

# **Strip searching of children in England and Wales:**

First complete dataset  
for 2018–2023, including new  
data July 2022–June 2023

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August 2024

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## 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 impact 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** 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)

## Making a complaint to the police

If you believe that you, or a child in your life, has experienced inappropriate behaviour from a police officer, you can make a complaint to the police.



The **Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC)** oversees the police complaint system in England and Wales: [policeconduct.gov.uk/complaints/submit-a-complaint](https://policeconduct.gov.uk/complaints/submit-a-complaint)

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Dr Miranda Bevan and Dr Vicky Kemp for their advice on this report. However, the responsibility for the report's contents rests with the Children's Commissioner's office.

## Foreword from Dame Rachel de Souza



In light of the shocking case of Child Q, a 15-year-old Black girl who was strip searched while at school in Hackney nearly four years ago, I wanted to use my statutory powers as Children's Commissioner to investigate the practice of strip searching children by the police. Child Q's case was so extreme that I wanted to ensure it was a one-off – I was clear that 'sorry' was not sufficient. Such a case should and could not happen again.

The findings from my initial project, focusing on the Metropolitan Police, were alarming. They exposed system-wide issues in the force with a lack of transparency, minimal scrutiny and non-compliance with statutory codes of practice when carrying out strip searches of children under stop and search powers, leaving these children exposed to unacceptable safeguarding risks.

My second report, in March 2023, used data from police forces across England and Wales and proved that these issues were systemic, not isolated - they could be seen nationally. I am grateful to the many members of both Houses of Parliament for their efforts in bringing attention to the findings and the urgent change that is needed, as well as the responses from a range of organisations in support of my recommendations, many of which were subsequently recognised in the Government's recent review of the codes of practice for strip searching children and vulnerable people.

In this latest report, the third in my series of work, I present a complete analysis of strip searches conducted by police across England and Wales across five and a half years of data, from 2018 to 2023, including new data for 2022 to 2023. My research again confirms that the issues are not confined to London – indeed, there are indications that outside of London the issues are even more deeply entrenched. Throughout England and Wales, police continue to strip search children as part of stop and searches, revealing concerning practices and widespread failure to comply with safeguarding procedures designed to protect children.

Senior police officers have shared with me that there will be certain, limited times when an immediate risk of harm means that a search of this nature is both appropriate and necessary. My firm recommendation is that this should only be the case where there is a clear and immediate danger to the child or others. However, the majority of searches are still conducted on suspicion of drugs and nearly half result in no further action, indicating that many traumatic searches, similar to the experiences of Child Q, could be preventable. If such an intrusive and potentially traumatic power is deemed necessary, it must be accompanied by robust safeguards after considering of potential long-term impacts on children’s mental health.

At the time of publication, there is much attention on children’s involvement with the police, in the wake of violent riots around the country. This disorder has been distressing to witness and I am clear that any individual found to have been involved should face appropriate consequences. But - first and foremost - children are children and need to be treated as such. Every interaction with a child should be viewed as an opportunity to understand their situation, safeguard them from exploitation, and work with them positively to prevent their involvement with crime.

More encouragingly, this third report shows there are signs of clear and positive change. The total number of strip searches conducted across England and Wales appears to be declining, particularly in London. This suggests that some efforts to address the issue are having an impact. Additionally, while the disproportionate number of searches that Black children experience remains a critical concern, the disparity has reduced. Black children are now four times more likely to be strip searched compared to national population figures, rather than six times as previously reported. This indicates steps are being taken in the right direction, though much work remains to resolve this inequality.

Additionally, we are seeing evidence that the majority of police forces have made procedural changes to how they carry out strip searches and nearly half of searches between July 2022 and June 2023 resulted in the force making a safeguarding referral – a significant increase from previous years and an indication that an increasing number of children who experience a strip search are receiving support afterwards.

In total, 457 searches were conducted on children between July 2022 and June 2023 in England and Wales – which is equivalent to one child every 19 hours over this period, on average. Of these, half resulted in no further action being taken – calling into question the necessity of such an intrusive search in the first place.

Furthermore, this report presents new evidence that police forces are, on average, twice as likely to routinely record additional characteristics of vulnerability, such as whether a child is in care, has a medical condition or is a victim of sexual exploitation, for searches in custody compared to searches under stop and search. As strip searches under stop and search are conducted in a less controlled environment and often under high-tension, time-pressured conditions, strip searches during stop and search should undergo more rigorous scrutiny than those conducted in custody, not less. More must be done to safeguard vulnerable young people, and mitigate significant unrecorded data, which is currently obstructing proper transparency and scrutiny.

The current system still lacks effective safeguarding procedures. It relies heavily on frontline officers, who are not specialists, to always act correctly, without adequate scrutiny to ensure adherence to vital safeguards, and with little consideration of the impact on vulnerable children. It cannot be the job of police officers alone – we need health and children’s social care services to step up as the other statutory safeguarding partners and consider how to commission mental health and neurodiversity support. Consideration also needs to be given to bringing in education, youth work and youth justice services.

My sustained attention on this issue stems not from internal whistle-blowers or inspection reports but from the bravery of a girl speaking out about her traumatic experience. There is an urgent need to strengthen guidance around strip searches, ensure oversight and inspection, and reform a culture that has allowed non-compliance to go unchallenged. It is unacceptable that police forces across England and Wales cannot adequately account for the necessity, circumstances, and safeguarding outcomes of every strip search of a child they have conducted.

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The way these searches have been conducted indicates that police too often forget that children are children. The primary duty of the police, as with all professionals, should be to protect children from harm. We must strive for a system where an officer encountering a child suspected of carrying drugs or a weapon prioritises their safety first, always.

## 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 conducting strip searches across England and Wales. It has been clear that these searches are too often carried out in ways that are deeply traumatising to children, and where essential safeguards are not met.

### About the data

Using powers under the Children Act 2004, the Children's Commissioner received data from all 44 police forces in England and Wales, including the British Transport Police, regarding the number of strip searches conducted under stop and search involving a child between July 2022 and June 2023.

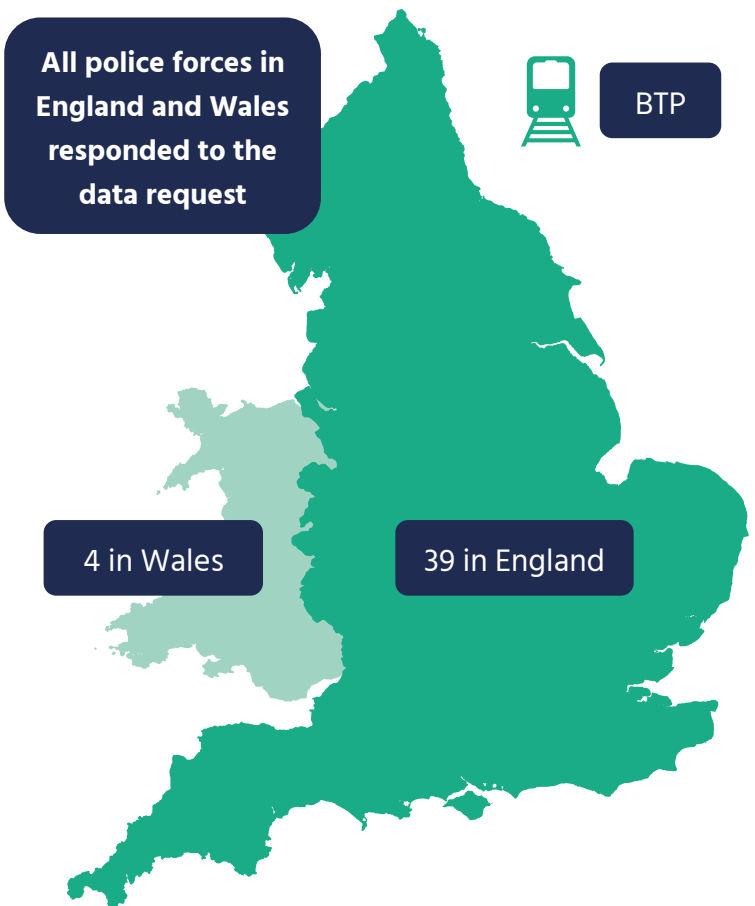
To this the office added data from the Children's Commissioner's previous request, to create a complete dataset for all forces in England and Wales covering January 2018 to June 2023.

All police forces also answered a series of questions on children's interactions with the police.

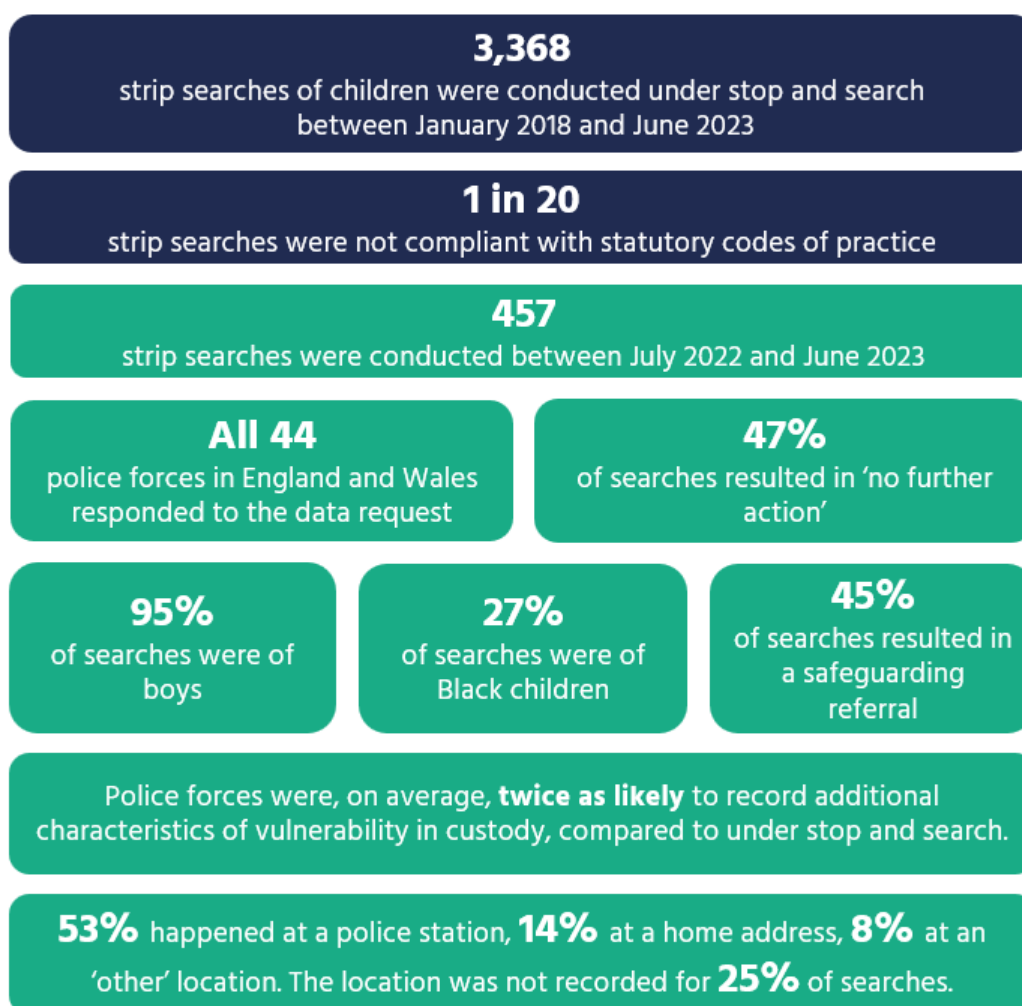
### Key findings

In this report, the CCo is publishing never-previously-published data on strip searches conducted under stop and search powers by police forces in England and Wales:

### What's new?



- From January 2018 to June 2023, 3,368 strip searches of children were conducted by 44 police forces in England and Wales, including 64 searches conducted between 2018 and June 2022 that were previously not reported. As data is provided at the search-level, the total number of children strip searched is unknown.
- This report provides an update from the CCo's 2023 report<sup>1</sup>, presenting data on the number and circumstances of strip searches conducted under stop and search between July 2022 and June 2023. In total, 457 strip searches of children were conducted in England and Wales between July 2022 and June 2023.
- Police forces were asked a series of force-level questions, including which, if any, of seven key characteristics of additional vulnerability are routinely recorded under stop and search and for strip searches conducted in custody.



