

**WHAT CAN BE DONE TO MAKE OUR STREETS SAFER, BUT KEEP THE COMMUNITY ON SIDE?**

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# NEWSFOCUS



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Hands asked the Home Secretary to review the search laws, claiming that the current regime is dogged by political correctness which places recording the ethnic background of the person being stopped above effective policing.

"The Home Secretary has a habit of announcing new data-gathering exercises and new offences. What we need is to change the way London is policed. It's time to copy New York City and introduce zero-tolerance policing, get more police on the streets and give powers to local officers to make sure our streets are safe for our children to walk on," he added.

Who police stop, how often and why, has been a thorny political issue for many years, and it is unusual to hear a politician talk frankly on the subject.

To the black community, stop and search has long been the symbol of a draconian police system which unfairly targets and harasses the black youngsters.

The issue was brought to the fore by the racist murder of black teenager Stephen Lawrence in 1993.

Lawrence was stabbed to death because he was black, and did not get justice for the same reason.

Judge Sir William Macpherson reported on the murder and bungled Met police investigation, sparking a national debate on race and criminal justice, and propelling into the public area many issues key to London's black community.

Macpherson came up with 70 recommendations to bridge the chasm of trust between the 'institutionally racist' Met police and London's ethnic communities. Monitoring the use of police stop and search was

**'CRITICS SAY THAT NEW POLICE GUIDELINES HAVE STRIPPED OFFICERS OF THEIR POWER, SHIFTING THE BALANCE IN FAVOUR OF VIOLENT CRIMINALS'**

one, aiming to make the police accountable and prevent what many felt was black stereotyping.

Previously police officers acted with impunity, searching whoever they liked on the street. But new guidelines were introduced after Macpherson.

Now officers need 'reasonable grounds based on specific information' to conduct searches, and must record ethnic backgrounds and reasons for a search. Forms have to be completed when police make a 'stop and account', or question someone without conducting a search.

It has quantified what was once an informal but crucial element of beat policing and the Home Office publishes annual stop and search tables, broken down by ethnic background.

Critics say the guidelines have stripped police of their power. It has gone full circle, they claim, shifting the balance in favour of violent criminals and emboldening them to carry weapons.

The Home Office and police are acutely aware how emotive stop and search is. Figures show that if you are black you are six times more likely to be stopped

# HAVE THE BAD GUYS GOT THE EDGE?

**FROM BEING PERCEIVED AS UNFAIR AND RACIST, HAVE THE STOP AND SEARCH RULES SWUNG TOO FAR IN FAVOUR OF KNIFE AND GUN CARRIERS? AIDAN JONES INVESTIGATES**

and searched than a white person. Asians are twice as likely to be searched, but that rockets when searches under the Terrorism Act are added.

To many black Londoners, stop and search evokes raw memories. Tempering of police power is, for many, a symbol of the growing awareness of race equality in British politics and society, and the only practical way to win over ethnic minorities after years of mistrust.

The older generation remember the 'sus' laws of the 70s and early 80s, which let police search and arrest on the suspicion someone might commit a crime. Sus was widely believed to have been used by police to abuse and harass young black men across London. In 1981 there was rioting, caused in part by what the law represented. It was replaced soon after by Section 1 of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act.

Despite the softer line, stop and

search still causes tension, and it is getting worse.

Campaign groups such as the 1990 Trust say police stop and search is still the entry point for black youngsters into the criminal system, where they make up a disproportionate number of those searched, cautioned and jailed.

Last weekend Lib Dem leader Sir Menzies Campbell waded into the debate, slamming the searching of blacks and Asians under anti-terrorism powers as "overused and ineffective". Since 2000 nearly 170,000 people have been stopped and searched under the Terrorism Act, with only 40 convicted of an offence.

A spokesman for the 1990 Trust said figures showed police still searched disproportionately. "The figures don't support the argument that police are not doing enough searches," he said.

"Stop and search is on the up and is a very worrying trend."

Police say it leaves the policy in limbo; neither building community relations nor effectively catching and punishing those carrying knives, guns and other weapons.

"I don't think we search as many people as we used to a few years ago," said one Kensington policeman who did not want to be named.

"Our officers might walk past 20 people a day carrying knives, but they have no grounds to stop them. It is frustrating and I imagine it makes children more confident that they won't be stopped, searched and arrested."

Post-Macpherson, 'reasonable grounds' are no longer down to an officer's local knowledge, nous or judgement, but must be calibrated on a higher level of suspicion.

According to the Kensington police officer, the result is that drug dealers or addicts are being picked up because their crimes are more visible, but people carrying weapons are not.

