

## BRIEFING

# **The racialised harm of police strip searches**

A response from the Runnymede  
Trust to a Home Office  
consultation

June 2024

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## About the Runnymede Trust

The Runnymede Trust is the UK's leading racial justice think tank.

From broadening the curriculum to exposing the Windrush scandal, our work is rooted in challenging structural racism and its impact on our communities. Our authoritative research-based interventions equip decision makers, practitioners and citizens with the knowledge and tools to deliver genuine progress towards racial justice in Britain.

## Contents

Summary	2
Background and context	2
Strip search in England and Wales	4
Strip search in London	6
Response from the Runnymede Trust	7

## Summary

- New Home Office data and a government consultation has enabled the Runnymede Trust to explore the use of strip search by the police, and its impact on people of colour in the UK.
- Black people are subject to disproportionate rates of strip search across all police forces in England and Wales:
  - Black children are 6.5 times more likely than white children, and Black adults 4.7 times more likely than white adults, to be strip searched by police.
  - In London, Black children are 5.3 times more likely than white children, and Black adults 3.5 times more likely than white adults, to be strip searched by police.
  - Nearly half (47.7 per cent) of strip searches carried out on children in London are on Black children.
- The Metropolitan Police conducted around a third of strip searches in England and Wales in the year to March 2023.
- Evidence illustrates the disproportionate, racialised harm caused by strip searches.
- Instead of using heavy police powers such as strip search, and in the context of wider punitive policing and curtailment of rights, the Runnymede Trust calls for a societal reorientation to address the root causes of criminalised behaviour, to actually prevent harm.

## Background and context

The Home Office has opened a consultation on the use of strip search against minors, proposing a number of new measures that they argue will help safeguard children who are subject to the exposure of intimate parts 'without hindering the police's ability to keep the public safe'.<sup>1</sup>

The changes being proposed by the Home Office include, but are not limited to:

- Introducing a new requirement for police custody officers to consult an officer of at least the rank of inspector prior to conducting an EIP (Exposure of Intimate Parts of the Body) search of a child or vulnerable person in custody.
- Introducing a new requirement to notify a parent/guardian of the search and its outcome as soon as practicable when an EIP strip search takes place.
- Adding a paragraph to the PACE Codes which makes clear the potentially traumatic impact of the strip searches on children.
- Introducing a new requirement to notify an officer of the rank of at least superintendent as soon as practicable following any urgent strip search of a child or vulnerable adult – i.e. where no appropriate adult was present.

The consultation comes at a time of increased scrutiny of the police power to order strip searches. This follows the abhorrent strip search of Child Q, a Black girl who was strip searched while on her period in her school in Hackney, without an appropriate adult present, after being wrongly accused of smelling of cannabis.

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<sup>1</sup> *Proposed amendments to Pace Codes of Practice A and C: Strip searches* (2024) GOV.UK. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/proposed-amendments-to-pace-codes-of-practice-a-and-c-strip-searches> (Accessed: 31 May 2024).

Recently published data by the Home Office has been analysed for the first time by the Runnymede Trust to explore the broader racialised nature of these powers.<sup>2</sup> This research is detailed below.

Strip searches are a highly intrusive subjection of state power on citizens. As our research shows, strip searches are also highly racialised, with Black minors in particular far more likely to be strip searched than their white counterparts. Research has shown how strip search can be severely traumatic and humiliating, particularly for children, with long lasting effects such as anxiety, depression and lower educational attainment.<sup>34</sup>

The use of strip search by the police must be seen in a context of increased police powers, such as the introduction of Serious Violence Orders under the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act of 2022. Analysis by the Runnymede Trust found that SVROs, and other forms of intrusive and invasive police powers, are likely to be used disproportionately against people of colour and be largely ineffective.<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that this increase in police powers is not supported by a wide evidence base<sup>678</sup>, and is creating irreparable harm in our communities.<sup>9</sup>

The Runnymede Trust does not agree that the proposed changes to strip search by the Home Office go far enough to protect minors. Strip searches do more harm than good, merely attempting to address the symptoms of criminalised behaviour when we need a systemic approach to preventing it. The Runnymede Trust contends that there are better ways to protect minors from harm than what is being proposed. We propose an immediate end to the use of strip search on minors, and advocate for a reorientation away from punitive policing and move towards harm reduction rooted in the community, addressing the socioeconomic causes of criminalised behaviour.

