

Briefing: Stop-and-Search and Knife Crime

A controversial practice

1. The use of stop-and-search has been in steady decline for the last five years. Police in England and Wales conducted 541,000 stop-and-searches in 2014/15, a drop of over 50 per cent from the all-time high of 1.2 million in 2010/11. Stops of black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) individuals have also declined, both in real terms and as a proportion of all stop-and-searches.
2. However, nearly three quarters of all stop-and-searches still result in nothing being found, and only 14 per cent of stops lead to an arrest. Furthermore, a recent review of over 4,000 stop-and-search records by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary revealed that 15 per cent did not have reasonable grounds recorded (in Cleveland, 64 per cent of records showed no reasonable grounds). And while the likelihood of being stopped and searched if you are a BAME individual has fallen, it remains the case that black people are *over four times* as likely to be stopped as white people.
3. The use of stop-and-search continues to attract controversy over its effectiveness and its disproportionate impact on BAME people, corroding community relations between police and minority communities. However, some commentators – and also the Metropolitan Police Commissioner – have previously suggested that it might have a deterrent effect on crime, particularly on the carrying of knives. With emerging signs of a recent surge in knife crime in London coinciding with an all-time low in the Metropolitan Police's use of stop-and-search, arguments about the necessary use of stop-and-search as a deterrent have re-emerged.
4. This briefing demonstrates why these arguments draw false links between the decline in the use of stop-and-search and an uptick in knife crime, a point recognised by the Home Secretary in a speech to the National Black Policing Association in October 2015. It is notable that the Metropolitan Police responded to the speech by admitting that there is 'no definitive evidence to prove or disprove the suggested link.'

Absence of evidence

5. The Home Office released a report in March 2016 on the impact of Operation BLUNT 2, a spring 2008 initiative by the Metropolitan Police to dramatically increase the number of weapon searches in London. In ten prioritised boroughs, the number of weapon searches more than tripled, with the expectation that crimes such as assault involving a sharp weapon, robbery, and possession of a weapon would come down.
6. However, the Home Office's analysis of police recorded crime 'found no statistically significant crime-reducing effect from the large increase in weapons searches during the course of Operation BLUNT 2. This suggests that the greater use of weapons searches was not effective at the borough level for reducing crime.' A

similar analysis of London Ambulance Service data on calls for injuries caused by weapons actually found that such call-outs fell faster in boroughs with smaller increases in the number of weapon searches.

7. Robust evidence from New York similarly outlines a lack of positive correlation between stop-and-search – or ‘stop-and-frisk’ – and violent crime. Since 2011, the number of stops in New York fell by over 90 per cent. Rather than an increase in the number of violent crimes (as predicted by the New York Police Department), the decline in the controversial use of stop-and-frisk has coincided with a 23 per cent drop in shootings and a 33 per cent drop in murders.

Does Stop-and-Search actually reduce crime?

8. The Home Office report admits candidly that any evidence base for crime-reducing effects of stop-and-search is ‘limited’. Research into the use of stop-and-frisk in New York using annual crime data and over larger geographical areas is, at very best, inconclusive. It has been shown that stop-and-frisk may lead to a small reduction in the probability of a crime occurring in *very small* geographical areas. But even if this small deterrent effect does exist, it is both localised and short-term, lasting only four days with a radius of 300 feet.
9. UK evidence is similarly insubstantial. There is some evidence to suggest that targeted use of stop-and-search in crime ‘hotspots’ can have a very temporary deterrent effect on crime, similar to the localised effect mentioned above. However, another study of Operation BLUNT 2 found that while there was an immediate positive effect on recorded crime in hotspot areas where five or more stops occurred, it only took three days for crime rates to return to levels comparable to the time before the increase in the use of stop-and-search.
10. As the Home Office report concludes, even where there is evidence about an apparent crime-reducing effect of stop-and-search, the results are very mixed and there are firm counteracting arguments. Furthermore, these types of analysis do not take into consideration the negative impact stop-and-search tactics can have on police/community relations and the consequential impact on public willingness to positively engage with the police and the law.

What we know:

- There is no evidence that the reduction in the use of stop-and-search in the UK has caused an increase in knife crime.
- Any evidence of increased stop-and-search having a clear and crucial crime-reducing effect is inconclusive, both in London and New York.
- In those cases where stop-and-search *has* been shown to have any deterrent effect, it is both very short-lived and highly localised and is likely to have damaging impact on community relations.

For further information contact Ben Summerskill, Director, on 0203 176 1153 ben.summerskill@criminaljusticealliance.org.uk or Peter Keeling, Member Support Officer, on 0203 176 1153 peter.keeling@criminaljusticealliance.org.uk.