Review: “Scared Straight” and other juvenile awareness programmes increase criminal behaviour


QUESTION: In children who have been, or are at risk of being, adjudicated or convicted by a juvenile court, do programmes using organised prison visits designed to deter criminal behaviour (eg, “Scared Straight” programme) reduce offending activity?

Data sources
Studies were identified by handsearching 29 criminology or social science journals; searching 16 electronic databases (including the trial registers of the Cochrane Collaboration and the Campbell Collaboration); scanning references in relevant reviews, bibliographies, books, articles, and other documents; and contacting experts in the field.

Study selection
Published or unpublished studies were selected if they were randomised or quasi-randomised controlled trials, the intervention included a visit to prison for children ≤17 years of age, a control group receiving no treatment was included, and ≥1 outcome assessed subsequent offending behaviour. Studies with overlapping samples of adolescents and young adults were included.

Data extraction
Data were extracted on participants, length of follow up, study design, intervention, and outcomes. Authors were contacted for missing data. The quality of studies was assessed. Data were pooled using both random and fixed effects models.

Main results
9 studies (8 randomised controlled trials) met the selection criteria. The mean age of participants ranged from 15–17 years. Only 1 study included girls. Follow up ranged from 3–24 months. None of the 9 studies showed a benefit for “Scared Straight” or other juvenile awareness programmes. When results for the 7 studies reporting recidivism data for each group were combined, juvenile awareness programmes led to an increase in criminal behaviour relative to no treatment (table); this effect was present with both random and fixed effects models. The effect was slightly smaller when a trial with randomisation problems was removed; the results were similar when 1 study with potential for high attrition was removed from the analysis (table).

Conclusion
In children who have been, or are at risk of being, adjudicated or convicted by juvenile courts, “Scared Straight” and other juvenile awareness programmes increase criminal behaviour.

COMMENTARY
Several programmes to prevent and/or reduce juvenile delinquency have been developed and evaluated in response to growing concerns about the long term social and health consequences of juvenile delinquency and violence among youth. The systematic review by Petrosino et al summarises the best available evidence about the effectiveness of a deterrence based single component strategy to reduce delinquent behaviour in youth 10–17 years of age.

Petrosino et al used a rigorous review methodology with a thorough search of both published and unpublished literature and predefined selection criteria that included random or quasi-random allocation. A strength of the review is the use of police arrest or self reports of offending as outcome measures. However, care must be taken when generalising the results to other populations because all of the studies took place in the US with primarily male participants. Girls were included in only 1 study. These research findings indicate that organised, “one time”, prison visit interventions based on a deterrence model are not effective in reducing juvenile delinquency. In fact, these data show that these interventions do more harm than good. This places high risk juveniles at even greater risk of reoffending, thereby exposing citizens to added criminal victimisation. Policy makers in jurisdictions still using “Scared Straight” or similar interventions need to rethink whether this is an appropriate use of resources. The results of this meta-analysis also emphasise the need to further develop and evaluate parent and family based strategies with demonstrated effectiveness.

For public health practitioners who work with high risk or delinquent youth, and for programme planners, this review suggests that other types of interventions need to be considered for implementation.

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