



# UCL

A nighttime photograph of the London skyline. The Shard is on the left, and the Gherkin is on the right. Both are brightly lit. In the foreground, there are silhouettes of trees and a body of water with light trails from cars.

## Stop and search in London April to June 2020

**Dr Matt Ashby | October 2020**

## Main points

**Police in London stopped and searched 105,842 people and vehicles in the three months from April to June 2020. The number of searches has generally increased over the past two years.**

**69% of searches were for drugs, with 79% of all searches resulting in no further action.**

**Different demographic groups are searched at different rates, with men aged 18-24 identifying as Black being 21 times more likely to be searched than the population as a whole.**

## Introduction

Stop and search is a legal power that allows police officers to search people to find out if they are carrying prohibited items such as drugs, weapons or stolen goods. Stop and search means officers can confirm if a person is or is not in possession of contraband without arresting them and taking them to a police station, but it is also a source of tension between police and communities. [A review by the College of Policing](#) found little relationship between how many searches police do and how much crime occurs, but [police insist stop and search helps them fight crime](#). This report is the first of a series that will analyse stop and search in London each quarter.

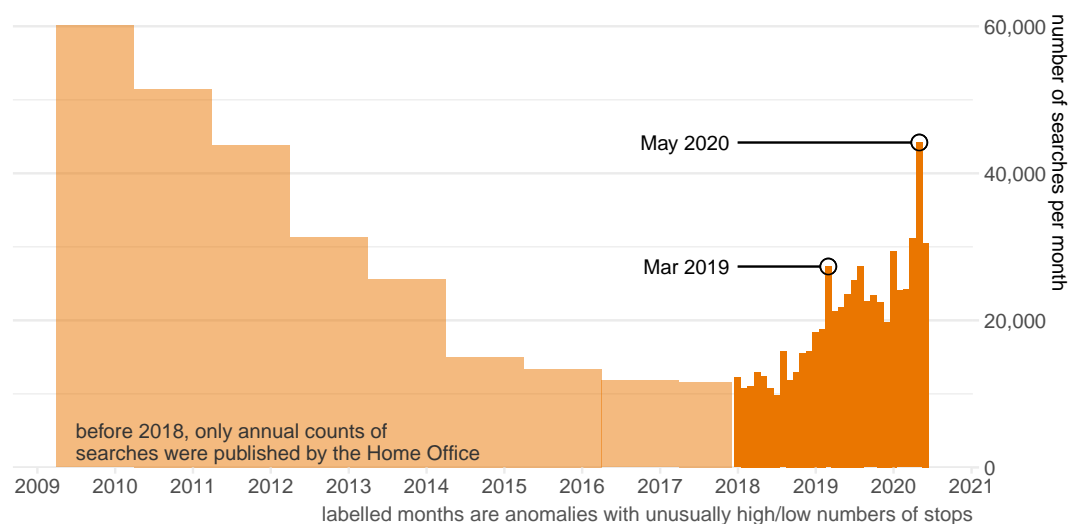


Figure 1: Number of stop-and-searches in London, January 2018 to June 2020

**Between April and June 2020, police officers in London carried out 105,842 stop-and-searches**, or about 8,142 per week. Of those, 98% were conducted by the Metropolitan Police, 1% by British Transport Police and 1% by City of London Police. Across the three forces, 72% of stops were of pedestrians, 27% of people in vehicles and 2% of only vehicles.

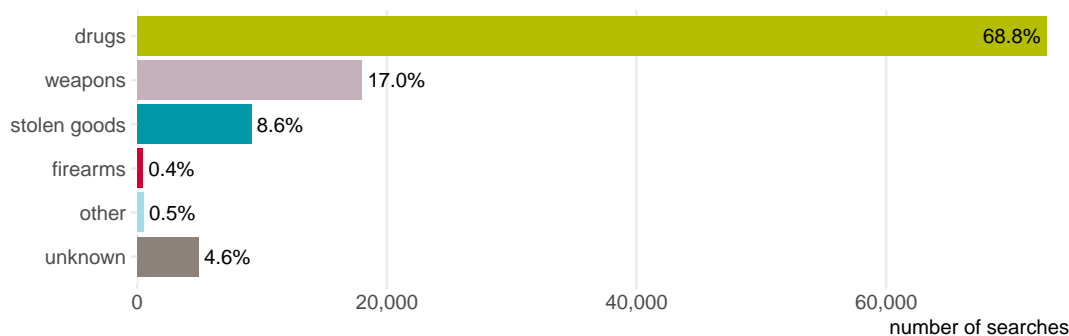


Figure 2: Searches by type of object being searched for, April to June 2020

The number of searches carried out in April to June 2020 was **an increase of 36% from the previous quarter** and the largest quarterly change since at least the first quarter of 2018 (Figure 1). This increase was consistent with the upward trend since 2018, with stops having **increased by 7% per month on average over the past two years**. Prior to 2018, the number of searches had decreased every year since 2009, dropping by 81% in nine years.

