



THE RECORDING OF POLICE STOPS: METHODS AND ISSUES

Executive Summary and Recommendations

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Every day, police officers in jurisdictions around the world conduct thousands of stops, identity checks, and searches. Police stops are notoriously imbalanced: they are routine for the officers conducting them, but for the person being stopped the experience can be embarrassing, intrusive, and frightening. And those who experience repeated encounters with the police may develop concerns about bias, overly-aggressive law enforcement, and the targeting of certain communities or groups. Despite the frequency and importance of these police-initiated contacts, police generally collect surprisingly little data on their stops. Police legitimacy is inextricably linked to the manner in which officers use their powers and whether it is perceived to be fair, reasonable, and transparent. Today, an increasing number of police departments are starting to record their use of stops, identity checks, and searches in order to monitor and track disproportionate impacts and to assess the stops' effectiveness.

Recording police stops and measuring their effectiveness is complex. Recording stop data generally requires the introduction of new data collection systems because many existing systems are not designed to generate statistical data or to support analysis and conversations with local communities.

Introducing the recording of stop data typically provokes resistance from police officers who feel that their professionalism is being questioned, and who worry about increasing bureaucratic burdens. But at the same time, recording only takes a matter of minutes; some bureaucracy is necessary to ensure that police are accountable, effective, and transparent; and establishing positive community relations, promoting accountability, and establishing legitimacy are part of “real police work.”

This report sets out what data should be captured by officers when recording police stops. It examines three techniques for recording police stops—paper forms, radio dispatch systems, and mobile systems—and notes the limitations of body-worn cameras as a means for capturing stop data. Finally, this report reviews experiences in implementing recording practices, including over-coming resistance, and offers recommendations for good practices. It is based on interviews with 35 people, over half of them current police officers, involved in the recording of stops across a range of countries. In summary, this report shows that properly recording police stops need not be burdensome, and can be used to improve police efficiency and police-community relations.

WHAT DATA SHOULD POLICE DEPARTMENTS RECORD AND WHY?

This basic data set can support the management and targeting of stops and support conversations concerning the fairness and efficiency of local policing practices.



METHODS OF RECORDING

Paper forms

Historically, officers have recorded their stops on paper forms. This simple means of data collection is familiar to the police, who typically use paper forms for issuing fines and citations. Each police officer carries a pad of stop-search forms, and completes one after the stop has been conducted. The form used in England and Wales consists of a front sheet and a yellow carbon copy given to the person stopped and/or searched. It generally takes officers 3-5 minutes to fill out the form. Once completed, the officer submits their form to their supervisor for review, after which the information is entered onto an electronic database, usually by police administrative staff or with electronic scanning equipment.

Strengths:

- + Easy to complete: officers are “used to filling in forms”
- + The person stopped receives a complete record of the stop at the time, providing immediate accountability
- + Affordable: stop forms can be introduced without significant financial investment in expensive equipment
- + Easy for supervisors to review

Weaknesses:

- Officers and the public may view paper forms as old-fashioned
- Requires double data entry, first to complete the form and then enter the information into the database
- Poor handwriting can cause inaccuracies in data entry
- Lack geo-coding for location, paper forms do not allow accurate mapping of stop activity

“With regards to paper records, it cheaper straight off, you are not reliant on IT. Officers are used to pen and paper, filling out forms... the potential downside is that they won’t be completed properly. They will miss boxes ...because this is a brand new way of doing stuff, it’s not just a small change...Its bringing in a mental shift to start recording in a different way. As a starter, if you don’t have mobile devices, paper will work well.”

Police Officer, England and Wales

Dispatch radios

The use of police radios and computer-aided dispatch systems to record stops is fairly well-established in the U.S., largely because it eliminates the need for officers to complete paper forms and builds on existing communications practices. When conducting a stop, the officer contacts the control centre by radio and verbally relays required data for the operator to record directly into the electronic database. The control room operator gives the officer a unique reference for the stop record, which the officer writes on a paper receipt and gives to the person stopped. The person can use that reference number to obtain the full record, either online or through a request to the local police station. It takes 2-4 minutes for officers to relay information, although there can be delays in getting through to the dispatch centre before recording can start. An electronic stop record is emailed to the supervisor for review.

