

UK report says Black children six times likelier to be strip-searched



People protest outside Stoke Newington police station in London in 2022, over the treatment of a Black 15-year-old schoolgirl who was strip-searched by police. Photograph: Stefan

London, April 26 (RHC)-- Black children in England and Wales are six times more likely to be strip-searched by police, according to a report that finds children were failed by those sworn to protect them.

The report, released by Children's Commissioner Rachel de Souza, found nearly 3,000 children were strip-searched from 2018 to mid-2022 and more than half the searches were conducted without an appropriate adult present.

The investigation was launched after a Black 15-year-old girl suspected of having marijuana was strip-searched at a London school in 2020 by two female officers without another adult present. The girl, identified as "Child Q", was menstruating and no drugs were found. A previous report said racism was a likely factor for the humiliating search.

"The bravery of a girl to speak up about a traumatic thing that happened to her" led to the report, which found "widespread noncompliance" of safeguards and evidence of a "deeply concerning practice", de Souza said. The findings follow a scathing report that found the public had lost confidence in London's Metropolitan Police and the force was plagued with institutional racism, misogyny and homophobia and didn't do enough to remove bad officers. That report was commissioned after an officer raped and killed a young woman in 2021.

The report said children as young as eight were searched in places that were often inappropriate, such as amusement parks or vehicles and sometimes even within public view. In some cases, at least one officer present was of a gender different than the child being searched. More than a third of the 2,847 searches were of Black children, making them more than six times more likely to be searched based on population figures, the report said. White children were about half as likely to be searched. De Souza called the disparity "utterly unacceptable."

The Runnymede Trust, a race equality think tank, said the findings were "even harder to absorb" than the report about the Metropolitan Police, which has faced critical reports in the past. The trust called for removing police from schools and revoking their authority to strip-search children.

"Officers are often unable to justify the necessity of strip-searching, nor can they report on the safeguarding impact on the child concerned," the group said. "Quite the contrary. It also confirms that our policing crisis is not just confined to London. It is national."

De Souza said strip searches can be necessary but "robust safeguards" are needed to protect children. She made 17 recommendations, including calling on the Home Office to review legislation and policy for searches and make specific changes to police and criminal evidence codes.

A spokesperson said the Home Office takes safeguarding children seriously. "Strip search is one of the most intrusive powers available to the police," the spokesperson said. "No one should be subject to strip search on the basis of race or ethnicity, and safeguards exist to prevent this."



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