

UK police make one million stop and searches of young people

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A report by the House of Commons All-Party Parliamentary Group for Children has revealed that more than one million police stop and searches were carried out on children and young people under the age of 18 in England and Wales over the last five years.

Between 2009 to 2013, 1,136 stop and searches were carried out on children under 10 years old, despite the fact that they are under the age of criminal responsibility in England and Wales.

The real figure will be much higher.

Figures were provided by 26 of the 43 police forces in England and Wales. In some police forces young people accounted for up to 28 percent of all stops recorded. The total of 1,136 children stopped excludes figures for the Metropolitan Police, the largest police force in the UK, which covers the Greater London area and a population of over 8 million people.

The Metropolitan Police did not provide any total figures for the 2009-2013 period. It did reveal that 136 stops of children occurred between 2011 and 2013, with six of them involving children under five.

Some police forces are stopping and detaining children, even though it was revealed that 20 of the 43 forces did not have separate custody facilities for children and young people.

The figures revealed by some of the individual forces reveal the blanket use of stop and search powers. Overall about a million people a year are stopped—equivalent to two percent of the adult population. From 2009 to 2013 West Yorkshire Police carried out 177,695 stops and checks (nearly 100 a day) on adults and children. More than 50,000 (more than 27 per day) of these were children—the highest number outside London.

Police are allowed by law to stop someone only if they have reasonable grounds to suspect they are

carrying illegal drugs, a weapon, stolen property or something that could be used to commit a crime. But under Section 60 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act, introduced in 1994, police officers can also stop and search someone without suspicion that they believe is involved in any wrongdoing, if approved by a senior officer. Such practices can be justified on the pretext such as a concern that serious violence could take place.

Section 60 has been used by police on a far wider basis, including against peaceful protesters. For example, in November 2011 police issued a brochure prior to a demonstration by students in London stating that they intended to use Section 60. The brochure read that the law “gives police the right to search people in a defined area at a specific time” and “provides powers to require the removal of disguises at public order events.”

The figures follow a House of Commons debate in April that noted growing opposition and anger to the arbitrary use of stop and search powers. Conservative Party Home Secretary Theresa May was forced to acknowledge the results of a recent inquiry by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary which found that 27 percent of stop and searches had no reasonable grounds for suspicion. On this basis more than 250,000 of the more than one million overall searches conducted last year could have been illegal.

Figures also uncovered that only about 10 percent of more than a million searches lead to an actual arrest. Black people were six times more likely to be stopped than whites.

An analysis of 2,493 stop and searches carried out in Bolton, in Greater Manchester, between April 2013 and March 2014 found that just 192—equivalent to 7.7 percent—resulted in an arrest. More than 1,400 led to no

further action.

Charles Walker, Conservative MP for Broxbourne, an area just outside Greater London, told parliament that one of his constituents had been stopped 50 times between the ages of 13 and 18.

May stated in parliament, “It is very clear that in a large number of cases the reasonable grounds for suspicion were not there and one can only therefore assume, given that black people are six times more likely to be stopped and searched than a white person, that it is precisely the fact that they are a black person that has led to that stop and search taking place.”

Despite this feigned concern about the arbitrary use of stop and search powers, there are no proposals to end such flagrant abuses of democratic rights. The government proposed only a review, to be headed by the professional standards body, the College of Policing, into stop and search training for all forces. It also proposes that individual police officers could face disciplinary action if they “misuse” stop and search powers—or be prevented from using them altogether.

In a July 2013 debate in parliament, Labour Party MP Diane Abbott pointed out that the systematic use of stop and search powers by the police was a central factor behind the riots which broke out in the capital in 2011. She said, “[N]o single police activity causes more unhappiness and antagonism between the police and young black people than stop and search. That goes all the way back to the 1980s and the Brixton riots. Even after the 2011 riots, when I spoke to young people in Hackney about what triggered the riots, they said, ‘Stop and search’.”

Despite this Abbott stated that the issue came down to one of better police training, stressing, “Stop and search is an important weapon for the police but proper training should stop its being used in a way that is detrimental to community relations.”

In her latest parliamentary response to the home secretary, Abbott said, “Given that successive governments have failed to act, she [May] gets some credit from some of us for taking things as far as she has.”

Labour would proceed no differently. They introduced the Terrorism Act 2000 as part of a raft of anti-democratic measures legislated during 13 years in office to 2010. This legislation has been used over and over again to curtail basic democratic rights, including

stopping and searching hundreds of thousands of people without any pretext.

By 2008/09 more than a quarter of a million searches were made under Section 44 of the Terrorism Act, more than double that of the previous year. Despite growing opposition to these laws, by 2009/10 a total of 101,248 stops and searches (more than 277 a day) were made under the Terrorism Act. Figures were released showing that only one in every 200 stops led to an arrest and none of these were terror-related.



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