

“Scared Straight” and other prison tour programs for preventing juvenile delinquency

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Protocol

Background

In the 1970s, a group of inmates serving life sentences at a New Jersey (USA) prison began a program to "scare" at-risk or delinquent children from a future life of crime. The program, known as "Scared Straight," featured as its main component an aggressive presentation by inmates serving a life sentence to juveniles visiting the prison facility. The presentation realistically - even brutally - depicted life in adult prisons, and often included stories of rape and murder ([Finckenauer 1982](#)). An award-winning television documentary on the program aired in 1979 and provided anecdotal evidence of Scared Straight's effectiveness in deterring young people from future crime. "Scared Straight: 20 Years Later" was shown on United States television twenty years later and claimed similar results ([UPN 1999](#); "Kids and Crooks," 1999). As in the 1979 television program, no data on a control or comparison group of young people were presented.

The underlying theory of the program is criminal deterrence. Program advocates believe that the realistic depiction of adult prison will deter juvenile delinquents or children at risk for becoming delinquent from further involvement with crime. Many similar types of programs have been implemented in the USA and elsewhere, although the inmate presentations are now sometimes designed to be more educational than confrontational (Petrosino, Turpin-Petrosino and Finckenauer 2000). A randomized trial testing the New Jersey program in 1982, however, reported no statistically significant effect of the program on its participants ([Finckenauer 1982](#)). In fact, Finckenauer ([Finckenauer 1982](#)) reported that participants in the experimental program were more likely to be arrested. Yet, beliefs in the program's efficacy continued, a result that Finckenauer called the "Panacea Phenomenon," as policymakers, practitioners, and lay person continue to latch onto quick, short-term and inexpensive cures for difficult social problems ([Finckenauer et al 1999](#)). Despite the evidence from the New Jersey study, Scared Straight expanded to over 30 jurisdictions in the United States following the 1979 television airing ([Finckenauer 1982](#)).

Other randomized trials reported in the USA soon questioned the effectiveness of Scared Straight type programs in reducing subsequent criminality ([GERPDC 1979](#), [Lewis 1983](#)). Parallel with these findings, reviewers of research on the effects of crime prevention programs have not found deterrence-oriented programs like Scared Straight effective ([Sherman et al 1997](#), [Lipsey 1992](#)). Despite these results, Scared Straight type programs continue to be used in the United States ([Finckenauer et al 1999](#)) and elsewhere ([Hall 1999](#)).

Positive perceptions of the program's effectiveness persist, however, reinforced by the 1999 television program in the USA. Since no prior review has exclusively examined Scared Straight

type programs, a systematic review is required to assess the overall weight of the evidence from all relevant randomized trials.

Objectives

To assess the effects of programs comprising organized visits to prisons of juvenile delinquents (officially adjudicated or convicted by a juvenile court) or pre-delinquents (children in trouble but not officially adjudicated as delinquents), aimed at deterring them from criminal activity.

Criteria for considering studies for this review

Types of studies

Randomized or quasi-randomized (i.e. alternation assignment procedures) controlled trials with or without blinding. The study must include a no-treatment control group.

Types of participants

Only studies involving juveniles, i.e. children 17 years of age or younger, will be included. Participants may be delinquents or pre-delinquents. Studies that contain overlapping samples of juveniles and young adults (e.g. ages 13-21) will be included.

Types of intervention

The intervention must feature a visit by program participants to a prison facility as its main component. Programs, however, may include other components such as orientation, tours, counseling, etc.

Types of outcome measures

The interest of citizens, policy and practice decision-makers, media, and the research community is in whether Scared Straight and its variations have any crime deterrent effect. We will therefore focus on crime measures.

Types of data

For each study, we will extract outcome data for crime measures. We will organize it into two major categories: official reports (from government administrative records) and self-reported criminality (obtained from investigator-administered survey questionnaires). Since the crime data are likely to be very diverse ([Petrosino 1997](#); [Lipsey 1992](#)), we will organize it into indexes that make sense to readers:

INCIDENCE: What percentage of each group failed or succeeded?

PREVALENCE: What was the average number of offenses or other incidents per group?

SEVERITY: What was the average severity of offenses committed by each group? Or what percentage of persons in each group later committed crimes against the person?

"TIME TO EVENT" "TIME TO FAILURE" OR "LATENCY": How long was return to crime or failure delayed for each group?

We will report both results for official and self-report crime measures for each of these categories, if applicable.

Search strategy for identification of studies

Both published and unpublished work will be eligible for the review. We will conduct searches of the ten data bases listed below. Note that six of the data bases listed contain citations to unpublished documents (#4,5,6,7,9,10).

