

Police powers and children – strip searching and use of force

April 2026

Table of contents

Content warning	3
Foreword from Dame Rachel de Souza.....	4
Executive Summary	7
1. Introduction	14
Understanding strip searches conducted by the police.....	15
2. Findings.....	18
Strip searches under stop and search.....	18
Prevalence of strip searches.....	18
Demographics of children searched	22
Conduct of Strip Searches.....	27
Location of searches.....	27
Presence of an appropriate adult.....	29
Gender of those present during the search.....	30
Non-compliant and concerning searches	30
Reasons for searches.....	33
What was the outcome of the search?	34
Data recording and reporting.....	35
Use of force by the police to effect stop and search.....	40
Age, gender, ethnicity, health conditions, and where the incident took place.....	40
Reasons for use of force incident.....	41
Tactics used.....	42
Contextual factors relating to the use of force incident	44
Outcome.....	46
Injuries sustained.....	49
3. Conclusion	49
Recommendations.....	51
4. Methodology	54
Police force data	54
Use of force data.....	55
References	56

Content warning

This report is not intended to be read by children - but by professionals and policymakers committed to making children safer. This report contains graphic language and makes frequent reference to searches that involve involuntary exposure of intimate parts, including the genitals, of children. This content may be difficult and upsetting to read. However, we think it is important to understand how strip searches and police use of force impacts young people, in order that we may better protect all children from harm.

Receiving support

If you or any child you know of are affected by the issues discussed, the following organisations can provide you with expert information, advice and support:

childline

Childline is a free and confidential service for under-19s living in the UK: [childline.org.uk](https://www.childline.org.uk) | **0800 1111**



Shout provides 24/7 urgent mental health support: [giveusashout.org](https://www.giveusashout.org) | text **SHOUT** to **85258**



You can also contact **your local NHS urgent mental health helpline** or call **111** for 24/7 advice | [nhs.uk/service-search/mental-health/find-an-urgent-mental-health-helpline](https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/mental-health/find-an-urgent-mental-health-helpline)

Foreword from Dame Rachel de Souza



Few issues have defined my tenure as Children's Commissioner so sharply as the strip searching of children by police.

As a former teacher and headteacher of 30 years, I thought I was hardened to the vast spectrum of failures in children's rights, but the case of Child Q in Hackney five years ago shocked me to the core.

Child Q was 15 when she was strip searched at school while on her period. Her case was so upsetting that in 2021 I set out to look into the data around strip searching to assure myself that it was a one-off. It quickly became obvious that it was far from it – and that no-one had previously sought to look under the surface of these headlines.

Her story, and my subsequent data exploration, was the genesis of a five-year investigation, beginning with the police force that searched Child Q – London's Metropolitan Police - then compiling complete data sets from forces across England and Wales.

By the time the police officers who carried out her strip search were dismissed last July for gross misconduct, my research had already found that not only was Child Q not an isolated case, there were

systemic failures in police oversight, a deep misunderstanding of safeguarding practices, and concerning ethnic disparity in the treatment of children – particularly the ‘adultification’ of Black children.

Yet, the narrative around it seemed to be shifting. With each report, the media headlines grew, Parliamentary discussion increased, and the Government committed to action: Better data collection, changes to the codes of practice and improved training for frontline officers.

On top of that, storytelling played a powerful role in shining a light on this issue. Last Easter, 2.8 million television viewers watched a teenage character on the soap opera Eastenders being strip-searched. The search portrayed was legal and permitted in line with the Police and Criminal Evidence (PACE) codes – but just like the thousands of real-life searches, too many of which are not carried out within the rules, it was humiliating and distressing.

This can have long term impacts on vulnerable children seeking help from police when they need it. I will never forget what a young adult told me about his experience of being strip-searched by police:

“They told me to get naked. They told me to bend over... I think there were about three officers present... The police never really looked mortified at doing it... It almost felt a bit of a joke to them... From that really was just a terrible start of a relationship with the police.” – Young man, 19, with experience of being strip searched by police as a child.

For too many children, these are not fictional storylines. They remain a reality, even as numbers fall overall and practices improve. By the time I published my last research in 2024, signs of positive change were noticeable: The number of strip searches carried out on children was declining, ethnic disparities were less pronounced, and procedural changes were being made in most police forces.

But acknowledging progress does not mean becoming complacent.

It’s why I have continued gathering the data from police forces on strip searching once again this year, to continue shining a light on the practice until I see concrete and irreversible evidence of meaningful change.

That means a permanent fall in the number of children being subjected to these searches, better adherence to safeguarding protocols across every police force, and an end to the racial disparities that

have persisted for too long. It means safeguarding at the heart of every interaction between a child and the police, serving not as an opportunity to enforce power or punishment, but as an opportunity to build trust between communities and professionals. And it means improving the accuracy of recording and transparency of published data on children's interactions with the police.

This year's research offers a reason for optimism; that doggedly pursuing this issue and doing the meticulous work required to uncover the data has led to clear indications of change. There is less variability between regions. London no longer makes up the largest proportion of searches. Searches are no longer happening in schools.

But there are still far too many strip searches happening. Our threshold for subjecting children to this humiliating process - one which could profoundly undermine their relationship with police - must be high. It must only be when there is clear and immediate risk of harm. This report shows we are still too far away from that being the reality. It is still the case that some searches are still happening in public view, or without an appropriate adult present, which should never be happening. And this year I reveal even more concerning findings. For the first time, we can see that almost a third (30%) of strip searches in this year's data involve children who have already been strip searched at least once before – risking significant and repeated damage to their mental wellbeing, their relationship with the police, and showing a clear failure to successfully intervene with children.

For the first time I have also looked at the use of force in these searches. I am particularly concerned about the ethnic disproportionality as to why officers say force was needed: White children are more likely to be described as having a mental health need, while for Black children the reason identified is simply their size or build. We cannot accept that Black children are subjected to use of force because of the way they are perceived.

I have always been clear that in some, limited, circumstances a strip search may be necessary, but this report reveals how much more must be done to ensure they are only happening when truly necessary, and with all appropriate safeguards in place. Too often, police officers forget that children are, first and foremost children. Their primary duty should be to protect children from harm.

Executive Summary

The Children's Commissioner has a statutory duty to promote and protect the rights of all children in England, and in the UK on reserved matters. Following the deeply concerning and traumatic practice revealed in the strip search of Child Q, the Commissioner has annually requested data about the number, disproportionality and manner of strip searches across England and Wales. Across that work, it has been clear that these searches happen too often, are too often carried out in ways that are deeply traumatising to children, and where essential safeguards are not met. This has the potential to undermine children's trust in police, which is essential for ensuring their safety.

This report examines:

1. The use of the police powers to strip search children is based on a data collection from all 44 police forces in England and Wales, using the Children's Commissioner's statutory powers. The data covers 3,370 searches carried out between January 2018 and June 2024. It introduces new data and analysis on the 362 searches that happened between July 2023 and June 2024.
2. The use of force on children who are stop and searched, the types of force used, and subsequent outcomes. This is based on data published by the Home Office spanning April 2024 to March 2025.

Prevalence of Strip Searches

- There have been 3,370 strip searches of children in the period January 2018 to June 2024.
- The total estimated number of searches for 2024 is 377 (169 searches were conducted between January to June 2024, and the office calculated an estimate of 377 for the whole of 2024). This compares to 436 searches in 2023, and 854 searches in 2020, so a decline of 56% between 2020 and 2024.

Regional variation in searches

In the latest data collection period:

- London no longer makes up the largest proportion of strip searches and has seen the biggest decrease in rate of children strip searched across all regions.
- There is less variability in the use of strip search between regions than in previous data collection periods, as rates of strip search have declined in the regions with higher use of strip search.

The analysis also looked at the variation in strip searches by police force area against crime rates. It found there is no relationship between overall police force area level crime rate and the rate of strip searches of children in that area. Areas with similar rates of crime appear to have very different practices when it comes to use of strip search.

Demographics of children searched

- Ethnic disparities remain prominent in the strip search of children.
 - Children of Black ethnicity are more likely to be strip searched than children of other ethnicities. Although the previous report showed signs of progress between 2018 and 2023, this new data shows that between July 2023 and June 2024, Black children were almost 8 times more likely to be strip searched than White children and around 5 times more likely than Asian children, meaning there has been no improvement to disproportionate strip searching of Black children since the last data collection period.
- Over a quarter (27%) of strip searches between July 2023 and June 2024 were of a child aged 15 years old or younger.

Children subject to repeated searches

- For the first time, the Children's Commissioner asked about any previous strip searches. Where recorded, 68 strip searches conducted between July 2023 and June 2024, almost one third (30%), involved children who have been strip searched previously.
- Where a child had previously been subject to a strip search, 63% of these searches resulted in a safeguarding referral. For 13% of children who have been repeatedly strip searched, no

safeguarding referral has been made and, due to non-recording, for the remaining 24% of children it cannot be confirmed whether they had a safeguarding referral.

Conduct of strip searches

- Where data has recorded the location of the strip search, between July 2023 and June 2024 no searches were recorded as being conducted at a school, however, 26% of search locations were not recorded.
- Concerningly, some searches are still being conducted in public view (26 strip searches between July 2023 and June 2024) and without an appropriate adult present (22 strip searches between July 2023 and June 2024).
- The Children's Commissioner believes safeguarding referrals should be made for any child subject to a strip search, as it indicates a level of concern about involvement in criminal behaviour that should receive a multi-agency response. It will not be a 'remedy' for the trauma of the search itself. The number of safeguarding referrals raised by police following a strip search was 49% between July 2023 and June 2024. However, at least 16% of strip searches do not result in a safeguarding referral and in 35% of cases this was not recorded.

Reasons for searches and search outcomes

- Between July 2023 and June 2024, 48% of strip searches led to no further action being taken, and the vast majority of searches (89%) took place due to suspicion of the child carrying drugs.
- Overall, 32% of searches led to an arrest, while 48% led to no further action being taken. 7% resulted in a community resolution, 5% led to voluntary attendance at a police station, and the remainder were cautions, warnings, seizure of property or not recorded.

Data recording and reporting

- There have been improvements in the quality of data recorded by forces about their use of strip searching. In the 2018 data, 83% of records had at least one of the fields we requested missing, this fell to 54% of records by 2024.
-

- The Home Office has now begun to report on the use of strip searches, although will not cover repeat searches of children.

Use of force in stop and search

- In addition to looking at the strip searching of children. We looked at the use of force by police for the purpose of effecting a stop and search in 2024-25. We found that:
 - Based on office calculations of Home Office data, almost one fifth (17%) of all stop and searches of children resulted in a use of force incident, involving tactics ranging from handcuffing to the use of firearms and TASERS.
 - The most common outcome following a use of force was no further action (43%) calling into question the use of necessary and proportionate tests.
 - There are ethnic disparities in both the use of force and the contextual factors surrounding the use of force. Black children are over-represented in use of force incidents and higher proportions of Black children have their size, gender, or build listed as a contextual factor in the use of force report than their Asian, White and Mixed ethnicity counterparts.

Conclusion and next steps

Since the Children's Commissioner's first report, there have been changes to policy about strip searching.

- The College of Policing is consulting on changes to stop and search guidance to emphasise safeguards for children¹.
- The Home Office consulted on proposed amendments to PACE codes of Practice A and C, referencing the Children's Commissioner's research, and has started publishing data on the use of strip search².
- The Metropolitan Police have made local policy changes to how strip searches are conducted³.

- The Department for Education issued updated guidance for schools to emphasise their duty of care towards students, encouraging them to consider the necessity of calling police to perform strip searches and to ensure that strip searches are conducted in line with statutory guidelines⁴.

These policy changes have led to some improvements, with an overall reduction in the number of strip searches of children in England and Wales, as well as greater transparency and oversight. However, there is still further to go to ensure that appropriate safeguards are always in place, fewer searches occur and that improvements to practice are all embedded. This report makes recommendations to support that change. Including:

Recommendation 1: The Home Office should consult on a standalone Police and Criminal Evidence Act Code of Practice that governs police interactions with children across all domains.

In the short-term, current PACE codes A and C should be urgently updated following the consultation carried out in 2024. They must make clear that:

- Children should only ever be strip searched if there is an immediate risk of significant harm, recognising that the experience of a strip search is itself harmful and traumatic.
- An appropriate adult must always be present, except in the most exceptional circumstances where there is a serious risk to a child's life and welfare.
- Parents or carers must be informed in advance of a strip search.
- If a young person claims to be under 18 they should be treated as such unless there is clear evidence to the contrary.
- No child should be searched by an officer of the opposite sex, unless that is their choice. Children should always have the choice about where the search is conducted.
- A safeguarding referral should always be made for a child who has been strip searched.
- Force should only ever be used against children in order to prevent significant harm to themselves or others, not just to detain them for the purposes of a search.

Recommendation 2: The Home Office should pilot the use of emerging and alternative technologies to minimise the need for invasive strip searches of children, including the use of X-ray body scanners and similar technologies

Recommendation 3: The Department for Education and Department for Health must ensure that the “consistent identifier” that will be rolled out to improve data sharing in child safeguarding must extend to all children, not just those currently in contact with safeguarding services, in order to ensure that children’s health, education, and previous involvement with police can be more accurately shared.

