

Is stop and search contributing to the spread of COVID-19 in the UK?

9 July 2020, by Ghaith Aljayyousi

As I was finishing my one-hour walk of the day on the afternoon of June 11 2020, two officers from the Merseyside Police Force stopped me near where I live and work in Liverpool. The men, who were in civilian clothing, identified themselves by showing me their IDs and handcuffs.

The officers asked why I was walking slowly and what I was thinking about. The questions made me feel like I was a character in a dystopian film. Naturally, I refused to answer.

The officers were not using any personal protective equipment (PPE). I asked them to keep a two-metre distance. But instead of complying with the social distancing rule, the officers asked if I had [illegal drugs](#) on me. I told them that I didn't. They immediately demanded a full-body search. I was stunned that they were going to search me without using gloves or a mask. I refused to be searched without the necessary precautions.

Because PPE was not available to the officers where they stopped me, I was walked to the nearest [police](#) van and was asked to enter it. There were officers inside the vehicle and no one was using PPE. The gloves were passed between different officers with their bare hands before they were worn by the one who searched me. He didn't disinfect them, and I was too scared to ask for the proper use of gloves at that point.

I have worked with [infectious diseases](#) for the last seven years. I use mathematical models to predict whether new drugs that look promising in the lab against a pathogen have the potential to cure or protect people from the disease in safe doses. The mathematical models I build help study the potential of new drugs in limiting the transmission of a disease.

Recently, I started to use these models with potential COVID-19 drugs. So far, no drugs seem to have the potential to limit the transmission of

COVID-19, so social distancing and physical protection are the only alternatives for the time being.

As I was being searched in the confined space of a police van, I recalled the [steps needed to reduce the transmission of the disease](#): maintaining a two-metre distance, washing hands, disinfecting surfaces and using a face covering. None of these criteria were met during the search.

[Guidance to the police](#) focuses on the use of PPE for the protection of police officers and emphasises that "officer safety is paramount in responding to situations" while ignoring public safety. The guidance discusses "the possibility that infected occupants do not know that they are infected". The possibility that the officers themselves not knowing they are infected is ignored.

My experience of the police conducting a stop and search without proper PPE is not unique. British Olympian and gold medallist Linford Christie recently described [the incident](#), recorded on video, of police dragging two international athletes, Bianca Williams and her partner, Ricardo dos Santos, away from their three-month-old child in a car "without one piece of PPE".

Similarly, [the shocking video](#) of police smashing the windows of the artist and rapper Ryan Colaço's car window and dragging him out of it also shows how the police did not use any PPE.

Earlier in May, during the height of the pandemic, a police officer [grabbed the wrist of an ambulance driver and handcuffed him](#) in London, again without using PPE.

Those incidents combine physical and [psychological violence](#) with what I would describe as biological violence, that is exposing people to serious disease through reckless physical interaction.

While physical and psychological violence can seriously harm or kill the direct victims, biological violence has the potential to spread from the victim to their immediate family and community through common routes of (viral) transmission making it potentially more dangerous.

Where are you from?

I was speaking in Arabic on the phone shortly before I was stopped. The officers took particular interest in my place of origin, asking where I was from many times while I was being questioned.

[The Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984](#)

indicates that stop and search is authorised when there are reasonable grounds to do so. The reasonable grounds test requires that first, the officer must have formed a genuine suspicion that they will find stolen or prohibited items and second, that there is an objective factual basis for that suspicion so that a reasonable person would reach the same conclusion.

The motives behind the police stopping and searching someone are difficult to prove in any individual incident. What we know however is that Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) people are [up to ten times](#) more likely to be stopped and searched compared with white people indicating that British police are [institutionally prejudiced](#) against this group of people.

We now know that BAME people in the UK are [at a significantly higher risk of COVID-19](#) even when correcting for socioeconomic factors. While this vulnerability might have physiological explanations, Angela Obasi, a senior clinical lecturer at the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, [argues](#) that it might actually be the subtleties of racism that are putting this group at higher risk from the disease.

We do not know whether the police incidents with the athlete, the rapper, the ambulance driver or myself were isolated. However, police guidance on the use of PPE does not give the impression that protecting the public has been given serious attention. For these reasons, a [public enquiry](#) into police stop and search practices in the UK during the pandemic is urgently needed.

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