

Race, Crime and Injustice? *Strip Search and the Treatment of Suspects in Custody*

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Tim Newburn, Michael Shiner, Stephanie Hayman

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Abstract

As Britain has become an increasingly diverse society, law enforcement and order maintenance have, almost inevitably, generated sharp conflicts of interest. Police relations with young people in general, lesbians and gay men, and gypsy and traveller groups have all caused concern in recent times. Greatest concern has, however, been reserved for the policing of Britain's black and minority ethnic communities, particularly those of African–Caribbean heritage. While the use of ‘stop and search’ has provided a key focus for such concern, less attention has been paid to what happens within the police station—although, historically, this has also been a source of considerable mistrust and tension. In this paper, we focus on a largely unexamined police power—the use of strip search. Using data from a single police station (Kilburn) in north London for the period May 1999 to September 2000, we assess the differential use of strip search with a particular focus on ‘race’. The data suggest that this power is used more frequently in connection with arrestees of African–Caribbean origin than any others—even when other factors, such as age, sex and offence, are controlled for.

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