Recommendation 4: Police forces must urgently review cases where they have strip searched a child more than once, to understand why they have come back into contact with police and what diversionary opportunities have been missed. The Children’s Commissioner will write to National Police Chiefs’ Council to share which forces have conducted multiple searches of children.

Recommendation 5: The Home Office must work with police forces to improve data quality, availability and transparency. This should include:

- Requiring that additional vulnerability characteristics are recorded as standard on all police data recording systems rather than as an optional free-text field.
- A Public Protection Notice should be recorded for every stop and search involving a child.
- There should be a mandatory flag on police data recording systems for non-compliant strip searches.
- The Home Office should publish all variables it collects in open data tables with one row per strip search – similar to the 'Police Powers and Use of Force' statistics. This would enable researchers and advocacy groups to conduct their own analysis and maintain consistent monitoring in the future.

Recommendation 6: The Home Office should improve compliance with PACE codes in all police forces. In the recent data collection, the CCo identified strip searches conducted by 29 police forces where we have concerns about the safeguarding of children, or we consider that there has been a breach of a statutory code of practice by the police. The Children’s Commissioner will write to all relevant

Professional Standards Departments (PSDs) through the National Police Chiefs' Council outlining which cases she believes they should review and refer to the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC). In future, the Home Office should require forces to refer all non-compliant searches to the IOPC.

Recommendation 7: Police forces should review ethnic disproportionality in their reasons for use of force. The Home Office should amend the wording in the Use of Force data collection for 'size, build and gender' to separate out build and gender, to allow for better identification of reasons for use of force, and ensure that the recording can identify number of children subject to use of force as well as the number of incidents.

1. Introduction

The Children's Commissioner's office has focused squarely on the issue of strip-searching children since the case involving a Black girl who was strip searched while on her period at a school in Hackney in 2020, known as Child Q. Five years later, in June 2025, the police disciplinary panel ruled that the actions of 2 of the police officers involved amounted to gross misconduct and they were dismissed without notice.⁵ The disciplinary panel concluded the search was 'disproportionate, inappropriate, and unnecessary,' and highlighted failures in police oversight and of the officers to follow key procedural safeguards.⁶

Using data powers under the Children Act 2004, the Commissioner investigated the number, disproportionality and manner of conducting strip searches firstly in London, and then across England and Wales. This is the fourth report in the series of reports:

- In 2022 - Strip search of children by the Metropolitan Police Service
- In 2023 - Strip search of children in England and Wales (2023)
- In 2024 - [Strip searching of children in England and Wales: Complete dataset for 2018–2023](#)

The 2023 and 2024 Children's Commissioner's reports revealed that Child Q's experience was not an isolated incident, but part of a broader pattern where nearly 3,000 children were strip-searched over a four-year period—often without an appropriate adult present, without further safeguarding, and often resulting in no further action by the police.⁷⁸

Since the first report there has been significant policy change at the local and national level. The College of Policing is consulting on changes to stop and search guidance to emphasise safeguards for children.⁹ The Home Office consulted on proposed amendments to PACE codes of Practice A and C, referencing the Children's Commissioner's research, and has started publishing data on the use of strip search.¹⁰ Following the case of Child Q, the Metropolitan Police made local policy changes to how strip searches are conducted, and the Department for Education issued updated guidance for schools to emphasise their duty of care towards students, encouraging them to consider the necessity of calling police to perform strip searches and to ensure that strip searches are conducted in line with statutory guidelines.¹¹

This report therefore tracks whether these policy changes have had the intended consequences.

It also, for the first time, analyses the use of force against children in order to conduct stop and searches. Because as both individual forces and national policy focus on reforming how searches under stop and search powers are conducted it is critical that both the thresholds and safeguards for use of force, and for carrying out strip searches, are considered holistically.

Understanding strip searches conducted by the police

The police possess various search powers; this report and the office's previous reports focus exclusively on 'strip searches'. Specifically, the office's report series address searches involving the exposure of intimate parts (EIP), conducted under PACE Code A stop and search powers.¹³ These are searches where a child is required to remove clothing in order to expose intimate parts; they are a sub-category of 'more thorough searches' which is where a child may be asked to remove any clothing beyond a jacket, coat, shoes or hat.

See the graphics below for breakdowns of police search categories and the specific routes through which a child might interact with the police.

TYPES OF SEARCH

↑ MORE INTRUSIVE ↑

INTIMATE SEARCH

CUSTODY

- > **What:** Medical professional physically examines body orifices
- > **Where:** In medical premises in custody
- > **Who:** Search must be conducted by a medical professional with Appropriate Adult present

STRIP SEARCH

CUSTODY

STOP AND SEARCH

FOCUS OF THIS REPORT

- > **What:** Searching officer removes clothing exposing intimate parts and may physically contact the child. The search must be conducted as quickly as possible; with regard for dignity, sensitivity, and vulnerability; and minimise embarrassment by not requiring the child to remove all clothes at once
- > **Where:** Search must be conducted out of public view (but not in a police vehicle) for stop and search, or in a custody suite
- > **Who:** Frontline or custody officers. No more than two people may be present and they must be the same sex as the child being searched. An Appropriate Adult must be present (except for urgency due to risk of serious harm, or if the child refuses)

MORE THOROUGH SEARCH

CUSTODY

STOP AND SEARCH

- > **What:** Searching officer removes any other clothing than the outer layer, but not exposing intimate parts
- > **Where:** Search must be conducted out of public view, or in a custody suite
- > **Who:** Frontline or custody officer. An Appropriate Adult must be present in custody

JOG SEARCH

CUSTODY

STOP AND SEARCH

ON ARREST

- > **What:** Searching officer may remove jacket, outer coat or gloves (JOG), and may put hands inside shoes, socks, pockets, collars and hair or headgear
- > **Where:** Search can be conducted in public view, or in a custody suite
- > **Who:** Frontline or custody officers

↓ LESS INTRUSIVE ↓

POLICE POWERS TO SEARCH

CUSTODY

- > **When:** After arrest
- > **Where:** Conducted in a custody suite inside a police station
- > **Who:** Custody officers (or medical professionals)
- > **Guidance:** PACE Code C
- > **Statistics:** Experimental annual reporting from 2021-22

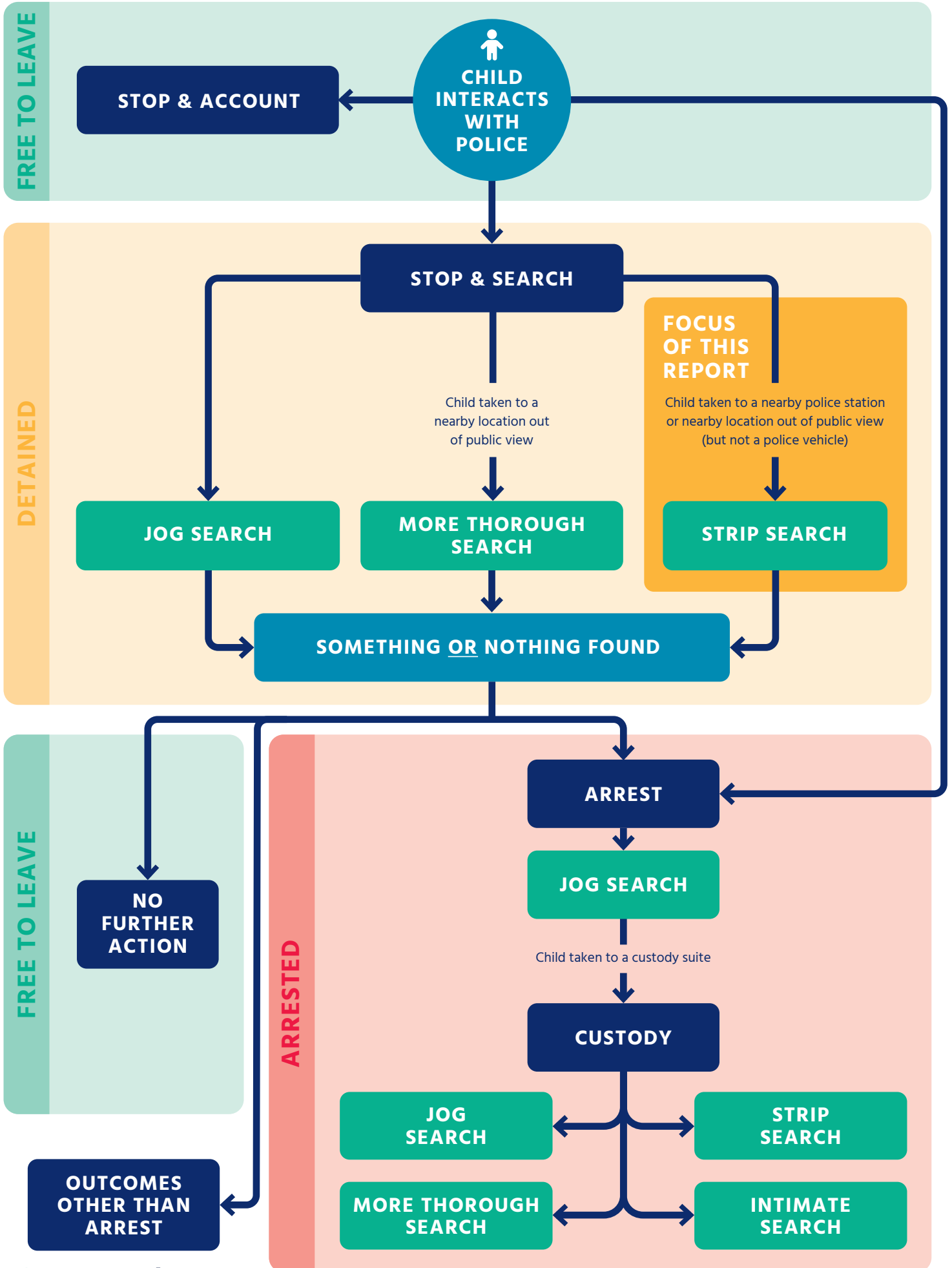
ON ARREST

- > **When:** On arrest
- > **Where:** Conducted in a range of locations
- > **Who:** Frontline officers
- > **Guidance:** PACE Code G

STOP AND SEARCH

- > **When:** Before arrest (detained for stop and search). Officers must have reasonable suspicion the child is involved in certain crimes, or without suspicion in designated areas where violence could occur
- > **Where:** Conducted in a range of locations
- > **Who:** Frontline officers
- > **Guidance:** PACE Code A
- > **Statistics:** No annual reporting

WHERE A CHILD MIGHT BE SEARCHED IN AN INTERACTION WITH POLICE



2. Findings

Strip searches under stop and search

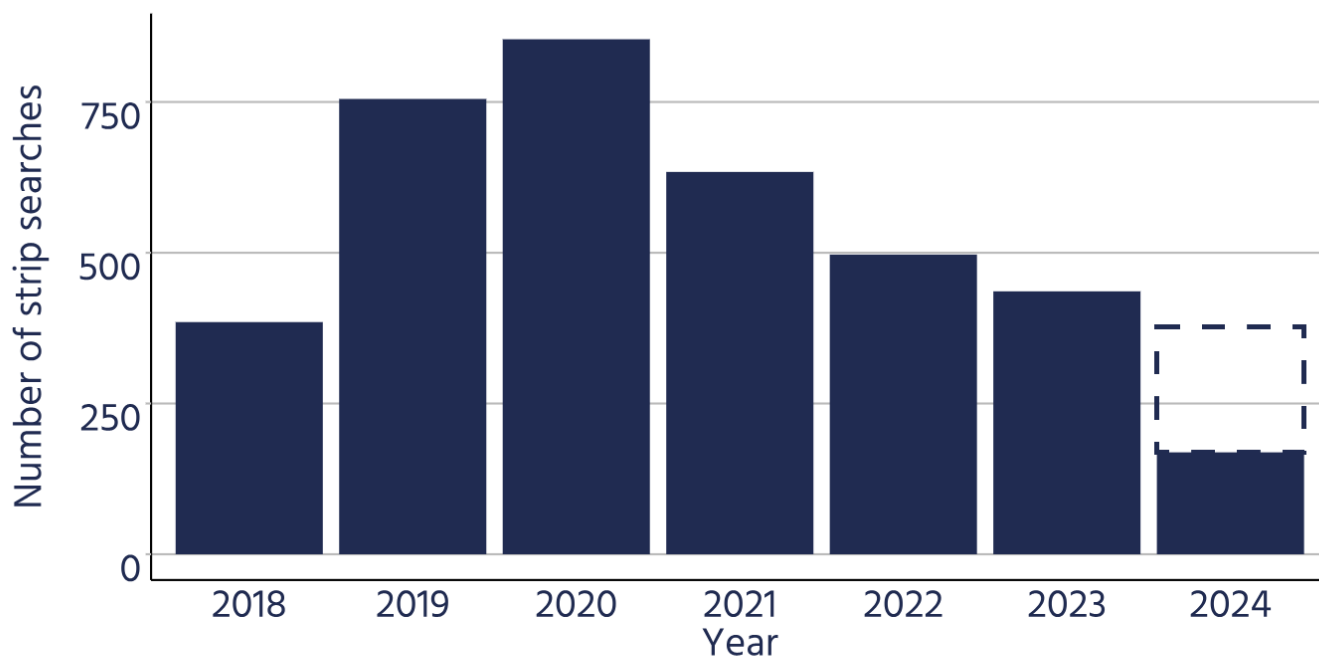
This section presents findings from three successive data collections by the Children's Commissioner's office from all 44 police forces in England and Wales (including the British Transport Police) from January 2018 to June 2024 on the use of strip search on children under police stop and search powers. The office asked police forces to return data about individual children who had been strip searched. Including their age, gender, and officer-defined ethnicity of the child, whether an appropriate adult was present, whether any of the searching officers were the opposite gender to the child, whether the search took place in public view, location of the search, whether a safeguarding referral was made, the police powers under which the search took place, and the outcome of the search. For the first time, police forces were asked to provide data on whether the search was the first time the child had been subject to a strip search, or if they had previously been strip searched.