*The Runnymede Trust has provided a response to the government's consultation, an amended version of which can be found below.*

## Key Findings

We have conducted an analysis of the use of strip search using data published by the Home Office<sup>10</sup> for the year ending March 2023 which provides the most detailed reporting of its

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<sup>2</sup> Home Office (2024) *Other PACE powers, year ending 31 March 2023 (second edition)*. GOV.UK. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/other-pace-powers-year-ending-march-2023>

<sup>3</sup> Children's Commissioner (2023) Strip search of children in England and Wales – analysis by the Children's Commissioner for England.

<sup>4</sup> Juvenile Law Center (no date) 'Addressing Trauma'. Available at: [https://jlc.org/sites/default/files/publication\\_pdfs/AddressingTrauma-EliminatingStripSearch.pdf](https://jlc.org/sites/default/files/publication_pdfs/AddressingTrauma-EliminatingStripSearch.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Head, T. (2023) Against Serious Violence Reduction Orders - Discriminatory, Harmful and Counterproductive. *The Runnymede Trust*.

<sup>6</sup> Tiratelli et al. (2018) 'Does stop and search deter crime? Evidence from ten years of London-wide data'. *The British Journal of Criminology*, 58 (5), pp. 1212–1231.

<sup>7</sup> Liberty et al. (2023) Holding Our Own: A Guide to non- policing solutions to serious youth violence.

<sup>8</sup> McCandless et al. (2016) Do Initiatives involving Substantial Increases in Stop and Search Reduce Crime? *Home Office*.

<sup>9</sup> Liberty et al. (2023) Holding Our Own: A Guide to non- policing solutions to serious youth violence.

<sup>10</sup> Home Office (2024) *Other PACE powers, year ending 31 March 2023 (second edition)*. GOV.UK. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/other-pace-powers-year-ending-march-2023>

use to date.<sup>1112</sup> The data has allowed us to explore the racialised nature of strip search among both adults and children. While our main focus is across England and Wales, we also conducted specific analysis of its use in London, given the controversies around their use since Child Q, the high public interest, and the fact that over 50 per cent of strip searches of Black children, and around a third of all strip searches, are conducted by the Metropolitan Police.

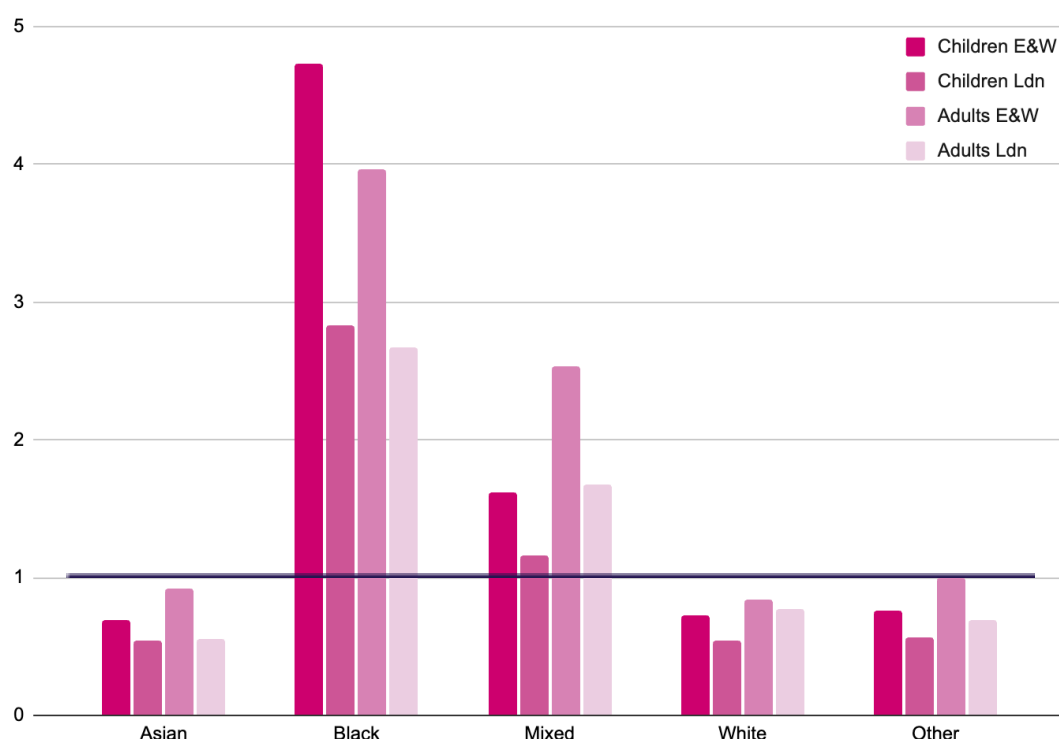
### Strip search in England and Wales

Black children are 6.5 times more likely than white children to be strip searched by the police. Despite making up 5.5 per cent of the child population of England and Wales, 26 per cent of strip searches of children are carried out on Black children, nearly five times the proportion of the population.