### **Positive steps forward**

- The number of strip searches under stop and search in England and Wales appears to be declining, and with fewer searches conducted in London compared to previous years.
- Black children in England and Wales were still disproportionately likely to be strip searched between July 2022 and June 2023 (over four times more likely than national population figures), while White children were still disproportionately less likely to be searched (a quarter as likely).
- Of the 457 strip searches of children in England and Wales between July 2022 and June 2023, 45% resulted in the police force raising a safeguarding referral, an increase of 28 percentage points compared to the figure for 2018 to June 2022.
- The majority of forces (37 of 44) reported making at least some policy or procedure changes regarding searches exposing intimate parts of children under stop and search powers or in custody since March 2022. The other seven forces either did not specify any changes, reported there had been no change, or reported that no changes had been made yet.

### **Who was searched?**

- The proportion of searches conducted involving a child aged 15 years old or younger increased by 5 percentage points from 23% to 28% compared to 2018 to June 2022.
- Only 1 in every 20 searches between 2022 and June 2023 conducted were carried out on girls (5% girls, 95% boys).

### **How and where were the searches conducted?**

- In total, 4% of searches (n=122) conducted between 2018 and June 2023 were not compliant with statutory codes of practice and a further 11% of searches (n=387) constituted a safeguarding concern. Only 85% of searches were conducted in a manner that appears to be consistent with statutory codes of practice.
- Between July 2022 and June 2023, 11% (n=52) were within view of the public, contrary to guidance, and for 4% (n=17) of searches this information was not recorded. The remaining 85% were conducted outside of public view.
- Between July 2022 and June 2023, just over half of searches were conducted at a police station (53%), 14% of searches were conducted in the child's home and concerningly, 8% of searches

were conducted at an 'other location' and the location was not recorded for the remaining 25% of searches.

- Between July 2022 and June 2023, an appropriate adult could not be confirmed to be present in 45% of searches (n=205): in 39% of searches this information was not recorded and an appropriate adult was confirmed to not be present in 6% of searches, including 1% of searches in which the child was identified as a child after the search had taken place.
- On average, police forces routinely recorded only two out of seven vulnerability characteristics for searches conducted under stop and search. Police forces were least likely to routinely record Looked After Child status (18% of forces) and most likely to routinely record whether the child was potentially a victim of child criminal or sexual exploitation (36% of forces).

#### **What were the reasons for the searches and were these linked to the outcomes?**

- Between July 2022 and June 2023, 88% of searches were conducted on suspicion of drugs, and 6% on suspicion of carrying weapons, points and blades. The remaining 6% of searches were conducted for suspicion of stolen property, 'other' reasons and going equipped.
- Of searches conducted between July 2022 and June 2023, just under half of all searches resulted in 'no further action' (47%), around a quarter of searches resulted in an arrest (26%), and concerningly, 6% of search outcomes were not recorded.

## Context

### Children's interactions with the police

Children's interactions with the police are extensive every year. The following statistics provide an overview of children's experiences and interactions with the criminal justice system in England and Wales:

- 1,275,667 children experienced victimisation in the year ending March 2024 (10.2%)<sup>2</sup>;
- 54,875 detentions of children occurred in police custody in the year to March 2023<sup>3</sup>;
- 58,607 arrests of children happened in 2022-23<sup>4</sup>;
- 11,900 times in 2022-23, children were sentenced<sup>5</sup>; and
- 411 children were living in the youth secure estate in February 2024<sup>6</sup>.

In 2021-22 in England and Wales, Home Office statistics show that there were 52,953 arrests for notifiable offences of children, and 41,312 uses of handcuffs on children, equivalent to 78%<sup>1</sup>. The equivalent percentage for adults was 64%.<sup>7</sup>

Police have specific responsibilities when interacting with children up until the age of 18, as a protected group in UK legislation and whose rights are protected by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)<sup>8</sup>.

The College of Policing issue guidance on police interacting with children and people. The police also have specific responsibilities under section 10 and section 11 of the Children Act 2004 to protect children and are one of the three statutory partners of children's local safeguarding partnerships<sup>9</sup>. The multi-agency safeguarding duties on the police are laid out in statutory guidance.

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<sup>1</sup> Note that handcuffs can be used by police outside the context of an arrest.

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## **Understanding searches conducted by the police**

### **What is a strip search?**

The police can search children in several different ways, for a number of reasons, with different rules applying to each of these types of searches, which have been comprehensively summarised by the House of Commons Library and the National Appropriate Adults Networks.<sup>10, 11, 12</sup>

This report, and the CCo's previous reports in this area, are specifically about 'strip searches' (i.e., searches exposing intimate parts) that are conducted by police under stop and search powers (i.e., under PACE Code A). An overview of publicly available data on strip searches conducted in custody can be found in Annex 1.

### **What types of searches are the focus of this report?**

For the purposes of this report, a 'strip search' is defined as a search exposing intimate parts (EIP), also known as a more thorough search exposing intimate parts (MTIP). The CCo considers that the public, including children, generally understand a strip search to be one in which intimate parts are exposed.

See the next sections for further information about the types of police search, the powers that police have to search, and where a child might experience a search in their interaction with 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

- > **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)

STOP AND SEARCH

FOCUS OF THIS REPORT

## MORE THOROUGH SEARCH

CUSTODY

- > **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

STOP AND SEARCH

## JOG SEARCH

CUSTODY

- > **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

STOP AND SEARCH

ON ARREST

↓ 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

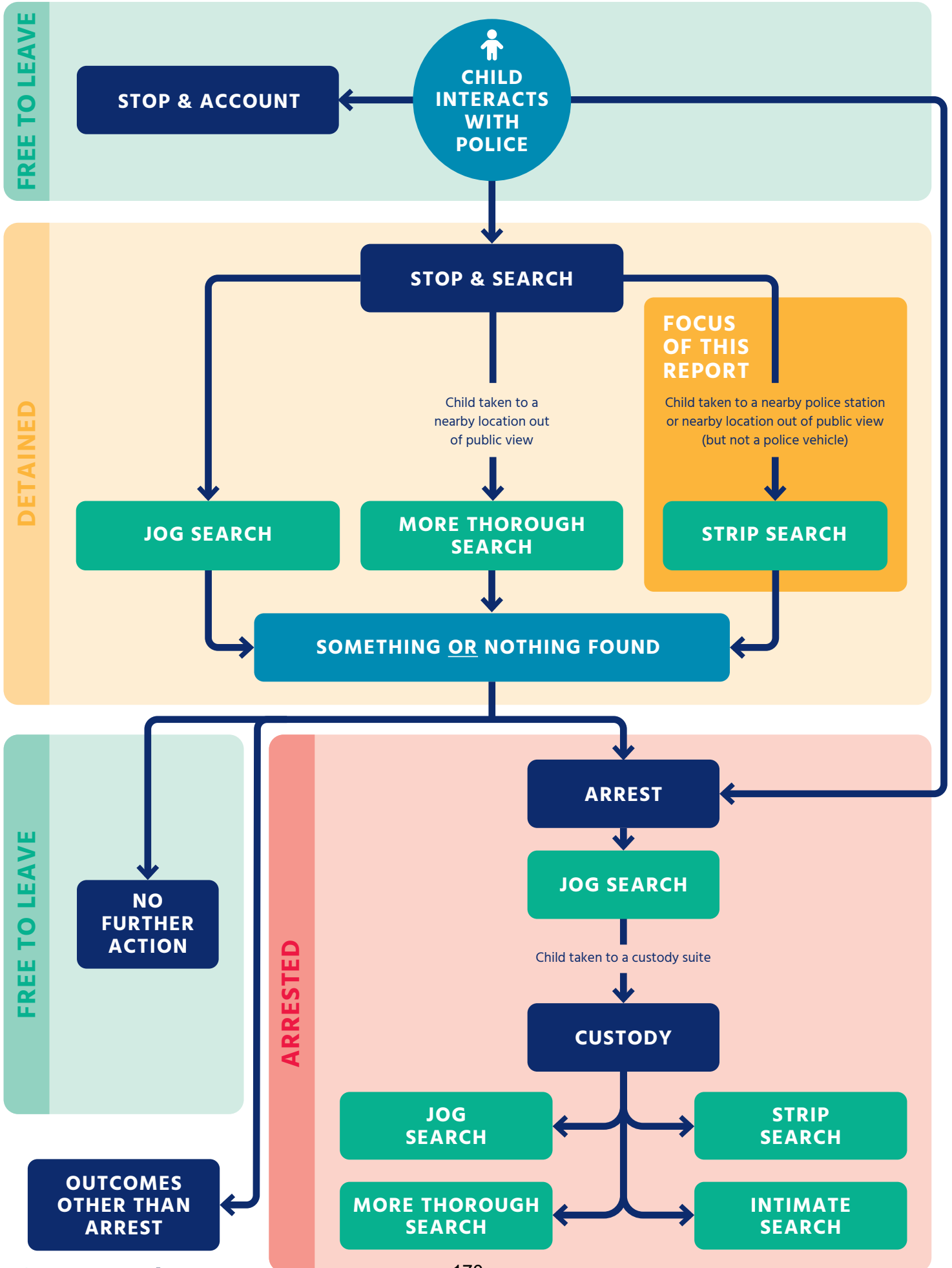
- > **When:** On arrest
- > **Where:** Conducted in a range of locations
- > **Who:** Frontline officers
- > **Guidance:** PACE Code G

## 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



## **What are the rules for strip searches under stop and search?**

Under stop and search powers, police are able to detain members of the public, including children, who they have reasonable grounds to suspect have committed certain crimes. Police have various powers of stop and search, but the most commonly used powers are under section 1 of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984<sup>13</sup> and section 23 of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971<sup>14</sup>.

The College of Policing's guidance for stop and search requires officers to use the GOWISELY approach, providing the child being stopped and searched with the grounds for and object of the search, provide a warrant card, identify themselves by name and number, give their station, inform them of their entitlement to a copy of the search record, give the legal power used, and inform the person being searched they are being detained.<sup>15</sup>

All police forces in England and Wales have adopted the Home Office's voluntary Best Use of Stop and Search Scheme (BUSS) Scheme to improve data recording, community observation, and community scrutiny, and to reduce the number of 'no suspicion' searches under section 60 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994.<sup>16</sup>

Strip searches have a potentially traumatic impact on children, which makes a safeguarding referral to children's services important. A young man interviewed for the CCo's 2023 report on strip searching of children described being strip searched by police as traumatic and humiliating.<sup>17</sup>

For more details and for an overview of the rules for searches conducted under stop and search, see the Children's Commissioner's 2023 report.<sup>18</sup>

## **Why focus on these searches?**

The CCo considers that strip searches under stop and search powers require particular attention for several reasons.

Firstly, strip searches under stop and search have been under heightened scrutiny since the traumatic experience of Child Q. The CCo has since published two reports investigating the number and searches under stop and search involving children, both specifically in London in 2022, and at a national scale across England and Wales in 2023.

Secondly, there are no comprehensive national figures on strip searches of children under stop and search because the Home Office does not require annual reporting from forces, and it is particularly challenging for the media to gain these records under the Freedom of Information Act due to the complexity and sensitivity of this data. Starting in 2022, the Home Office requested that forces report on the number of strip searches that are conducted in custody, resulting in the publication of two full years of data (see Annex 1).

Finally, strip searches under stop and search are conducted in the least controlled environment by non-specialist frontline officers with few formal procedures. These searches are often complicated, unplanned, potentially occurring in a high-tension situation, under time pressure, and with no dedicated location away from public view. Given this, it is deeply concerning that there are few safeguards, no transparency, and little scrutiny. For more details and an overview of changes as a direct result of the Chid Q case, see the Children's Commissioner's 2023 report.<sup>19</sup>

## **Previous work and progress**

The Children's Commissioner's work in this area has had significant impact across policy, policing conduct and procedure and safeguarding of children and young people in England and Wales.

The Commissioner's two previous reports in this area, first focussing on strip searches under stop and search conducted by the Metropolitan Police Service, published in 2022, followed by a national-level report across England and Wales, published in 2023, received notable interest across sectors.