Prevalence of strip searches

In total, data collected by the Children's Commissioner's office show 3,730 strip searches of children under stop and search powers recorded in England and Wales between January 2018 and June 2024. The total estimated number of searches for 2024 is 377 (169 searches were conducted between January to June 2024, and the office calculated an estimate of 377 for the whole of 2024). This compares to 436 searches in 2023, and 854 searches in 2020, so a decline from 2020 to 2024 of an estimated 56% (Figure 1).¹

¹ This has been calculated using the mean of the proportion of strip searches conducted in the second half of 2022 and 2023 (45%).

Figure 1 – Number of strip searches conducted between January 2018 and June 2024



Note: The solid bar in 2024 covers the six months of data between January and June. The dashed lined estimates total 2024 searches based on the proportion of searches that happened in the first half of 2022 and 2023. This was on average 45% of searches.

Regional Variation

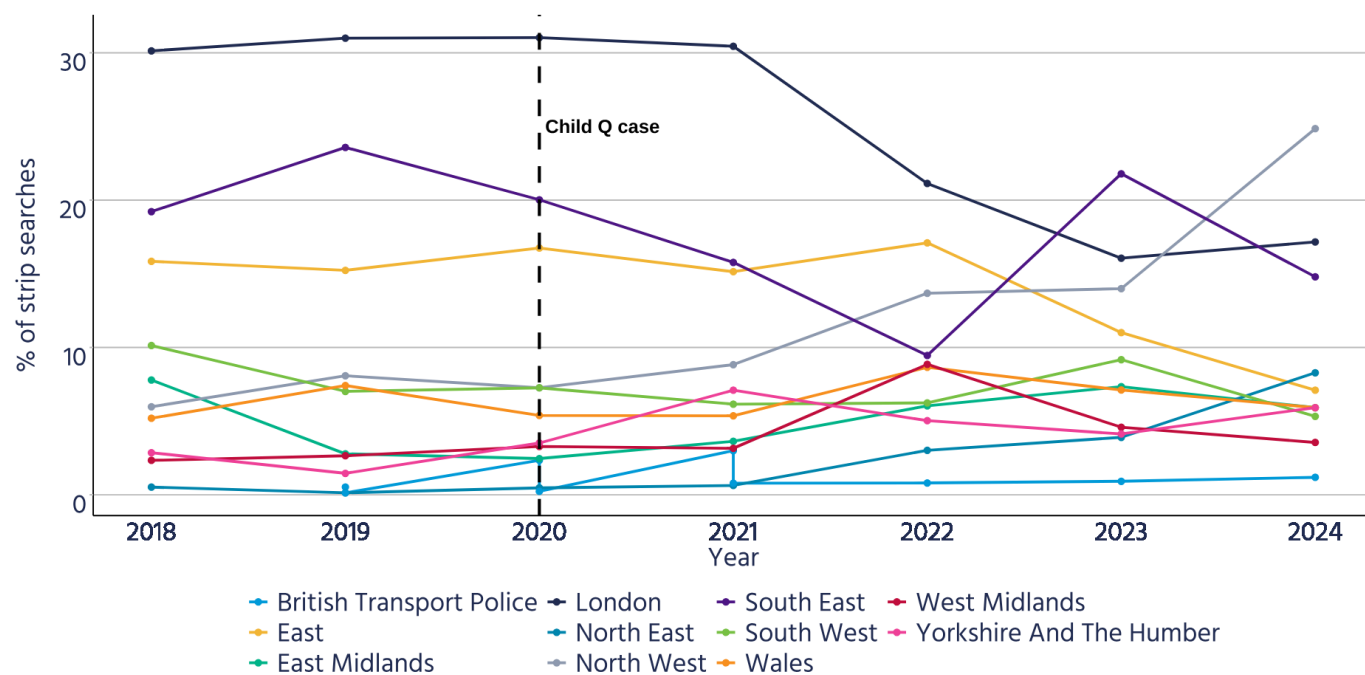
Before 2023, London accounted for the largest proportion of strip searches in England and Wales, but this has been on a downward trajectory since 2021 (Figure 2).

The North West has seen both an increase in the proportion of strip searches over time and has the highest proportion of strip searches in the first six months of 2024. In 2019, the North West accounted for 8% of all strip searches but this had increased to a quarter of all strip searches in the six months of

data to June 2024. This does not necessarily mean that the number of strip searches has been rising in the North West, indeed, the number has remained fairly stable between 2019 and 2023.²

When looking at the rate per 10,000 children aged 10 to 17, to take into account differences in population sizes across regions, London has the largest rate of strip searching prior to 2022 (Figure 3). Interestingly, there was much more variability in strip search rates across police forces in earlier years of the data. Post 2020 regional strip-search rates started to converge, mainly due to substantial reductions in the police forces with high rates of strip searches of children. London in particular has reduced the rate of children being strip searched from 3.1 per 10,000 in 2020 to 0.8 per 10,000 in 2023. Rates in other police forces with low levels of strip search have maintained these low levels.

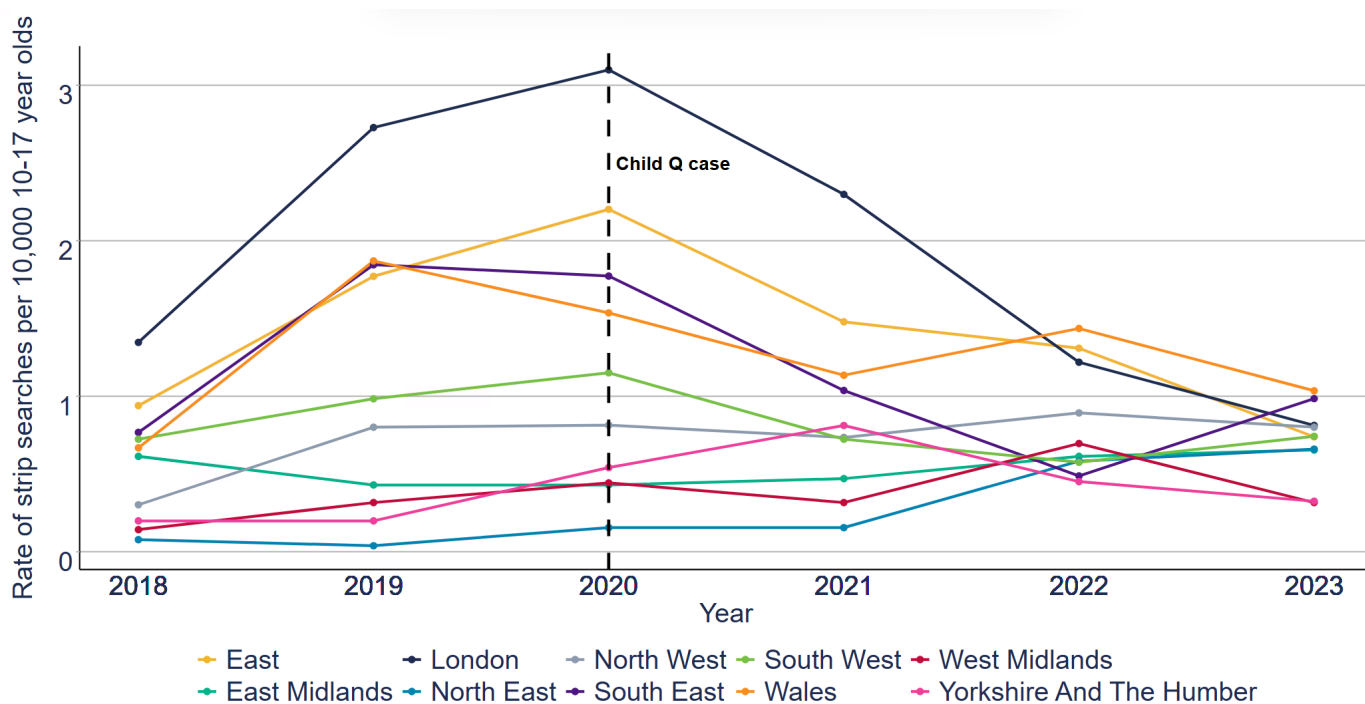
Figure 2 – Proportion of strip searches conducted by region between January 2018 and June 2024



Note: 2024 only contains the six months of data between January and June.

² Given there are only the first six months of data in 2024, it is not possible to compare numbers from previous years with 2024.

Figure 3 – Rate per 10,000 children (10-17 year old population) strip searches by region between 2018 and 2023



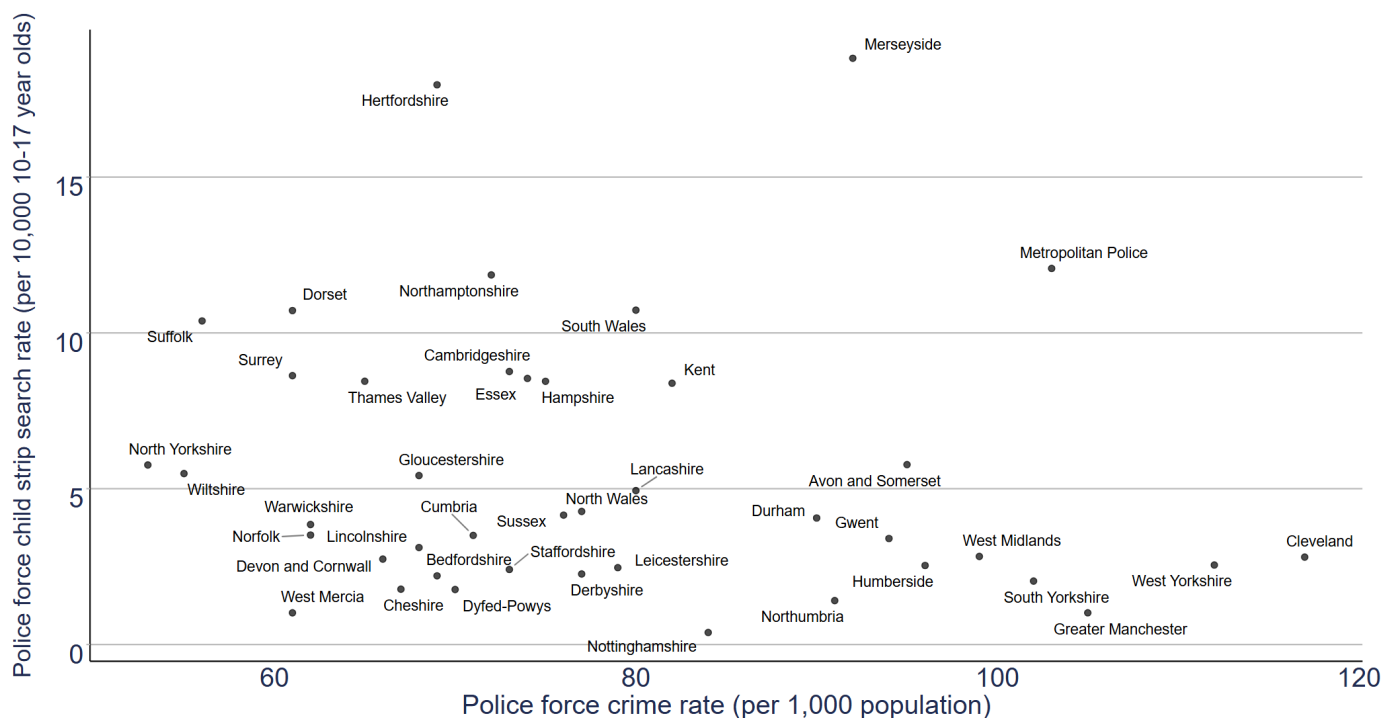
Note: The British Transport Police has been excluded from this analysis

Relationship with crime rates

The rate of strip searching in each police force area between January 2018 and June 2024 has been mapped onto Home Office published 2025 police recorded crime rates (excluding fraud) by police force area (both adult and children)¹⁴, to investigate any relationships between areas with high crime rates and the use of strip search on children. Areas with similar rates of crime appear to have very different practices when it comes to use of strip search (Figure 4).

