what we do. This sentiment was depicted in the film, *Dead Poet's Society*, in which Robin Williams' character, Professor John Keating, forced his students to stand on their desks and look at the same thing and think something different.

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Hopefully this paper will engender in the reader as much enthusiasm for the subject as I have found.

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## Executive Summary

- The underlying theoretical foundation for this approach is deterrence, with the belief that realistic, and often aggressive, depictions of prison life will cause youth to refrain from delinquency due to fear of the consequence of incarceration.
- At the individual level, specific deterrence is explained by the fact that the pain/discomfort generated by the punishment will serve to discourage future criminality. It assumes a rational choice model of decision-making in which the offender perceives that the benefits of the crime are outweighed by the costs of the sanction. General deterrence, in contrast, refers to the impact the threatened punishment has on *potential* offenders, thus reducing the chance that they will commit crimes.
- Petrosino and colleagues conducted a meta-analysis review of Scared Straight programs with the most rigorous methodological standards to date.
- Meta-analysis results show the scared straight-type intervention *increases* the odds of offending by between 1.6 and 1.7 to 1 compared to a no-treatment control group. These findings lead the researchers to conclude that participating in the Scared Straight program actually correlates with an increase in re-offending compared to a control group of youth who received no intervention at all.
- Other reviews of the research find deterrence-oriented programs ineffective in preventing crime (Lipsey, 1992; Sherman et al., 1997). More explicitly, the Sherman et al. “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.
- 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.

## **Scared Straight, Jail and Detention Tours: Lessons Gained from Research**

The central premise of Scared Straight, jail tours, and similar programs rests on the notion that organizing prison visits for juvenile delinquents or at-risk youth will in turn deter those youth from future delinquency. The underlying theoretical foundation for this approach is deterrence, with the belief that realistic and often aggressive depictions of prison life will cause youth to refrain from delinquency due to fear of the consequence of incarceration.

Programs classified as deterrence-oriented are those with a primary purpose of deterring either the individual offender or others through the objectionable nature of the sanction. These are distinguished from other strategies because the major emphasis here is on the punitive nature of the punishment and not on reducing crime through restraint, discipline or rehabilitative challenge (Sherman et al., 1997). At the individual level, specific deterrence is explained by the fact that the pain/discomfort generated by the punishment will serve to discourage future criminality. It assumes a rational choice model of decision-making in which the offender perceives that the benefits of the crime are outweighed by the costs of the sanction. General deterrence, in contrast, refers to the impact the threatened punishment has on *potential* offenders, thus reducing the chance that they will commit crimes. In conjunction, this framework meshes with popular notions of “get tough” policies of how to prevent crime.

Programs in which inmates describe to youth their life experiences and the reality of prison life have a long history in the United States (Brodsky, 1970). The original “Scared Straight” program began in the 1970’s when inmates serving life sentences at a New Jersey prison (Rahway State Prison) began a program in which they would “scare” at-risk or delinquent children using an aggressive presentation which “brutally depicted life in adult prisons and often included exaggerated stories of rape and murder” (Petrosino et al., 2003; Finckenauer, 1982). This original program generated media attention and a television documentary touting a 94% success rate, and sparking replication attempts in 30 jurisdictions, reporting success rates between 80% and 90%.

These results led to special congressional hearings by the U.S. House Subcommittee on Human Resources (U.S. House 1979). While deemed a success, no data on a control or a comparison group of youth were presented.

The confrontational style utilized in the original Scared Straight program remains the most popular, yet other programs are designed to be more educational with interactive discussions between the inmates and the youth (Finckenauer,

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1999; Lundman, 1993). Scared Straight, jail tours, and similar programs remain popular and continue to be used in the United States and several other nations, including Australia, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Norway (Finckenauer & Gavin, 1999; Hall, 1999; Lloyd, 1995; O'Malley et al., 1993; Petrosino et al., 2003; Storvall & Hovland, 1998). Examples in the United States include a Carson City, Nevada program which brings juvenile delinquents on a tour of an adult

Nevada State Prison and a Washington, DC program which received media attention in 2001 when guards went as far as to strip search a group of students touring a local DC jail. The guards were eventually fired yet were so convinced that they were operating under a sound strategy to turn the lives of the delinquent youth around, one officer reported he would want his daughter to go through the program if she were on a similar path (Blum & Woodlee, 2001).

