

## Research Article

# Public Influence on the Ethnic Disparity in Stop-and-Search Statistics in Four London Boroughs

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## Abstract

The literature on police stop-and-search events over the last two decades has heavily criticised the police for being racially disproportionate towards young black men compared to their white counterparts, resulting in the police being labelled as institutionally racist. However, none of the literature considers the fact that the public reporting of incidents may have had a major and direct influence on police stop-and-search outcomes. This significant issue remains a hidden and under-researched area, even though the disproportionality of police stop-and-search incidents is the leading cause of the negative relationship between the police and black and minority ethnic groups. This study addresses this gap by examining public bias in reporting incidents that result in police stopping and searching an individual. This study addresses this gap by examining public bias in reporting incidents that result in police stopping and searching an individual. A mixed method approach has been taken and primary data has been collected through freedom of information requests from the four borough command units (BCU) of the Metropolitan Police with densely populated areas with Black and Asian minority groups to investigate the link between public calls or reports of incidents and the initiation of police stop-and-search events. This data has been measured against national stop and search statistics in line with demographic data gathered from National Census data for the areas. The research concludes that there is discrimination against black and minority ethnic groups in members of the public reporting concerns. Freedom of information request for quantitative data from the Metropolitan Police reveals that public calls for reported incidents are on average 8.4 times more likely to describe the perpetrator as black European rather than white and 23.9 times more likely in the Central East borough when describing Asian ethnicity.

## Keywords

Bias, Discrimination, Ethnicity, Police, Stop &amp; Search, Public Perception

## 1. Contextual Background on Police Stop-and-Search Activities

The police stop-and-search power remains one of the most controversial and seems to be used disproportionately to target black and minority ethnic groups [50, 64, 71]. Since the McPherson report was published in 1999, stop-and-search

has been put into the spotlight by recommending a change in reporting standards, to record all stop-and-searchers after the Metropolitan Police was found to be 'institutionally racist' [66]. The more recent report by Baroness Casey [17] echoed

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the findings and the Metropolitan Police was again termed 'institutionally racist, sexist and homophobic', with a significant factor in this being the stop-and-search data [17].

The existing research into this disparity and the subsequent recommendations focus only on one party and conclude that the police are to blame [9, 17, 25, 31, 51, 52, 66]. It is apparent that police stop-and-search is analysed as the cause and the subsequent 'effect' equates to a disproportionate level of searching of minority groups. The public influence on stop-and-search data only looks at the public being the target of police due to location/access (cause) and the police searching minority groups as they are more available to the police (effect) [8]. In addition, the stop-and-search literature needs more consideration and reflection on the public's influence on stop-and-search as there is little research mentioning the public as a potential cause of the problem, leaving a considerable gap in the knowledge. Nevertheless, there is a substantial amount of research on public biases affecting minority groups throughout society and evidence of systematic discrimination can be seen everywhere, whether in the school or university application process, public and private sector recruitment processes, access to NHS services or social interactions [4, 14, 20, 29]. These public and societal biases are not analysed by considering stop-and-search outcomes being influenced by the public calling for police intervention, eventually resulting in police stop-and-search activities disproportionately targeting people from ethnic minorities. The consequences of disproportionate targeting can be damaging to the police reputation and their relationship with certain groups resulting in violent protests, riots and complete distrust of the police [35, 39, 61]. This article argues that public reporting of incidents against minority groups can be a major contributing factor to the disproportionality of police stop-and-search data.

#### *The Article Seeks to Answer the Question*

Do members of the public call for police assistance disproportionately when faced with minority groups?

## 2. Literature Review

The existing research on police stop-and-search activities in the UK contains critical evaluations that raise questions about the fairness, effectiveness and possible prejudices involved in these encounters. Machado and Lugo [41] identify different areas of criticism, shedding light on the constraints and problems surrounding stop-and-search. One criticism is the discriminatory targeting of people from minority groups, notably those from black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) origins. There is a gap in the frequency of stop-and-search, suggesting that BAME individuals are being discriminated against [60].

Tiratell et al. [58] highlight the subjective personality of reasonable suspicion to individual police officers, underlining the possibility of implicit bias influencing officers' decision-making. They investigated the influence of societal

preconceptions and negative attitudes in the police and among the general public in biased profiling during stop-and-search situations. Public perceptions, demands and expectations may affect the frequency and regularity of these contacts with the police [71]. There is a need to investigate the connection between societal processes, public demands and the conduct of law enforcement agencies in stop-and-search processes.

