

Anonymous survey to understand the decision-making around the use of handcuffs

An anonymous survey was carried out to understand the effects of handcuff use and officers' decision-making around this force tactic.

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Key details

Does it work?	Untested – new or innovative
Focus	Organisational
Topic	Diversity and inclusion Ethics and values Operational policing
Organisation	Avon and Somerset Police
HMICFRS report	PEEL 2023–25 Police effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy: An inspection of Avon and Somerset Constabulary
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Partners	Police

Key details

Stage of practice	The practice is implemented.
Start date	December 2023
Completion date	December 2023
Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	Workforce

Aim

The aims of the intervention were to:

- gain feedback and reflections from officers without the fear of scrutiny or punishment
- gain an insight into officers' decision-making around the use of the tactic of handcuffing
- assess the rate of disproportionality in the use of police powers towards the black community

Intended outcome

The intended outcomes are to:

- reduce the disproportionality rate
- reduce the risk of officer bias in the use of handcuffing during an arrest or stop and search
- improve officers' decision-making skills
- increase the force's knowledge of officers' decision-making
- improve the support to officers to ensure they feel safe at work and make effective decisions
- broaden the force's insight into compliant handcuffing

Description

A review into stop and search encounters revealed that handcuffing was a commonly used tactic. In conjunction to the review, community feedback also highlighted that this tactic was used disproportionately towards the black community. An anonymous survey was developed to understand officers' decision-making on the use of handcuffing.

A tactical operational lead was appointed to oversee the planning and roll out of the survey, which was created using Microsoft Forms. The decision was made to anonymise the survey to encourage officers to share their feedback without the fear of scrutiny or punishment. The questions were determined by using operational knowledge and anecdotal feedback on tactic of handcuffing. The survey also included questions relating to 'compliant' handcuffing, which is when officers use handcuffs with the consent of the person being handcuffed. The force received approximately 500 responses.

The survey revealed factors which can impact officer decision-making, including:

- being single crewed
- age
- gender
- location

The force used data from the survey to form the hypothesis that handcuffing was used when an officer feared being assaulted or an individual escaping detainment. While there are legitimate reasons to apply handcuffs, the data revealed that the majority of stop and search encounters did not result in an item being found. The feedback was shared with the operational training department to include in their handcuffing training.

The survey feedback prompted the formation of a task and finish group. This group supports officers' learning and decision-making with the intention of reducing the disproportionality rate. The task and finish group is attended by:

- operational training
- professional standards department
- Avon and Somerset Police Federation

- outreach team
- corporate communications
- operational officers

A further area of focus was the identification of the demographic of officers' who are most likely to use handcuffing as a tactic during an arrest or stop and search. This has led the force to offer support to this demographic of officers to ensure they feel safer at work and make effective decisions.

There was no cost to the planning or delivery of the anonymous survey or the task and finish group.

Overall impact

Avon and Somerset Police are currently determining the impact of the data from the anonymous survey. The force has used the data to improve decision-making when handcuffing to ensure that the tactic is used legitimately and to maintain the public's confidence in the police.

The task and finish group provided a definition for the use of compliant handcuffing, to support officers using the tactic and to determine how accurately they are recording their use of force. Once the definition is introduced force-wide, the plan is to evaluate the progress within a year.

The anonymous handcuffing survey successfully met its objective of gathering meaningful insights into operational handcuffing practices across the force. Approximately 500 responses were collected out of just over 3,000 officers. The survey achieved a strong level of engagement and provided a valuable evidence base for further organisational learning.

Learning

- By creating the survey on Microsoft Forms, this ensured a simple and cost-effective approach. There were no financial costs incurred beyond the tactical lead's time to create the form. This enabled the initiative to be an accessible and scalable model for future internal research.
- It is essential to have a robust communication strategy to promote engagement. Involving the corporate communications team at the earliest opportunity enabled the survey to be framed as a constructive improvement initiative rather than a scrutiny exercise. This helped foster trust and transparency among the workforce.

- It is important to clearly communicate the purpose of the survey. By framing the survey as a positive approach to enhancing officer safety, legitimacy and public confidence, the initiative avoided the perception of punitive oversight.
- All learning and decisions from the survey were made in conjunction with the relevant departments and committee, including legal services, the ethics committee and the community scrutiny group. This collaborative approach ensured that outcomes were operationally and ethically robust.
- The overarching aim of the survey and subsequent work was to reduce disproportionality in the use of handcuffing tactics. To achieve this, it was essential to include the community in shaping the outcomes. Their involvement helped ensure that the work was not only reflective of operational realities but also aligned with public expectations and values.
- One of the most significant outputs was the development of a working definition for compliant handcuffing, a concept previously undefined within UK policing. The definition is now being embedded into training and guidance materials.
- The survey also revealed a mixed understanding among officers regarding what constitutes compliant handcuffing. This insight has informed the creation of targeted training interventions and the formation of a task and finish group to explore the data in more depth and develop evidence-based recommendations. These will be trauma-informed and aligned with College of Policing training licence guidelines.

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