Black adults are 4.7 times more likely than white adults to be strip searched by the police. 3.7 per cent of the adult population of England and Wales are Black, yet 14.5 per cent of adult strip searches are carried out on Black adults.

Our analysis finds that people of White, Asian and Other ethnicities are generally subject to approximately equal or a lower proportion of strip searches relative to their proportions of the population (Figure 1). These disparities are specific to all Black communities, but particularly Other Black and Black Caribbean ethnicity groups. The disaggregated Mixed groups reflect this trend; those with Mixed White and Black heritage (but also Mixed Other) are subject to disproportionate strip searches while Mixed Asian groups are not (Figure 2).

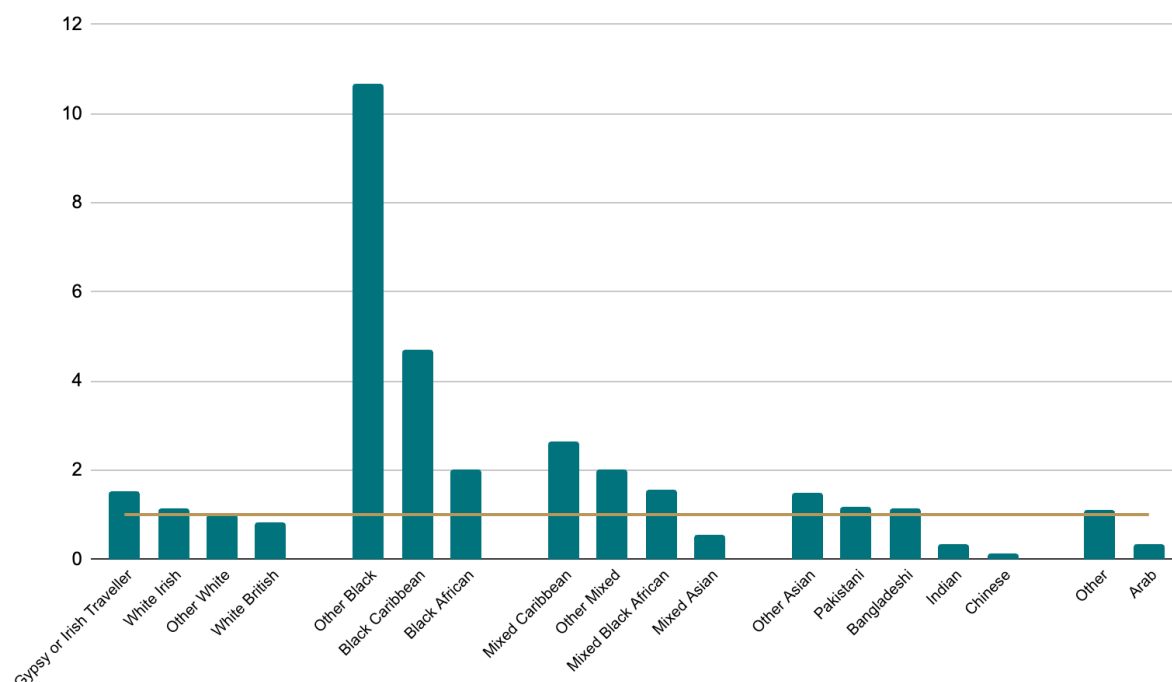
Figure 1: Strip search rates by multiple of population proportions, by age and area



<sup>11</sup> All figures are excluding those who did not state their ethnicity

<sup>12</sup> Police force data excludes Devon & Cornwall and Humberside as data was not available

Figure 2: Strip search rates by multiple of population proportions, England and Wales



When disaggregated, the disproportionate rates of strip searches among Black people are widespread and exist across all police force areas (with the exception of North Wales where no strip searches were conducted). In Sussex, a Black person is 18 times more likely to be subject to a strip search than a white person. In our analysis, we found ten police forces that strip search Black people at a rate ten times higher than white people (Figure 3 and Table 1).