While popular and often declared successful by many practitioners claiming intuitive knowledge of accomplishment and citing testimonials from participants, the empirical status of Scared Straight programs is not nearly as promising. The original New Jersey Scared Straight program was evaluated in 1982 using a randomized control group for the first time (Finckenauer, 1982). The evaluation reported that not only was there no effect on the criminal behavior of participants who went through the program in comparison with those who did not, the participants were actually more likely to be

arrested (Finckenauer, 1982; Petrosino et al., 2003). Other randomized trials in the U.S. also put into question the effectiveness of similar programs (Buckner and Chesney-Lund 1983; Lewis, 1983). These initial evaluations are in keeping with reviews of the research finding deterrence-oriented programs ineffective in preventing crime (Lipsey, 1992; Sherman et al., 1997). More explicitly, the Sherman et al. "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.

Petrosino and colleagues conducted the most rigorous review of Scared Straight programs (Petrosino et al., 2003; Petrosino et al., 2002). This meta-analysis searched for empirical analysis of Scared Straight-type programs by multiple methods, including visually inspecting 29 leading criminology and social science journals; checking Weisburd et al.'s (1990) Registry of Randomized Experiments in Criminal Sanctions; electronic searches of extracts (i.e. PsycINFO, Criminal Justice Extracts); searching 18 bibliographic databases by information specialists; mailing over 200 researchers and 100 research centers; searching dissertations and unpublished papers; and citation/reference tracking. Studies were graded based on whether randomization was utilized, extent of attrition (individuals dropping out of the study), "blinding" of those collecting data to ensure they did not know who was assigned to each group (Scared Straight or control), and fidelity of the program implementation (Petrosino et al., 2003).

From the 500 citations generated, this stringent process yielded nine studies that met the methodological demands to be included in the final analysis. These studies were conducted between 1967-1992 in eight different states throughout the U.S., with Michigan being the site for two. The collective sample was 946 juveniles with an average age ranging from 15 to 17 years old, a racial composition between 36%-84% white, with only one study including girls (for complete breakdown by study see Petrosino et al., 2003). The focus of investigation was on the proportion of each group (Scared Straight or control) that re-offended.

The results from the re-offending rates show that the Scared Straight-type intervention *increases* the delinquency outcomes during the follow-up period. This means that those youth who went through these types of programs have higher recidivism rates than those youth who did not go through the programs. It is important to remember that the treatment and the control groups were randomized, meaning that each youth had an equal probability of being placed in either group, thus assuring that each group is comparable and essentially identical at the outset of the experiment. This guarantees that any difference between the two groups is due to the intervention itself, and not to any characteristic of the youth in each group. The Odds Ratios can be used to illustrate the effectiveness/ineffectiveness of the programs versus the control groups. An Odds Ratio of 1 would imply that for every 1 youth who re-offends from the program group, 1 youth re-offends from the control group. A 95% Confidence Interval is provided which can be interpreted as saying “we are 95% confident that the true Odds Ratio falls between this interval”. Due to disagreement in the literature of whether random effects or fixed effects models are more appropriate, both are reported (See Table 1).

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**Table 1: Odds Ratios for treatment group versus control group re-offending**

<u>Model</u>	<u>Odds Ratio</u>	<u>95% Confidence Interval</u>
Fixed Effects	1.68	(1.20-2.36)
Random Effects	1.72	(1.13-2.62)

(Information for Table 1 gathered from Petrosino et al., 2003)

Table 1 illustrates that the odds of re-offending are higher for the youth going through the Scared Straight-type program versus those who do not. This result is the same regardless of the model preferred, and is statistically

significant. What Table 1 shows is that 1.68 youth based on fixed effects modeling and 1.72 youth based on random effects modeling who went through Scared Straight will re-offend for every 1 youth who re-offends in the control group. This can be interpreted as saying that the scared straight-type intervention increases the odds of offending by between 1.6 and 1.7 to 1. The confidence intervals for each modeling strategy show all ranges over 1.13 meaning that we can say that we are 95% confident that at least 1.13 youth who go through these programs will re-offend for every 1 youth who re-offends in the control groups. The essential fact to gather from this table is that across all of the studies, and using either preferred statistical procedure, individuals who go through Scared Straight-type programs re-offend at a higher rate than those identical youth who do not go through the programs. These findings lead the researchers to conclude that participating in the Scared Straight program actually correlates with an increase in re-offending compared to a control group of youth who received no intervention at all.