Shortly after publication, the 2023 national-level report led to an urgent question in the House of Commons<sup>20</sup>, raised by Munira Wilson MP, calling for a statement from the Secretary of State on the strip searching of children, as well as a question in House of Lords by Baroness Floella Benjamin<sup>21</sup>. In March and April 2023, the College of Policing made changes to stop and search guidance to emphasise safeguards for children during strip searches<sup>22</sup>.

A number of responses were also published by charities, legal groups and civil society organisations, including the Race Equality Foundation<sup>23</sup>, The Runnymede Trust<sup>24</sup>, Save the Children<sup>25</sup>, and the Equality and Human Rights Commission<sup>26</sup>. The report was also cited in the recent statement proposing the Consultation on proposed amendments to PACE Codes of Practice A and C.<sup>27</sup>

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## **Recent procedure changes**

In April 2024, the Home Office launched a consultation on proposed amendments to PACE codes of Practice A and C<sup>28</sup>. The consultation particularly focussed on ways to strengthen the safeguards for children and vulnerable persons without hindering the police's ability to keep the public safe, including lifting the minimum rank of authorisation to inspector, strengthening protections for any young person that may be a child to treat them as a child and to consider child's thoughts on the location of a search and whether a parent or guardian should be notified.

## Findings

### Strip searches under stop and search

#### Data completeness and quality

The section below presents findings across all 44 police forces in England and Wales (including the British Transport Police). This is an improvement since the CCo's previous report, published in March 2023, in which only 39 police forces responded to the data request, including one nil return. Furthermore, all five police forces that did not respond to the previous request provided the full 5.5 years of data for this return. Therefore, this report presents data from 2018 to June 2023 for all 44 police forces, providing a complete and valuable dataset.

The quality of the data returned has also improved. Our review of the 44 datasets revealed that 75% of forces returned clean datasets, with the other 11 forces returning datasets with data issues, including additional unrequested data, additional variables in one or more columns, or missing data.

The data include an ethnicity field supplied by an officer completing a record of a strip search based on their interpretation of the child's appearance. Research shows this recording may be biased, with adults from mixed, White and Asian ethnic backgrounds more likely to be categorised as Black if convicted or cautioned for a serious violence offence, compared to other offence types, when police-recorded data are compared to linked administrative data on ethnicity.<sup>29</sup>

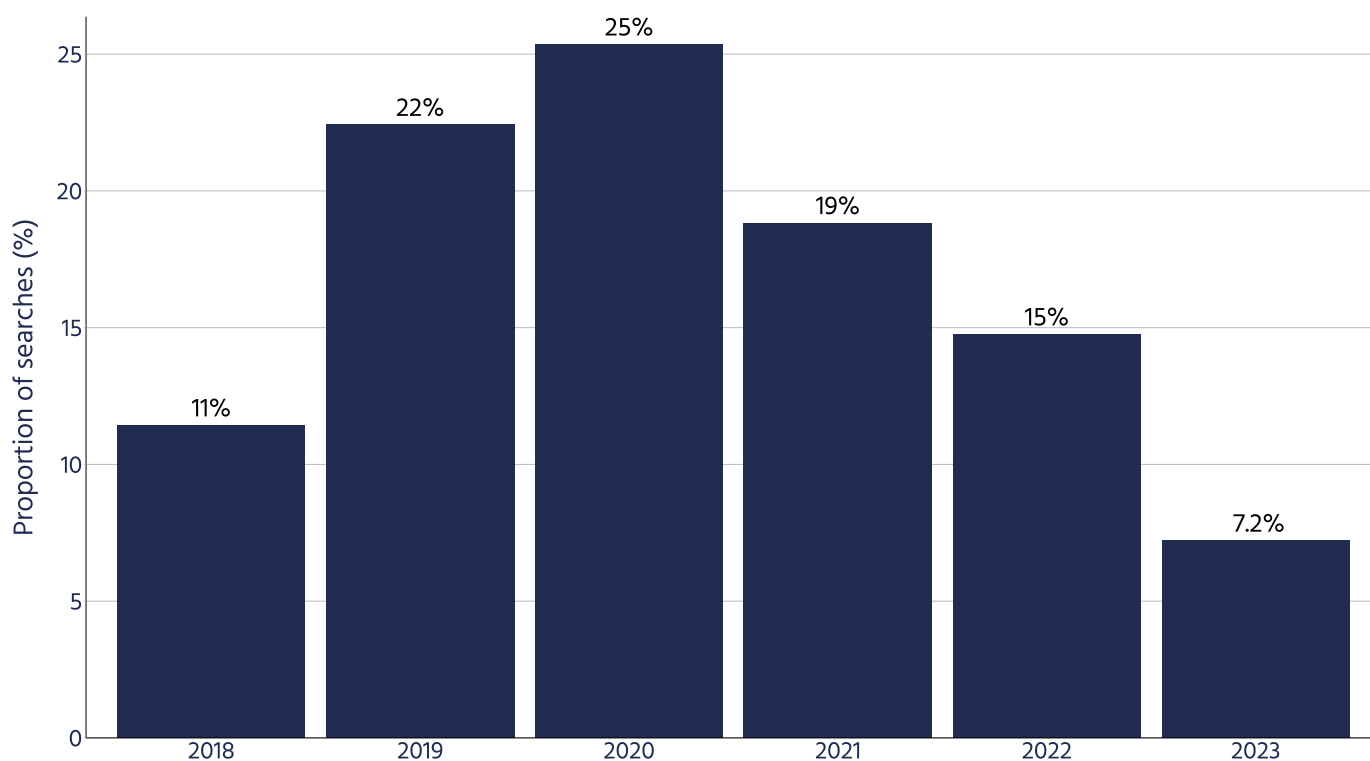
#### Number of searches

In total, 3,368 strip searches of children under stop and search powers were reported in England and Wales between 2018 and June 2023. This is an increase of 521 searches since the CCo's previous report published in March 2023, which presented data from 39 police forces on searches reported between 2018 and June 2022. This additional data includes 64 searches conducted between 2018 and June 2022, and 457 searches conducted between July 2022 and June 2023.

The majority of this report will focus on the 457 searches conducted between July 2022 and June 2023.

The number of strip searches under stop and search of children in England and Wales appears to be declining, as the number of searches in 2022 was 42% lower than in 2020 (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Percentage of strip searches conducted per year from 2018 to June 2023**

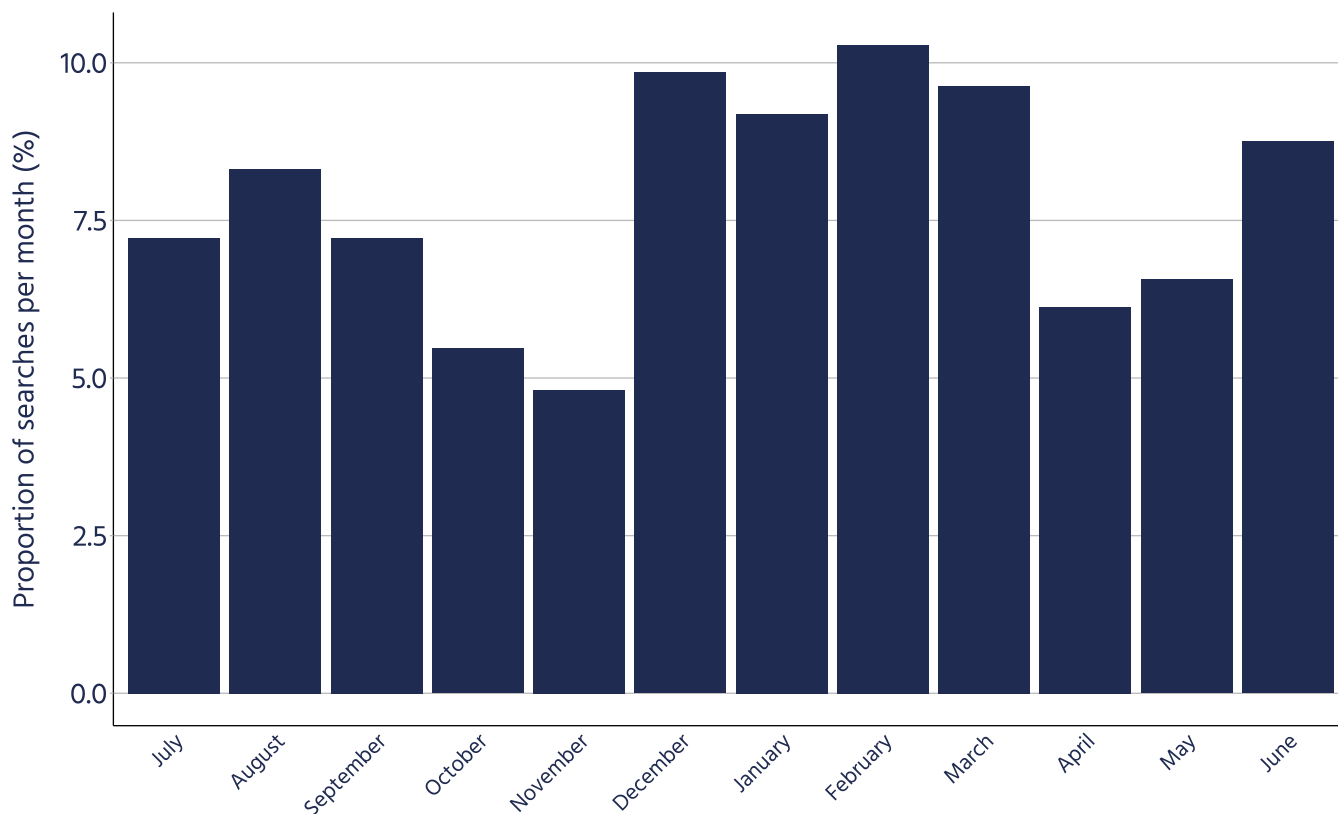


Note: 2023 data covers the 6 months from January to June only.

Between January 2018 to June 2023, the highest proportion of strip searches were conducted in 2020 (25% of all searches, n=854), compared to 15% (n=497) in 2022. While 2023 saw the lowest proportion of searches (7.2%, n=243) in England and Wales across the full timeframe, it should be noted that 2023 only presents data from January to June.

By month for the year between July 2022 and June 2023, strip searches were more commonly conducted between December and March, while October to November was the least likely period for strip searches to occur (Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Proportion of searches conducted per month from July 2022 to June 2023**