Further research could explore the correlation between strip searches and youth crime rates. Additionally, given that the reason given for majority of strip searches (89%) are drug-related, further analysis into the specific relationship between drug offenses would also be valuable.

Figure 4 – Relationship between area-level crime rate and the use of strip search in children, January 2018 to June 2024



Demographics of children searched

As in previous reports by the Children’s Commissioner on strip searching, police forces provided data on child demographics. These latest data show that the demographics look similar to the previous report covering data collection period July 2022 to June 2023, though, between data collection periods, the total number of strip searches over a 12 month period has fallen from 457 to 362.¹⁵

Table 1 – Overview of sample size and demographic characteristics of children strip searched between July 2023 and June 2024

Demographic variable	Number of searches	Share of total searches (%)
Age group		
12 or under	<5	<1%
13 to 15	<100	27%
16 to 17	262	72%
Total	362	100%
Gender		
Female	27	7%
Male	334	92%
Not recorded	1	0.3%
Total	362	100%
Officer-defined ethnic group		
Asian	41	11%
Black	111	31%
Mixed	<10	<2%
White	182	50%
Other	<10	<3%
Unknown	10	2.8%
Not recorded	<10	<2%
Total	362	100%
Search history		
Never been searched previously	157	43%
Searched once previously	37	10%
Searched twice previously	<10	<2%
Searched three or more times previously	<25	<7%
Not recorded	137	38%
Total	362	100%
Total	362	100%

Age and gender

Across the 362 strip searches conducted in England and Wales between July 2023 and June 2024, the lowest age of children strip searched was less than 12 years old. Over a quarter (27%) of strip searches were of a child aged 15 years old or younger (Table 1), the same percentage as the previous data collection period (July 2022 – June 2023).

The majority of strip searches between July 2023 and June 2024 were carried out on boys (92%), while 7% of searches were carried out on girls. This was slightly higher than the 5% of searches conducted on girls found in the office's previous strip search report from 2024.¹⁶

Ethnic group

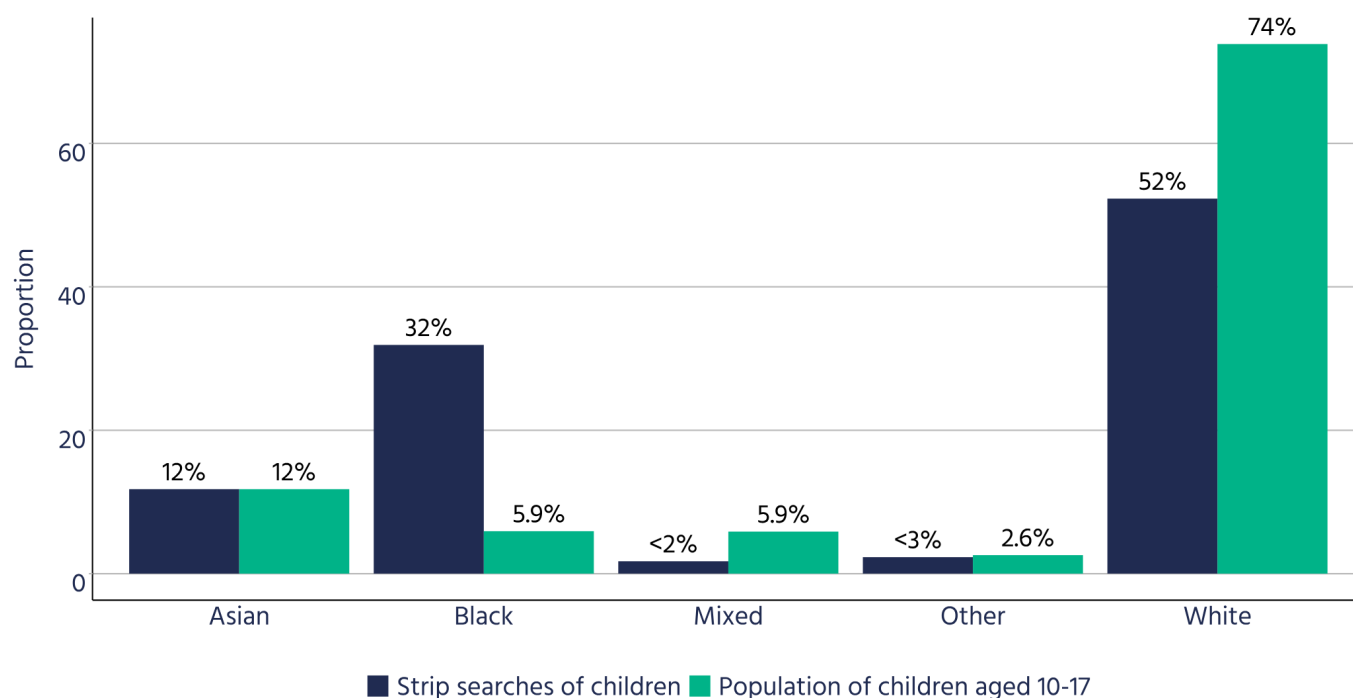
From July 2023 and June 2024 across England and Wales, 50% of children who were strip searched were of White ethnicity, 31% were Black, 11% Asian, 1.7% of mixed ethnicity, 12% other ethnicity, and 3.9% unknown or not recorded ethnicity.

Comparing the searches where ethnicity was recorded to the incidence of ethnic groups in the population of 10 to 17 year olds, children of Black ethnicity are over-represented in strip searches, while all other ethnic groups are represented either in line with the population or under-represented (Figure 5).³ Although only 6% of the population of 10-17 year olds in the 2021 census were Black, 35% of the children strip searched were of Black ethnicity. Black children are disproportionately almost 8 times more likely to be strip searched than White children and over 5 times more likely than Asian children.

Although the previous report showed signs of progress between 2018 and 2023, this new data shows that in 2024, there has been no improvement to disproportionate strip searching of Black children since the last data collection in 2023.¹⁷

Figure 5 – Ethnicity of children subject to a strip search between July 2023 and June 2024 and comparison with 10 – 17-year-old population in 2021 census

³ Note, these percentages are slightly different to those found in Table 1 as the unknown and not recorded categories have been removed from the analysis.



Children subject to repeated searches

For the first time, the office asked police forces to report whether the child had been previously subjected to a strip search. This is important for several reasons. Firstly, the existing data reflects the number of strip searches, not the number of individual children. If many children are being subjected to repeat strip searches it may indicate profiling or over-policing of specific individuals rather than seeking or responding to new evidence. Second, there are safeguarding issues. Repeated searches may mean that interventions are failing. These children might be at risk of criminal exploitation or gang involvement and should be receiving safeguarding interventions to divert them from involvement with criminality.

Given that this was the first year of asking police forces to report the search history, it was not recorded for over a third of strip searches (38%). This was driven by six police forces who systematically did not record this data for any strip searches.

Of all strip searches in 2023 to 2024, 43% of children had never been strip searched before, 10% had been strip searched once before, less than 2% had been searched twice before, and less than 7% had

been searched three or more times. Among the searches with recorded histories of any previous searches, 30% of children had been subject to multiple strip searches.

Searches of Black children were more likely than searches of other children to have missing data on whether it was a first search, or second or subsequent search. Until this data quality improves, it is therefore not possible to say whether searches of Black children were more or less likely to be repeat searches. Proportions of first compared to repeat searches were similar for searches of Asian children compared to White children, though numbers are small, and missing data may conceal a real disproportionality in either direction.

Repeat strip searches should trigger safeguarding concerns, because of both the underlying vulnerabilities of the child which may relate to the fact they are being strip searched more than once, and the trauma associated with the strip search itself. Where a child had previously been subject to a strip search, 63% of these searches resulted in a safeguarding referral. For 13% of children (n=9) who have been repeatedly strip searched, no safeguarding referral has been made and, due to non-recording, for the remaining 24% of children (n=16) it cannot be confirmed whether they had a safeguarding referral.

Of the strip searches recorded as the child's first strip search, the percentage with a safeguarding referral was made was lower at 48%, but a very similar percentage (15%) had no safeguarding referral made, and the remaining 36% of searches did not have it recorded. Using only the recorded data shows that children repeatedly strip searched have a slightly higher chance of a safeguarding referral (83% compared to 76%), but until the data recording improves on both safeguarding referrals and on the search history, it is difficult to evaluate the extent to which safeguarding referrals and search history are connected.

Conduct of Strip Searches

Location of searches

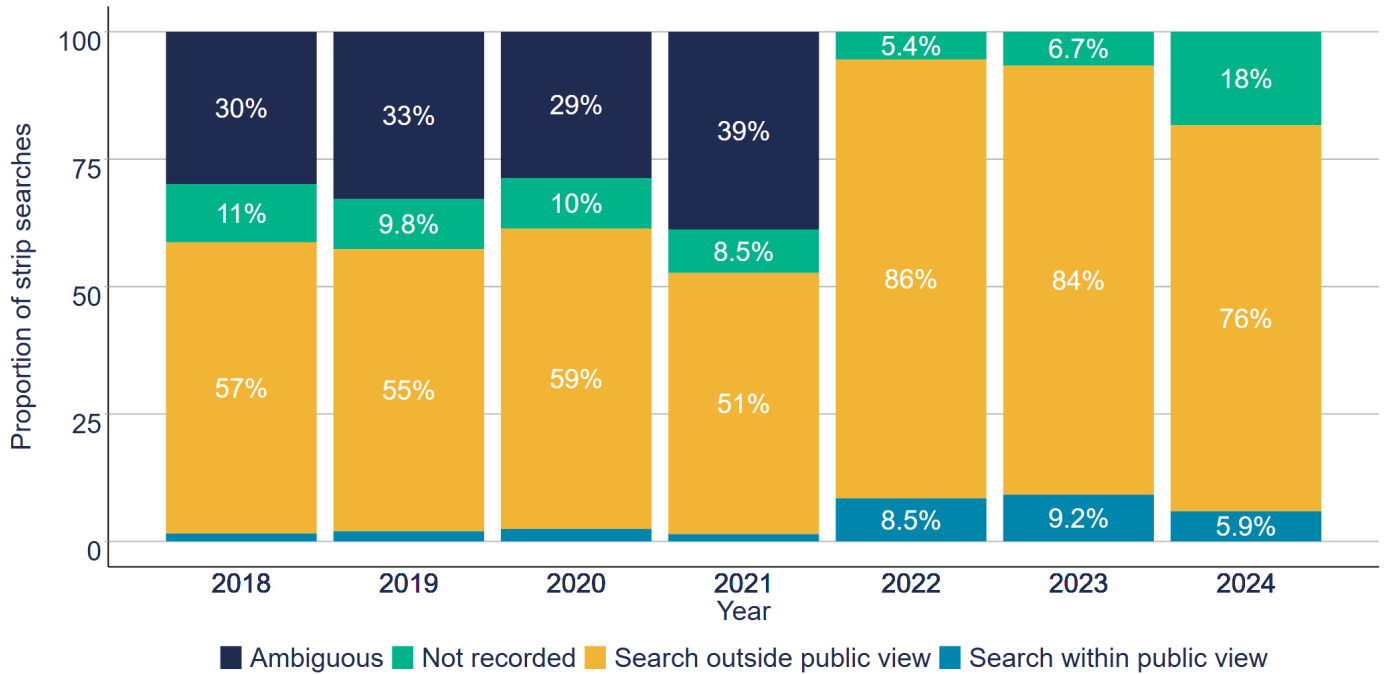
No strip search should be conducted within public view.⁴ Findings suggest that in 2022 and 2023 most searches were conducted outside of public view (86% and 84%), but there remained a concerning percentage of cases (8.5% in 2022 and 9.2% in 2023) that were conducted within public view (Figure 6). Data recording issues (skewed by one large police force) in 2024 meant that this percentage has fallen to 5.9%, but it is unclear whether this is due to non-recording or due to an actual decrease in searches within public view.

It is difficult to observe the long-term trend in whether searches are being conducted within public view due to missing data. It was only after 2021 that data reporting improved dramatically and “ambiguous” was no longer required as a category (Figure 6).

The missing data may be correlated with whether the search was conducted within public view. However, removing searches with missing data from the analysis shows that 93% of searches in the first six months of 2024 were conducted outside public view (n=128), and 7% (n=10) were in public view. This was similar to 2022 and 2023 where 91% and 90% of searches were conducted outside public view. Over the period of July 2023 – June 2024, the number of searches conducted in public view was 26.