## What items are people searched for?

Police officers are empowered to search people for different items – including drugs, items to use in theft or criminal damage, stolen goods, weapons and even some fireworks – under different acts of parliament. Although police emphasise that stop and search “[protects Londoners by taking weapons off the streets](#)”, only about one in six searches between April and June 2020 were for weapons – **69% of searches were for drugs** (Figure 2).

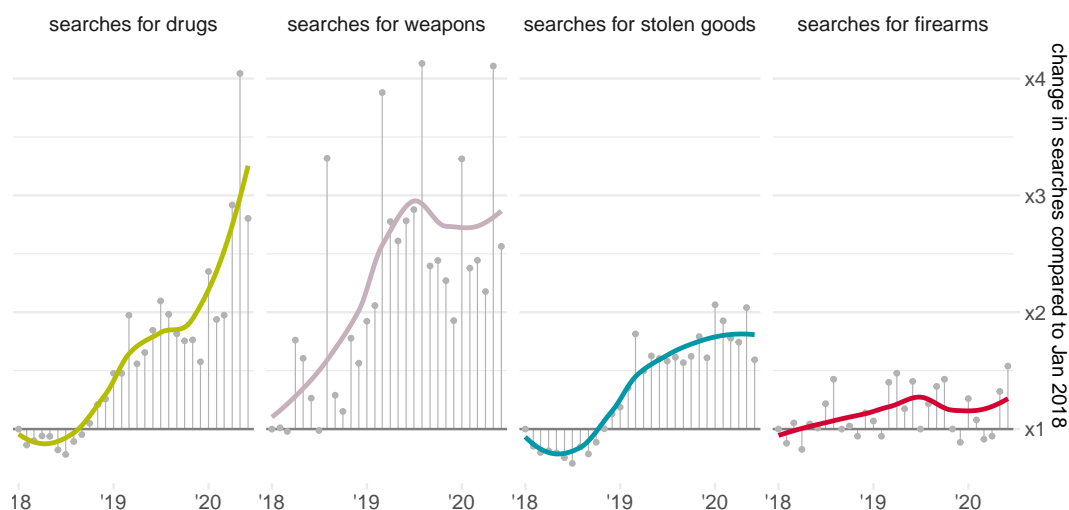


Figure 3: Change in number of searches by type, January 2018 to June 2020

About 95% of searches are looking for the four main types of contraband: drugs, firearms, stolen goods and weapons. Since 2018, the number of searches for drugs, stolen