"You can smell drugs or look at someone and see they're high, but you can't detect an offensive weapon. Unless a member of the public or our officers see someone showing off a knife or making threats, we cannot search them."

It is discouraging the police from stopping people, even against their better judgement, the officer added.

"As the grounds for searching have become a lot more stringent and the spotlight has turned on the police, there's a natural tendency for officers to do it less frequently. They're asking themselves 'Is it worth my job?' because every search now has the potential to turn into a complaint of police harassment."

It is a sobering assessment and one that is unlikely to reassure west Londoners during this tense time.

Community leader Dawn Lewis, who organised a meeting last week to address the issue of gang violence at the Emerald Centre, Hammersmith Road, appreciates the difficulty police face in walking a tightrope between targeting black youths who carry weapons and keeping the community on side.

"We must be careful not to go backwards, because a heavy-handed approach will cause problems of its own. But as a parent you most definitely want to see more searching at times like this, as long as it's done sensitively. Searches are embarrassing and there are days that kids really don't need that to happen to them, but if you haven't done anything wrong there should be nothing to worry about," she explained.

Senior community leaders have warned that the horrific knife and gun murders of recent weeks may be just the tip of the iceberg. In some areas carrying weapons is the rule rather than the exception for teenagers, and knife-carriers are getting younger all the time.

Until there is a dramatic shift in teenage culture, youths of all colours may have to get used to constant searches. The Violent Crime Reduction Act comes into force this year giving teachers the power to search pupils they suspect of carrying weapons. West London police want more frequent use of metal detectors at tube stations, and there are increasingly vocal calls for knife-detection 'archways' at school gates, as used in the United States.

Many officers would also like to see the current search law re-worded to give them more freedom to do their job.

"We disproportionately searched black kids, not white ones, and that's where it went wrong, but the situation on the streets now is fairly shocking and we have to get to grips with it very quickly," the police source said.

"People are going to think how are these teenagers walking around with knives and not being arrested? Maybe it's time for a national debate."

## YOUR SHOUT:



Jason Smith, 20, of Goldney Road, said: "I don't mind if it's for a genuine reason, but cops make up excuses. They'll say, 'We're stopping you on suspicion of robbery,' if I walk out my house. Tracksuit bottoms and hoodies; that's code for being stopped."



Laranda Reveira, 31, a mother of two of Harrow Road, Kensal Town, said: "My young black male friends get searched on the way to picking up their kids or to the shop. Police never apologise. It's not helping because they target stereotypes."



Michael Kandinski, 18, of Goldney Road, Maida Hill, said: "I get stopped and searched on a regular basis - inappropriately. It happens especially if you're black. If police see a group of white kids and a group of black kids, you know who they're going to move to first. It makes me want to rebel. They should be catching the real criminals."



Ken Power, 39, a father of five of Westbourne Park Road, Notting Hill, said: "It may be a hassle but if it stops one more youth being killed, it's worth it. If you've nothing to hide, there's no harm done. I get stopped, but if you're polite and don't act back it confuses them and they relax. My son, Michael, 20, also gets stopped a lot. He sees it as a hassle, but he's a good kid so it's not a problem."



Daniel Eaton, 16, of Marylands Road, Maida Vale, said: "I get stopped all the time. Once I got nicked for telling them my real name, but we know their tricks. They radio in and if they can't find your name, they take you down to get your prints and details on file for future reference."

**'WE HAD A THIEF IN THE SHOP, AND IT TOOK THE POLICE TWO AND A HALF HOURS TO GET THERE'**



Josh, 19, of Shirland Road, Maida Vale, said: "I get stopped pretty much every night because I've got my hood up in the winter. I don't think the police do a good enough job. We had a thief in the sports shop in Bayswater where I work and it took them two and a half hours to get there. They should be responding to calls like that rather than stopping random people in the street."



Ross Shayler, 21, of Chippenham Road, Maida Hill, said: "Everybody gets stopped. I've been stopped at least 50 times. Cops shove their hands in your pockets. I've been beaten in the back of a van and in the cell. There are good cops around, but the ones that aren't give them all a bad name."



Nick Berry, 21, an American student in Elgin Avenue, Maida Hill, said: "I'm not surprised that the ratio of those stopped is six blacks to one white. Stopping you and making you empty your pockets is too intrusive and condescending."



Otis, 19, of Mozart Street, West Kilburn, said: "I've been stopped and searched 10 times. It makes me feel like a criminal. It's not effective crime prevention. Police would rather nick someone for something petty than patrol out in the cold."

● INTERVIEWS BY CHRISTIAN McLAUGHLIN