⁴ As stated in PACE Code A, Annex A, paragraph 3.7: "Searches involving exposure of intimate parts of the body may be carried out only at a nearby police station or other nearby location which is out of public view (but not a police vehicle)"

Figure 6 – Proportion of searches that were conducted within public view

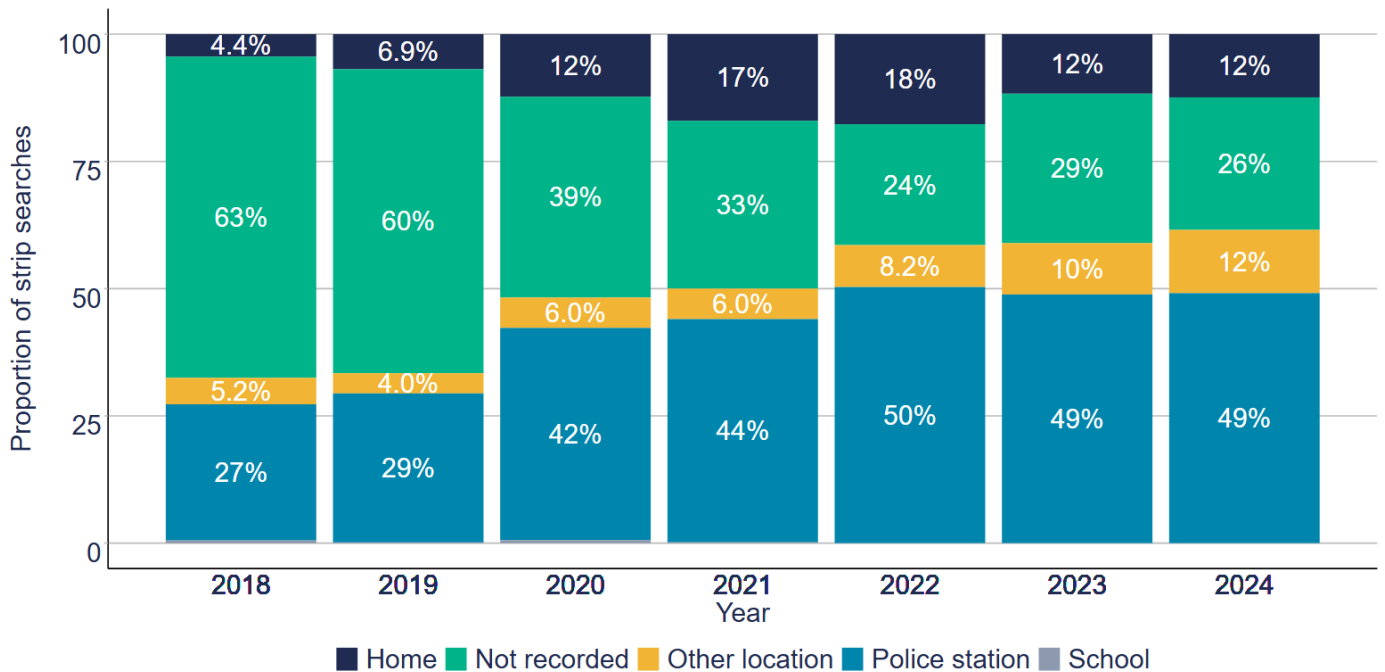


Note: 2024 only contains the six months of data between January and June.

Around half (49%) of searches between January and July 2024 were conducted in a police station (Figure 7), 12% of searches happened at home and 12% at a location described as ‘other’. Searches on school premises appeared to be a rare occurrence and from 2022 onwards there were no reported searches conducted in a school. However, one quarter of searches did not have the location recorded, so the location of these searches is unclear.

Removing the searches where location was not recorded from the analysis shows that two thirds of the searches were conducted in a police station, 17% at home and 17% at an ‘other’ location.

Figure 7 – Location of strip searches



Note: 2024 only contains the six months of data between January and June.

Presence of an appropriate adult

Under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (PACE) code C, an appropriate adult must be present when a child is strip searched, unless urgent action is required to prevent serious harm. While typically this is a parent or carer, an appropriate adult can also be a social worker, representative of a local authority, or charitable organisation the child is in the care of. It can be any responsible person over the age of 18 who is not a police officer, and local schemes exist for volunteers to play this role. Although a child may choose for the appropriate adult not to attend the search, the presence of an appropriate adult is still required to sign a formal statement confirming the child’s request for them to not be present during the search.¹⁸

In the most recent data collection, between July 2023 and June 2024, 6% (n=22) of children had no appropriate adult present during their strip search. Out of these 22 cases, police forces reported that 4 were due to the appropriate adult being identified as a child after the search. For 58% of children, it is

possible to say with certainty that an appropriate adult was present. However, the level of non-response (36% of searches had not recorded the presence of appropriate adult) means that it is unclear how often appropriate adults are present. Removing the non-recorded data shows that an appropriate adult was present for 92% of strip searches in the first six months of 2024. This percentage has been improving over time, rising from a low of 75% in 2018.

Gender of those present during the search

For the first time, the office investigated whether an officer of the opposite gender to the child was present at the strip search. The PACE code A stipulates that a strip search must be conducted by an officer of the same sex, and no person of the opposite sex is permitted to be present during a strip search unless specifically requested by the child.¹⁹

During the period from July 2023 to June 2024, there were 9% (n=31) cases where at least one officer of the opposite gender was present, including cases of girls being strip searched by male officers. In 36% of cases however, this data was not recorded, so the true proportion of these searches is unknown.

Non-compliant and concerning searches

A non-compliant search is defined as one in which: A child is younger than 10, the search is within public view, or an officer of the opposite gender is present. Between July 2023 and June 2024, there were 47 (13%) strip searches that were not deemed to be compliant (Table 2). The category 'not confirmed to be compliant' captures records which contain a missing data field, meaning the non-compliant category represents the best-case scenario level of compliance by police forces. Between July 2023 and June 2024, 83 searches (23%) had missing data that meant it was not possible to say if they were non-compliant, and 232 (64%) were compliant. Most searches are compliant, and this would still be true even if all these 83 were non-compliant. Despite this, there are some which still represent a concern. Searches where the child is aged between 10 and 12, conducted in a school, or where an appropriate adult was not present are particularly concerning. Between July 2023 to June 2024, of the 362 strip searches, 23 (6%) had at least one concerning feature. Of the 232 searches that the office defined as compliant, 8% (n=19) of searches had a concerning feature.

Table 2 – Non-compliant searches

	Strip searches conducted between (July 2023 – June 2024)
Non-compliant searches	13% (47)
Not confirmed to be compliant (missing data)	23% (83)
Compliant searches	64% (232)
Total	100% (362)

Safeguarding children

The Children’s Commissioner believes safeguarding referrals should be made for any child subject to a strip search, as it indicates a level of concern about involvement in criminal behaviour that should receive a multi-agency response. It will not be a ‘remedy’ for the trauma of the search itself. Of the 362 strip searches in England and Wales between July 2023 and June 2024, 49% resulted in a safeguarding referral, for 35% of strip searches it was not recorded whether a referral was made, and for the remaining 16% no safeguarding referral was made. However, the Children’s Commissioner believes every one of the 362 should have resulted in a safeguarding referral. These 16% represent 57 different children, all of whom have been denied an opportunity to keep them safer in future.

Recording additional vulnerability characteristics

The office asked police forces which, if any, seven key characteristics of children’s vulnerability are routinely recorded by police forces. To undertake a comparison of the routes through which a child may be strip searched, police forces were asked to provide this separately for strip searches conducted under stop and search and strip searches conducted in custody. The reason for asking about whether these characteristics are recorded (rather than the number of children with the characteristic), was to try and understand the extent to which police forces can be responsive to the needs of the child, a key tenet

of the child-centred policing model. The office asked if police forces recorded whether the child was looked after, a child in need, had any disabilities, special education needs or disabilities (SEND), was neurodivergent or had medical vulnerabilities, mental health needs, or was a potential victim of criminal or sexual exploitation.

Police forces more effectively record additional vulnerabilities for children who are strip searched in custody than under stop and search. The average number of vulnerability characteristics routinely recorded for children strip searched in custody was 5.9 and for stop search was 2.1.

For stop and search, 5 out of 44 police forces (12%) routinely recorded all characteristics of vulnerability, while 24 forces (56%) failed to routinely record any additional characteristics. Police forces were least likely to routinely record child in need status (19% of forces), followed by looked after child status and SEND status (21%) and medical vulnerabilities (23% of forces) (Table 3). Forces were most likely to routinely record whether the child was potentially a victim of child criminal or sexual exploitation (35% and 37%).

For custody, 19 of the 44 police forces (44%) routinely recorded all characteristics of vulnerability, with only one police force not recording any additional characteristics. Almost all forces recorded medical vulnerabilities and mental health needs (93%), followed closely by disability and SEND status (86% and 84%) (Table 3). Over half of forces recorded whether the child was looked after or a child in need (61% and 54%) and 25 forces (58%) recorded whether the child was a victim of criminal or sexual exploitation.

Table 3: Extent of recording of children’s additional vulnerability characteristics by police forces between July 2023 and June 2024

Characteristic	Vulnerabilities recorded where strip search	Vulnerabilities recorded where strip
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	happens in stop and search	search happens in custody
Looked after child status	21% (9)	61% (26)
Child in need status	19% (8)	54% (23)
Disability	26% (11)	86% (37)
SEND	21% (9)	84% (36)
Physical health	23% (10)	93% (40)
Mental health	28% (12)	93% (40)
Victim of criminal exploitation	35% (15)	58% (25)
Victim of sexual exploitation	37% (16)	58% (25)
All of these	12% (5)	44% (19)
None of these	56% (24)	2% (1)

Reasons for searches

Between July 2023 and June 2024, a large majority, 89% of searches (n=321), were conducted due to suspicion of the child carrying drugs. The second most often reported reason for the strip search was suspicion of the child carrying weapons, points and blades. This accounted for 8% (n=30) of strip

searches. The remaining 3% of searches were conducted for suspicion of (in order of frequency) carrying stolen property, carrying articles to cause criminal damage, going equipped⁵, anticipated violence⁶, firearms and 'other' reasons.

The Children's Commissioner believes that children should only be strip searched in extremely rare circumstances, where there is an immediate risk of significant harm; it is unlikely that this will be the case in the majority of cases where the search is for the suspicion of carrying drugs.

What was the outcome of the search?

Overall, 32% (n=115) of searches led to an arrest, 48% (n=173) led to no further action being taken, 7% (n=27) resulted in a community resolution, and 5% (n=19) led to voluntary attendance at a police station. The remaining 8% included summons, other action, verbal warning, cannabis warning, caution, seizure of property, and not recorded.

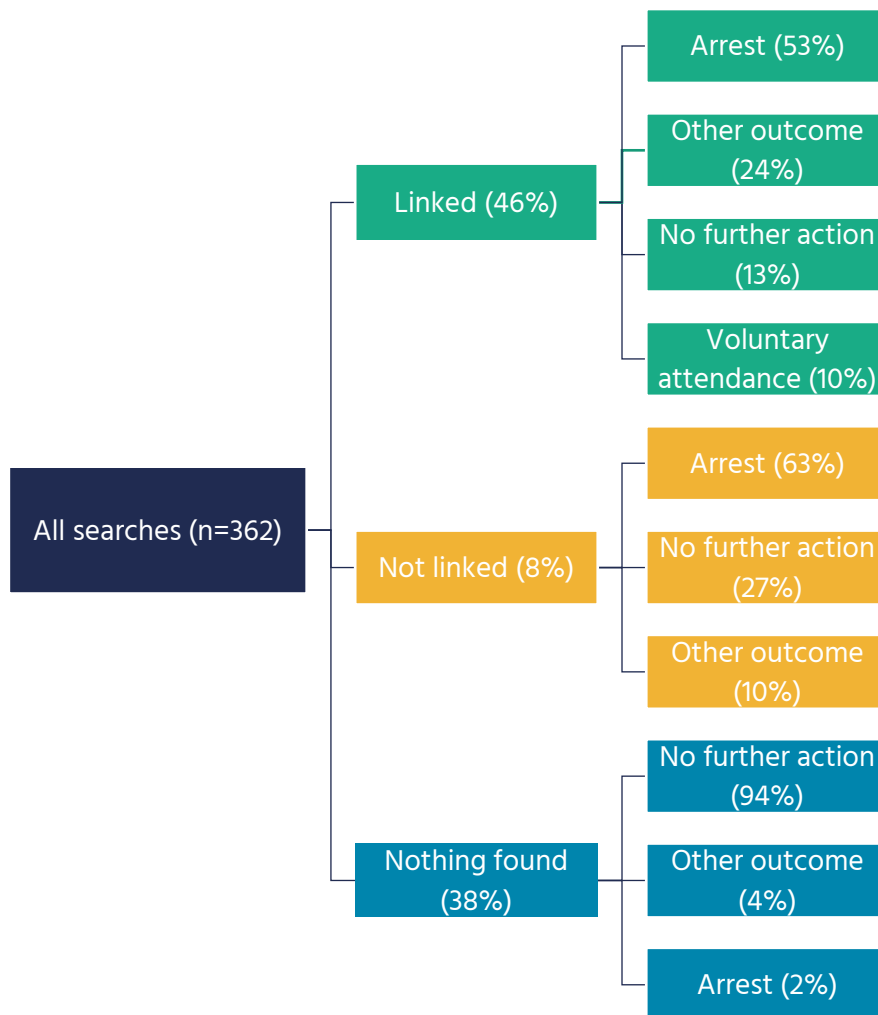
The office asked whether the outcome of the search was linked to the initial reason for the search. For instance, if the search reason was suspected drugs possession and drugs were discovered, then the office considered the reason and outcome of the search linked. Of the 362 searches that occurred between July 2023 and June 2024, 46% had an outcome linked to the initial reason for the search, for 8% the outcome was not linked to the reason, and in 38% of cases nothing was found (Figure 8). When looking across the entire dataset Jan 2018 – June 2024, drugs were the reason for the strip search in 95% of searches where the outcome and reason were linked. Where the outcome and reason were not linked, drugs were the reason in 67% of searches, weapons points and blades accounted for 21% and stolen property 5% of cases.