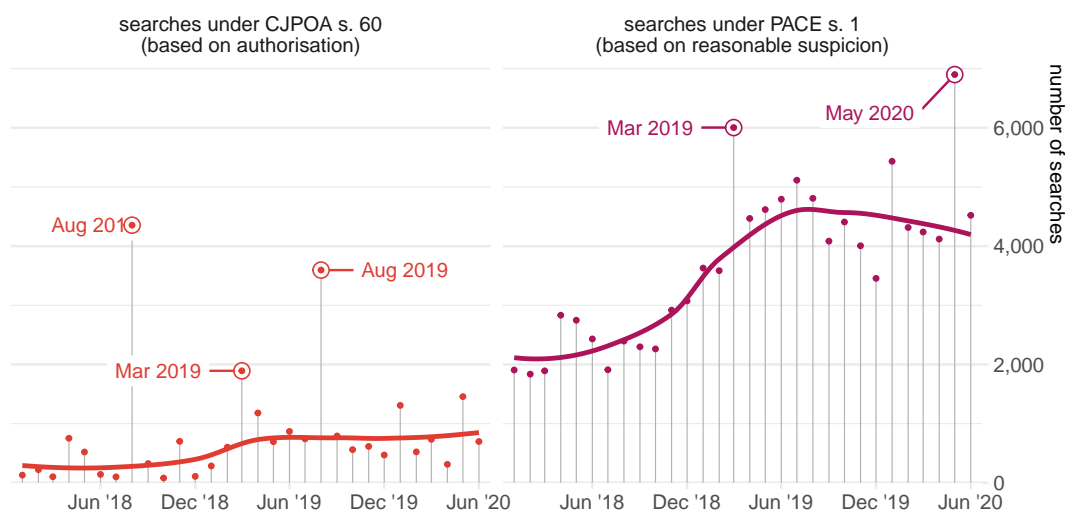


Figure 4: Change in number of searches for weapons, January 2018 to June 2020

goods and weapons have increased while searches for firearms have remained largely static (Figure 3).

Police can search people for weapons using two different legal powers. Searches under [section 1 of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 \(PACE\)](#) require the officer to have “reasonable grounds for suspecting” that the person is carrying an offensive weapon or other prohibited item. Conversely, officers can search people under [section 60 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 \(CJPOA\)](#) without having any reason to think the person has a weapon, as long as a more-senior officer believes “incidents involving serious violence may take place” in the area. These ‘section 60’ searches are particularly controversial because they allow officers to search *anyone* in an area, even if there is no reason to think they have a weapon in their possession. Between April and June 2020, 86% of weapons searches are based on reasonable suspicion under PACE section 1, with the remaining 14% based on authorisations under CJPOA section 60. Police do not publish any information about authorisations made under section 60, so it is difficult to track any patterns or trends.

Searches based on reasonable suspicion the person being searched is carrying a weapon have increased by about 5% per month on average over the past two years (Figure 4). In comparison to that trend, the number of these searches in the second quarter of 2020 was anomalously high in May and within the expected range otherwise – prior to this quarter, PACE section 1 searches had been anomalously high in March 2019. No-suspicion searches under section 60 have remained largely static over the past two years, with the number of these searches between April and June 2020 within the range that would be expected based on that trend. Before that, section 60 searches had been anomalously high in August 2018, March 2019 and August 2019.

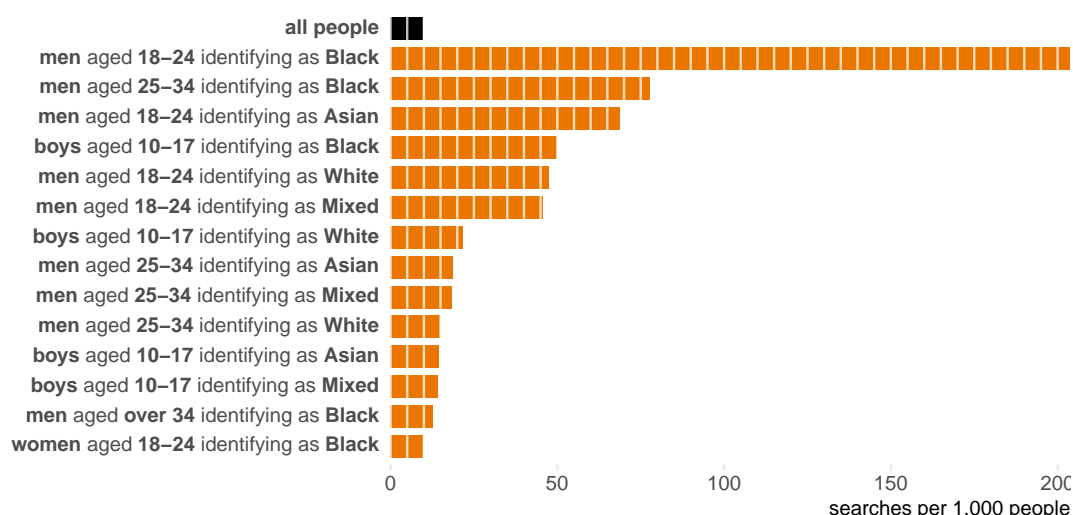


Figure 5: Search rates for different demographic groups, April to June 2020

## Who do police search?

Of the 103,934 searches of pedestrians and vehicle occupants from April to June 2020, **93% were searches of men or boys**. Of all people searched, 15% were aged under 18, 41% were between 18 and 24, and 44% were 25 or older. The self-defined ethnicity of the person searched was known for 78% of searches, of which 40% of people described themselves as white, 34% as Black/Black British and 18% as Asian/Asian British.