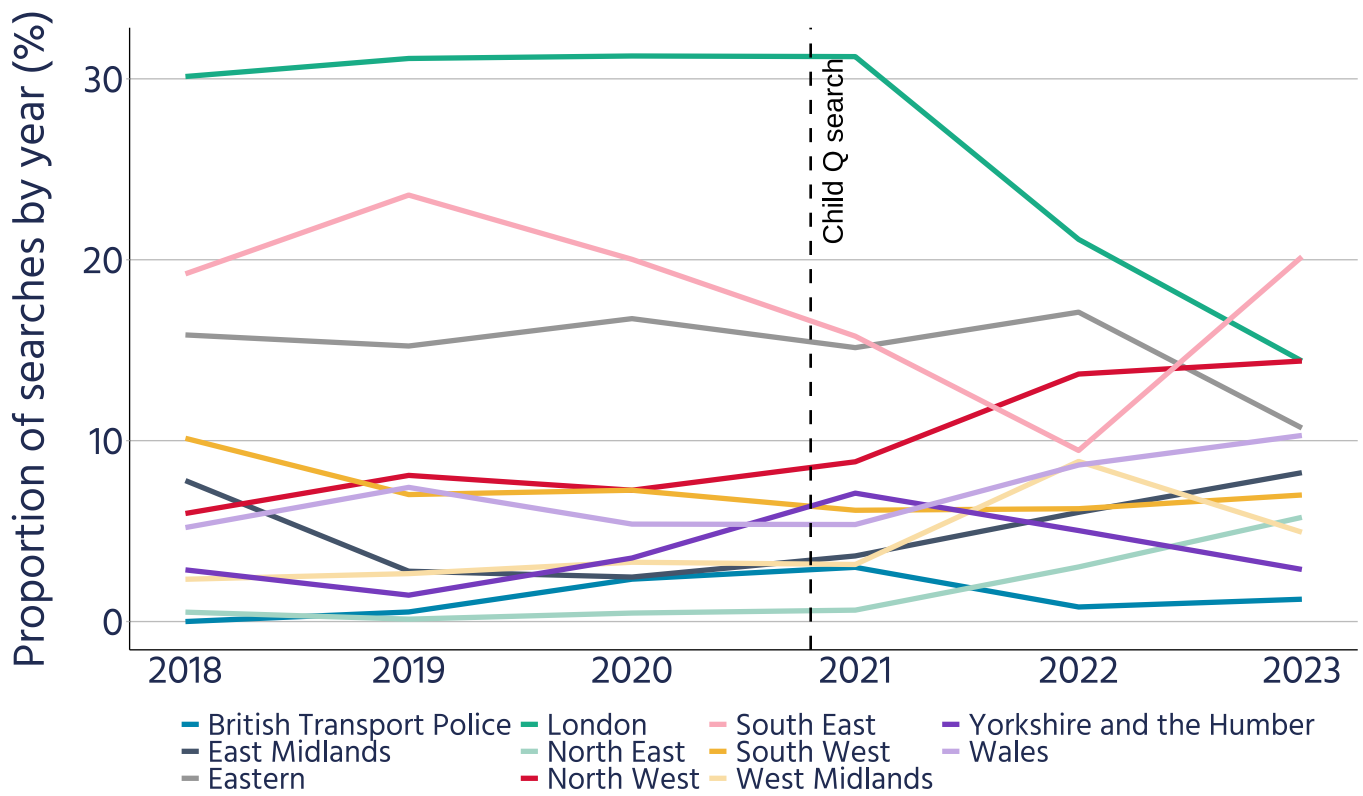


Nationally, England continues to account for the majority of searches between July 2022 and June 2023 (88% of searches), in line with population figures (Annex 2). Wales accounted for 11% of searches in the same time period, a six percentage point increase<sup>2</sup> in searches compared to 2018 to June 2022 figures. Between July 2022 and June 2023, 1% of searches were conducted by the British Transport Police across England and Wales, similar to previous years (Annex 2).

<sup>2</sup> This finding may in part be a result of data quality improvements, as one of four police forces in Wales did not respond to the previous data request

Inspecting variation in the number of searches by region, the most striking change over time between 2018 and June 2023 was seen in London, which showed a sharp reduction in the proportion of all searches from 2021, shortly after the search of Child Q in December 2020<sup>30</sup> (Figure 3).

**Figure 3. Proportion of searches conducted per year per police force between 2018 and June 2023**



Sample size: 3,368. Note: 2023 includes January to June only.

Overall, between 2018 and June 2023, London conducted the highest proportion of searches (28%) followed by the South East (18%) and the East of England (16%), while the North East and British Transport Police conducted the lowest proportion of searches (both 1%).

**However, between July 2022 and June 2023 only, police forces in the South East conducted a greater proportion of searches than London (17% vs. 14%),** followed by Eastern England and the North West (both 13% - Annex 2).



By police force area, between 2018 and June 2023, the Metropolitan Police and City of London Police combined account for the highest proportion of searches (28%), followed by Hertfordshire Constabulary, Merseyside Police and Thames Valley Police (all 6%).

Similarly, between July 2022 and June 2023 only, the Metropolitan Police and City of London Police account for the highest proportion of searches (14%), followed by Merseyside Police (10%), Thames Valley (8%) and Dyfed-Powys Police (7% - Annex 2).

### **Search rate as a proportion of population**

#### By region

Across the five and half years between 2018 and June 2023, as a proportion of the total population of children aged 10 to 17 in each region, police forces in Wales conducted the highest proportion of searches (0.11), while forces in the North East, Yorkshire and the Humber and West Midlands conducted the lowest proportion (all 0.02).

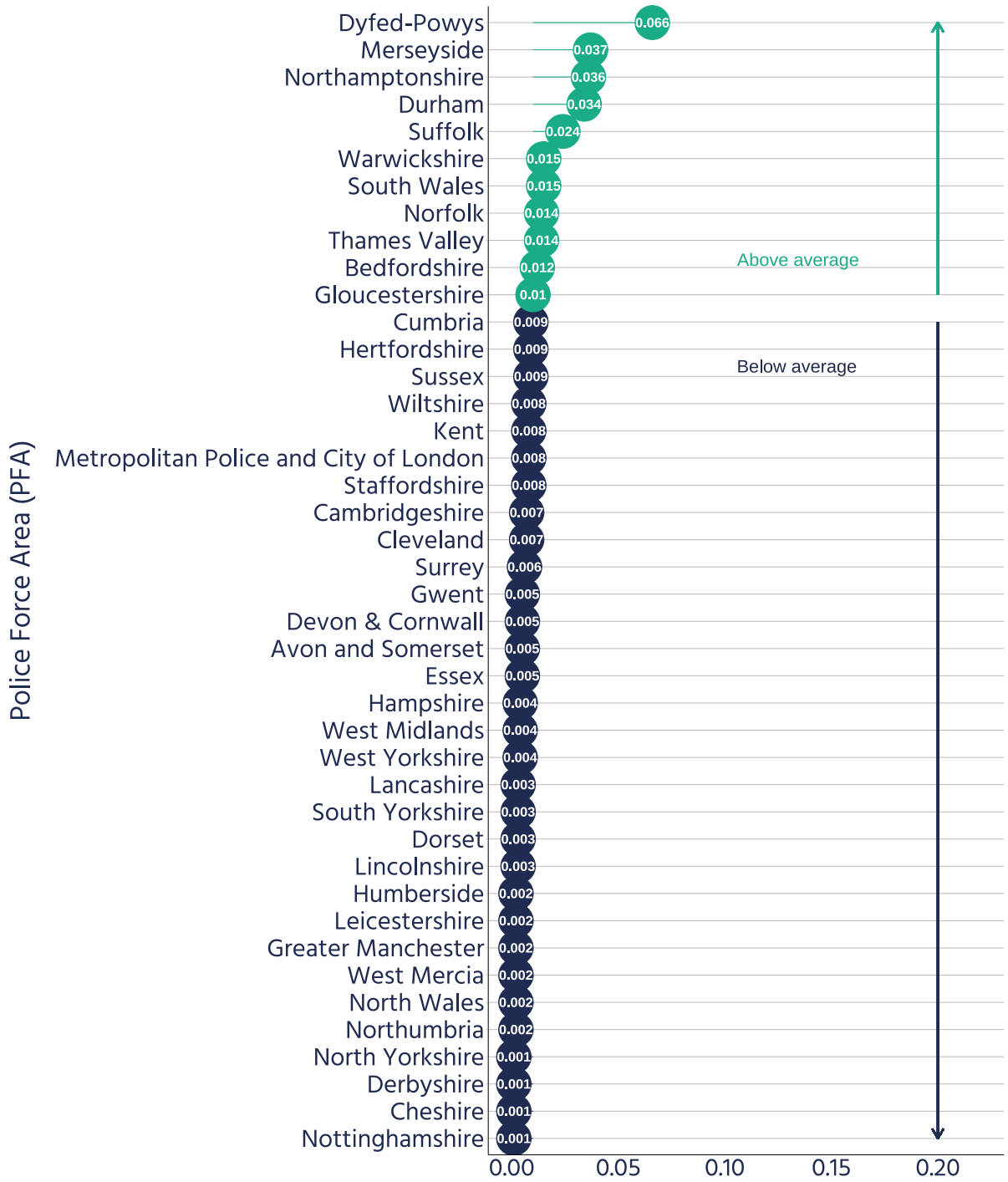
However, looking at data from July 2022 to June 2023 only, Wales, the North East and the Eastern region of England had the highest rates of strip searching, with Wales's rate around 6 times higher than the lowest rate, in Yorkshire and the Humber, per 10,000 local children.

This analysis assumes each strip search is of a different child, which is unlikely to be true and may vary geographically. While the absolute number of strip searches between July 2022 and June 2023 was relatively high in London and the South East, these regions have large populations of 10 to 17 year olds, and so have middling strip search rates.

#### By police force area (PFA)

By police force area between 2018 and June 2023, the five police forces with the highest search rate as a proportion of all local children aged 10 to 17 were Hertfordshire, Merseyside, Dyfed-Powys, Metropolitan Police and City of London Police, and South Wales. Nottinghamshire Police showed the lowest search rate of any PFA (<0.01), followed by Cheshire, Greater Manchester, Northumbria and West Mercia.

**Figure 4. Search rate of children as a proportion of the total population of children aged 10- 17 in each police force area between July 2022 and June 2023**



Note: British Transport Police is removed due to lack of population-level data.

Between July 2022 and June 2023 by police force area (PFA), the police forces with the highest search rate as a proportion of all local children aged 10 to 17 were Dyfed-Powys (0.07), Merseyside and Northamptonshire (both 0.04), Durham (0.03) and Suffolk (0.02). All other police force areas had a search rate of 0.015 or lower between July 2022 and June 2023 (Figure 4).

## Who was searched?

Age, gender and ethnicity were collected for all searches conducted under stop and search between 2018 and June 2023. The ethnicity used in this analysis is based on the ethnicity of the child as described by the searching officer. The CCo has chosen to use this data in spite of its limitations because police perception of ethnicity was an important factor in the Child Q case and because there is no requirement for a child to provide their ethnicity (or other details) in a stop and search.

**Table 1. Overview of sample size and demographic characteristics of children strip searched between July 2022 and June 2023**

Demographic variable	Number of searches (July-2022 - June 2023)*	Share of total searches (% , July-2022 - June 2023)	Percentage point change (since 2023 report)	Population of children in England and Wales (%)
<b>Age group</b>				
10 to 12	0	0%	0	39%
13 to 15	127	28%	+5	37%
16 to 17	327	72%	-4	24%
Not recorded	<10	<1%	0	N/A
<b>Gender</b>				
Female	21	5%	-1	49%
Male	436	95%	0	51%
Not recorded	<10	<1%	+1	N/A
<b>Officer-defined ethnic group</b>				
Asian	38	8%	-6	12%
Black	124	27%	-11	6%

Mixed	<10	1%	0	6%
White	269	59%	+17	74%
Other	<10	2%	0	3%
Unknown	<10	2%	0	N/A
Not recorded	<10	1%	0	N/A
<b>Total</b>	<b>457</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>N/A</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Note:** \*National-level population estimates are reported for children aged 10 to 17 in England and Wales using Office for National Statistics' Mid-Year Population Estimates June 2021 dataset (age and gender) and the Census 2021 Ethnic group by age and sex dataset (ethnic group). For percentage point change, '0' indicates no change.

### Age and gender

Across 457 strip searches conducted in England and Wales between July 2022 and June 2023, the minimum age of children searched was 13 years old. Over a quarter (28%) of strip searches were of a child aged 15 years old or younger, five percentage points higher than for 2018 to June 2022 (Table 1). The mean age of children at the time of the search across the full 5 and a half years of data, and between July 2022 and June 2023, was 16 years old.

Children below the age of 10 are below the age of criminal responsibility and may only be stopped and searched in 'exceptional circumstances'<sup>31</sup>. It is worth noting, however, that there is no requirement for a child to provide their age (or other details) in a stop and search so some ages will be estimates by the searching officer. Furthermore, some children will only be identified as a child once they are arrested.

The overwhelming majority of strip searches between July 2022 and June 2023 were carried out on boys (95%), while 5% of searches were carried out on girls, echoing findings in the CCo's 2023 report<sup>32</sup>. Therefore, one in every 20 searches conducted were carried out on girls during this time period.

### Ethnic group

The Home Office and Ministry of Justice say that nobody should be stopped and searched because of their race.<sup>33</sup> However, from July 2022 to June 2023 across England and Wales, 59% of children searched were White, 27% were Black, 8% were Asian, 1% were of mixed ethnicity, 2% were of an 'other' or unknown ethnicity and 1% were not recorded (Figure 5). These figures indicate a stark change in the

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proportion of searches conducted by ethnic group, with White children 17 percentage points more likely to be searched compared to numbers between 2018 and June 2022, while Black and Asian children are comparatively less likely to be searched (-11 and -8 percentage points respectively)<sup>3</sup>.