⁵ Going equipped means when not at his place of abode, the child has any article for use in the course of or in connection with any burglary or theft.

⁶ Where police anticipate there may be higher levels of violence they might place a section 60 order on a specific high street or park for a period of 24 or 48 hours. It relates to powers that allow officers to search for dangerous instruments or offensive weapons without reasonable grounds, for a limited time, within a specified area (under Section 60 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act, 1994)

Of the cases where nothing was found, 94% had no further action taken, though in 2% of cases, children were still arrested.

Figure 8 – Reasons for strip searches linked to the outcome of strip searches, July 2023-June 2024



Data recording and reporting

While also police forces responded to our data request, some appeared to not record specific data fields requested. Most commonly this was whether an appropriate adult was present, whether a safeguarding referral was made, or whether any of the officers involved in the strip search were of the opposite gender to the child.

When asked to provide additional context on why these fields were not recorded, police forces gave reasons ranging from them simply not recording it on IT systems, to recording it in case notes that could not be extracted for our request. Some police forces had made changes that allowed them to collect the data in the future.

Data recording has generally improved over time (Table 4). In the 2018 data, 83% of records had at least one of the fields in Table 4 missing, this has fallen to 54% of records by 2024. While this is an improvement it is still a substantial amount of missing data. The first six months of 2024 appears to be the best in terms of data recording across most individual data fields.⁷ The most improved data field has been the recording of whether safeguarding referrals were made following a strip search. Between 2019 and 2021, almost three quarters of strip searches had no record of this. By the first six months of 2024, non-recording had fallen to 38% of strip searches.

In 2018 and 2019 around 60% of search locations were unknown. Although this has improved, one quarter of strip searches in the first six months of 2024 still do not have the search location recorded.

In 2018 almost half of all strip searches did not have a record of whether there was appropriate adult present. In the most recent data, that had fallen to just over one third of searches.

Although ethnicity has been well-recorded since the start of data collection, with less than 1% of searches missing ethnicity, there are concerns that the ethnicity of the child has been defined by the officer rather than children self-identifying. This could lead to inaccuracies in the data for individual children, as well as potential systematic bias in the way that children's ethnicity is categorised.

Where data isn't recorded it is impossible to assess whether strip search of children is being used appropriately. Although improvements have been made, there are still some concerning data recording

⁷ The larger percentage of non-recording of search in public view in 2024 is because a large police force was unable to provide this data manually.

gaps. It is promising that many of the police forces now have systems in place to record this data, and with recent collection of data from the Home Office, meaningful data improvements could continue.⁸

Table 4: Data recording changes over time (2018 to 2024)

Percent of cases that were not recorded	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024 (Jan-Jun)
Appropriate adult present	47%	43%	40%	40%	40%	35%	36%
Officer defined ethnicity	0.8%	1.3%	0.4%	0.6%	1.4%	0.9%	0.6%
Search location	63%	60%	39%	33%	24%	29%	26%
Search in public view	11%	10%	10%	8.5%	5.4%	6.7%	18% ¹
Safeguarding referral made	68%	73%	71%	73%	44%	38%	38%
At least one of the above fields missing	83%	81%	82%	83%	57%	57%	54%

Home Office data collection

As well as better data recording for the office's own data collection, in response to our previous report there has been a commitment from the Home Office to collect and publish this data themselves. The

⁸ Although non-recording is an issue, if the missingness is random then removing the non-recorded cases from the analysis should still give a representative national picture. Unfortunately, some of the categories were systematically not recorded by police forces. If those forces are either excelling or struggling in their duties, then excluding their data will skew the final analysis and not reflect practice across the country.

Home Office data collection on police forces' use of strip searching of children – which started in 2023-24 – is positive but has a number of limitations.²⁰

First, some crucial data points are missing from the Home Office data collection including the number of children who are strip searched multiple times.

Second, the Home Office only reports the data in a limited way. Currently, there is a lack of transparency, as the data is not provided in open data tables (unlike use of force data), nor is there any published analysis or more granular breakdowns beyond police force, age, gender, or ethnicity (see Column 3, Table 5).

Table 5 – Comparison of Children's Commissioner's strip search of children data collection to Home Office data collection

Strip search data	Collected by CCo	Collected by Home Office (ADR 150)	Published by Home Office
Police force	Yes	Yes	Totals, not broken down by age group
Month	Yes	Yes	No
Age of child	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sex of child	Yes	Yes	Yes
Search history	Yes	No	No
Ethnicity of child – self defined	No	Yes	Yes – combined officer-defined and self-defined

Ethnicity of child – officer defined/ethnic appearance	Yes	Yes	Yes – combined officer-defined and self-defined
Legal power for search	Yes	No	No
Reason for search	Yes	Yes	No
Outcome of search	Yes	Yes	No
Outcome linked to search	Yes	Yes	No
Level of search	No – only EIP	Yes	Yes
Presence of appropriate adult	Yes	Yes	Yes
Presence of officer of opposite gender	Yes	No	No
Supervisor consulted	No	Yes	No
Search in public view	Yes	Yes	No
Search location	Yes	Yes	No
Safeguarding referral	Yes	Yes	No

Use of force by the police to effect stop and search

When a child is stopped by police for a search, they may be subject to a strip search, but they can also be subject to the use of force in order for that search to be conducted. This report therefore also examines how often this is happening to children. The use of force and the use of strip search are both traumatic for children, and are both governed by the same PACE codes when conducted as part of a stop and search, so the rules about their use should be considered holistically.

Since April 2017, all police forces in England and Wales have been required to record data on the police's use of force, the different types of force used, and the context in which it occurs.^{9 21} This data is published in an open data format, with each row relating to a single use of force report.²² The office analysed this data for children in 2024-25, where the reason for the use of force was 'to effect a stop and search'. Published statistics show that there were 95,900 stop and searches of children in 2024-25, and 22,483 reports of force. Office calculations, based on Home Office estimates of the number of individuals subject to a use of force, indicate that almost one quarter (17%) of all stop and searches of children result in a use of force.

Age, gender, ethnicity, health conditions, and where the incident took place

There were 46 instances of use of force used when conducting a stop and search of children under the age of 11, the remaining 22,437 children were aged between 11 and 17.

Force was primarily used against boys (91%) with girls accounting for just 7% of cases. In terms of ethnicity, 8% of children were Asian, 23% were Black, 6% Mixed ethnicity, 59% were White, and 3% Other ethnicity. White and Asian children were under-represented in being subject to use of force, and Black children were over-represented compared to the general population of children. Mixed ethnicity children were represented in line with their population share. Indeed, Black children were almost 5 times as likely to have force used than their White counterparts. This mirrors longstanding concerns raised in

⁹ Since 2021 these have been published annually by the Home Office as official statistics.

national reviews—including the Lammy Review and HMICFRS inspections—about disproportionality in policing outcomes for Black children.^{23 24}

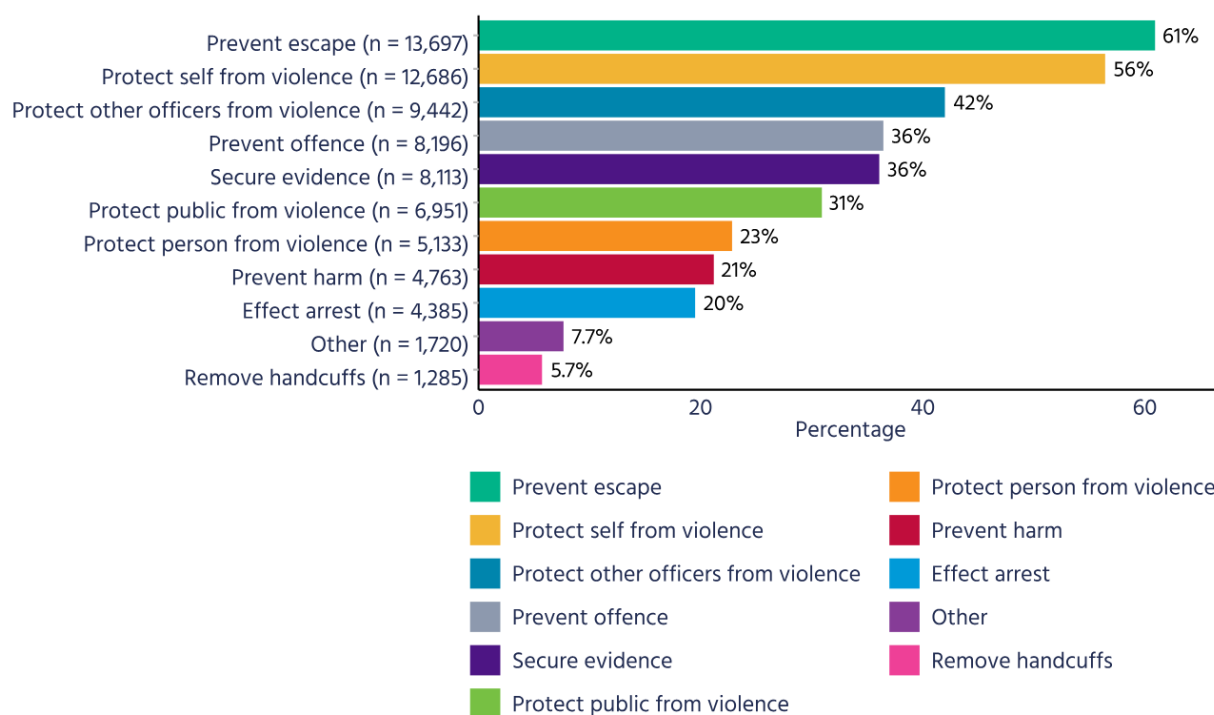
Of all uses of force against children, in 92% of cases children were reported as having no health condition. The most commonly reported type was a mental health condition (6%). Physical health conditions were uncommon (0.5%). There was no field to record whether the child had any learning difficulties or neurodivergence. These results contrast to the higher levels of health conditions reported among adults against whom the police used force: 86% of reports had no health condition, 11% had a mental health condition reported and 1.7% a physical health condition. The data guidance states that if the child does not self-report (or is not asked) about the characteristic, the officer records what they perceive the characteristic to be.²⁵ The data do not distinguish self-defined characteristics from those defined by the officer.

Most incidents involving the use of force on children occurred in public spaces. In 95% of cases, only a single location was recorded, while 4% involved two locations and a very small number involved three or more locations. The most common setting was on a street or highway where 73% of incidents took place. A further 14% occurred on open ground (e.g. park, car park, field etc.), and 4.6% took place on public transport. The remaining 10% of incidents were distributed across a range of other environments including, in order of frequency, 'other', dwellings, retail premises, custody blocks, police vehicles, accident and emergency departments, licensed premises, mental health settings, sports events and ambulances. Of the 148 total incidents in these three health settings, 85, 51 and 12 were in A&E departments, mental health settings, and ambulances respectively.

Reasons for use of force incident

Police forces may record multiple reasons for a use of force incident. Alongside the reason being to effect a stop and search, 61% of incidents have "prevent escape" listed as a reason, 56% to "protect the officer from violence", 42% to "protect other officers from violence", 36% to "prevent an offence" (Figure 9).