**Search rates vary hugely across different groups.** While disparity between ethnic groups has generated much comment, there are also disparities between age groups and sexes. The best demographic predictors of a person in London being searched in April–June 2020 were (in descending order) being male, being aged 18-24 and being aged 25-34, with 14 groups being searched at a higher rate than average (Figure 5). The reasons for these differences are likely to be complex: many types of offending are concentrated among some groups (particularly young men) as well as in some neighbourhoods, and there are [longstanding issues of bias and stereotyping among police and in society](#). There is also an interaction between factors such as deprivation and the amount of time people spend in public (where almost-all searches occur). There is no way to know from the data analysed here what combination of these factors drives the disparities in search rates.

In comparison to the population as a whole, people in the group with the highest search rate (men aged 18-24 identifying as Black) are on-average 21 times more likely to be stopped and searched. Disparities in search rates also vary according to the type of search. Disparity is highest in searches for weapons (based on reasonable suspicion), for which men aged 18-24 identifying as Black were 31 times more likely to be searched than the population at large. Of the 32 combinations of age, ethnic-group and sex categories present in the data, the rate of searches was highest for all five of the main types of search for men aged 18-24 who identified as Black. It is important to note that these disparity ratios only represent *average* search rates for different groups – they do not reflect the

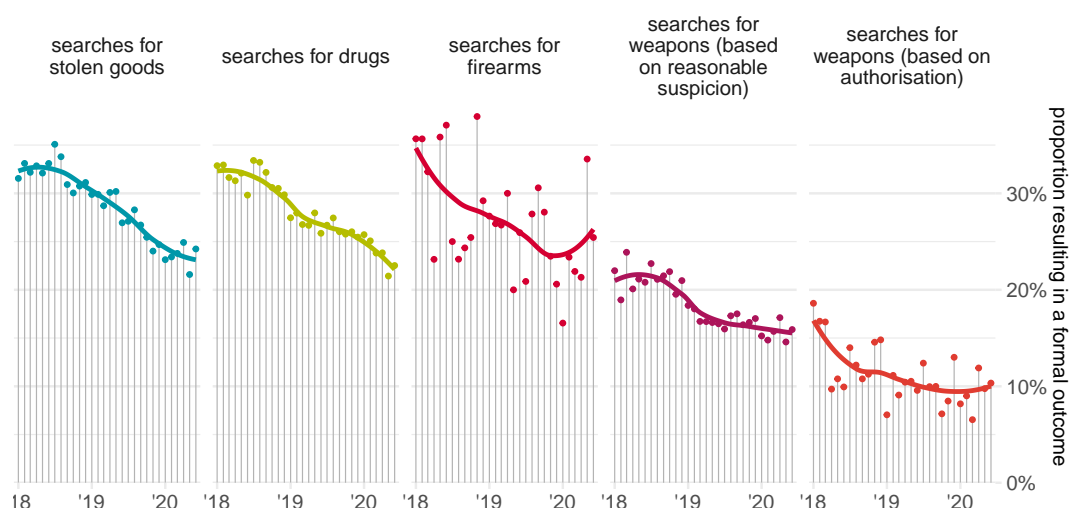


Figure 6: Change in proportion of searches with a formal outcome, January 2018 to June 2020

individual experience of everyone in each group. It is likely that a small number of people in each group are being searched repeatedly while others are searched far less often, but since police do not publish data on repeated searches it is difficult to know how this affects overall search rates.

## How often do police find items during searches?

The purpose of stop and search is to “enable officers to allay or confirm suspicions about individuals without exercising their power of arrest” ([PACE Code A, paragraph 1.4](#)). As such, a search that does not find what is being searched for can be considered successful if it prevents an innocent person being arrested and a police officer being taken off the street unnecessarily. As such, there is not necessarily an optimal proportion of searches that should result in the officer finding what they are looking for. Measuring outcomes is also difficult: officers may have legitimate grounds to search a group of people (e.g. all the occupants in a vehicle believed to contain a firearm) when only one person has contraband in their possession. Nevertheless, all searches are an “intrusion on the liberty of the person” (PACE Code A, paragraph 1.2) and high proportions of searches that do not find anything may indicate that searches are not well targeted.

The data released by the Home Office do not specify whether or not the item police were looking for was found during a search. Instead, we can measure whether a search resulted in some formal criminal-justice process. This is not a perfect measure of whether an item was found during a search, because a person might be arrested for some other reason (for example because there was an outstanding warrant for their arrest) or contraband might be found but police deal with it informally. Nevertheless, this is the least-worst measure of search outcomes that is currently available.

