

# How To...

## Avoid the Failures of Scared Straight Programs

### WHAT IS A SCARED STRAIGHT PROGRAM?

- Programs that bring at-risk youth into an adult prison where they are confronted by inmates
- Programs include prison tours, personal stories from inmates, and the integration of youth into the prison population,<sup>1</sup> where some youth have reported that adult inmates sexually propositioned them and tried to steal their belongings<sup>2</sup>
- The major emphasis is on punishment and the assurance that youth are aware of the daily lack of comfort and the degradation of American prisons.<sup>3</sup>

### CAN SOMEONE REALLY BE SCARED STRAIGHT?

- Scared Straight is based on the assumption that the consequences of illegal behavior will act as a deterrent. This approach may work with adults, but teens' ability to anticipate the consequences of their conduct is at a low point during adolescence. Some youth may interpret Scared Straight tactics as a challenge to their ability to overcome/beat the consequences these programs hope will act as deterrents.
- Evaluators found that instead of scaring youth straight, these programs generally increased crime between 1% and 28%.<sup>4</sup>
- A University of Maryland review of over 500 evaluations of crime prevention strategies listed Scared Straight as a program that does not work.<sup>5</sup>
- The 2001 Surgeon General's Report on Youth Violence said that, "Numerous studies of Scared Straight have demonstrated that the program does not deter future criminal activities."<sup>6</sup>
- The U.S. Department of Justice won't fund it.<sup>7</sup>

### IF IT DOESN'T WORK, THAN WHY DO PEOPLE DO IT?

- Desperate parents and program providers hoping to divert troubled youth from further misbehavior placed their hopes in a program they see touted as effective on TV, and policymakers opted to fund what appeared to be an easy fix to juvenile crime.<sup>8</sup>
- These programs are popular because they align with common cultural views that punishment and fear (i.e. getting tough on crime), are the best approaches to reducing juvenile crime.<sup>8</sup>
- These programs are very inexpensive (a Maryland Scared Straight program was estimated to cost less than \$1.00 per participant), and some people think they provide an opportunity for adult offenders to contribute productively to society by preventing youngsters from following the same path.<sup>9</sup>



### WHO'S TALKING ABOUT SCARED STRAIGHT?

*The role of a school resource officer is not to be the bogeyman... We're there to mentor young people... The problem with such scare tactics is that they are counterproductive to what should be a central focus of any SRO program: fostering positive relationships between cops and kids.*

**Curt Lavarello, Executive Director,  
National Association of School Resource Officers**

Quoted in JDNews.com Dec. 3, 2002 article: Resource Officers Express Criticism of Use of "Jail Tours" and Mock Arrests

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## How To... Avoid the Failures of Scared Straight Programs (CONT.)

### WHAT DO THE AUTHORITIES SAY?

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) of the U.S. Department of Justice publicly denounced these programs in August 2011. OJJDP stopped all federal funding for any Scared Straight program, or any program with a similar framework.

### WHAT DOES WORK WITH TEENAGERS?

Effective juvenile offender programs

- Provide large amounts of meaningful contact and are longer in duration
- Are designed by a researcher or have research as a major component of the treatment
- Offer behavioral, skill-oriented, and multimodal treatment
- Are gender-specific and sensitive

Most successful programs<sup>9</sup>

- Focus on behavior change through social interaction, role modeling and the role playing of positive behavior with people youth can relate to
- Target four or more of a youth's risk factors and assess each individual's needs
- Separate high and low-risk youth
- Remain aware of peer influence and focus on building positive relationships

Example of a successful alternative

El Paso County's Challenge Academy: El Paso Teens Build Thanksgiving Float that Earns Community Recognition

1. Laurie O. Robinson and Jeff Slowikowski, "Scary – and ineffective: Traumatizing at-risk kids is not the way to lead them away from crime and drugs," Baltimore Sun, 31 January 2011
2. Laurie O. Robinson and Jeff Slowikowski, "Scary – and ineffective: Traumatizing at-risk kids is not the way to lead them away from crime and drugs," Baltimore Sun, 31 January 2011
3. Anthony J. Schembri, "Scared Straight Programs: Jail and Detention Tours."
4. Anthony Petrosino, Carolyn Turpin Petrosino and John Buelher, "'Scared Straight' and Other Juvenile Awareness Programs to Preventing Juvenile Delinquency," The Campbell Collaboration, 2004.
5. Anthony Petrosino, Carolyn Turpin Petrosino and John Buelher, "'Scared Straight' and Other Juvenile Awareness Programs to Preventing Juvenile Delinquency," The Campbell Collaboration, 2004.
6. "Youth Violence: A Report of the Surgeon General," Office of the Surgeon General, 2001.
7. Laurie O. Robinson and Jeff Slowikowski, "Scary – and ineffective: Traumatizing at-risk kids is not the way to lead them away from crime and drugs," Baltimore Sun, 31 January 2011.
8. Anthony Petrosino, Carolyn Turpin Petrosino and John Buelher, "'Scared Straight' and Other Juvenile Awareness Programs to Preventing Juvenile Delinquency," The Campbell Collaboration, 2004.
9. O'Connor, C. (2008). What research tells us about effective interventions for juvenile offenders. What Works, Wisconsin Fact Sheet. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin–Madison/Extension.