- (1) Criminal Justice Periodical Index
- (2) Psychological Abstracts
- (3) Sociological Abstracts
- (4) Criminal Justice Abstracts
- (5) National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS)
- (6) Child Abuse and Neglect Abstracts (National Child Abuse and Neglect or NCCAN Clearinghouse)
- (7) Educational Resources Information Clearinghouse (ERIC)
- (8) Legal Resource Index
- (9) Dissertation Abstracts
- (10) Government Publications Office, Monthly Catalog (GPO Monthly)

We will begin with the following terms to search the 10 data bases listed above:

Scared Straight

tour

visit

aversion

orientation

prisoner-run

inmate-run

juvenile awareness

prison awareness

rap session

speak-out

confrontational

We will also rely upon existing registers of randomized controlled trials. These include (1) the "Registry of Randomized Experiments in Criminal Sanctions, 1950-1983" ([Weisburd et al 1990](#)), (2) the "Social, Psychological, Educational and Criminological Trials Register" or SPECTR being developed by the U.K. Cochrane Centre and the University of Pennsylvania ([Petrosino et al 2000](#)), and (3) the Cochrane Schizophrenia Group's current project to create a register of trials relevant to the management of violent or aggressive individuals. The titles and abstracts in these data bases will be screened for references to Scared Straight-like programs.

We will also search through existing systematic and narrative or traditional reviews of research on the effects of crime programs for references to experiments testing Scared Straight like programs. These reviews include but are not limited to the following: Petrosino's meta-analysis of 150 randomized experiments in crime reduction ([Petrosino 1997](#)); Sherman's 1997 Report to the Congress ([Sherman et al 1997](#)); Lipsey's meta-analysis of delinquency prevention and treatment programs ([Lipsey 1992](#)); Andrews et al's meta-analysis of rehabilitation programs for juvenile or adult offenders ([Andrews et al 1990](#)); and Lipton's Effectiveness of Correctional Treatment ([Lipton et al 1975](#)).

We will also contact leading researchers on Scared Straight programs as another method of tracking grey literature studies.

Methods of the review

SELECTION OF TRIALS

Both reviewers will screen abstracts or leads to potentially eligible studies, and indicate which full text reports should be pursued. Only the full text articles of titles and abstracts indicating random or quasi-random assignment or that may potentially have used random or quasi-random assignment will be obtained. Both reviewers will independently screen the full text of studies. Where there is conflict between the two reviewers about whether a study should be included, the original investigator will be contacted for additional information. Further disagreements will be resolved by appeal to an expert arbitrator.

ASSESSMENT OF METHODOLOGICAL QUALITY

For each study, we will assess methodological quality for three characteristics. These are: (1) the level of concealment of randomization from program staff and participants; (2) whether investigators report violation or subversion of random assignment procedures; and (3) whether investigators report major attrition or loss of participants from the sample initially randomized (i.e. more than 10% loss from original sample).

DATA MANAGEMENT AND EXTRACTION

The two reviewers will independently extract information from the full text report on study characteristics using a specially designed data extraction instrument. In cases in which outcome information is missing from the original reports, attempts will be made to retrieve the necessary data for the analysis from the original investigators.

Inter rater agreement (i.e. coding reliability) will be assessed for all studies and not a sample.

The rate of agreement will be reported separately for all items to avoid inflation with study characteristics that generally achieve perfect agreement (e.g. year of publication). Disagreements will be resolved by meeting and discussing coded items. Only data with perfect agreement will be entered. Poorly interpreted items will be dropped from the data set.

The data will then be entered into RevMan for analysis.

DATA SYNTHESIS

Using RevMan software, we will express dichotomous outcome measures of crime as Odds Ratios (OR) and continuous measures of crime as weighted mean differences (WMD). We will report the 95% Confidence Intervals (CI) for both. Both fixed and random effects models will be assumed in weighting treatment effects across the randomized trials. We will examine these effects at follow-up intervals of 0-6 months, 7-12 months, 13-18 months, 19-24 months, and beyond 2 years.

We will conduct a sensitivity analysis that compares results for two different groups of trials. The first group are those that report good "randomization integrity" (concealment of allocation procedures, no subversion or breakdown of random assignment, and no serious attrition from initial randomization sample). The second group of trials will have reported one or more of these characteristics. Where it is possible, issues of blinding (unlikely in most trials in criminal justice) will be discussed.

Potential conflict of interest

None.

References

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Cover sheet

"Scared Straight" and other prison tour programs for preventing juvenile delinquency [protocol]

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