Aside from the disproportionate targeting, many dispute the effectiveness of stop-and-search as a crime-fighting approach with the detection and arrest rate being 13% in 2022 [28]. The low detection rates of illegal items or criminal activities, according to O'Neill [54], are insufficient justification for the intrusive nature of these encounters and possibly more effective ways including intelligence-led policing and community participation are proposed. The absence of accountability and transparency is a further recurrent theme with the requirement for police to be more accountable and open in stop-and-search procedures [52]. Finally, community relations and trust are recurrent themes. For instance, there is a need to develop constructive connections between police and communities [45].

### 2.1. Blaming the Police for Biased Stop-and-Search Practices

According to the prevailing opinion, police misconduct is mostly to blame for unfair stop-and-search procedures [9, 18, 25, 31, 66, 51, 52]. This is due to concerns about potential discrimination, excessive targeting and civil rights violations. However, it is important to understand how the public's perspective has shaped this attitude and its implications [49].

Scholars who hold this position stress statistical discrepancies in stop-and-search encounters, notably the overrepresentation of specific groups such as people with minority ethnic backgrounds. These discrepancies indicate structural biases in police procedures, resulting in a disproportionate concentration on specific neighbourhoods [36]. Additionally, the Independent Office for Police Conduct [34] points to police officers' implicit biases, social prejudices and negative impressions which may affect decision-making during stop-and-search encounters. The prevalent opinion emphasises the importance of increased awareness, training and steps to confront and reduce these prejudices in the police service.

However, it is necessary to consider the broader environment in which these actions take place. The effect of public perspectives on stop-and-search confrontations must be considered [7]. Understanding the complexity of biased stop-and-search approaches requires acknowledging the public's perspective's role in forming this dominant position.

### 2.2. Factors Beyond Police Responsibility

Several contextual and cultural elements influence stop-and-search behaviours and understanding them is critical for a thorough analysis. The first factor affecting these inter-

actions' frequency and character is the legislative framework that governs stop-and-search powers, such as the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (PACE) and the related Codes of Practice. The law establishes the boundaries in which police officers must work and that any biases or defects in the law may affect stop-and-search authority [25].

Other factors that influence bias are public views, political debate and media narratives about crime and public safety which can all affect the prioritising and magnitude of stop-and-search approaches [18, 38]. Borooah [6] suggests that governments should embrace proactive enforcement techniques such as increased monitoring of stop-and-search powers to prevent public anxiety and politicisation of these operations. Socioeconomic gaps and inequities in society can also contribute indirectly to the incidence of stop-and-search procedures. This also suggests that people from areas with greater levels of hardship and deprivation may have more frequent contact with law enforcement authorities in response to crime trends and community demands [47].

Other criminological theories may also influence the police. These are routine activity, social norms and rational choice which have all been found to change the perception of the police [8]. Whereby these factors around people's availability in social norms and routine activity being less of a suitable guardian; Nevertheless, it does not explain the disparity in the stop-and-search statistics [8]. Police proactivity has also significantly reduced, with research pointing to financial austerity and government budget cuts [10, 19]. The effect of this is that it has been shown that police officers have limited capacity to be proactive and can only answer emergency calls [3]. This lack of proactivity could lead to public calls initiating stop-and-search even more. The police may not have the time and resources to conduct stop-and-search proactively and may only respond to stop-and-search incident calls.

The occupational culture and practices of police departments can influence the execution and consequences of stop-and-search operations. Officer discretion, training guidelines, supervisory methods and performance indicators might influence the incidence, targeting and behaviour during these encounters [16].

Scholars have investigated the link between socioeconomic status and stop-and-search methods and found that regions with greater socioeconomic hardship had higher rates of stop-and-search encounters [70]. Socioeconomic disparities can lead to a greater concentration of policing resources in certain areas, resulting in disproportionate stop-and-search rates.

Likewise, the level and character of crime in a given location have been shown to influence stop-and-search approaches, with higher crime areas usually seeing more stringent policing and increased use of searches and seizures as a crime control strategy [39].

Examining these characteristics sheds light on the environmental influences on police stop-and-search tactics that extend beyond individual officers. The research emphasises

the importance of addressing structural disparities, promoting community empowerment and fostering collaborative approaches between the police and the community they serve by considering socioeconomic considerations, crime rates and social factors.