Figure 9 – Reasons given for use of force



Tactics used

The type of use of force is recorded by police forces. The Home Office categorise these into six broad categories. These include restraint (handcuffing (compliant or non-compliant), limb or body restraints, ground restraint), unarmed skills (escorting individuals, distraction strikes with hands and feet, pressure point and joint locks), use of other equipment (a baton, irritant spray, spit and bite guard, shield), less lethal weapons (conducted energy device (CED), for example, TASER, attenuating energy projectile (AEP))¹⁰, firearms, and other (use of dogs, improvised tactics).²⁶ There may be multiple types used within

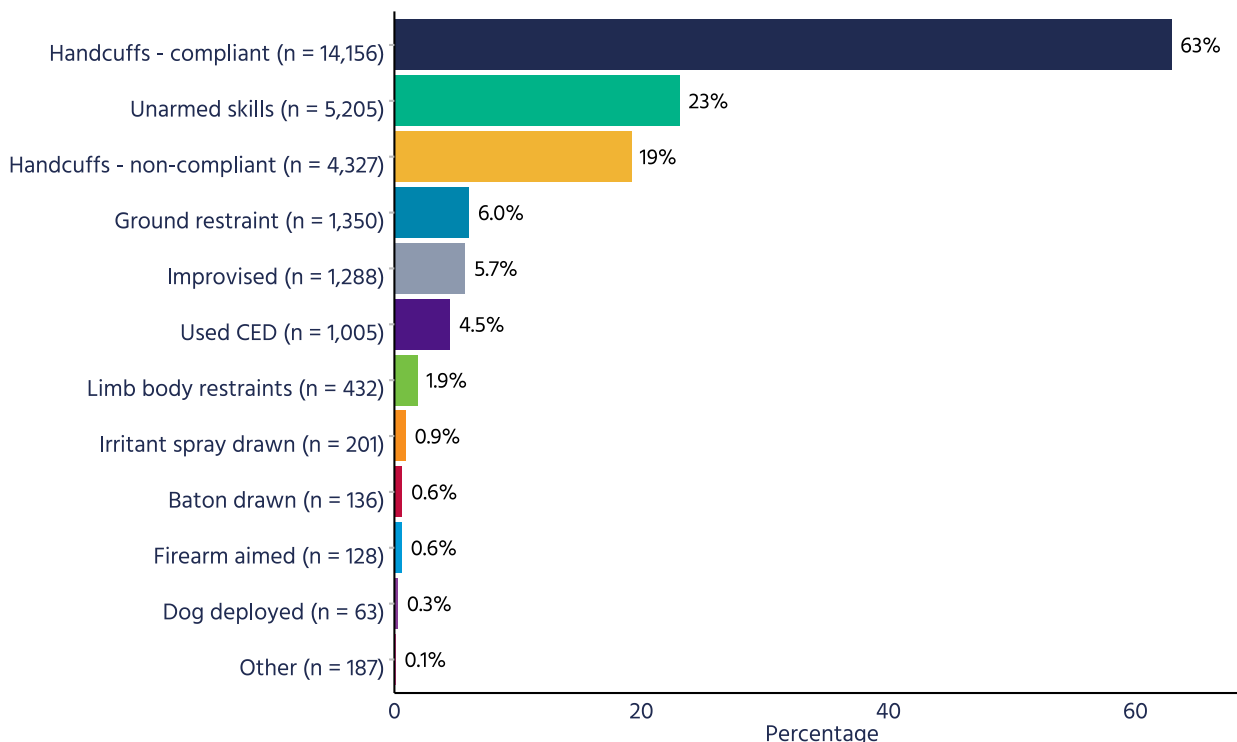
¹⁰ Attenuating energy projectiles (AEP) are soft-nosed kinetic projectiles intended to dissuade or prevent a potentially violent person from their intended course of action, thereby neutralising the threat. See [here](#).

on incident. On average there were 1.3 tactics used per use of force report. The majority of reports (78%) recorded the use of a single tactic, while 18% involved two tactics and 4% involved three or more.

Analysis of the detailed categories shows compliant handcuffing was the main tactic used - 63% of all use of force incidents (Figure 10). National guidance is explicit - handcuffing must not be used routinely and it must be necessary, proportionate and lawful. An officer should never handcuff a child if there is not a specific threat or behaviour from the child.²⁷

Unarmed skills were the second most commonly used tactic in 5,205 (23%) incidents, followed by 4,327 non-compliant handcuffs (19%) and 1,350 cases involving ground restraint (6%). Improvised tactics were used in 1,288 (6%) of incidents, conducted energy device (CED) in 1,005 incidents (4%) and limb body restraints in 432 (2%). Although rarely used, there are still 201 incidents where children were subjected to an irritant spray being drawn, 136 to a baton being drawn, 128 had a firearm aimed, and 63 had a dog deployed. Other tactics which each made up around 0.1% of incidents (187) were dog bites, batons being used, irritant spray being used, an AEP drawn, and spit guards. The use of more intrusive tactics—such as batons or firearms was rare, which may reflect policy requirements that officers consider a child's age, vulnerability and safeguarding needs when selecting tactical options.

Figure 10 – Types of tactics used on children in use of force incidents 2024-25



Contextual factors relating to the use of force incident

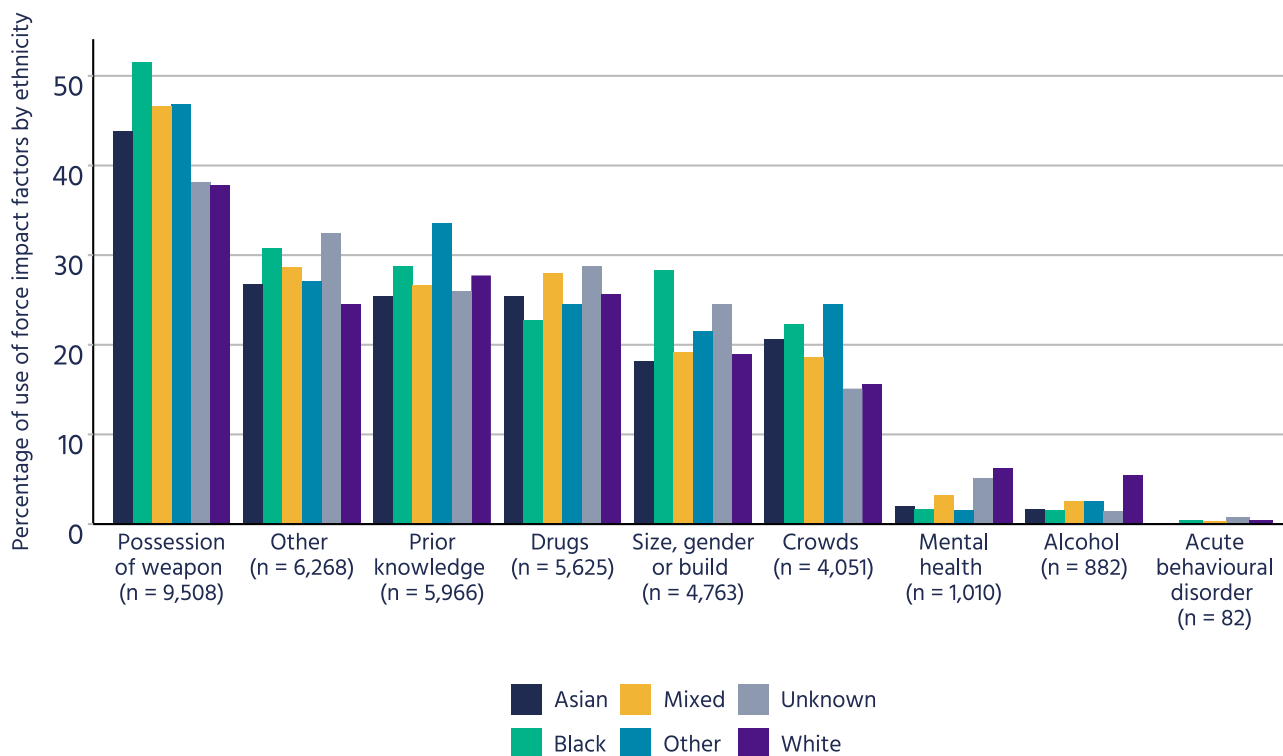
Factors that capture the contextual factors that influenced the use of force being used are recorded in the data. Multiple factors can be recorded for each report, reflecting the complexity of the circumstance.²⁸

The most frequently recorded factor was possession of a weapon, present in 42% of these searches. This was followed by ‘other’ (28%), prior knowledge relating to the incident (27%), drugs (25%), the size, gender, or build of the child (21%), and crowds (18%). Less common factors included mental health (4.5%), alcohol (3.9%) and acute behaviour disorder (0.4%).

Across all stop and search incidents involving children, the average number of factors recorded was 1.7. This differs slightly depending on the ethnicity of the child, Black children have the highest average number of factors recorded at 1.9. This suggests that police are more often assessing incidents involving Black as involving multiple risks or complicating factors.

The disproportionate use of force against Black children can be attributed to adultification bias where racialised children, particularly Black children, are perceived as older, more dangerous, and more guilty than their White peers. This bias shifts the police's focus away from a child's actual vulnerability and children are more likely to be treated with suspicion than raising safeguarding concerns. Incidents that involved Black children had higher percentages of size, build and gender (28%) being a factor in the use of force compared to Asian (18%), White (19%), and Mixed ethnicity children (19%). They also have higher percentages on prior knowledge, possession of weapon, crowds, and lower percentages of alcohol and mental health being factors (Figure 11). This suggests differences in how children are perceived. Black children are being associated more with factors that suggest a threat such as possession of weapons or their physical appearance, where White children more with vulnerability factors like mental health or alcohol.

Figure 11 – Contextual factors recorded against children in use of force incidents to effect stop and search, 2024-25

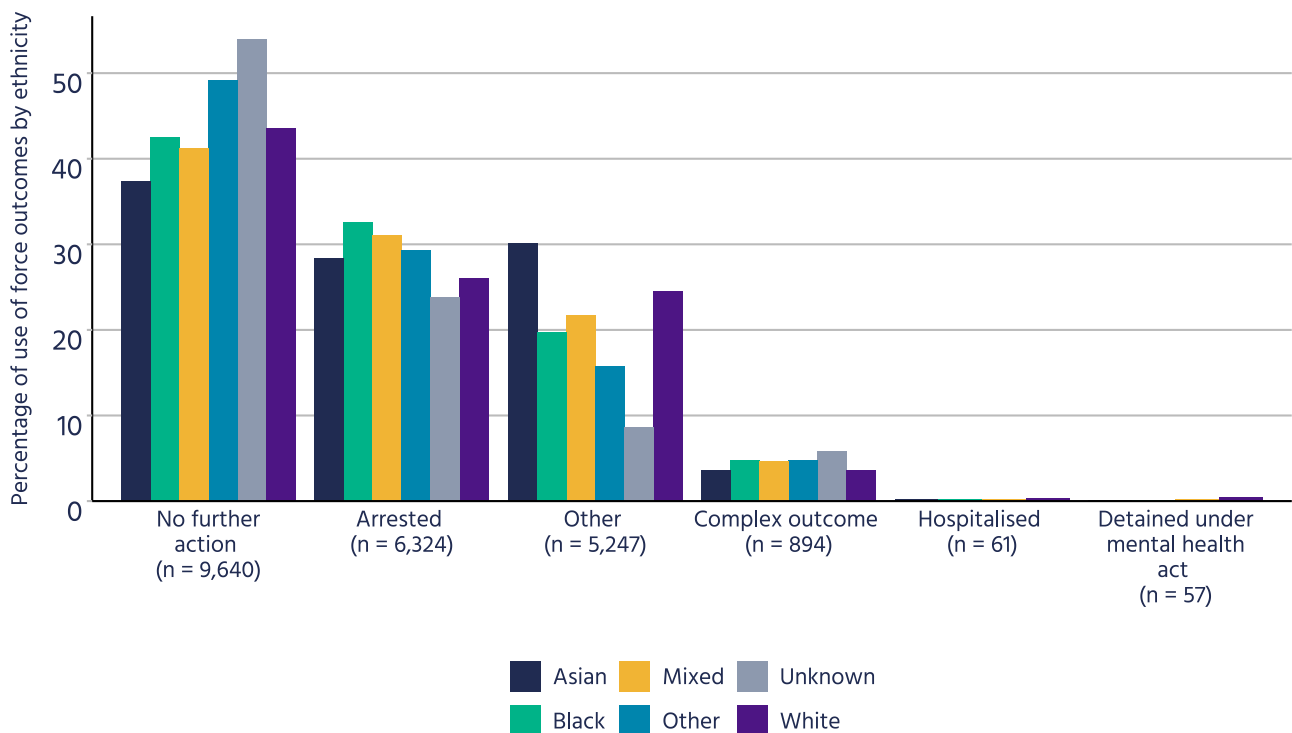


Outcome

Of the children subject to a use of force to conduct a stop and search, the most common outcome was no further action (43%). Over a quarter of children (28%) were arrested, and 23% had an 'other' outcome recorded. Other outcomes include the child being cautioned, or de-arrested following further information. It may capture out of court disposals or referrals to youth offending teams.²⁹ A small percentage of children (4%) had more than one outcome recorded for the same use of force incident which is defined as a complex outcome. Very few children were either detained under the Mental Health Act or hospitalised (118 incidents).

There are some differences by ethnicity, children of White ethnicity and unknown ethnicity had the smallest proportions of children being arrested compared to the other ethnic groups. Of the children who had no further action taken, Asian, Black and Mixed ethnicity children had the smallest proportions compared with White and Other ethnic groups. Asian and White children had highest percentages of those with an 'other' outcome compared to Black, Mixed and Other ethnic groups. (Figure 12).