**Black children in England and Wales were therefore still disproportionately more likely to be strip searched, compared to national population figures (over four times more likely), while White children were disproportionately less likely to be searched (around a quarter as likely).** While disproportionality continues to be a prominent cause for concern, this finding indicates progress since our previous report, which found that Black children were six times more likely to be searched between 2018 and June 2022<sup>34</sup>. This apparent improvement is in line with published figures for stop and search: the Home Office and Ministry of Justice report that the ethnic disparity in stop and search fell between the year to March 2021 and the year to March 2022, from Black children being 3.5 times more likely to be stopped and searched than White children, to 2.9 times more likely.<sup>35</sup>

However, substantial ethnic disparities remain within the criminal justice system. A 2021 report by the Youth Justice Board on ethnic disparities in remand and sentencing found that Black and mixed ethnicity children were more likely than White children to be placed in custodial remand, after controlling for other factors, such as court type, offence and age.<sup>36</sup> His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons reported in January 2023 that children from an ethnic group other than White were more likely to report being out of their cell for less than two hours at the weekend (64% versus 46%); victimisation by staff (42% versus 27%); and restraint (73% versus 54%).<sup>37</sup>

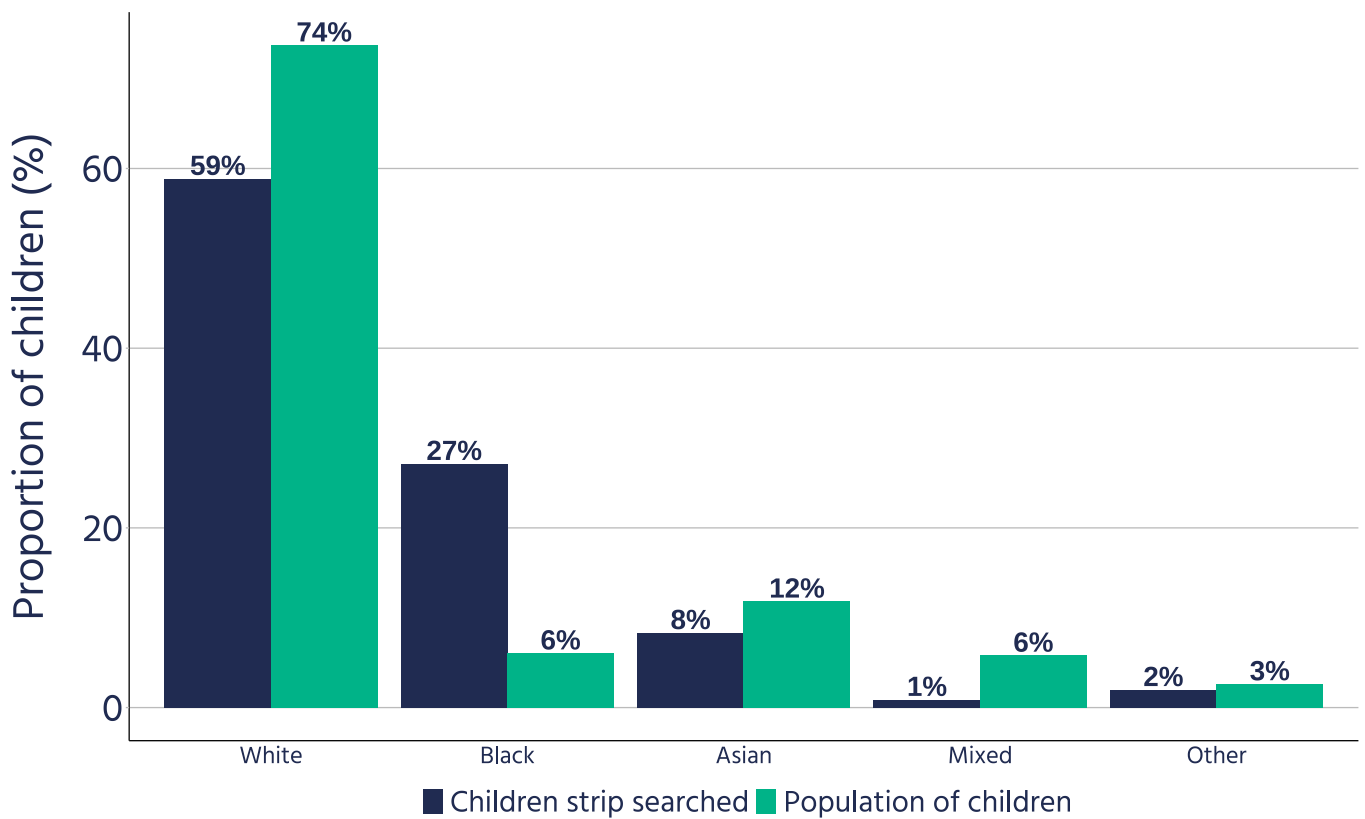
In the year to March 2022, the Home Office and Ministry of Justice found that Black children were 2.2 times more likely to be arrested than White children.<sup>38</sup> The Home Office and Ministry of Justice recognise there is an ethnic disparity in Youth Cautions and other forms of Out of Court Disposals, which are less common for ethnic minority children. If a child refuses to admit guilt, they are ineligible for these, meaning that the police may instead go on to charge the child. The Lammy Review (2017) found that

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that the number of searches is not equal to the number of children searched as data is provided at the search-level, rather than at the child-level. See the Methodology for more detail.

individuals from ethnic minority people were more likely to distrust the justice system, including legal professionals, and were therefore less likely to request legal advice.<sup>39</sup>

**Figure 5. Proportion of searches by child’s ethnicity, as defined by the searching officer, versus national population figures**

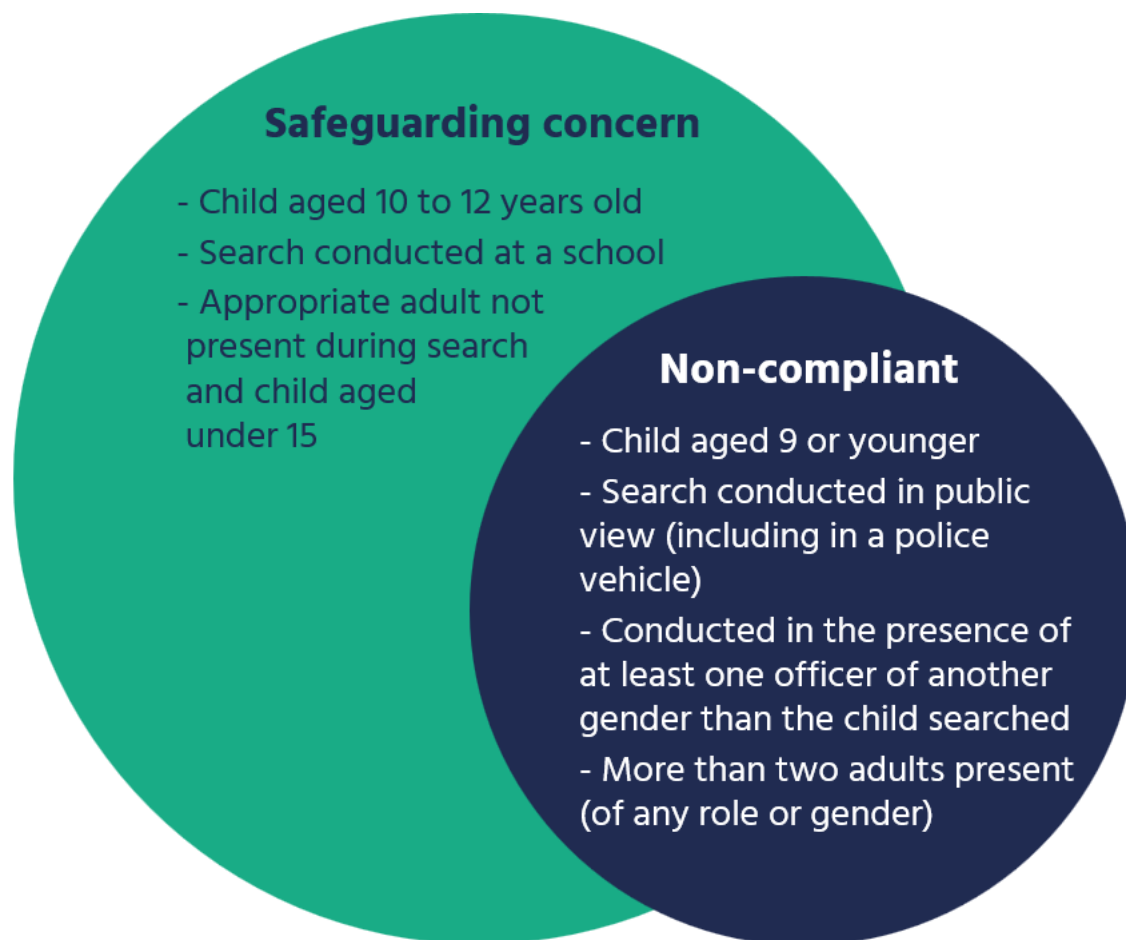


**How were searches conducted?**

**Compliance with statutory codes of practice**

Strip searches can be considered to be conducted appropriately and within statutory codes of practice if all the following criteria are met: the child was aged 10 or older, the search was not conducted in a police vehicle, or within public view, no more than two adults were present, including one officer of the same gender of the child, and one appropriate adult. If these criteria are not met, the CCo has categorised searches into searches of ‘concern’ and ‘non-compliant’ searches (Figure 6).

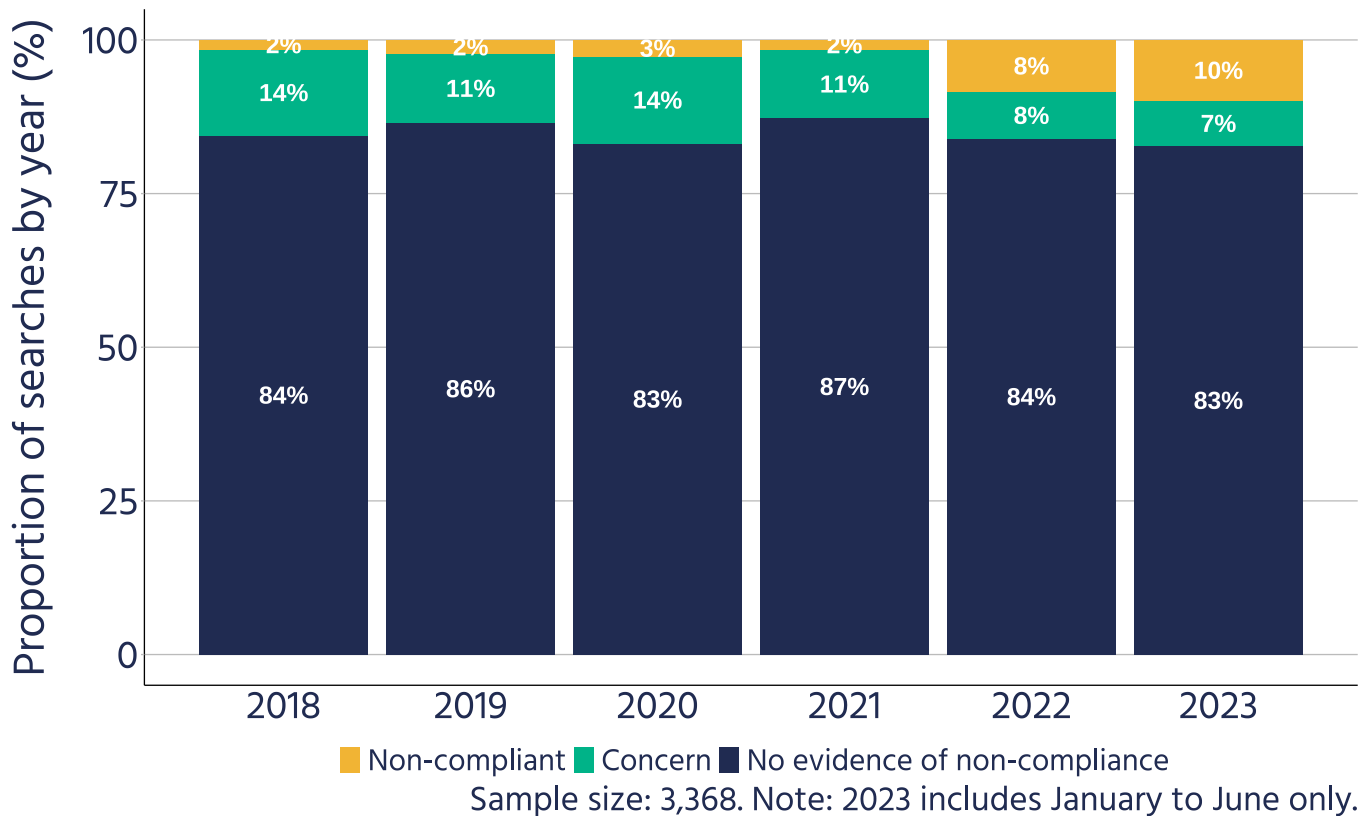
**Figure 6. Search conditions constituting a safeguarding concern and non-compliance**



In total, 122 (4%) searches conducted between 2018 and June 2023 were not compliant with statutory codes of practice and a further 387 searches (11%) constituted a safeguarding concern. Therefore, only 85% of searches conducted across the five-and-a-half-year period were conducted in a manner that indicated no clear evidence of non-compliance with codes of practice (Figure 7).

