

Trial Design

Transcript

The 1978 Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature went to *Scared Straight!*, a story about a group of juvenile delinquents who were given a glimpse of prison life in an attempt to shock them into changing their behaviour.

The movie title came from a crime-reduction program designed to divert teenagers from a life of crime. The premise behind scared straight was to take teenagers who been in trouble with the law into a prison to meet long-term inmates who would attempt to scare them straight and avoid a future in prison. Prisoners would scream at the visitors, tell them of their experiences, their regrets, and the opportunity these teenagers still had to avoid prison.

At the end of the *Scared Straight!* documentary, the teenagers spoke of their desire to avoid jail. Three months after their visit, 16 of the 17 that featured in the documentary were still going straight. The message seemed to have got through.

Politicians and the media lined up to praise the Scared Straight program. It was implemented across the United States, Canada, the UK, Australia and Norway. The statistics appeared impressive, with 80 to 90% of the attendees going straight after their visit to prison.

In the same year as *Scared Straight!* was receiving an Oscar, Professor James Finckenaueur decided to test Scared Straight. Rather than simply collecting survey data on the outcomes for the attendees, he decided to conduct a randomised controlled trial.

The problem with simply collecting data on the attendees of the scared straight program is that you don't know what would have happened if they had not attended. Would they have continued to commit crime if they had not experienced their visit to prison?

A randomised controlled trial allows us to answer this question. In the simplest form of a randomised control trial, experimental participants are randomly split into two groups. One group receives the treatment. The other, the control group, does not. As the randomisation process should result in each group having broadly similar characteristics, you can infer that any difference in outcomes between two groups is due to the treatment.

Finckenaueur's trial was one of many randomised controlled trials that were ultimately conducted examining the efficacy of the Scared Straight program. They all showed the same thing. Scared Straight did not work. Not only that, Scared Straight alumni were more likely to commit crime than those who did not attend. A crime prevention program was rolled out across the world, yet was actually increasing crime.

Scared straight provides an illustration of the importance of trialling interventions to see if they actually work, and structuring those trials in a way that we can infer the effect of the intervention that we are seeking to understand.

In this unit, Trial Design, you will learn more about why we should conduct trials to test if our planned behavioural interventions work. We will explore how to design a trial, the common pitfalls that you need to avoid, and the analytical techniques that underly a trial. We will also explore the ethics of trials and how to design experiments that respect the experimental participants and minimise harm.