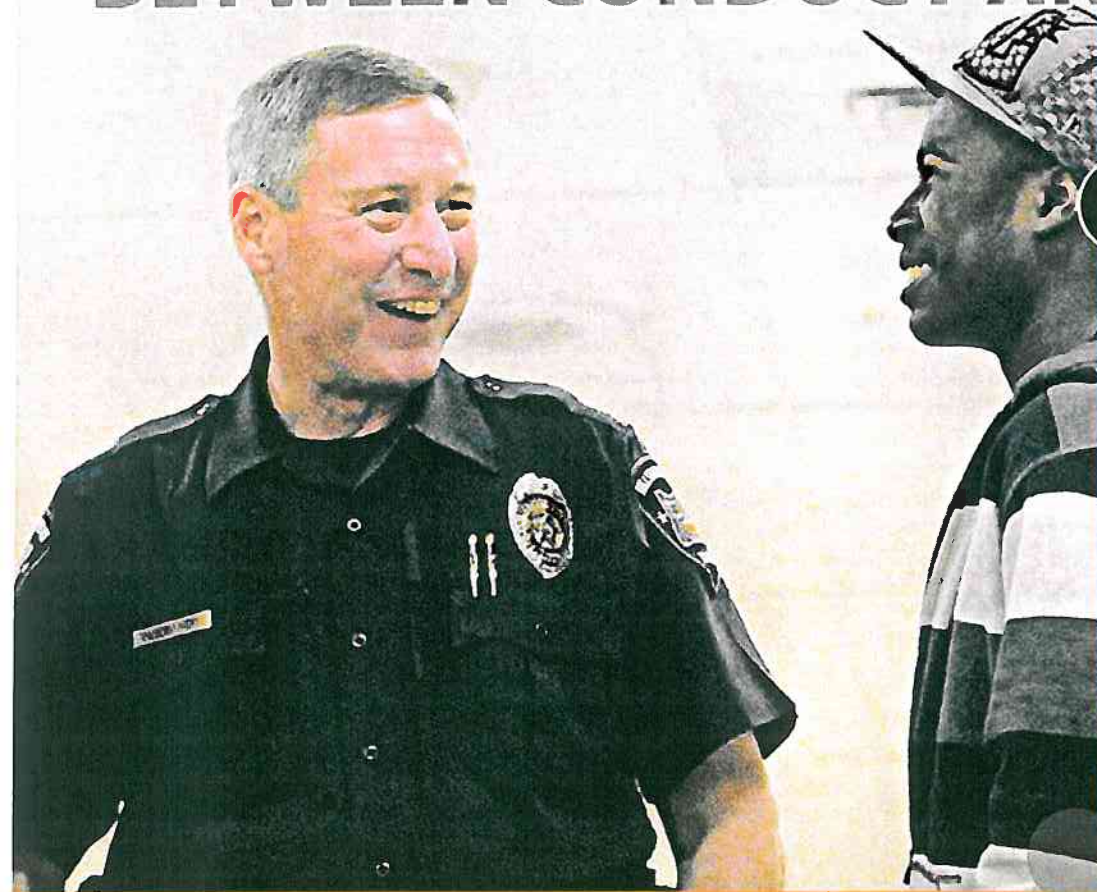


CONNECTING THE DOTS

BETWEEN CONDUCT AND GOALS:



WHY THE "SCARED STRAIGHT APPROACH" DOESN'T WORK

By **Dr. Jeff Bostic**, EdD., Director of School Psychiatry, Massachusetts General Hospital, and **Paige Pihl Buckley**, Communications Coordinator for Strategies for Youth

The "jump-out boys" of one police department are known to literally jump out of their unmarked cars to slam youth into walls and search them, spread-eagled on the sidewalk. The lesson: "Don't even think about it." On the television show "Scared Straight", a group of terrified girls are shouted at by menacing inmates, "The second you come through that gate, you're mine!" They are told that were the cameras to turn off, they would be in big trouble: No one would hear their screams.

The idea that youth can be scared into line or deterred from crime originated in the 1970s with the advent of Scared Straight, a program where youth were brought to prisons and confronted by inmates. Prisoners describe the horrors of prison life and warn youth not to take the prisoner's path. The theory is that youth would become so frightened by the experience that they will be deterred from criminal involvement and live life on the straight and narrow. Now television is making this fear factor a spectator sport.

The only problem is, it doesn't work. Studies have found these tactics are ineffective and even increase criminality. That's because the teen brain doesn't work in the same way the adult brain does. Young people in particular are simply not motivated by fear. They are provoked by it and view such daunting challenges as something they, unlike their more foolish adult-counterparts, can conquer.

When officers attempt to keep youth in line by demonstrating their strength and youth's powerlessness, a typical response

for adolescent boys is to prove themselves: to assert their toughness and bravado. Oftentimes, it's better to be loyal or to save face than to appear weak, to themselves or to peers. And, young people perceive consequences and their future impacts quite differently than adults. Youths' sense of time is different; the focus is on immediacy and the belief that the future is distant and open. They often think they can be the one who can avoid consequences or they don't think about consequences at all.

For these reasons, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Programs concluded in a widely-circulated report

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last August that, "Traumatizing at-risk kids is not the way to lead them away from crime and drugs." As a child psychiatrist who works with youth daily, the tactics my colleagues and I find work best are ones that emphasize the positive, teach what to

do instead of stressing what not to do, and involve youth in connecting the dots between their conduct and their goals.

Once officers make an initial connection, they can work with youth to develop a solution to a problem that works for everyone—without the conflict. While this method may initially take more time and effort on an officer's part, the solutions are more long lasting and model effective behaviors that can serve young adults for years to come.

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Rather than trying to scare youth or even to rehabilitate those exhibiting criminal patterns, our focus must be on habituating them to do the right thing in the first place. Threats usually work while the adult is watching. Then youth typically return to what they were doing. What works most successfully is modeling good behavior, using interactions as teachable moments, and helping youth think through options and project consequences.

The better approach is "Think Straight," which replaces the ineffective "Scared Straight" approach. "Scared Straight" may have been attractive to adults who can play out their most scary sides, but it is neither effective nor how we want our nation's officers to induce change.