**By year, the proportion of non-compliant searches increased notably between 2021 and 2022, from 2% of searches to 8% of searches in 2022 and 10% of searches in the first half of 2023.** The vast majority of non-compliant searches were reported as being conducted in public view (see next section).

**Figure 7. Proportion of non-compliant and concerning searches conducted per year between 2018 and June 2023 across all police forces**

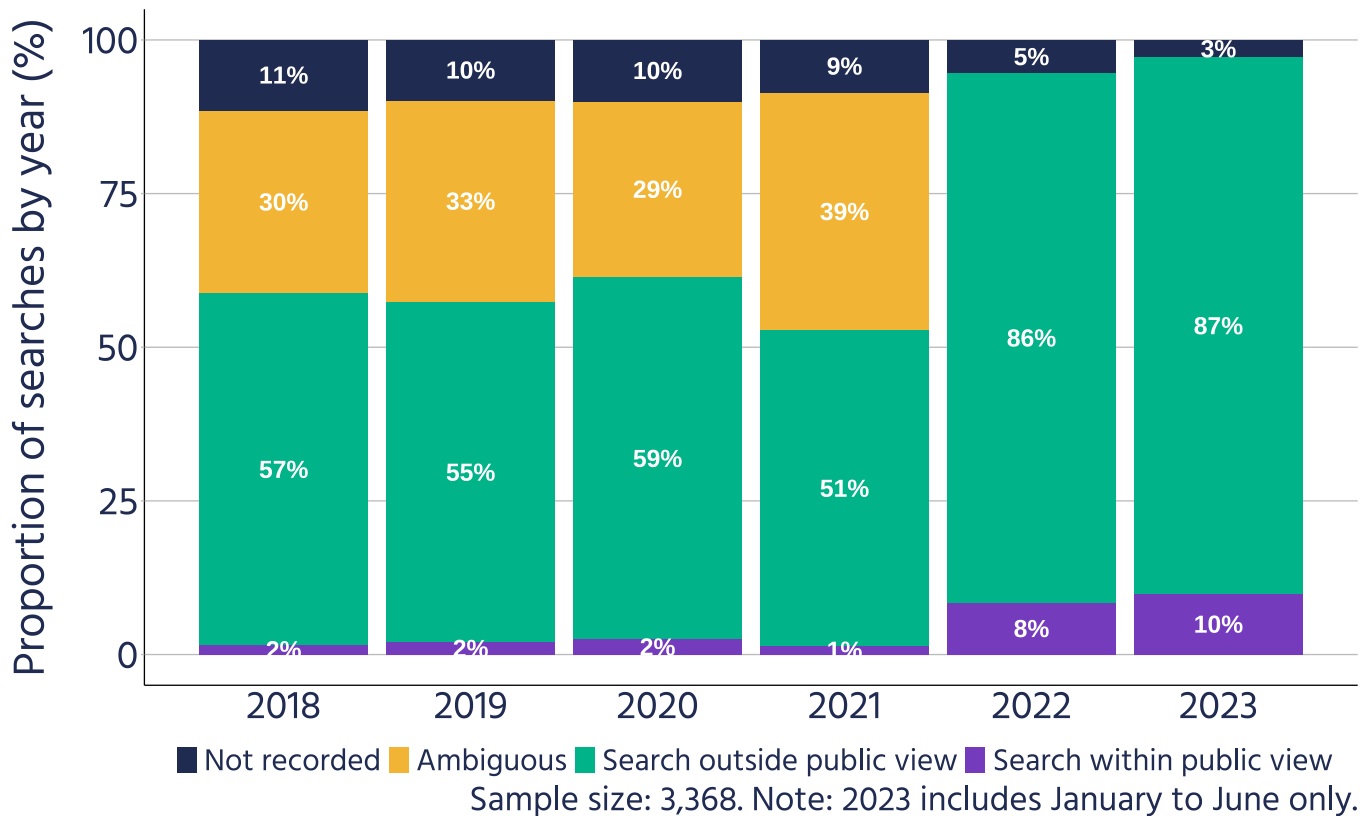


**Location of searches**

Police forces were also asked whether searches were conducted within or outside public view. The location of searches conducted on children varied between 2018 and 2023. Concerningly, the proportion of searches conducted within public view increased over time, from 2% of all searches in 2018 to 2022, up to 8% in 2022 and 10% in 2023 (Figure 8). These searches are deeply concerning and in breach of strip search codes of practice.



**Figure 8. Proportion of strip searches conducted within or outside public view per year between 2018 and June 2023 across all 44 police forces**

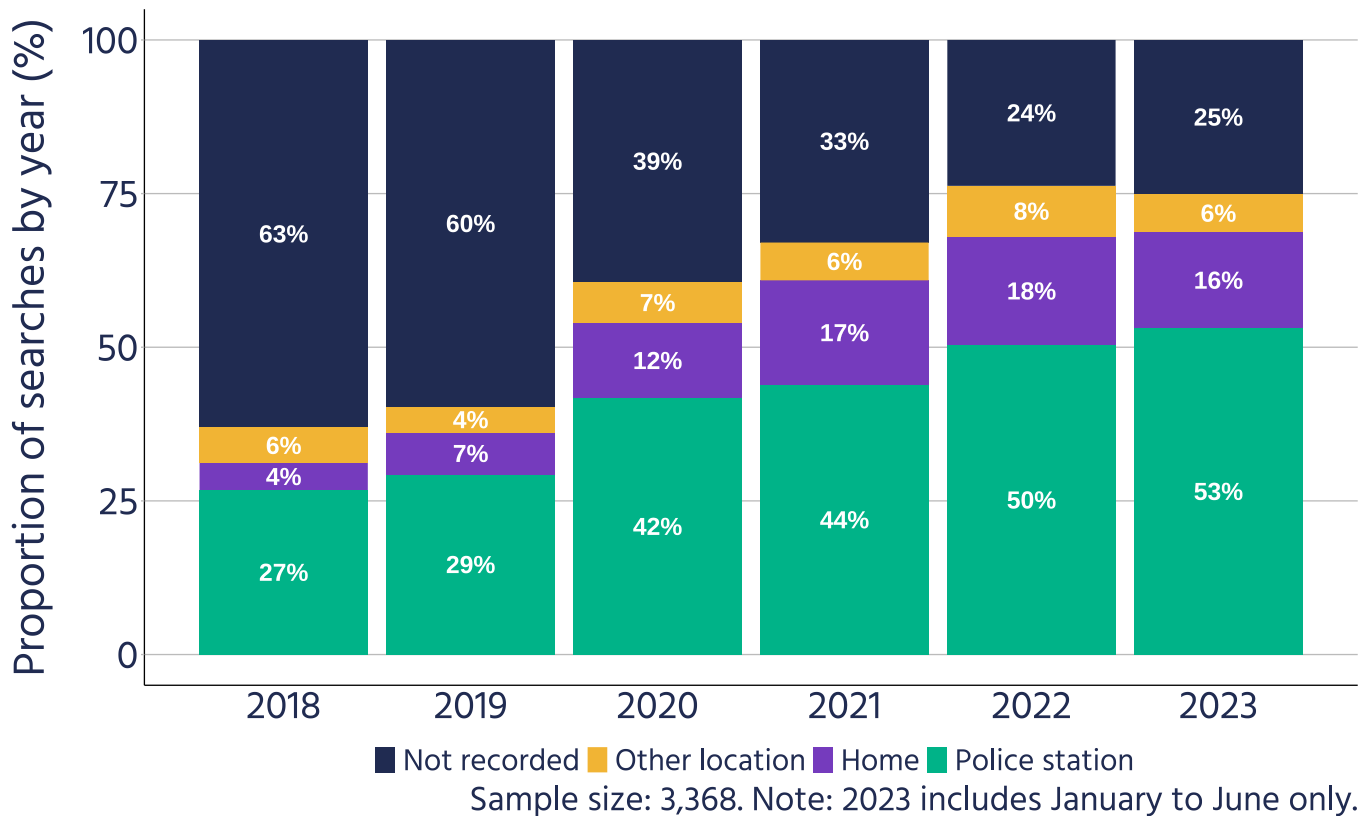


Note: 'Ambiguous' refers to searches where it was unclear whether the search was conducted within or outside public view.

Of the searches conducted between July 2022 and June 2023, 11% (n=52) were conducted within view of the public and for 17 searches (4%) this information was not recorded. The remaining 388 searches (85%) were conducted outside of public view.

Furthermore, of the searches conducted between July 2022 and June 2023, just over half of searches were conducted at a police station (53%, n=244), 62 searches (14%) were conducted in the child's home and concerningly, 35 searches (8%) were conducted at an 'Other location' (Figure 9).

**Figure 9. Proportion of strip searches conducted by search location per year between 2018 and June 2023 across all 44 police forces**



### Presence of an appropriate adult

The Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 and associated statutory guidance require that an appropriate adult is present when a child is strip searched, except in cases of urgency where there is a risk of serious harm to the child or others. As defined in the Act, an appropriate adult is usually a parent or guardian, but can be a social worker, or representative of a local authority or charitable organisation the child is in the care of. An appropriate adult 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. A child has the right to refuse the presence of an appropriate adult during the strip search itself, but an appropriate adult is still required to be present in order to sign a statement in the presence of the child stating that they do not wish them to be present for the search.

Between July 2022 and June 2023, an appropriate adult was confirmed to be present in 252 searches (55%), an increase of 7 percentage points compared to findings published in the CCo's 2023 report which presented data from 2018 to June 2022<sup>40</sup>. Therefore, concerning an appropriate adult was not confirmed to be present in 205 searches (45%) between July 2022 and June 2023. Of these searches, in 39% (n=176) this information was not recorded, and an appropriate adult was confirmed to not be present in 24 searches (6%), including 1% of searches in which the child was identified as a child after the search had taken place.

### **Why was the search conducted?**

Between July 2022 and June 2023, 88% of searches (n=400) were conducted on suspicion of carrying drugs and 6% (n=28) on suspicion of the child carrying weapons, points and blades. The remaining 6% of searches were conducted for suspicion of (in order of frequency) stolen property, 'other' reasons and going equipped [for theft]<sup>41</sup>.

These findings are broadly reflected in the search powers used by police officers to conduct strip searches during this time period: 86% (n=394) of searches cited section 23 of the Misuse of Drugs Act (1971), 13% (n=59) cited section 1 of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (PACE), and under one percent of searches cited section 60 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act (CJPOA) 1994, similar to findings published by the CCo for 2018 to June 2022<sup>42</sup>.

### **What was the outcome of the search?**

Information on the outcome of each search was requested, and whether the outcome of the search was linked to the initial reason for the search. Between July 2022 and June 2023, just under half of all searches resulted in 'no further action' (47%, n=217), similar to findings for 2018 to June 2022 (51% of searches)<sup>43</sup>. Therefore, for the children who were subject to these more than 200 searches, the strip search may have been conducted unnecessarily.

The proportion of searches which resulted in no further action did not vary substantially by ethnicity; 46% of searches of White children resulted in no further action, compared to 51% of searches of Black children and 53% of searches of Asian children.