Overall, about 21% of searches in the second quarter of 2020 resulted in a formal



Figure 7: Proportion of searches resulting in a formal outcome, January to June 2020

criminal-justice outcome (arrest, charge by post, caution, fixed penalty, community/local resolution or drugs warning), while the remaining **79% of searches resulted in no further action**. Over the past two years, searches for stolen goods have been most likely to lead to a formal outcome, while 89% of searches for weapons under a section 60 authorisation resulted in no further action.

In the past two years, the proportion of searches for drugs, stolen goods, weapons (based on authorisation) and weapons (based on reasonable suspicion) resulting in a formal outcome have all decreased (Figure 6). Overall, **the proportion of stops with a formal outcome has dropped from 28% in 2018 to 22% in the past 6 months**.

When a stop does result in formal action, the most common outcome is arrest (used in 53% of cases with a formal outcome). However, which action police choose varies with the type of search: 79% of positive searches for firearms result in arrest, compared to only 37% of positive searches for drugs. The outcomes of some searches suggest that the outcome does not relate to the type of contraband that police were looking for. For example, fixed penalties are not a legally available option for dealing with weapons or firearms offences, but 8% of formal outcomes to searches for weapons based on reasonable suspicion, 15% of formal outcomes to searches for weapons based on section-60 authorisations and 6% of formal outcomes to searches for firearms were fixed penalties. This suggests that some weapons and firearms searches result in police not finding weapons but discovering more-minor offences such as cannabis possession.

While the rate of searches varies between ethnic groups, the probability of a search resulting in a formal criminal-justice outcome is broadly the same across ethnicities – over the past six months, the probability of a formal outcome to searches of Black or Asian people was not significantly different from the probability of a formal outcome to searches of White people for any of the main search types (Figure 7).

## Where do stops happen?

Stop and search is geographically concentrated in some parts of London: **half of searches between April and June 2020 occurred in 12% of neighbourhoods**. Searches

are also concentrated in deprived areas: 70% of searches took place in neighbourhoods that were more deprived than average. In particular, 79% of searches for weapons under section 60 occurred in the most-deprived half of neighbourhoods.

Of the 33 boroughs in London, the most searches in April to June 2020 took place in Newham (5,671 searches), Tower Hamlets (5,095) and Westminster (5,015), while the fewest took place in City of London (392 searches), Richmond upon Thames (983) and Bexley (1,189). We can identify search hotspots by counting searches in each of about 2,000 equally-sized cells (Figure 8).

Of the 657 local-authority wards in London, the ward with the most searches between April and June 2020 was Abbey ward in Barking and Dagenham, in which there were more searches than in the entire boroughs of Richmond upon Thames or City of London (Table 1).

Searches for weapons under section 60 can only take place in areas in which an inspector (a second-line supervisor) believes “incidents involving serious violence may take place”. Of the 2,464 no-suspicion searches under section 60 from April to June 2020, more than half (51%) took place in five boroughs (11% in Westminster, 11% in Hackney, 10% in Camden, 10% in Newham and 9% in Barking and Dagenham). Meanwhile, there were no section-60 searches in Kingston upon Thames or Sutton boroughs.

## A note on data

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This report uses data published by the Home Office at [data.police.uk](https://data.police.uk) under the [Open Government Licence version 3.0](#). Officers are legally required to record searches, but officers may not report some searches for a variety of reasons, from forgetting to do so after a long shift to not recording because the search was unjustified. Searches were included in this report if they were conducted by the Metropolitan Police Service or City of London Police, or by British Transport Police at a location in London.

Search rates are calculated using [2020 estimates of the London population by age and ethnic group](#) produced by the Mayor of London. Rates based on residential populations are imperfect because some people being searched in London will live outside London, but the vast majority of people searched in London are likely to also live in the region. All ethnicity figures in this report are self-defined ethnicities.

