

NPIA research briefing

Stop and search, the use of intelligence and geographic targeting: findings from case study research

- Drawing on case study research, this study explored the extent to which police stop and search activity was informed by intelligence and targeted towards crime hotspots in the mid-2000s.
- The findings presented a mixed picture. While officers said they valued intelligence and felt it guided their use of searches, they tended to rely selectively on intelligence that supported their prior knowledge about offenders. Geographically, while searches were found to be concentrated in hotspots, these did not always correspond with crime hotspots.
- There was also some evidence to suggest these search hotspots had a higher than average proportion of residents from minority ethnic groups, which may have potentially contributed towards race disproportionality.
- The study, thus, raised important questions about how stop and search was targeted, and its longer term affect on police legitimacy. One option to safeguard legitimacy would be for the police to engage to a greater extent with communities about how local crime problem are to be tackled and what the impact of that approach might be on local people.
- The lack of alignment of stop and search and crime hotspots coupled with officers' tendency to focus on known offenders from briefings suggested potential for police intelligence and briefing processes to be more focused on encouraging police activity in specific places. Targeting hotspots is an approach supported by robust review of 'what works' to reduce crime.

This summary presents findings from case study research carried out in the mid-2000s which examined the role of intelligence in police stop and search practices. As an intelligence-led approach may help improve the effectiveness and the fairness of stop and search, the study focused on three main research questions:

1. To what extent was intelligence used by police in routine stop and search?

2. To what extent were statistical and geographical patterns of searches consistent with the application of intelligence to search practices?
3. What were the potential implications of the application of intelligence for race disproportionality in stop and search?

To address these questions, the study relied on in-depth interviews with operational officers from two case study police forces, and statistical and geographical analysis of search records from five case study sites.

Since the work was conducted, police practices may have changed in the study sites and across the wider service. Nevertheless, the research remains of relevance to policy-makers and practitioners because of the high profile nature of stop and search, and continuing absence of robust empirical research on its effectiveness. More importantly, there is scope for forces to build on the analysis presented here as new statistical techniques and automatic methods of geocoding search records have become available.

Stop and search decision-making and intelligence

Qualitative interviews with police officers, and intelligence officers and analysts in two case study forces showed the following:

- Intelligence was highly valued by officers. They learned about it in regular shift briefings, and some also self-briefed using force intelligence system.
- Intelligence was reported to be important in guiding their search activities. In particular, hotspot analyses helped guide officers geographically, and information on active offenders was also said to direct their attention towards particular people. However, there was some evidence to suggest officers tended to focus more on the intelligence that supported their prior knowledge, and exclude new information that was not in line with their experience.
- A number of obstacles were identified during the research to the effective application of intelligence to stop and search:
 - The need to respond to calls for service meant that officers often felt they had limited time to carry out proactive intelligence-led stop and search.

- Officers often felt judged by supervisors on the quantity of searches they carried out. At times, this may have prevented them from adopting an intelligence-based approach.
- Because officers had a relatively broad understanding of what constituted intelligence, there was a view that they may often act on low grade information without regard to its quality.
- Officers sometimes faced difficulties recalling the detailed intelligence provided in briefings because of what was perceived to be an overload of intelligence information.

Stop and search patterns and intelligence

Statistical and geographical analysis showed that the patterns of recorded searches in the five case study forces were not always consistent with what might have been expected from a fully intelligence-led approach:

- Search rates showed substantial variation across the five sites that could not simply be explained by underlying crime rates.
- Overall, there was little relationship between the volumes of crime and searches over time, suggesting searches did not track crime levels in a way that might have been expected with an intelligence-led approach.
- Searches were geographically clustered in hotspots in the study sites. This clustering could not always be explained by the volume of crime in those hotspots. Search hotspots often seemed to be 'hotter' than would have been predicted from the level of crime in the area, and did not necessarily result in a high arrest rate – a possible deviation from an intelligence-led approach.
- While search hotspots often coincided with crime hotspots, the match was less than perfect. Importantly, search hotspots sometimes appeared in places where recorded crime problems were not evident. At other times, crime hotspots emerged and persisted without the police concentrating their stop and search activity in the hotspots in response to the problem.
- In the case study sites, the search hotspots tended to have a higher than average proportion of residents from minority ethnic groups. This

concentration often translated into higher rates of stop and search for people from minority ethnic groups in those search hotspots. The focused geographic use of stop and search might, therefore, have contributed towards race disproportionality. It was unclear, however, whether better targeting of stop and search towards crime hotspots would have produced a different outcome.

- There were no consistent relationships in the study sites between the ethnic profile of the suspect descriptions reported by victims and witnesses, and the profile of those searched by the police.

Conclusions and implications

Overall, the research presented a mixed picture in terms of the application of intelligence to stop and search. Evidence from across the sites suggested that the flow of intelligence to stop and search decision-making could have been better, and police activity was not always well targeted as an operational tactic.

While being important in terms of effectiveness, a targeted and intelligence-led approach to stop and search also has important implications for the legitimacy of the police practices. First, while officers have the power to search people outside crime hotspots, they may have to 'work harder' to be able to justify their actions and give a good reason to the person being searched – a factor crucial to that person perceiving the encounter as satisfactory.

Second, at a more strategic level, it is harder for the police to explain to the public that stop and search is effective and well targeted if its overall pattern of use does not seem to correspond to crime. Given the public's in-principle support for stop and search is contingent on it being used in targeted, fair and respectful way, the moves towards greater transparency could lead to the police being asked some difficult questions about how stop and search is directed overall.

Finally, by not focusing stop and search activity on crime hotspots, the police may not be getting the best out of its resources and could potentially be missing opportunities to reduce crime. Systematic review evidence, for example, has shown that targeted policing activity in crime hotspots can be effective at reducing crime and disorder.

The research presented some evidence to suggest search activity was concentrated in areas that had a higher than average proportion of residents from black and minority ethnic groups, which could make a contribution to race disproportionality. It was not clear whether this pattern would have changed if searches were more closely targeted at crime. Nevertheless, the concentrated geographic use of searches has the potential to increase race disproportionality. With this issue in mind, and the evidence that perceptions of unfair policing can undermine the public's willingness to cooperate with the police and not break the law, practitioners should consider whether any short term benefits are outweighed by the long term costs. An alternative approach might be for the police to concentrate more on the legitimacy of their activities, and to engage with local communities to develop a shared understanding about how best to tackle crime problems, and what the implications might be for local people.

The research also raised important questions for the police service in terms of how to ensure police activity is informed by the most up-to-date intelligence picture. Given the evidence on the effectiveness of place-based policing, the attention given by officers to intelligence about known offenders and the concentrated use of searches outside crime hotspots, suggest there is scope for improvement. As these issues are likely to relate to how officers are briefed, and the type and volume of information with which they are provided, there may be potential for police intelligence and briefing processes to encourage officers to target their activity less on people and more on places (while recognising the need to have reasonable grounds for suspicion).

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