Figure 3: Times more likely a Black person is to be strip searched compared to a white person, by police force area

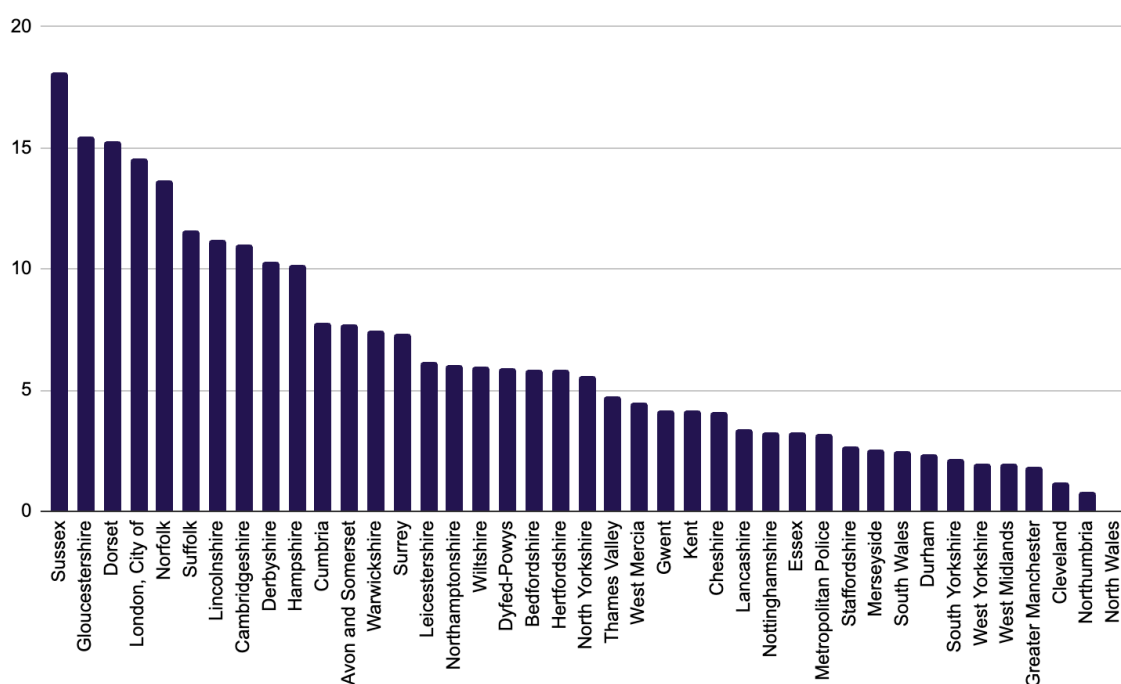


Table 1: Strip search rates and times more likely Black people are strip searched than white people

	White (rate per 1000 pop)	Black (rate per 1000 pop)	Times more likely
Sussex	0.3	6.2	18.1
Gloucestershire	0.2	2.7	15.4
Dorset	1.5	22.9	15.3
London, City of	10.9	158.8	14.5
Norfolk	0.2	2.3	13.7
Suffolk	0.3	3.3	11.6
Lincolnshire	0.4	5.0	11.2
Cambridgeshire	0.2	1.9	11.0
Derbyshire	0.2	2.1	10.3
Hampshire	0.3	3.5	10.2

### Strip search in London

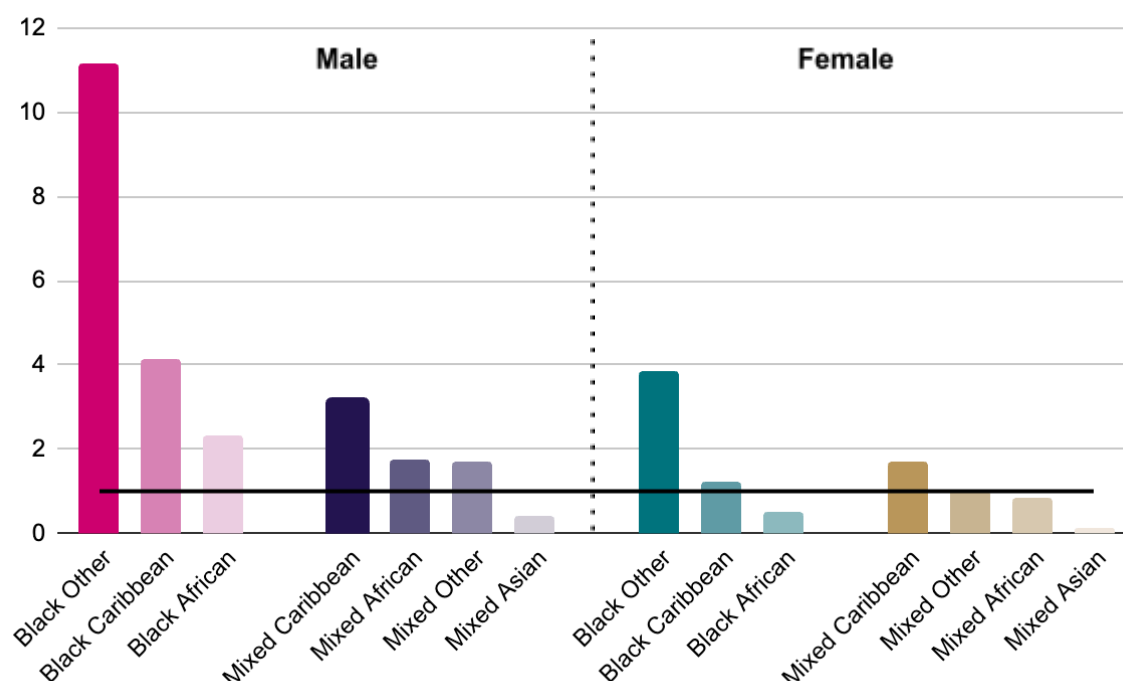
Almost a third of strip searches - over 20,000 - were conducted by the Metropolitan Police force last year. Overall, Black children are 5.3 times more likely than white children to be strip searched by the Metropolitan Police. Nearly half (47.7 per cent) of strip searches carried out on children are on Black children, despite making up 16.9 per cent of London's child population.