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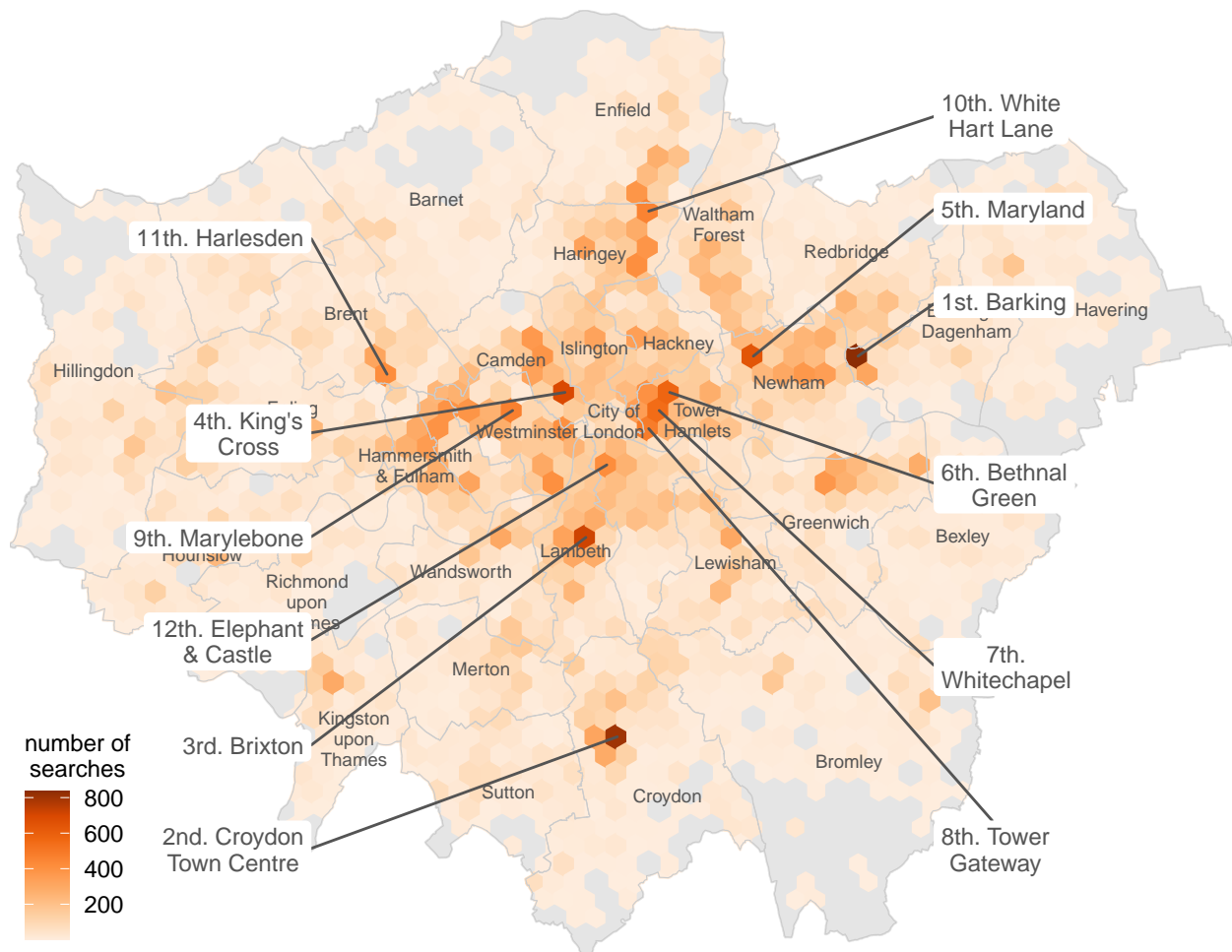


Figure 8: Location of searches, April to June 2020

Table 1: Local authority wards with the highest number of searches, April to June 2020

council ward	searches	council ward	searches
1. Abbey, Barking and Dagenham	1,080	11. Tottenham Hale, Haringey	564
2. Woolwich Riverside, Greenwich	1,019	12. Tottenham Green, Haringey	557
3. Stratford and New Town, Newham	901	13. Harlesden, Brent	555
4. Broad Green, Croydon	847	14. East Ham Central, Newham	519
5. St James's, Westminster	747	15. Manor Park, Newham	494
6. Whitechapel, Tower Hamlets	667	16. West End, Westminster	484
7. St Peter's, Tower Hamlets	663	17. Lewisham Central, Lewisham	478
8. Edmonton Green, Enfield	604	18. Hounslow Central, Hounslow	461
9. Northumberland Park, Haringey	595	19. Coldharbour, Lambeth	445
10. Fairfield, Croydon	576	20. Camden Town with Primrose Hill, Camden	444