

# Exploring the decision making processes of police officers during incidents of stop and search

Understanding individual officer cognitions, how they understand their environment and use experiences to reason and make decisions.

## Key details

<b>Lead institution</b>	<a href="#">University of Central Lancashire</a>
<b>Principal researcher(s)</b>	Denise Hanson <a href="mailto:dhanson2@uclan.ac.uk">dhanson2@uclan.ac.uk</a>
<b>Police region</b>	North West
<b>Project start date</b>	June 2024
<b>Date due for completion</b>	June 2027

## Research context

Stop and search is a complex process and an essential part of modern-day policing intended as an intervention to keep people safe, with some police watchdogs raising concerns around lawfulness and effective use of this legislative power (House of Commons 2022).

Though there is little evidence to suggest that stop and search proves an effective deterrent to offending, those in policing argue that targeted use in line with the law and guidance facilitates the confiscation of dangerous and prohibited items without undermining public trust.

HMICRS (2021) states that no force 'fully understands the impact of the use of [stop and search] powers' nor satisfactorily explain why ethnic 'disproportionality persists'. It is widely acknowledged that this damages police community relations with growing recognition of this 'damage impact' and the potentially traumatic impact it can have on both individuals and communities (House of

Commons, 2022). Using stakeholder engagement, the proposed study will examine how officers make sense of stop and search situations and how they construct their construction of mental models and shared mental models in a team environment.

In addition, the project will explore how the [national decision model \(NDM\)](#) is operationalised in the field. The study will therefore focus on understanding the cognitions of individual officers and how they understand their environment (Richards and others 2021), using experiences to reason and make decisions. Rapid decision making in a policing environment and especially in a team, requires awareness of self, others and the ability to process information effective to aid decision making in complex environments.

## Research methodology

There are two interconnected studies which will provide foundational knowledge relating to:

1. How an officer currently engages with stop and search through lived experience
2. What information they attend to during the process.

Both studies will gather information to inform any relevant future studies within the thesis.

Study 1 uses interpretative phenomenological analysis, with an interview designed to capture the lived experience of serving police officers at tactical level, including newly qualified to experienced operatives. The study is designed to examine specific aspects of officer decision making that considers expertise, challenges experience, pedagogical frameworks and current organisational requirements in terms of police officer training in the application of Section 1 of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act (PACE) 1984 (persons only).

Study 2 is exploring the cognitive processes of officers in decision making through the elicitation of knowledge using cognitive task analysis. This will involve the use of stop and search video footage to explore the differences between novice and expert officer responses, to map out what individual/shared mental models of stop and search are. This will allow a novice/expert comparison.

## References

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS). 2021. ['Disproportionate use of police powers: A spotlight on stop and search and the use of force.'](#)

19/02/2026

Exploring the decision making processes of police officers during incidents of  
stop and search

HMICFRS [internet].

House of Commons. 2022. '[Police powers: Stop and search](#)'. House of Commons Library Research Briefing.