### 2.3. Subconscious Bias of Police Officers

Miller et al. [48] found that officers with deeper implicit biases were more inclined to participate in discriminatory activities such as unfair stop-and-search strategies. They emphasised the possible effect of subconscious preconceptions on dealing with people of different races or ethnicities, as well as the impact of officer qualities and experiences on subconscious prejudices [62]. These prejudices were exemplified by officers with less experience being more likely to have larger implicit biases, highlighting the relevance of training and exposure to other communities in eliminating bias in law enforcement employees [21]. These studies demonstrate potential unconscious biases among police officers and how they might affect stop-and-search interactions. They emphasise the necessity for continual education, tactics and training to lessen the effect of bias on the decision-making procedures in law enforcement organisations [25].

The results of police stop-and-search tactics, particularly skewed outcomes and discriminatory effects, have important implications for developing fair and transparent policing strategies [64]. Zilka et al [72] advocate for more openness and accountability in stop-and-search procedures to overcome. Clear explanations from police about the grounds for stops and searches, and improved data collecting and reporting methods could tackle public concerns and foster more trust in law enforcement.

### 2.4. Societal Bias

Scholars have shown that sub-bias plays a vital role in our everyday lives and is fundamental to our daily interactions with people [1, 3, 13]. Our animal instinct for safety, socialisation, learning and emotions uses our experiences subconsciously to make decisions. This would suggest that sub-bias is connected to human nature, comparing this to the brain not working if you don't have sub-bias [26]. This is due to our brain's information processing taking shortcuts in unsafe situations. This notion that it is wired into human nature as a defence mechanism is further verified by neuroscientists. This leads to sub-consciousness in society, including human perception and judgements. Eagleman [22] showed that discrimination is formed from people's environment and experiences and is an animal safety mechanism that can cause sub-consciousness discrimination when safety is at risk. Scholars also agree that these sub-biases are fundamental to humans as we cannot function without them; however, they can cause negative consequences. Michel and Peters [46] support this view but state that this can lead to inaccurate

beliefs and discrimination. These actions were tested on a class of students where initial tests to identify personal biases were revealed via the use of role actors playing different economic and ethnic backgrounds. What was found that when dealing with participants pretending to be from wealthy backgrounds, the students reacted in ways that showed that these wealthy individuals were seen as threats [53].

Police are not the only part of the criminal justice system where bias is prevalent. In 2018, 40% of prisoners were of black or mixed ethnicity and when compared to demographic data, there is significant discrimination in sentencing [69]. It was stated that judges give harsher sentences to BME over white defendants, which has been attributed to bias [58]. The jury system is also subject to these biases. Hunt [33] investigated jury bias and found that the jury is more likely to give guilty against black defendants where the victim is white. Efforts to make a more representative jury do not affect this discrimination [63]. Therefore, the bias appears to be systemic throughout the criminal justice system and society as a whole.

Educational biases are prevalent in applications, grading and teaching and lead to discrimination in the education field. This further supports the notion that biases are not just in the police service but throughout society. Nordell [53] found that the application process for universities discriminates against BME groups. The experiment was conducted by using different ethnic-sounding names but keeping everything else the same and it was found that names that sounded as though they were from a black applicant were less likely to be accepted. Grades are also affected [20]. This shows a double effect whereby BME groups are less likely to be accepted into education and less likely to succeed. The notion of being double-affected needs to be further considered as this may play a role in the stop-and-search statistics. Further similarities have also been extended to society, whereby universities are called 'institutional racists', similar to the police, stating that health students are racially discriminated against in the curriculum [30]. It is apparent that the wider health education provision is plagued with racial discrimination and bias, playing a crucial role in discriminating against black minority groups [4, 14, 29].

The technological field and recent innovations in artificial intelligence have drawn these biases to the fore. In an investigation into the world of technology and policing, Fan [24] discovered that a programme of AI to be used in body-worn videos and automated facial recognition was mislabelling black people as apes, showing the programmers' or society's bias manifesting in this error. It is also apparent that the facial recognition software being used by police is biased due to statistical programming leading to false and discriminatory results [32].

Most research agrees that BME groups are treated differently due to race in day-to-day life including shopping, walking and general interaction, which scholars call microaggression caused by bias [20, 69]. Combined, it is evident that bias plays a role in the lack of legislative changes in drug laws and the subsequent discrimination against BME groups.

However, most research focuses on the police being the sole cause of the disparity in stop-and-search statistics [9, 25, 51, 52]. It appears to focus most research on the police, blaming some direction on training, society theories and overall exposure.