The results presented in detail above mimic those reported by others. Lipsey (1992) conducted a meta-analysis of juvenile prevention and treatment programs. The Lipsey study found that the effect size for the 11 “shock incarceration and Scared Straight programs” was  $-.14$ . This negative effect size means that the program had a negative impact on the youth. This result shows, once again, that those youth who go through deterrence-oriented programs have higher recidivism than control groups who do not go through the programs.

Gendreau and colleagues (1996) performed their own meta-analysis of what they called “get tough” or “get smart” sanctions. These programs and interventions were designed to deter crime (programs like Scared Straight) as well as to punish/control offenders at a reduced cost to incarceration (such as intensive supervision). The researchers calculated correlations between participating in these programs and future recidivism. After examining 15 experimental and quasi-experimental evaluations of Scared Straight-type programs, they found a correlation of  $.07$  with criminal recidivism. This means that participating in the program was associated with an increase in recidivism. The correlation between Scared Straight-type programs and recidivism was

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larger than any other correlation in their analysis, greater than that between any other types of program. This means that not only is Scared Straight not effective at reducing future recidivism, it is in fact criminogenic, and more so than any other type of program in that analysis.

## **Practical and Conceptual Explanations**

There exist several additional reasons to refrain from utilizing Scared Straight-type programs, beyond the negative evaluations established in the extant empirical literature. The first may be a practical issue in that the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) has taken the firm position that it will not fund any Scared Straight-type program, or any program with a similar framework as even a component to it. For practical funding issues, this situation would be relevant for the program narrative/scope of services for any grant application seeking Federal funding.

An additional reason for refraining from the use of Scared Straight-type programs and jail tours is more theoretical in nature. This relates to the question of “why” individuals who go through these programs are more likely to re-offend. Several rationales have been advanced to explain the association between deterrence-oriented program participation and an increase in re-offending. One group of researchers from Illinois contends that many delinquent youth feel alienated and may see prison as place where they would fit in, in the sense that their behavior and values are no longer on the fringes and unacceptable, and they may finally belong (Greater Egypt Regional Planning & Development Commission, 1979). Finckenaer (1982) suggests that the possibility that a delinquency fulfilling prophecy exists in which the programs may “romanticize the Lifers—and by extension other prison inmates—in young impressionable minds. Or, the belittling, demeaning, intimidating, and scaring of particular youth may be seen as a challenge; a challenge to go out and prove to themselves, their peers and others that they were not scared” (p.169).

An additional hypothesis may be advanced in the form of “anticipatory socialization”. This process occurs when individuals perceive the certainty of an event and, upon being placed in a similar situation, begin to be socialized toward that event. Merton elaborates on the process arguing that anticipatory socialization includes the prior experience and learning that prepares the individual

for entry into a collective/group and that the extent to which an individual's prior expectations match the situation may ease the adjustment period, leading to eventual success in adopting the new role (Merton, 1957). A parallel can be drawn between the youth in question and expectant parents attending Lamaze classes. It is recommended to many first time expectant parents to attend these classes as well as visit a maternity ward to begin to socialize, as well as desensitize, them to prepare for the inevitable birth of the child. Similarly, delinquent and at-risk youth may be being socialized to the prison culture and desensitized to its negative climate by the Scared Straight and jail tour process. Exposure to the prison/jail environment as well as to inmates themselves may serve as a desensitizing factor thus making the possibility of incarceration for future offenses less threatening, thereby eliminating any deterrent effect the thought of prison may have served.

The empirical evidence cited above, together with the theoretical and practical reasons outlined, are intended to argue for the avoidance of further, as well as the cessation of ongoing, Scared Straight, jail tour, and similar deterrence-oriented programs for delinquent and at-risk youth. The issue is not whether the programs provide benefit to the participating youth, but rather that the programs are in fact iatrogenic. These programs not only fail to attain the desired goal of deterring future criminality, they correlate with an *increase* in re-offending. Empirical research, under the most stringent demands for scientific methodology, have shown that it is better for youth to receive nothing than to participate in these deterrence-oriented programs. The youth in the control conditions received no treatment at all, and yet had re-offense rates

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lower than those of participating youth. 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).

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. The empirical findings illustrate Scared Straight and deterrence-oriented programs to be not only damaging to the youth, but also detrimental to society, as they increase the victimization rate for the general population by increasing the re-offense rate of participants.



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