Black adults are 3.5 times more likely than white adults to be strip searched by the Metropolitan Police. Despite making up 12.6 per cent of the adult population of London, over a third (33.6 per cent) of strip searches carried out on adults are on Black adults.

Disaggregated analysis of strip searches in London show that, despite making up just 1.7 per cent and 3.9 per cent of the London population, Black Other and Black Caribbean people are subject to 9.3 per cent and 7.4 per cent of strip searches, respectively. Again, Londoners of Mixed Black ethnicity specifically are overrepresented in strip search numbers, with highly disproportionate rates among people with a Mixed White and Black (both Caribbean and African) heritage, rather than those with Asian heritage.

Intersectional analysis shows that Black African men (2.3 times), Black Caribbean men (4.1 times) and Black Other men (11.2 times) are all more likely to be strip searched than White British men in London. Other Black women are nearly four times more likely than White British women (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Times more likely disaggregated ethnic groups are to be strip searched than their male or female White British counterparts



## Response from the Runnymede Trust

The power of police to strip search minors should be immediately revoked.

This current policy is unworkable for a number of reasons. Our analysis shows that the policy is used disproportionately against Black minors in particular, and is heavily racialised. The policy creates long-term emotional harm<sup>13</sup> to those that are subjected to it, and is a highly intrusive subjection of state power on citizens.<sup>14</sup> This police power must also be seen in a context of increased police powers brought in by successive government legislation, which serve to over- police and under- protect communities of colour<sup>15</sup>, and alongside the institutional racism within the Metropolitan Police force detailed in the Baroness Casey Review.<sup>16</sup>

Evidence shows that tackling the wider socio- economic determinants of harm in society, including tackling poverty, social inequality, poor quality housing, failing education systems and increasing access to social provisions such as food, welfare and childcare, are much

<sup>13</sup> Children's Commissioner (2023) *Strip search of children in England and Wales – analysis by the Children's Commissioner for England*.

<sup>14</sup> 'Northern Ireland: Police must stop strip searching children immediately' (2023) *AIUK Press Releases* [Preprint]. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/northern-ireland-police-must-stop-strip-searching-children-immediately> (Accessed: 31 May 2024).

<sup>15</sup> Head, T. (2023) *Against Serious Violence Reduction Orders- Discriminatory, Harmful and Counterproductive*. rep. The Runnymede Trust.

<sup>16</sup> Baroness Casey of Blackstock DBE CB (2023) *An independent review into the standards of behaviour and internal culture of the Metropolitan Police Service*. rep.



more effective in reducing harm in society than 'tough on crime' policies, such as strip search.<sup>17</sup>

The Runnymede Trust therefore advocates for a societal reorientation towards a system rooted in care and the community, away from discriminatory systems and institutions. What is urgently necessary is the adequate provision of meaningful investment in community led projects, separate to the state, which aim to reduce harm within their communities through healthcare, education and accessible early years and youth service provision. These measures need to be designed in fundamentally new ways, so as not to replicate the harmful discriminatory, carceral practices present in many of our other institutions.

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<sup>17</sup> Liberty *et al.* (2023) *Holding Our Own: A Guide to non- policing solutions to serious youth violence*.



For racial justice