

Britain leads the world in cracking down on climate activism, study finds

Research shows UK police arrest environmental and climate protesters at three times the average global rate

Damian Gayle, *The Guardian*, 11 December 2024

British police arrest environmental protesters at nearly three times the global average rate, research has found, revealing the country as a world leader in the legal crackdown on climate activism.

Only Australia arrested climate and environmental protesters at a higher rate than UK police. One in five Australian eco-protests led to arrests, compared with about 17% in the UK. The global average rate is 6.7%.

The research comes amid an outcry over the targeting of climate and environmental protesters, with a rise in the suppression of dissent around the world as the climate, biodiversity and pollution crises take hold.

It found an increase in the number and proportion of protests linked to climate and environmental destruction over the past decade, but argued that rather than tackling the issues provoking them, states are focusing on punishing dissent.

Michel Forst, the UN special rapporteur for environmental defenders, said earlier this year: “In many countries, the state response to peaceful environmental protest is increasingly to repress rather than to enable and protect those seeking to speak up for the environment.”

The latest research paints a picture of extensive repression of climate and environmental protest in the global north and south, with distinct characteristics in each region contributing to the overall trend.

“There is an increasing criminalisation and repression of climate and environmental protest,” said Oscar Berglund, a political economist at the University of Bristol who led the study. “These kinds of protests have increased, climate protests quite sharply, and the response to this has been a crackdown that has to be seen in the wider political sense of a breakdown in climate action.” [...]

Across the countries studied, an average of 6.7% of climate and environmental protests led to arrests, but the figure varied widely with the highest rates in the global north, not just in Australia and the UK, but also Norway, which had a rate of 15.1%.

The countries with the lowest arrest rates were Brazil at 0.6%, Peru at 2% and Uganda at 2.2%, but these were also the countries with the highest levels of police violence.

There were more than 2,000 killings of environmental defenders during the period studied, the researchers said, citing figures collated by the NGO Global Witness.

The researchers also found that new laws in the UK, the US, Australia and elsewhere had created new offences, increased sentence lengths for non-violent protest and minor acts of sabotage, and given police new powers to stop protests during them and before they take place.

The UK’s Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2021 and the Public Order Act 2022 transformed the relationship between protesters and the state, handing police extensive new powers to curtail protests and criminalising a range of protest activities. Berglund said his team’s research had found that these moves had been followed by many other countries.

At the same time, states around the world have repurposed existing powers. “One really alarming trend has been this use of organised crime legislation,” said Berglund, citing the case of activists from Futuro Vegetal in Spain. “In no possible way can you say that these are organised criminals.”