First introduced in the 1970s as a “hard-hitting” way to prevent juvenile delinquency, Scared Straight programs became popular before being thoroughly evaluated. Three subsequent decades of research show that programs premised on Scared Straight approaches are ineffective, counterproductive and costly.

- **Scared Straight is not an effective crime prevention strategy.** Randomized trials in the United States, including an analysis of the original New Jersey Scared Straight program, reveal no effect on the delinquent/criminal behavior of participants who went through the program when compared with those who did not.¹ More explicitly, a comprehensive “What Works” report to the U.S. Congress in 1997 of more than 500 crime prevention evaluations listed Scared Straight under “what does not work.”²

- **Scared Straight has been shown to lead to increased offending:** Scared Straight programs not only fail to deter crime, but have been shown to result in increased juvenile offending when compared with no intervention.³ Research shows that Scared Straight-type interventions increase delinquent outcomes by 1% to 28%. Youth who went through such programs had higher rates of re-offending than youth who did not go through the programs.⁴

- **Scared Straight is cost-inefficient:** Scared Straight style programs typically cost less than $100 per child. Yet, research by the Washington State Institute on Public Policy found that for every $80 spent on such programs, taxpayers and crime victims pay an additional $14,000 associated with youths’ recurring contact with the juvenile and criminal justice systems. On the plus side, family/community-connected delinquency prevention strategies have been show to save the public between $5,000 and $78,000 per youth and avoid costs for court services, policing and care of victims.⁵

- **Scared Straight programs may cause state and local violations of federal law and regulations.** The federal Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDPA) prohibits court-involved youth from being detained, confined or otherwise having contact with adult inmates in jails and prisons.⁶ In keeping with the JJDPA, and supported by research, the federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention at the U.S. Department of Justice does not fund Scared Straight programs, and cites such programs as potential violations of federal law.

- **Policymakers and delinquency prevention practitioners must spend limited public monies wisely** Even when programs operate with good intentions, public officials, practitioners and providers must be diligent in their efforts to evaluate services and treatment provided to youth to ensure that public resources are used in ways that are effective; helpful not harmful; and truly lead to lasting community safety.⁷

For more information, contact Tara Andrews, Deputy Executive Director, Coalition for Juvenile Justice at 202-467-0864, ext. 109 and andrews@juvjustice.org.

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1 “Scared Straight Programs: Jail and Detention Tours,” Anthony J. Schembri, Secretary Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, pg. 4.


4 “Scared Straight Programs: Jail and Detention Tours,” Anthony J. Schembri, Secretary Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, pg. 6.


7 “Scared Straight Programs: Jail and Detention Tours,” Anthony J. Schembri, Secretary Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, pg. 10.