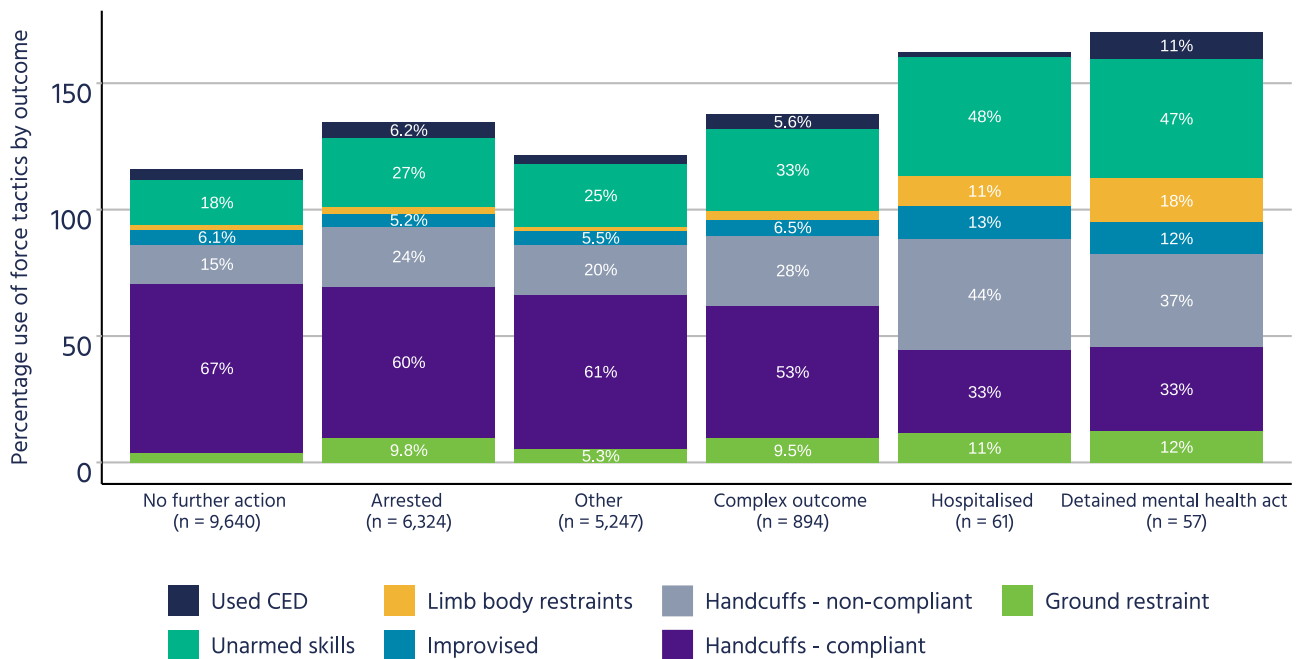
Figure 12 – Use of force outcomes for children by ethnicity in 2024-25



There are some differences in the type of tactic used by outcome (Figure 13). For the most used tactics, uses of force that result in no further action for the child are most commonly compliant handcuffing (67%), followed by unarmed skills (18%) and non-compliant handcuffing (15%). Ground restraint was used in 350 incidents (3.6%), limb body restraints in 165 (1.7%), and CED in 384 incidents (4%), less frequent but not insignificant numbers of children, especially considering no further action was taken. Comparing this to incidents that led to an arrest, compliant handcuffing makes up slightly smaller 60%

of the total where unarmed skills (27%) and ground restraint (9.8%) were more commonly used. The use of CED is slightly higher (6.2% compared to 4%). Where incidents led to hospitalisation or detention under the mental health act, limb body restraints (11% and 18%) and ground restraint (11% and 12%) were more commonly used than for other outcomes. Compliant handcuffing was less frequently used as a tactic in these two settings, though non-compliant handcuffing was more common than for other outcomes. It is striking that for 6 incidents (11%) that led to the child being detained under the mental health act a CED e.g. TASER was used.

Figure 13 – Most common tactics used in use of force by outcome



Note, percentages may add up to more than 100% because multiple tactics may be used per outcome. For instance, the average number of tactics used where the child was detained under the mental health act was 1.8, compared to 1.2 for children who received no further action.

Figure 11 presented only the most common tactics. Even for some incidents that led to no further action, there were also some more severe tactics that were used. In 60 incidents (0.6%) an irritant spray was drawn, 48 incidents (0.5%) involved a firearm being aimed, in 49 incidents (0.5%) a baton drawn, in 19

incidents (0.2%) a dog was deployed, in 10 incidents (0.1%) an AEP was drawn. In 3 cases a baton was used and in 8 an irritant spray used.

Injuries sustained

Police forces record whether the child involved in the use of force incident was injured during the use of force. They record whether the child was injured and if so, the level of injury sustained.¹¹

In total 611 use of force incidents (1.5%) were recorded as the child having been injured. Of these, 77 children (0.3%) sustained injuries not caused by the use of force itself, 193 children (0.9%) had injuries where the cause could not be determined from the available information, and 341 injured during the use of force. Where the severity of the injury was recorded, it was classified as severe for 3 of the incidents, and minor for 530 (2%). When compared with all use of force incidents across both adults and children, the injury rate for children is notably lower. While 3.3% of use of force on adults result in injury, 1.5% of uses of force reports among children.

3. Conclusion

The strip searching of children should be an incredibly rare event, that happens only when there is a real risk of immediate harm that can only be remedied through the use of strip-searching. Since the Children's Commissioner's first report, there have been changes to policy about strip searching. The College of Policing is consulting on changes to stop and search guidance to emphasise safeguards for children³⁰. The Home Office consulted on proposed amendments to PACE codes of Practice A and C, referencing the Children's Commissioner's research, and has started publishing data on the use of strip search.³¹ Following the case of Child Q, the Metropolitan Police have made local policy changes to how strip searches are conducted, and the Department for Education issued updated guidance for schools to emphasise their duty of care towards students, encouraging them to consider the necessity of calling

¹¹ A minor injury is defined as one where simple first aid may be required. A severe injury is a fracture, deep cut, deep laceration or an injury causing damage to an internal organ or the impairment of any bodily function.

police to perform strip searches and to ensure that strip searches are conducted in line with statutory guidelines.³²³³

These policy changes have led to some improvements, with an overall reduction in the number of strip searches of children in England and Wales, as well as greater transparency and oversight. However, this report shows how there is still much further to go.

The vast majority of children are still being searched for drugs, rather than weapons, where the risk of immediate harm is less clear. There are still some searches happening in public view, or without an appropriate adult present, and the data being recorded about the safeguards in place for children is still inconsistent. The racial disproportionality in strip searching Black children has seen no signs of improvement. However, there are also some positive signs in that the number of strip searches have been falling over time, and where we have location data, we know that strip searches are not happening in schools.

Some new findings have also emerged that were previously un-investigated. Almost one third of children who are strip searched are being subjected to multiple strip searches, which either indicates a lack of adequate safeguarding or a potential over-policing of certain children or communities. For the first time the office is aware of, the use of force under police stop and search specifically focusing on children has been explored. This shows that of all incidents of stop and search, almost one in five have a use of force report and often (in 43% of cases) these lead to no further action by the police. This calls into question the necessary, proportionate and lawful tests of police use of powers.

Since the previous report, where the office called for better data transparency and quality of collection, the Home Office (HO) began collecting data from police forces on the use of strip searching of children in 2023-24.¹² This is promising and will allow continued monitoring of the number of children strip searched under stop and search, but will not provide the same level of detail that the office reports.

¹² Comparing the number of HO recorded strip searches with CCo data showed that the CCo numbers were higher. However, the first year of data collection was voluntary for police forces, and there was non-response from some police forces.

Recommendations

Reducing the number of strip searches and improving the way they are conducted is of course only one part of improving children's treatment by police. The number of children affected every year is relatively small, compared to the numbers of children arrested or cautioned.³⁴ But that doesn't mean the need for reform is any less pressing. Because for the children who are affected, it is humiliating, traumatising, and will profoundly undermine their relationships with police. And also, because it is exactly by focusing on the sharpest end of the system – where the stakes are the highest – that we test a genuine commitment to a child-centred system. Improving strip searching means absolute dedication to having proper safeguards in place, to turning to 'last resort' options only as genuine last resorts, to tackling discrimination, to being open and transparent about what is happening and what is going wrong. All of these lessons can apply more broadly to developing a criminal justice system that treats children as children first and foremost.

The recommendations below set out what more can be done to ensure those safeguards, raised thresholds for use and improvements to practice are all embedded.

Recommendation 1: The Home Office should consult on a standalone Police and Criminal Evidence Act Code of Practice that governs police interactions with children across all domains.

In the short-term, current PACE codes A and C should be urgently updated following the consultation carried out in 2024. They must make clear that:

- Children should only ever be strip searched if there is an immediate risk of significant harm, recognising that the experience of a strip search is itself harmful and traumatic.
- An appropriate adult must always be present, except in the most exceptional circumstances where there is a serious risk to a child's life and welfare.
- Parents or carers must be informed in advance of a strip search.
- If a young person claims to be under 18 they should be treated as such unless there is clear evidence to the contrary.

- No child should be searched by an officer of the opposite sex, unless that is their choice. Children should always have the choice about where the search is conducted.
- A safeguarding referral should always be made for a child who has been strip searched.
- Forces should only ever be used against children in order to prevent significant harm to themselves or others, not just to detain them for the purposes of a search.

Recommendation 2: The Home Office should pilot the use of emerging and alternative technologies to minimise the need for invasive strip searches of children, including the use of X-ray body scanners and similar technologies

Recommendation 3: The Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care must ensure that the “consistent identifier” that will be rolled out to improve data sharing in child safeguarding must extend to all children, not just those currently in contact with safeguarding services, in order to ensure that children’s health, education, and previous involvement with police can be more accurately shared.

Recommendation 4: Police forces must urgently review cases where they have strip searched a child more than once, to understand why they have come back into contact with police and what diversionary opportunities have been missed.

Recommendation 5: The Home Office must work with police forces to improve data quality, availability and transparency. This should include:

- Requiring that additional vulnerability characteristics are recorded as standard on all police data recording systems rather than as an optional free-text field.
 - A Public Protection Notice should be recorded for every stop and search involving a child.
 - There should be a mandatory flag on police data recording systems for non-compliant strip searches.
 - The Home Office should publish of all variables it collects in open data tables with one row per strip search — similar to the 'Police Powers and Use of Force' statistics. This would enable
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researchers and advocacy groups to conduct their own analysis and maintain consistent monitoring in the future.

Recommendation 6: The Home Office should improve compliance with PACE codes in all police forces. In the recent data collection, the CCo identified strip searches conducted by police forces where we have concerns about the safeguarding of children, or we consider that there has been a breach of a statutory code of practice by the police. The Children's Commissioner will write to all relevant Professional Standards Departments (PSDs) through the National Police Chiefs' Council outlining which cases she believes they should review and refer to the Independent Office of Police Conduct (IOPC). In future the Home Office should require forces to refer all non-compliant searches to the IOPC.

Recommendation 7: Police forces should review ethnic disproportionality in their reasons for use of force. The Home Office should amend the wording in the Use of Force data collection for 'size, build and gender' to separate out build and gender, to allow for better identification of reasons for use of force, and ensure that the recording can identify number of children subject to use of force as well as the number of incidents.

4. Methodology

Police force data

In 2025 the Children's Commissioner requested data from police forces in England and Wales under section 2F of the Children Act 2004. This legislation enables the Children's Commissioner to gather information about children from public bodies to inform her work. All 44 police forces in England and Wales, including the British Transport Police, responded to the request within the required timeframe. Forces were asked to input search-level data into a template, covering strip searches (i.e., searches exposing intimate parts, or EIP search) conducted on children (aged 17 years old or under) under stop and search powers (i.e., PACE Code A) by the force between the 1st of July 2023 and 30th of June 2024 inclusive.

The search-level data comprised demographic data on children who were searched, search locations, including whether the search was in public view, whether an appropriate adult was present for each search, whether the officer present during the search was of the same gender as the child, whether the child had been subject to any previous searches, the legal search powers cited and the outcome of the search, including whether anything was found and whether the reason for the search was linked to the outcome. The template also asked whether a safeguarding referral had been raised after the search.

All data returns were manually checked and quality assured by the office. All further data cleaning and analysis was conducted using R. Responses which did not match the data template were standardised, and any personally identifiable data was removed. The office contacted police forces who did not fill in certain data fields e.g. presence of an appropriate adult and asked them to provide more context to why the data was not provided. Some police forces were able to manually check case notes and subsequently provide this data, others said their recording systems meant they were not able to provide this information at all. A few police forces highlighted recent improvements to their data systems that would allow them to provide this data in the future.

Population-level data from the Office for National Statistics on was added to the strip search dataset by region, ethnicity and police force area (PFA).³⁵ To look at trends over time, data collected from the

office's previous two national data requests were combined with the latest data return and, where possible, variables standardised.

It should be noted that as data is available only at the search-level, rather than at the child-level. For the first time the analysis is able to give an indication of the number of searches which are repeat searches, however, due to anonymisation of the data, it is not possible to identify which children are appearing more than once in the dataset.

Use of force data

This analysis utilizes the Police Use of Force Statistics, England and Wales: April 2024 to March 2025, published by the Home Office.³⁶ The dataset originates from the "Open Data Tables," which record every individual instance where a police officer used force. A use of force report is recorded by each individual officer, therefore, the total number of reports is an 'officer-count' of incidents. For example, if three officers use force on one person, the data will show three reports for that single incident.

To ensure a specific focus on policing powers used on children, the raw data was filtered using the following criteria:

- Age - Only records where the subject's age was under 18 were included.
- Reason for use of force - Incidents where at least one of the reasons for force was identified as "Stop and Search" were included in the analysis. Multiple reasons may be recorded against a use of force report and these records have been retained and analysed.

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