### 3. Methodology

A mixed method approach has been applied to analyse statistical and qualitative data with a critical review of the literature and in-depth data analysis of police stop-and-search acquired through freedom of information requests (FOI). Primary data had to be collected from the four borough command units (BCU) of the Metropolitan Police to investigate the link between public calls or reports of incidents and the initiation of police stop-and-search events. The reason for this was that the Metropolitan Police is the force most criticised in the literature and that existing research from the McPherson report and 2019 statistics indicate that it conducts most stop-and-search interventions with BME people [28]. It was also selected due to news headlines from 2019 reporting the heavy use of stop-and-search tactics and the ethnic diversity of London [5, 15]. It was then decided what stop-and-search items to search for. This was based on the literature findings around knife crime and drugs being the highest search items looked for by officers and the negative stereotype this can [28, 68]. The public call data from the FOI request was then sanitised further and broken down by ethnicity and analysed in line with stop-and-search data. The focus was more specifically on comparing means and ratios due to the limited data.

This allowed for comparing the likelihood of group by dividing the reported individuals by the demographic data, revealing the preference for identification codes IC1 and IC3 from the callers. These methods were chosen to analyse the data and address the research questions. Descriptive statistics provided an overview, the ratio comparison assessed preference. However, limitations exist, including assumptions, small data set and contextual considerations.

Data analysis was based on 999 phone calls made by members of the public describing suspects and incidents that may lead to a stop-and-search incident (possession of drugs, knives or other weapons, going equipped, etc.). The FOI data was requested from 16/03/2019 prior to any data being affected by COVID 19 pandemic in the UK. The calls from that day were then all analysed by the FOI officer and each relevant record was then recorded in time order. The call centres categorise these data into groups labelled as IC codes as follows:

- IC1 White – North European
- IC2 White – South European
- IC3 Black
- IC4 Asian (in the UK, 'Asian' usually refers to South Asians)
- IC5 Chinese, Japanese or other Southeast Asian
- IC6 Arab or North African
- IC9 Unknown

## 4. Findings and Discussion

Callers can select any ethnicity when making a call or give a description of the offender and the operator will assign an IC code. IC1 and IC3 have significantly different pool sizes. IC1 has a population size of 1,283,716 in the BCUs Central East (CE), North Area (NA), North West (NW) and Central North (CN) while IC3 has a population of 334,423, IC4 of 527,080,

and IC6 of 123,505. All these BCUs are dominated by the white population, followed by the Asian and black populations. Of note, the NW and CE have significantly higher Asian pollution compared to black. Table 1, regardless of the makeup of ethnic breakdowns of the population in each area, that black people are 8.4 times more likely to be reported to the police on average than any other ethnicity.

**Table 1.** Racial disparities in police call data: (initiated by members of the public).

	IC3	IC4	IC6
CN	4.6	0.3	N/A
CE	1.7	23.9	4.7
NA	14.1		1.2
NW	13.3	0.2	0.1
Average	8.4	8.1	2.0

Note: This table shows the likelihood of being described by the public for that ethnicity compared to IC1 (white) compared with demographic data.

**Table 2.** Ethnicity-specific police calls: a comparative analysis across four demographic areas.

Ethnicity	Total calls per ethnicity	Percentage of total calls	Total demographic (All BCU)	Disparity compared to white (IC1)
White – North European	68	31%	1,283,716	
White – South European	0	0%	0	
Black	100	46%	334,423	5.6
Asian (in the UK, ‘Asian’ usually refers to South Asians)	35	16%	527,080	1.3
Chinese, Japanese or other Southeast Asian	0	0%	0	N/A
Arab or North African	16	7%	123,505	2.2

Note: This date shows the completed disparity across all ethnicities. The minority ethnic groups are then compared to white ethnicity. This shows amount times more they are to be called and described by the public than white ethnicity.

The data shows that members of the public calling for service on different ethnicities significantly vary across the BCUs. However, the most interesting revelation is that even the BCUs with a larger proportion of BAME residents do not show a decrease in BAME groups being reported by the public. For example, in CE someone of Asian ethnicity (IC4) is 23.9 times more likely to be reported by the public compared to their white counterparts. This contradicts the findings from the majority of the research into human bias that exposure to more BAME groups decreases public bias and makes people less likely to discriminate against ethnic minorities [11, 56]. The research found that when people are in fear the amygdala otherwise known as brain processing of emotions, can cause

people to not have conscious considerations [1]. Hence, the findings support the initial hypothesis suggesting a further consideration in previous research that blames police for disrupting stop-and-search data and unfairly discriminating [50, 64, 71].

