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Stripped and searched, how British police abuse minors

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More than 2,000 children are strip-searched every year by police in the UK. The shocking news made public in November 2022, was divulged by the *Daily Mail*, in an aptly titled article, '[Stripped of their dignity](#)'. Four months later, a second [damning report](#) was

published by the Children's Commissioner (CC), Dame Rachel de Souza. It was so shocking the British government ordered an urgent review. This is the background to the Home Office's announcement this month that a six-week **consultation**, ending mid-June, would lead to significant changes to the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (PACE) and enforced as early as this summer. But, the real challenge facing the government will be to convince the British public to renew their trust in the police force to protect and support their children.

Both the *Daily Mail* investigation and the CC report came about in the aftermath of the strip-search **Child Q scandal**. In 2020, Child Q, a 15-year-old black schoolgirl, was taken out of an exam and strip-searched by two female police officers while on her period, without her parents being contacted or an appropriate adult present. Her teachers had contacted the police after they wrongly thought she had smelt of cannabis. A **safeguarding report** by City and Hackney Safeguarding Children Partnership found the search was unjustified and that racism was 'likely' to have been a factor in the officers' decision making. The search sparked **days of protests in 2022** outside the girl's east London school and was said to have left her traumatised and humiliated. The Metropolitan police apologised but public confidence in the police force plummeted to an all time low.

The first to respond to the Child Q case with a widespread investigation on the strip-searching of children by the police was the *Daily Mail*. It sent Freedom of Information requests to all the forces in England and Wales on children who had been strip-searched between 2016 and 2020. The results made dreadful reading and laid bare the extent of the tactic. "13,000 children strip-searched since 2016, including at least two under the age of ten," revealed the *Daily Mail*. "Extraordinary racial bias, black children make up more than 60% of under-18s strip-searched by some forces. More than 3,228 coming after Child Q was strip-searched at school (...) use of the controversial tactic almost doubled between 2017 and 2020 (...) in 80% of cases, nothing illegal was found." About the district forces which provided data, the *Daily Mail* wrote "just 28 out of 43 police forces" replied to request for information - "the real figures are likely to be far higher". The damage to the police force's image was incalculable.

Then the CC report came out and compounded the *Daily Mail's* findings adding more fuel to the fire. Dame de Souza requested data from all 43 police forces in England and Wales regarding the strip-searching of children between 2018 and 2021 using her powers under the Children and Families Act 2014. The CC final report, however, restricted its findings exclusively to strip searches involving the Exposure of Intimate

Body Parts (EIP) excluding More Thorough Searches (MTS) which instead the Daily Mail had included. 41 out of 43 police forces responded to the request. Not all of the feedback for 2021 could be included in the final report due to serious data errors. Nonetheless, the CC report remains the most complete national picture to date of the strip-searching of children by police in the UK.

Comprehensively, the CC research found, “a significant number of children are being subjected to this intrusive and traumatising practice each year”. “Safeguarding protocols were inconsistently followed”, “ethnic disproportionately” and that the “grounds for these searches” were often questionable. Specifically, 659 searches were carried out on under 18s including two under the age of ten and 25% were between 10 and 15 years old. 58% of boys who were stripped searched were Black and in 2018 it was 75%. On 23% of all occasions, an appropriate adult was not present although a statutory safeguard, and increased to 70% in 2018 when Black boys were strip-searched. In 53% of all searches nothing was found and no further action was taken suggesting the search was neither justified or necessary. And the locations for strip searches included police vehicles, home addresses and schools with a small number taking place in takeaways and amusement parks. On at least two occasions the child’s intimate body parts were in public view.

Given the findings of the investigation: strip-searching of children is used as a standard policing tactic across England and Wales, Dame Rachel de Souza listed 17 recommendations in her report and kicked the ball hard in the government’s court. “Strip searches on children should only be carried out in certain, exceptional situations, and as a last resort with robust protections in place..... I am also repeating my call for the government to publish annual data on strip-searches on children as my research found that often the police are not held to account for failing to meet the statutory safeguards that already exist,” she said.

The Home Office six-week consultation will hear the views of law enforcement, children's services and practitioners on 10 proposed amendments to prioritise children's "safety and wellbeing" in England and Wales. The proposals which would bring changes to the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (PACE) Codes of Practice A and C include requirements that when a strip-search of a child is carried out which involves the exposure of intimate body parts, the custody officer must notify a parent or guardian; an officer of the rank of inspector or higher must give authorisation and a record made of the reasons it was considered urgent; an appropriate adult of the opposite sex may only be present if known to the detainee and the detainee agrees.

The Children's Society chief executive, Mark Russell, said the proposals were "a welcome and crucial step forward, acknowledging the traumatic effects of this practice and its wider impact on the dignity of young people".

Crime and policing minister Chris Philip said, the new proposals would give 'greater clarity' to existing safeguards, adding that "whilst strip-search is necessary to keep the public and children safe, it should be used only where necessary and proportionate". 'With these reforms, we will ensure police are clear on what is expected of them so when it is absolutely necessary, they are able to use these powers with confidence and accountability.'

No doubt, bold words will be followed by noble actions. But the problem still remains that for some time now the British police forces have been applying double standards and fixing the law is just the first step on a long winding road to changing that perception.