Approximately a quarter of searches resulted in an arrest (26%), a decrease of five percentage points from findings for 2018 to June 2022<sup>44</sup>. These 121 arrests compare to the total 58,600 arrests of children in England and Wales in the most recent year of data (2022-23).<sup>45</sup> The remaining searches resulted in an 'other action' (7%, n=30), 5% (n=23) resulted in community resolution, 4% of searches (n=18) resulted in voluntary attendance<sup>4</sup> and the remaining 5% resulted in one of the following (listed in order of decreasing prevalence): a khat/cannabis warning, summons, seizure of property, verbal warning or penalty notice. Concerningly, 6% (n=26) of search outcomes were not recorded.

Across all searches conducted between July 2022 and June 2023, 46% of search outcomes were linked to the initial reason for the stop and search, of which 51% of these searches led to arrest (Figure 10). The search reason was not linked in 9% of searches, nothing was found in 40% of searches and the link was not recorded in 5%. Of particular interest are searches in which nothing was found (40% of all strip searches in this sample) and yet the child was arrested as a result of the search (1% of searches – Figure 10).

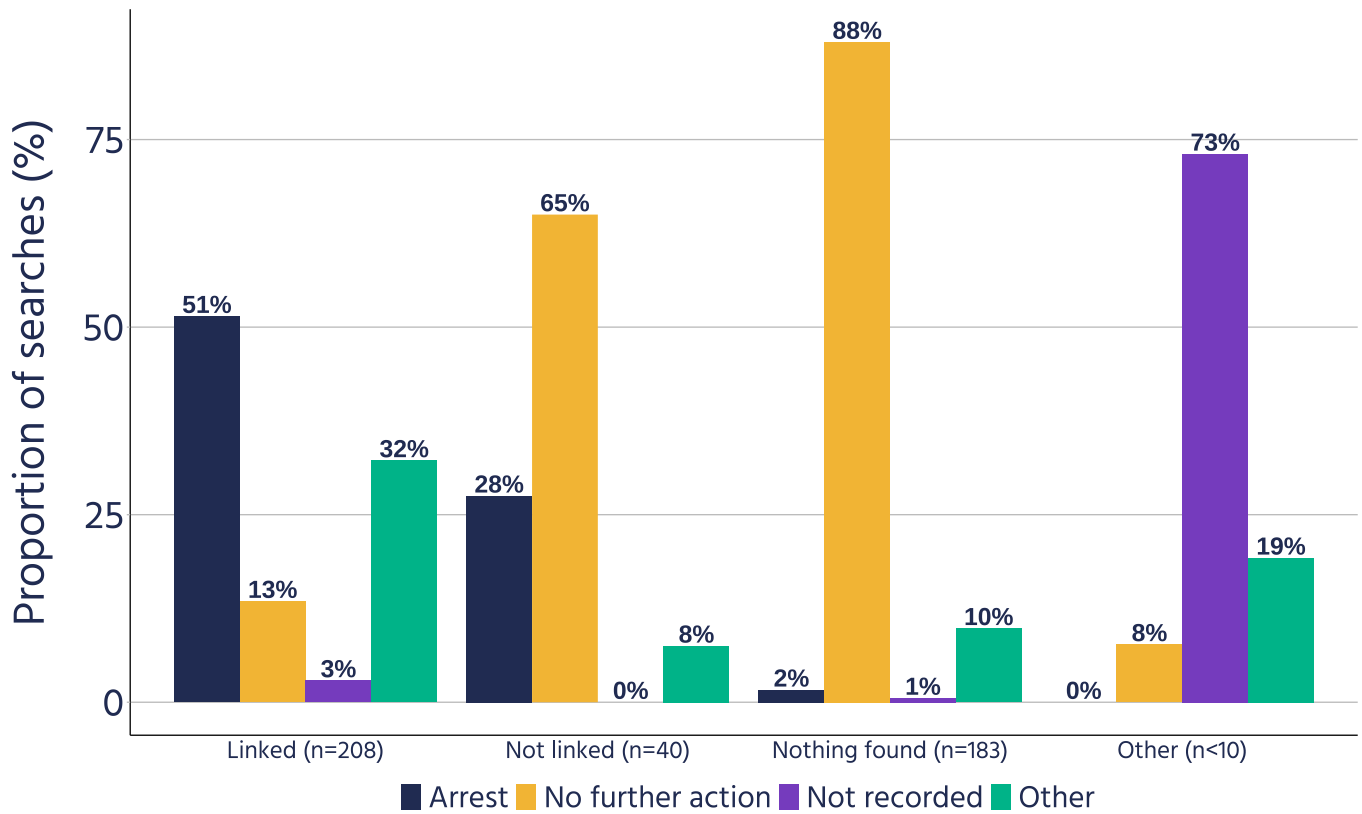
Whether the outcome of the search was linked to the reason for the search did not vary by ethnicity; approximately half of searches across all ethnic groups were linked to the outcome (White children - 46%, Black children - 45%, Asian children - 42%).

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<sup>4</sup> An interview which takes place at a police station where a person attends voluntarily and isn't under arrest.

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**Figure 10. Whether the outcome was linked to the initial reason for conducting the stop and search as a proportion of all searches**



## Safeguarding children from criminal exploitation

Of the 457 strip searches conducted involving children in England and Wales between July 2022 and June 2023, 45% (n=205) resulted in the police force raising a safeguarding referral, an increase of 28 percentage points compared to the figure for 2018 to June 2022<sup>46</sup>. The fact that most strip searches still are not confirmed to result in a safeguarding referral presents a continuing safeguarding risk to hundreds of children per year across England and Wales. The proportion of searches resulting in a safeguarding referral only increases slightly for searches which occurred on suspicion of carrying drugs or weapons (47%) which pose a significant and direct risk to children.

## Recording additional vulnerability characteristics

Police forces were asked which if any of seven key characteristics of additional vulnerability are routinely recorded under stop and search and for strip searches conducted in custody, namely, whether the child is looked after, a child in need, has special education needs or disabilities (SEND), has neurodivergence or medical vulnerabilities or is a potential victim of child criminal, or sexual exploitation.

**On average, police forces routinely recorded only two out of seven vulnerability characteristics for searches conducted under stop and search.** Six out of 44 police forces (14%) routinely recorded all characteristics of vulnerability, while 26 forces (59%) failed to routinely record any additional characteristics. Police forces were least likely to routinely record Looked After Child status (18% of forces), followed by Child in Need status, SEND status and whether the child had any diagnosed neurodivergence (all 25% of forces) and medical vulnerabilities (30% of forces). Forces were most likely to routinely record whether the child was potentially a victim of child criminal or sexual exploitation (both 36%).

On average, police forces routinely recorded twice as many vulnerability characteristics for strip searches conducted in custody (four out of seven), compared to searches conducted under stop and search. 11 out of 44 police forces (25%) routinely recorded all seven additional characteristics of vulnerability for searches conducted in custody, while 13 forces (30%) failed to routinely record any additional characteristics. Therefore, police forces are approximately twice as likely to routinely record data on additional vulnerabilities of children searched in custody, than searched under stop and search. In custody, police forces were least likely to routinely record Child In Need status and whether the child

was potentially a victim of child criminal or sexual exploitation (39% of all forces), followed by Looked After status (52%) and neurodivergence (61%). Forces were most likely to routinely record whether the child had SEND (66%) or medical vulnerabilities (68%).

Across searches conducted under stop and search, or in custody, police forces were able to provide additional comment on, in their own words, which vulnerability characteristics or information was routinely recorded. In total, 38 of 44 police forces (86%) provided comments. An analysis of these responses shows that overall, 37% mentioned raising safeguarding referrals for vulnerable children, 32% mentioned the recording of information on a Public Protection Notice and 29% mentioned risk assessments for vulnerable children.

Around a third (32%) of police forces mentioned a specific data recording system (e.g., Athena, Pronto, NICHE, Merlin or PoliceWorks) as a factor in which vulnerability characteristics were routinely recorded under either search type. Several police forces mentioned that many of these characteristics could be recorded in an open-text box, but this was not mandatory. One police force explained:

*“The Stop & Search form is a national template and doesn’t allow any additional information to be recorded. Albeit the details listed above may be recorded elsewhere on any master records on our system. I would not say that for this element it is routinely recorded.”*

This suggests that in some cases, while vulnerability characteristics may be recorded, the storage and access to this data may prevent the information being used during or after a search for the benefit of the child.

A minority of police forces mentioned specific partners and professionals that were routinely contacted for searches involving children. Around a quarter of forces (26%) mentioned a Health Care Professional (HCP), 11% mentioned a 5% mentioned a Multi-agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH), 5% mentioned a social worker and 5% mentioned a child-first or child’s voice approach.

Other frameworks mentioned by police forces included: A-B-C-D vulnerability framework, trauma-informed practice, Missing Person Trigger Plans and Autism Guides. Other additional or specific vulnerabilities recorded by some police forces included: Autism-spectrum condition, self-harm, suicidal, child protection, repeat subject, gender re-assigned, child abuse, child at risk, missing person, modern slavery victim, and organised crime group.

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## Procedure changes since Child Q

The majority of forces (37 of 44) reported making at least some policy or procedure changes regarding searches exposing intimate parts of children under stop and search powers or in custody since March 2022. The other seven forces either did not specify any changes, reported there had been no change, or reported that no changes had been made yet.

Forces reported that officers with different levels of seniority authorised searches. For example, searches exposing intimate parts of children must be authorised in Cheshire and Avon & Somerset by an Inspector, and in Hampshire by a Superintendent.

Good practice reported by forces included a presumption that no child will be strip searched, training for all inspectors to help them scrutinise requests for strip searches, explicit bans on conducting strip searches in the home or school, and the use of audio recording of strip searches.

We carried out a review of 23 documents provided by police forces in response to a request for their child-centred policing strategy or action plan. Of these, six police forces mentioned strip searching. Several of these forces referenced measures that forces had adopted to track the use of strip searching, including 'whether items are found', and whether the same children are being repeatedly strip searched.



## Conclusion

The Children's Commissioner's statutory data request and analysis continues to provide the best and only publicly available insights into the extent and nature of strip searching of children under stop and search in England and Wales. These findings show that concerning practices continue to be prevalent and data quality continues to be an issue, but also indicate areas of improvement that should be continued.

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 CCo will refer these searches to the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC).

**Based on the findings in this report, the Children's Commissioner makes the following recommendations:**

### **Strengthen national codes of practice for strip searching**

- **Recommendation:** Children should only ever be strip searched in exceptional circumstances where it is necessary to protect them or others from significant harm, and sufficient evidence is obtained to provide a case for conducting a search. If a search is required, this should occur in a safe, controlled and appropriate environment in accordance with strict and transparent procedures that are subject to scrutiny.
- **Recommendation:** The Home Office should make specific changes to the Police and Criminal Evidence (PACE) Codes A and C in order to strengthen the statutory safeguards for children strip searched by police. The Commissioner recommends that Codes be strengthened as follows:
  - The threshold for strip searching of children should be increased, to be considered a last resort action for police officers. Strip searches should only be conducted when there is a clear and immediate risk to the child or people around them. In all cases, this threshold should recognise the likely traumatic impact of these searches on children;

- Before every strip search involving children, police officers should systematically judge of the need for a strip search against the potential short- and long-term psychological harm to the child. The officers should consider the immediacy of risk to the child or others, the nature of the search and the preferences of the child and the appropriate adult before taking action;
- The Home Office should develop a programme of research, combining public consultation with deliberative quantitative and qualitative research to inform the development of the list of factors to be considered prior to any search and update the guidance accordingly. The research should incorporate the voices of children who have lived experience of strip searches, parents of these children and other appropriate adults. The research should consult with psychologists and other professionals to incorporate trauma-informed practices, including those working with children with special educational needs and disabilities, with the aim to minimise the mental health impacts on children;
- The pre-search considerations should inform the most appropriate location of a search. Strip searches under stop and search should only be conducted at a nearby police station, medical premises or home address. Schools should only be considered in exceptional circumstances, where the immediate risk to the child or others outweighs the potential impact of the search on the child's perceptions of school;
- An appropriate adult must always be present for strip searches of children in custody and under stop and search, except in the most exceptional situations where there is serious risk to the child's life or welfare. Urgency should be removed as an exception to this requirement and constant supervision should be recommended;
- Any young person who could be under the age of 18 should be assumed to be under 18 years of age to ensure that all children are safeguarded. In addition, it should be made clear that, if a young person claims to be under 18 this should be believed unless there is clear evidence to contrary. If a young person claims to be over 18 but evidence suggests otherwise, the young person should still be treated as a child as a precaution. This assumption is particularly important regarding the presence of an appropriate adult during a search;

- Parents or guardians of children should be informed in advance of strip or intimate searches of children in custody and under stop and search;
  - Strip searches in custody or under stop and search should not be conducted in front of officers of another sex to the child; and
  - A safeguarding referral should be made whenever a strip or intimate search of a child is conducted. Where a child refuses to provide information under stop and search, this should be recorded.
- **Recommendation:** As safeguards are strengthened, the College of Policing should continue to amend Authorised Professional Practice for strip searches and police interactions with children to emphasise the duty of police to safeguard children during searches in line with these recommendations.
  - **Recommendation:** The use of emerging and alternative technologies should be explored to minimise the need for invasive strip searches of children, including the use of X-ray body scanners and similar technologies, which have been successful within the adult secure estate<sup>47</sup>. The use of such scanners may offer the possibility of reducing trauma and preserving the dignity of children during police interactions, as well as providing more effective searches.

