ears stream down Sahn’s face as he cowers in the corner of a dirty bathroom stall. A burly man, easily three times Sahn’s size, is screaming at him—and blocking his escape. “Somebody can come in here and bust your head wide open,” the man shouts, his face inches away from Sahn’s. “Do you want to be left that way—in a puddle of blood?”

Sahn, 13, looks like a lost puppy that has been cornered by an enraged grizzly bear. He should be riding his bike. He should be doing homework. He should be anywhere but here, trembling in front of a convicted felon at the Maryland Correctional Institution in Jessup (MCIJ).

So how did a middle-school kid end up at an adult prison? His mom sent him there. Sahn (pronounced “Shawn”) is participating in one of several inmate-run youth intervention programs that exist around the country. These programs give troubled teens a horrifying and powerful dose of adult prison life, with the hope that it will scare them away from a life of crime.

Around the country, troublemaking kids are being sent to prison for a day—sparking a heated debate.

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He may be young, but Sahn already has quite a record. He has been caught shoplifting six times. He has been in so many fights that his nickname is “Bam Bam.” Sahn’s mom knows what the experts know: Sahn is at a critical point. Statistics show that criminal kids tend to become criminal adults. Within a couple of years, he could be locked up for life. But can one day in the slammer inspire Sahn to turn his life around?

A Terrifying Day in Prison

Programs like the one at MCIJ have been around for decades. They are currently in the spotlight as part of a new show called Beyond Scared Straight on the A&E network. The series gives viewers a close and gritty look at what kids go through in these types of programs.

Each episode focuses on different teens visiting a different prison. In most episodes, the kids are taunted, harassed, and intimidated by the inmates. They may be locked into impossibly tiny jail cells or taken to griny community showers and told horror stories about the fights that break out there. They may be forced to eat nasty prison food or learn about the grisly diseases spreading through the facility. During Sahn’s visit, one inmate pulls up his pant leg to reveal a staph infection that is devouring the flesh on his shin.

In an episode at San Quentin Prison in California, kids are even taken to death row, where nearly 700 men await execution. Reality Check

On this particular day at MCII, 10 teens are in the group, including Sahn. Some have been arrested for possessing or selling drugs. Others have been caught stealing or carrying weapons. At the start of the day, they all seem cocky and laid-back. One kid brags to the camera that prison doesn’t scare him. Sahn boasts that if an inmate gets in his face, he’ll fight back.

Their confidence melts away when they step inside. As the kids are marched single file along a corridor strewn with trash, they pass a dizzying number of cells—MCII houses more than 1,000 convicts. The inmates shake the bars of their cells and bark threats and obscenities at the kids. The sound of screams and clanging metal echoes around the room.

The noise is deafening. Sahn’s terror is palpable. And this isn’t even the scariest part of the day.

The scariest part is the lesson on “blind spots.” Blind spots, also known as “death traps,” are places without surveillance cameras or guards. The bathroom stall where Sahn finds himself cornered is one such spot. Inmates have been attacked by other inmates in that very place. Though Sahn is not in any real danger in that stall—armed guards and camera crews are standing by—he is still petrified.

Has this scare tactic worked?

Heated Controversy

As viewers tune in to watch Beyond Scared Straight in record numbers, an intense controversy has arisen. Supporters of scared-straight programs are thrilled to see the topic on a national television program. Others aren’t so sure it’s a good idea. They say it turns criminals into celebrities.

Supporters, however, argue that the inmates are chosen carefully. According to Barry Rosenberg, a spokesperson for the show, only those whose behavior in prison has been exemplary are allowed to participate. He says these inmates sincerely want to get through to teens with the message “Don’t do what I did. Don’t end up here.”

But the controversy doesn’t stop there. Some juvenile-justice experts say that scare-tactic programs don’t work—and that they may even be harmful. A team of researchers at the Campbell Collaboration found that kids who participated were 28 percent more likely to commit crimes than kids who did not. Another study, by the Washington State Institute for Public Policy, found a similar result.

Why? One theory is that these programs make prison seem less scary—and that they therefore make the threat of going to prison less of a discouragement to breaking the law. Another possible explanation is that kids feel proud for having survived the traumatic experience rather than feel freaked out about the idea of going to jail one day. “The hard-core delinquents will actually think it is pretty cool,” says juvenile-crime expert John Wilson. “They will identify with the prisoners. They think: ‘I’m tough. I can fit in.’ And then they brag about the experience to their friends.”

Beyond Scared Straight Producer Arnold Shapiro does not take these criticisms seriously. He points out that the studies critics cite are based on research from the 1990s and are out of date. He also says he knows these programs work—and he says he has the proof to back it up.

Beyond Scared Straight is based on an award-winning documentary Shapiro made in 1978, Scared Straight, which showed troubled teenagers visiting Raffley State Prison in New Jersey. Over the years, Shapiro has followed Teens hear inmates’ stories at California State Prison, Corcoran. Inset: The inmate at far left, now 19, has been in prison since he was 15.
up with the 17 kids who appeared in the documentary. Only one became a career criminal. Another died from a drug overdose. The others say the experience changed their lives for the better. Shapiro claims this is solid evidence that scare-tactic programs work.

Yet the U.S. Department of Justice (USDJ) does not support scared-straight programs. In fact, earlier this year, two top officials wrote a scathing editorial condemning the show. What do they support? Mentorship, which research shows to be particularly effective. Mentorship inspires kids with positive role models, rather than terrifying them with negative ones. Still, some argue that if scare tactics change even one young life, then the programs are worthwhile.

**Uncertain Futures**

So what happened to the kids at MCIJ? One month after filming, producers checked in to see how they were doing. Several of them had jobs, dreams, and the sense that they could be successful in life. One kid, though, continued to steal and is now serving four years in prison.

As for Sahn, his day in prison was not enough to overcome his past. Prior to the show’s airing, Sahn failed to show up at a court appearance for a previous shoplifting charge. As a result, he is now being held in a juvenile detention center. His family and his counselors have not lost hope that Sahn will be able to turn his life around. But in the end, that will be up to Sahn himself.

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**What Do You Think?**

**Are Scared-Straight Programs a Good Idea?** Go back to the article to find arguments that support each side of this debate. Write the information on the lines below.

**YES**

**I am totally convinced.**

1. It worked for some of the kids in the original documentary.
2. 
3. 

**NO**

**I am beyond disturbed.**

1. 
2. 
3. 

**Write an Opinion Essay**

Examine both sides of the debate, and decide what you think about this issue. Write your opinion in one sentence. Use this sentence as a thesis statement for an opinion essay on whether scared-straight programs are a good idea. Send it to PRISON CONTEST for a chance to win Francisco Stork’s *The Last Summer of the Death Warriors*. See page 2 for details.

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**Contest**

**Get This Activity Online**

![Image of a pencil with the text: GET THIS ACTIVITY ONLINE](https://via.placeholder.com/150)