

Op-ed: Unpacking the ‘Tough-On-Crime Election’ Agenda and Finding a Solution

L. Mussell, University of Canterbury

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One of the hot topics of this general election is [law and order](#), but are political parties getting this right? Tough-on-crime platforms are an easy way to [shore up votes](#), but the evidence shows that crime statistics are actually decreasing. [PAPA’s Care Not Cages](#) campaign calls for a rethink on our approach to justice, embracing [Turuki! Turuki! report](#) recommendations.

Imprisonment numbers are high, but that is not an accurate picture of public safety. New Zealand imprisons an astounding number of people, despite its small size and relative safety. Recorded crime levels in New Zealand are at their [lowest level](#) since the end of the 1970s. Yet, New Zealand has one of the [highest rates of imprisonment](#) in the OECD at around 220 per 100,000 people, in comparison to an OECD average of 147 per 100,000. This costs Aotearoa [\\$1.8 billion](#) in prison-operating expenditures each year alone. In the last 30 years the prison population in New Zealand has [risen considerably](#).

The costs are not only financial. Research shows that Māori, Pacific Peoples, and other racialised peoples are more likely to be [charged](#), [suffer use of force](#), [face imprisonment](#), and experience negative [stereotyped coverage](#) in media—and this is not due to certain people being more inherently “criminal.” We have known about this for decades, including through Moana Jackson’s seminal [He Whaipanga Hou](#) report. It’s connected to colonial disruption and institutions [more readily targeting](#) people who are brown, poor, and disabled (including mental disability and substance dependency). Māori constitute 17% of the general population and are hyper-represented at every stage of the criminal justice system, particularly in prison where they are [52.8% of prisoners](#).

Media focuses on sensational cases. Ram raids, gang violence, and interpersonal violence are happening in our communities, but tough-on-crime agendas will not stop this harm from happening. Tough-on-crime policies such as [three strikes sentencing](#), [Dawn raids against Pacific Peoples](#), and zero tolerance and [broken-windows policing](#) have all been shown as policy failures in New Zealand. Some of these ideas are transplanted from other places, particularly America, despite the lack of evidence to support them.

Political parties promise harsh punishments during election cycles, [regardless of their ability](#) to reduce crime. This is called penal populism, when politicians stir up and capitalise on concerns about crime to serve their own ends. New Zealand is a place identified by experts as [“particularly vulnerable”](#) to penal populism. The high imprisonment rates in NZ can be attributed to the introduction of various tough-on-crime policies, which have been heavily influenced by penal populism.

Imprisonment does not stop crime from happening, but it does cause harm. This includes harm to young people, people with mental illness, and tamariki and whānau left on the outside—not to mention everyone who feels unsafe under the current system. This contributes to ongoing [intergenerational disadvantage](#) and harm in New Zealand.

Tough-on-crime promises this election mostly involve rehashing failed policies of the past or from overseas. ACT are focused on reinstating [three strikes sentencing](#) and building more [prison beds](#) (increasing capacity to imprison more people). National also seeks to increase [imprisonment numbers](#) and [prison sentences](#), and create more [youth prisons](#). Labour promises to work [harder and smarter](#) to keep communities safe, yet also views this as focusing on policing and rebuilding prison spaces. The [Greens](#) and [Māori party](#) call for restorative and tikanga Māori-led justice.

The pathway forward is clear. The [Turuki! Turuki! report](#) was written by the Te Uepū Hāpai i Te Ora Safe and Effective Justice Advisory Group, comprised of people with practical working experience of the realities of the criminal justice system. It makes 12 recommendations to transform New Zealand’s justice system into a community-led system. A community-led system means communities are empowered to design social services that support families and individuals to be “safe and to flourish.”

These 12 recommendations will help address the social causes of harm, healing those who have been harmed, and are grounded in principles and processes of restorative and transformative justice. [Restorative justice](#) means restoring relationships between people who are harmed and have harmed. [Transformative justice](#) entails transforming relationships that were not whole to begin with. These principles are consistent with the principles of Te Tiriti O Waitangi. The current [corrections-led](#) approach, including Hōkai Rangī, has not done enough and has been largely “[ineffective and alien](#)” to Māori thinking.

We cannot continue with the same approaches and expect different outcomes. Political parties need to do better, and voters can demand fundamental change reflecting Turuki! Turuki! that prevents harm, addresses its causes, and promotes healing, restoration, and transformation.