### **Improve data quality, availability and transparency**

- **Recommendation:** The Home Office should require police forces to report annually on the strip searching of children under stop and search. This should distinguish between more thorough searches and strip searches, and include ethnicity information on the child, whether an Appropriate Adult was present, the specific location of the strip search, and whether a safeguarding referral was made.
- **Recommendation:** Police forces should report annually on the number and circumstances of strip searches involving children to Police and Crime Commissioners and independent community oversight mechanisms, such as independent advisory groups and stop and search scrutiny panels.

- **Recommendation:** His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) should embed and improve changes to scrutinise strip searches under stop and search in the framework for PEEL inspections of police forces.
- **Recommendation:** A consistent and unique child identifier should be introduced to expedite the identification of vulnerable children at booking in. For example, if a police station contacts a children's services duty line and receives a nil return, this could be due to the child being registered as an out-of-area placement.
- **Recommendation:** Further improvements should be made to data quality and recording, particularly information critical for ensuring that the child is properly safeguarded, including whether a parent or guardian is informed, an appropriate adult is present, the officer is of the same gender as the child, and that a safeguarding referral is raised. If these data are not recorded, or if any aspect of the search is not compliant with current codes of practice, the reason for non-compliance should always be recorded. We therefore recommend the following changes to improve data quality:
  - Mandatory recording of additional vulnerability characteristics needed as standard on all police data recording systems (e.g., Athena, NICHE, Pronto etc.), rather than as an optional free-text field, as suggested in the data collected for this report. This would help to ensure better data quality, enable better and more effective safeguarding, and streamline risk management;
  - A Public Protection Notice should be recorded for every stop and search involving a child.

### **Improve practice and compliance in all police forces**

- **Recommendation:** Police forces should commit to reviewing all concerning strip search cases identified by the CCo and refer these to the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC).
- **Recommendation:** Police forces should commit to training for frontline officers, who may conduct stop and searches in the course of their regular duties, on safeguarding children and trauma-informed practice.
- **Recommendation:** Police forces, as public bodies with obligations under the Equality Act 2010 and Human Rights Act 1998, should commit to working with the Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) as required after the publication of this report in order to deliver necessary reforms.
- **Recommendation:** His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) should conduct a thematic inspection of strip searches of children under stop and search.

### **Broader change in police interaction with children and safeguarding-first approaches**

- **Recommendation:** The National Police Chief's Council (NPCC) should publish an action plan on reforming stop and search practices, including strip searches, of children.
- **Recommendation:** Police forces should share strategic information on strip searching of children with local safeguarding partnerships and serious violence duty-holders to inform their priorities and work to assess and understand local need.
- **Recommendation:** The Crown Prosecution Service and the Home Office should consult on adding a safeguarding referral outcome to the Crime Outcomes Framework to encourage police officers to refer vulnerable children to children's social care.

## Methodology

### Police force level data

#### Data collection

The Children's Commissioner requested data from police forces in England and Wales under section 2F of the Children Act 2004<sup>48</sup>. 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 individual-level data into a set data return template which included a full specification for the data required as part of the data request.

Datasets were uploaded by means of a closed survey using the secure, online SmartSurvey platform. The survey also included a series of force-level questions including whether any policy or procedure changes had been made regarding searches exposing intimate parts of children under stop and search powers or in custody between July 2022 and June 2023, and which characteristics of additional vulnerability are routinely recorded for children who are stopped and searched, and in custody.

The search-level data collected included demographic data on children who were searched, search locations, including location type, 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 search was public, whether force was used, the legal search powers cited and the outcome of the search, including any objects 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.

#### Data cleaning and analysis

The data returned by police forces in England and Wales in January and February 2024 is the source of all findings in this report unless otherwise stated.

All data returns were manually checked by two researchers to ensure the data structure matched the data return template, then quality assured by another researcher. All further data cleaning and analyses

were conducted using R. After combining the police force datasets into one master dataframe in R, responses which did not match the data template were standardised. Any personally identifiable data was removed so that analysis was conducted on anonymised data.

Population-level data was added to the strip search dataset by police force area (PFA). The CCo estimates the population share for each high-level ethnic group in all PFAs for children aged 10 to 17 using the Census 2021 table on ethnic group by age and sex. Note that reported estimates are the midpoint between the lower bound and upper bound population shares calculated based on the rounded figures in the published census data. The estimates are no more than 5 percentage points from the actual share.

It should be noted that as data is available only at the search-level, rather than at the child-level, it is possible that disproportionality in the proportion of searches conducted involving a specific demographic group of children could mean that some children are being repeatedly searched, rather than a greater number of children are searched.

### **Analysis of children's policing strategies**

The children's policing strategies or action plans were reviewed and analysed by a researcher. The format of the document was recorded, and whether it was a children's policing strategy or a similar policing document, for example, a Serious Violence Response strategy, or a Youth Justice Strategy. Within each document, themes were identified iteratively against the NPCC child-centric policing best practice framework<sup>49</sup> and the CCo's own recommendations for the contents of these strategies, for example, whether the strategies adequately incorporate children's voice.

## Annex 1: Strip searches in custody

Section 54 of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (PACE) permits a person to be searched if the custody officer considers it necessary to be sure that the reason for arrest is valid<sup>50</sup>. The Home Office stipulates that strip searches should not be routinely carried out if there is no reason to consider that articles are concealed. A strip search in police custody is defined as a search involving the removal of more than outer clothing (see *'What types of searches are the focus of this report?'* section). A strip search under PACE Code C may take place only if it is considered necessary to remove an article which a detainee would not be allowed to keep, and the officer reasonably considers the detainee might have concealed such an article<sup>51</sup>.

Data on the strip searching of children in custody is available from the Home Office for the years ending March 2022 and March 2023. The data presents data on the number of detentions, strip searches and intimate searches conducted in police custody broken down by age, sex, self-defined ethnicity, and details of all offences linked to the custody record, whether the child was detained overnight and the presence of an appropriate adult.

The quality of the data varies between years, as not all police forces responded to the data request. In the year ending March 2022, 28 out of 43 police forces returned data<sup>52</sup>. For the year ending March 2023 data was missing from only two police forces: Devon and Cornwall, and Humberside<sup>53</sup>.

### Number of searches in custody

In the year ending March 2023, 3,122 searches of children (aged 10 to 17) were conducted in custody in England and Wales, a decrease of <1 percentage points since the previous year (3,133 searches). In both years, 5% of all searches conducted in custody involved a child aged 10-17.

### Who was searched in custody?

Out of 11 intimate searches conducted by police in the year ending March 2023, one intimate search was conducted involving a boy aged 17 or under. Similar to findings from the CCo's 2023 report on the number of strip searches conducted under stop and search, a disproportionate number of searches of children in custody in the year ending March 2023 were conducted on children defined by police as being Black,



Asian or mixed race. In the year ending March 2023, just over half (53%) of all children strip searched in custody were of a White ethnic background, compared with 71% of adults strip searched, and 37% of children searched were Black, compared to 19% of adults.<sup>54</sup> Similar findings were found for the year ending March 2022, in which only 43% of children strip-searched in custody had their ethnic background recorded as White, and 35% of children were Black.<sup>55</sup>

## Annex 2: Number of strip searches under stop and search

Table 2. Number of strip searches conducted by country, region and police force area (PFA)

Geographic area	Number of searches (July 2022 – June 2023)*	Share of total searches (July 2022 – June 2023)	Percentage point change (since 2023 report <sup>56</sup> )**	Population***
<b>National</b>				
England	400	88%	-6	95%
Wales	50 <sup>†</sup>	11%	+6	5%
British Transport Police	<10	1%	-1	N/A
<b>Regional</b>				
East Midlands	34	7%	+3	8%
Eastern	61	13%	-1	11%
London	66	14%	-18	15%
North East	25	5%	+4.5	4%
North West	61	13%	+4	13%
South East	79	17%	-3	16%
South West	28	6%	-1	9%
Wales	50 <sup>†</sup>	11%	+6	5%
West Midlands	30	7%	+3	10%
Yorkshire and the Humber	16	4%	0	9%
British Transport Police	<10	1%	-1	N/A
<b>Police force area</b>				
Avon and Somerset Constabulary	<10	2%	-1	3%
Bedfordshire Police	<10	2%	N/A	1%
Cambridgeshire Constabulary	<10	1%	N/A	1%
British Transport Police	<10	1%	-1	N/A
Cheshire Constabulary	<10	<1%	0	2%
Cleveland Police	<10	1%	0	1%
Cumbria Constabulary	<10	1%	0	1%
Derbyshire Constabulary	<10	<1%	0	2%

Devon and Cornwall Police	<10	2%	0	3%
Dorset Police	<10	<1%	-1	1%
Durham Constabulary	19	4%	+4	1%
Dyfed-Powys Police <sup>††</sup>	30	7%	N/A	1%
Essex Police	<10	2%	-3	3%
Gloucestershire Constabulary	<10	1%	N/A	1%
Greater Manchester Police	<10	1%	0	6%
Gwent Police	<10	1%	0	1%
Hampshire and Isle of Wight Constabulary	<10	2%	-3	3%
Hertfordshire Constabulary	11	2%	-5	2%
Humberside Police	<10	<1%	0	2%
Kent Police	15	3%	-2	3%
Lancashire Constabulary	<10	1%	-1	2%
Leicestershire Police	<10	<1%	0	1%
Lincolnshire Police	<10	<1%	0	1%
Merseyside Police	46	10%	+5	2%
Metropolitan Police Service and City of London Police	66	14%	-17	14%
Norfolk Constabulary	11	2%	+2	1%
North Wales Police	<10	1%	0	1%
North Yorkshire Police	<10	<1%	0	1%
Northamptonshire Police	28	6%	+4	2%
Northumbria Police	<10	<1%	0	2%
Nottinghamshire Police	<10	<1%	N/A	2%
South Wales Police	18	4%	0	2%
South Yorkshire Police	<10	1%	0	2%
Staffordshire Police	<10	2%	+2	2%
Suffolk Constabulary	16	4%	+2	1%
Surrey Police	<10	1%	-2	2%
Sussex Police	13	3%	+1	3%
Thames Valley Police	36	8%	+2	4%
Warwickshire Police	<10	2%	+2	1%

West Mercia Police	<10	<1%	0	2%
West Midlands Police	12	3%	+1	6%
West Yorkshire Police	<10	2%	0	5%
Wiltshire Police	<10	1%	0	1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>457</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>100%</b>

\*To prevent disclosure, counts of under 10 have been suppressed.

\*\* Percentage point changes of N/A are due to previously missing data in the 2023 report.

\*\*Population estimates are calculated at the national and regional levels reported for children aged 10-17 in England and Wales using Office for National Statistics' Mid-Year Population Estimates June 2021 dataset.

† Figures for Wales rounded to nearest 10 searches to prevent disclosure.

†† Figures for Dyfed-Powys Police include all searches in 2022 and 2023, as month of search was not provided. On 19 August 2024, Dyfed-Powys Police provided a statement on the figures published in this report: "An incorrect figure was supplied to the Children's Commissioner by Dyfed-Powys Police due to an internal error and was published within the report".<sup>57</sup>

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