

## **An International Perspective on the Tough on Crime Movement**

Many historians describe the Tough on Crime Movement, which pushed up penalties and prison time for minor or habitual offenses between roughly 1980 and 2000, as a primarily American phenomenon, caused by a conservative turn in politics and various systemic failures during the 1970s. The narrative is well known: the psychic trauma of losing the Vietnam War, systemic failures such as two energy crises and Three Mile Island, and panics over such uncommon and invented threats as serial killers, Satanic ritual abuse, and religious cults led to a Reagan-Bush-era shift from rehabilitation to retribution in penology. States passed punitive three-strike, habitual offender, and truth in sentencing laws, created supermax and private prisons, and removed the protections for juvenile offenders. At the same time, the War on Drugs, targeting primarily African-American men, poured federal funds into surveillance and arrests for previously minor offenses. As a result, the incarceration rate in the United States soared to over 800 per 100,000 capita, by far the highest in the world.

However, although the specific crime panics and resulting protocols are unique to the United States, the globalization of economic, political, and cultural movement made Tough on Crime an international movement. Britain, France, Australia, and India all made policy changes during the 1980s and 1990s that resulted in a sharp increase in their incarceration rates, although the rhetoric was adapted to their specialized economic, political, and cultural conditions.

In Britain under Margaret Thatcher, the main fears were of LGBT people waging war on “the foundations of society,” with the result that juveniles were “running wild,” with no morals

to deter them from violent behavior. Procedural changes included draconian anti-LGBT restrictions, the closing of the Borstals, removal of juvenile protections, and bindover of thousands of juveniles to adult prisons.

In Australia, the main fears were drugs (Prime Minister Bob Hawke was a particularly strong advocate of marijuana as a “gateway drug”) and immigration from East and Southeast Asia. As a result, An Australian War on Drugs pushed up the incarceration rate for drug offenses from about 25 to over 150 per 100,000, with ethnic Chinese, South Asians, and Aboriginals severely over-represented.

In France, isolationist, anti-immigrant, and anti-Muslim rhetoric prevailed under President Jacques Chirac. His successor Nikolaz Sarkozy continued and intensified the anti-Muslim rhetoric into the 2000s, resulting in the anti-Muslim policy of laïcité, and a prison population that is nearly 50% Muslim.

In India under President Venkataraman, Tough on Crime rhetoric was aimed at scheduled tribes (ethnic minorities) and minority religious groups, especially Christians and Sikhs. Fear of members of these groups committing violent crimes while out on bail resulted in a toughening in pretrial release protocols. By 2000, nearly half of the Indian prison population was awaiting trial, with scheduled tribes and religious minorities over-represented.