

# Stop and search: New data shows continued ethnic disproportionality

December 2 2021, by Winifred Agnew-Pauley, Amal Ali, Bisola Akintoye

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Each year the Home Office publishes data on stop and search from all 43 police forces in England and Wales. The latest figures [for the year](#)

[ending March 2021](#) reveal a familiar pattern: stop and search disproportionately affects black people and targets drugs, not serious violence.

The figures come as the government plans to introduce further stop-and-search powers as part of the [police crime sentencing and courts bill](#) in the form of [serious violence reduction orders](#). Campaigners have warned that the bill will [deepen racial inequality](#) in the criminal justice system.

There were 695,009 stops and searches between April 1 2020 and March 31 2021, an increase of 24% from the previous year. This was driven by a 36% increase in searches for suspected [drug](#) possession (69% of all stop and search). While [the current political focus](#) is on the ability of stop and search to reduce knife crime, it is evident that drugs remain the dominant grounds for searches. Black people were seven times more likely to be searched for drug offenses than white people, despite the fact that [black people are no more likely to use drugs](#). Rather than being indicative of increased drug crime or [drug use](#), increases in stop and searches for drug possession [likely reflect inequalities in stop and search practices](#).

The majority of stops and searches yield no results, with 77% in the past year resulting in no further [police](#) action. The latest figures report that offensive weapons were found in only one in 50 stop and searches over the past year. The proportion of searches for offensive weapons decreased in the latest year and accounted for only 12% of searches. While the government and police forces continue to justify the use of stop and search as a method to disrupt knife crime and violence, these figures highlight that broader police powers are an ineffective approach.

Racial disproportionality in stop and search has been [reported every year since records began in 2007](#). For the year ending March 2021, black people were seven times more likely to be searched than white people

for searches under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act and associated legislation (the most frequently used stop-and-search powers). This was a slight decrease from the previous year, when black people were nine times more likely to be searched.

However, on closer examination, the decrease in disproportionality this past year was due to an increase in the number of white people searched, not a decrease in the number of black people searched. In 2019–20 there were six stops of white people per 1,000, which increased to eight stops per 1,000 population in 2020–21. In 2019–20 and 2020–21, black people were stopped and searched at a rate of 54 stops per 1,000 people.

Black people were stopped and searched at a higher rate than white people by [every force in England and Wales](#) in the most recent year, though there is significant variation between different police force areas. For example, the rate at which black people were searched compared to white people varied from 1.8 times more in Merseyside to 19.5 in Dorset.

The reasons for this disproportionality are [entrenched and complex](#), stemming from implicit and institutional biases and wider structural inequalities experienced by minority groups. While attempts to understand disproportionality through [different analytical tools](#) is important, evidence that the use of stop and search has [damaged trust in the police](#) among black and ethnic minority communities is clear.

The latest figures from the [Crime Survey for England and Wales](#) show that the percentage of black people who have confidence in police has been dropping since 2017–18. In 2019–20, 64% of black people reported having confidence in their local police (76% in 2017–18) compared to 74% of [white people](#).

## **Rethinking stop and search**

The stated legislative purpose of stop-and-search powers is investigative—to confirm or allay suspicions that an offense has taken place (carrying an illegal item) or is about to take place (carrying equipment to conduct a burglary). The police, concerned with enforcing the law and promoting public safety, believe the widespread use of the tactic is justified if they are able to detect even a small number of offenses, and maintain that their presence and the ["threat" of stop and search use](#) is successful in deterring crime. From this perspective, [any stop-and-search encounter can be justified](#) as either detecting crime or deterring further crime. Yet, there is [limited evidence to suggest](#) this is successful.

New legislation, through the police [crime](#) sentencing and courts bill, will grant police more powers to use stop and search to target serious violence—a strategy we know will likely impact black and ethnic minority groups. This has ramifications for trust and cooperation with the police, impacting criminal justice outcomes and exacerbating the number of black and minority ethnic people in the criminal justice system.

The increases in stop and search during 2020–21 continue to yield the same results as years past—targeting [black people](#) and mainly resulting in the detection of low-level drug possession offenses. These findings suggest that [police forces](#) across England and Wales should seek to reduce the use of stop and [search](#), and to rethink its utility in targeting low-level drug offenses.

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