

'Stop and search' frequency reduced when law enforcement and academic research cooperate

May 8 2019, by Megan O'Neill And Liz Aston



Cressida Dick, Metropolitan Police Commissioner. Credit: [Isabel Infantes](#)

It has been a busy few days in the fierce debate about addressing the [knife crime problem](#) in England and Wales. London Metropolitan Police Commissioner Cressida Dick [unveiled](#) year-on-year declines in knife

crime and homicides in the capital for the year ended March, and claimed it was thanks to more police stop and search. Just days earlier, the College of Policing, which oversees police standards in England and Wales, said more or less the opposite about the tactic. Stop and search, it said, [risks](#) aggrieving people subjected to it and making them more likely to commit violent crimes down the line; instead, it wants England and Wales to adopt the more progressive approach to policing that has emerged in Scotland.

Knife crime rates have certainly been a political cause célèbre in recent months. The official 2017-18 [figures](#) for England and Wales were the highest since records began: homicides up by around a third year-on-year to 285, and [total knife offences](#) rising close to 40,000. With London a large contributor to these numbers, its new figures – out earlier than everywhere else – are quite a contrast. Homicides are down by a quarter, while knife-related injuries are down 10%.

It comes only weeks after Sajid Javid, the home secretary, [made it easier](#) for police to use stop and search. In particular, he loosened [the rules](#) around "Section 60" searches, which in certain circumstances – such as public events – can be mandated by senior police to allow officers to get around the rule that they must have reasonable suspicion that the person to be searched is carrying an offensive weapon.

The new London figures appear to vindicate these measures to make stop and search easier, but it's not actually that simple. The fall in [knife crime](#) may turn out to be blip, since annual figures are notoriously changeable, and a correlation with increased stop and search doesn't necessarily mean causation. There is plenty of [evidence](#) to support the College of Policing's argument that the stop and search measures are a step in the wrong direction. At this stage, it's hard to say anything conclusive.

If these subtleties appear to have been lost on Dick and Javid, it points to an important difference with how police policy has developed in Scotland in the past five years: academics have been allowed to play a major role in the Scottish reform process. This is one reason why Scotland has taken a more progressive approach to policing and stop and search to the one being pursued in London. This has been [achieved without](#) any noticeable rise in the violent crime figures, while there is [certainly](#) a case to be made that this will [benefit relations](#) between police and young people.

The College of Policing wants something similar adopted in England and Wales, along with the philosophy of the Glasgow-based Violence Reduction Unit, which [has championed](#) viewing violent crime as a "disease" that needs to be treated at source to stop it from spreading. To properly inform the debate about policing in England and Wales, however, it's important to understand how the involvement of academics in Scotland has played out.

Scotland's journey

Prior to 2015, Scottish stop and search [rates were](#) four times higher per capita than England and Wales. This flew under the radar because police often did it with the "permission" of the person they wanted to search. Like Section 60 searches south of the border, obtaining "consent" was a way for Scottish police to avoid the need for reasonable suspicion. Kath Murray brought this to light as part of her [Ph.D. research](#). Particularly worrying, searches involved disproportionate numbers of children, whose permission seemed the most dubious of all.

Police Scotland [tried to deny there was](#) a problem, before subsequently bowing to pressure and exploring reforms. For example, it piloted a more restrictive stop and search approach in the Fife region in late 2014, and asked us [to conduct](#) an independent evaluation. We [found](#) elements

of good practice, but also that police were still overly reliant on consensual searches and disproportionately targeted youngsters. We recommended scrapping the practice and moving away from confrontational searches towards more preventative policing that was much more engaged with [community groups](#) and other interested players.

The Scottish government created an [independent advisory group](#) to investigate these issues the following year, which used our report as part of the evidence. The group, which included prominent academics, [recommended](#) a code of practice for stop and search and an end to consensual searches. The government implemented both recommendations in the [Criminal Justice \(Scotland\) Act 2016](#).

Police Scotland, meanwhile, [accepted](#) all 19 of our recommendations. It set up an internal governance structure to oversee the new regime, [involving](#) academic researchers throughout. Most prominent was a research group, which included ourselves, Murray and others. We met roughly every six weeks from 2015-18, consulting on every stage of the [reform process](#). We wouldn't claim the arrangement was perfect, nor that we completely agreed with every police decision, but we think the process has helped to forge a more collaborative policing system that engages with partners and communities and focuses less on target-driven reactive methods.

It can be a challenge to play the role of "critical friends" when you are so frequently in contact with an organisation like the police, but it can be done if you are vigilant about academic independence. As shown in [previous studies](#), such a two-way flow of information is the best way to get people in public services to fully consider research findings in their decision making.

The police reform process incorporated research, for example, that gave

a voice to frontline officers, as well as people who experience stop and search. Both groups [are usually](#) ignored when senior officers make policy decisions. All the extra police contact can also inform research: we have already conducted [a review](#) of how visible policing affects public confidence, while one of us is supervising a Ph.D. on the cultural changes involved in Scotland's stop and search journey.

The Home Office needs to look at how to incorporate a similar two-way approach in England and Wales. There are signs that academic researchers are influencing certain aspects of policing south of the border: the [N8 Partnership](#) tailors research and gives advice on police policy in the north of England, for instance, while [EMPAC](#) does something similar in the East Midlands. Yet these groups are based on temporary funding and their contributions are mainly regional. The fact that Commissioner Dick and the home secretary are promoting stop and search to curb knife crime speaks volumes about the lack of influence of researchers at national level. It's a gap that could make a major difference to how the police service develops in the years to come.

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