

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/scaring-teens-doesnt-straighten-them-out>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

A&E's new reality show *Beyond Scared Straight*, which debuted in January, describes itself as a profile of the new approach to keeping today's teens from becoming tomorrow's prisoners. This approach taking at-risk teenagers to prisons to experience the harshness of prison life first-hand is certainly not too new to have been tested, and the research shows that it does not work. In fact, such programs not only threaten, intimidate, and humiliate young people; they have been shown to increase delinquent behavior.

Not surprisingly, the juvenile justice community has come out in force against this new show. Groups as diverse as advocacy and research organizations and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention have released statements that debunk the show's claims of deterrent effect and called for A&E to offer a more well-rounded perspective by presenting the shortcomings of *Scared Straight* and highlighting evidence-supported interventions.

Regardless of whether A&E heeds this outcry, the pushback itself has had a positive effect. Both Maryland and California have suspended their prison-diversion programs depicted on the TV series.

While the outcome in those two states may represent the triumph of rational, evidence-based perspectives on juvenile justice over emotionally driven policy making, it's sobering to learn that the season premiere of the A&E series pulled the network's all-time highest ratings.

Rational discourse alone rarely prevails in juvenile justice reform. It is often only one part of a broader war of attrition against political opposition, skewed public opinion reinforced by sensationalistic mass media representations, and inertia. The challenge of shifting the juvenile justice paradigm away from a belief in a punitive approach and dispelling the view of adolescents as dangerous involves systematically and persistently deploying research, demonstration projects, policy consulting, and media relations.

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