People's inability to read emotions was alluded to, and black ethnicity was more likely to be associated with people being criminals [37]. These biases and misidentifying could be a factor in why the public reports more black people pro rata compared with white people. This begs the question of why, if this has been known for a while, nothing has been done regarding safeguards for the public.

Other factors need to be considered such as the type of

crime asked about. Stop-and-search media reports have caused a 'label' effect, increasing the fear of crime [68]. In addition, the fear of drugs in neighbourhoods has been widely researched since the 1990s and can cause fear in BME neighbourhoods [40]. Survey results have found that people commonly associate drugs with these areas, which can cause stress and fear of crime [13]. This fear could cause an increase in calls for this type of crime. In addition, the use of these types of crimes could have affected the results. Conversely, even with these factors, the public disproportionately called the police on black minority ethnic groups compared to white ethnic groups in the period and area examined.

The final and unexpected observation in the results is that IC1 and IC3 appear to be the primary description codes used, with the other IC codes not used or underused. The research into facial recognition technology and mislabelling ethnicity may explain why people mislabel ethnicity [24, 32]. Research into this anomaly has found that black ethnicity is mislabelled on death certificates [2]. A quote from a participant in a racial mislabelling study stated, 'If you're not white skin toned, then you're Black' [44]. This may explain why all the statistics are so high; people only use two ethnicities when making calls to the police. It may also explain the disproportionalities in the calls for service.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The main aim of this study was to focus not just on blaming the police but us – the public – and the impact we may have on discrimination against black ethnic groups. The literature review offered a thorough analysis of current research into police stop-and-search procedures in the UK, considering the influence of the public viewpoint. The findings raise concerns about potential bias, unfair targeting and civil liberties abuses [49]. Some research acknowledges the impact of public attitudes and expectations on these actions. It recognises the intricacies inherent in stop-and-search operations and balances public safety and individual freedoms [18, 38]. The research showed that for the police to achieve fair and impartial stop-and-search procedures, it is important to involve communities, eliminate hidden biases and encourage communication between the public and the police [22, 48, 66]. What seemed to be obvious was that it all focused on blaming the stop-and-search statistics on the police but it is the public that calls the police and research shows that proactive policing has been significantly reduced in recent years due to funding cuts [10, 19]. With this, the literature found that the public clearly does have a subconscious bias, but the brain would not be working properly without subconscious bias [26].

Previous research, government reports and solutions fail to consider the role of the public. This study has started to plug the gap in the research of the public influences on potential discrimination and the roles of both the police and the public. This could lead to more effective solutions and a rebuilding of trust in the police among BME groups. It could suggest add-

ing training and safeguards and providing the best police response to everyone proportionately and equally where other research, evidence-based policing and government response have previously failed [12, 59].

The findings show that the public disproportionately discriminates when calling the police and the literature shows that bias discriminates against BME and that the potential increase of stop-and-search leads to BME protests and subsequent violence. This research recommends that there is a need for research into this area addressing the knowledge gaps, considering the number of stop-and-search incidents resulting in the use of force, arrests and charges in comparison to the number resulting in no further action.

It is suggested that translational criminology in policing research approach is taken [65]. It would recommend working with the Home Office and police services to add an extra box to record the initial ethnicity described from the public (if applicable) within the public data. This data should be analysed for a few years. Depending on the findings, an experimental design like research on emotional understanding and race could be used [32]. This is to establish the public biases when making a call for services and the rationale behind their intentions for reporting certain individuals. Once a full understanding has been achieved of why the public are calling disproportionately, then necessary safeguards based on this can be put in place. It is also recommended that the methodologic approach is used to overcome or reduce the potential influence of the public calls for service in further research and government investigation into stop-and-search.

The reason for this recommendation is due to the findings that the public does disproportionately call the police about black groups of people because previous research into stop-and-search ignores the public influence resulting in police stop-and-search. Finally, police service call centres must consider public bias when calls occur. The research suggests the benefits of training on public bias for the call handlers to raise awareness of the influence of potential public bias in the calls received, eventually resulting in a police stop-and-search.

## Abbreviations

BME: Black and Minority Ethnic  
 BAME: Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic  
 FOI: Freedom of Information  
 CE: Central East  
 NA: North Area  
 NW: North West  
 CN: Central North

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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