Strengths:

- ⊕ Reduced bureaucracy (compared to paper forms)
- ⊕ Easy integration with existing police systems, which require officers to call in their stops to log activity and for safety reasons
- ⊕ Can integrate on-the-spot supervision
- ⊕ Control room checks encourage compliance

Weaknesses:

- ⊖ No complete record for the person stopped
- ⊖ Inconsistencies in data-entry as information is relayed to and then entered by control room staff
- ⊖ Can overload dispatch systems, leading to delays and longer stops

“We did a survey with staff. I think it was 94% of staff said they thought it was a significant improvement and they liked it. I mean it’s taken a 10-minute process down to two to three minutes. It involves very little work for them. It’s easy, it’s efficient, it takes other work away. So the user satisfaction of it is high.... Initially, they [control room staff] were concerned about it in terms of demand. But if you’re doing a person’s check and you’re using the information you’ve already got on your system, the large part of the work is already done for them. And we’re not actually asking them to record that much extra work. So there is extra work in it for them, but the benefits outweigh the cost and demands.”

Police Officer, England and Wales

Mobile devices

The proliferation of mobile device technology (MDT) has created new possibilities for the recording of police stop-searches. The use of MDTs in police vehicles is well-established in the U.S., and mobile devices are increasingly used by officers on foot. The officer is issued a mobile phone or tablet with a stop recording application. The process of completing the online form generally takes 2-3 minutes. Once the form is completed and submitted, it automatically populates a centrally held database. The system provides the officer with a unique reference for the stop record, which the officer writes on a paper receipt for the person stopped. Once submitted, a notification is sent to the officer's supervisor to prompt review.

Strengths:

- + Viewed as modern by officers
- + Easy to use
- + Automatic data entry directly onto the database, no double entry
- + Automatic geo-coding to support mapping of stop activity
- + Built-in supervision options
- + Integration with other department software

Weaknesses:

- No full record for person stopped
- Potentially significant financial and start-up costs
- Limits direct communication with person stopped

“Officers love the tablets and handhelds because it promotes professionalism and efficiency. They don’t have to type things up when they get back into the station and it looks more professional. The technology is changing the way people working—officers are spending more time on the streets.”

Police Officer, England and Wales

Body worn video

Body worn cameras (BWC) are small video and audio recording devices designed to attach to a police officer's uniform. The use of body worn video (BWV) to record police-initiated encounters is a relatively recent development that is rapidly becoming more popular. Department policies differ greatly on matters of when the cameras should be turned on and what types of incidents officers are required to capture. At the end of the shift, officers upload the video footage onto the force system, and may mark individual incidents for evidentiary or other value. While video footage provides a detailed contemporaneous account of an incident, it does not generate quantitative data necessary to create statistics and analyse patterns of stop practice. BWV cannot be assumed to be objective, as it suffers from perspective bias, has the potential for manipulation, and any interpretation of the footage is subjective. Cameras do not preclude the need to use other forms to produce statistics and to provide those stopped with a record.

“The stop form takes you two minutes to fill out; watching a video will probably take 30-40 minutes to go through to identify when on the footage the stops are. And at no point have you got the officer's grounds. Has the video captured what the person was saying? Is the camera 100 percent working? If there is a slight fault in it and the microphone is not operating, I cannot hear the name, the reasons, the grounds. BWV is supporting evidence. It supports, it does not replace stop recording. It has no idea what's going on in your mind... The camera is there to record actions in the same way a paper form would but a paper form is more accurate and the camera definitely can't replace forms because when can a camera smell cannabis?”

Police Officer, England and Wales

Summary of strengths and weaknesses of each recording method

	Provides a receipt	Capture individual suspicions	Allow for ethnic data collection	Ease of data entry	Accuracy	Supervision	Geo-coding and mapping	Cost	Speed of recording
Paper forms	●	●	●	◐	◐	◐	○	●	◐
Dispatch radios	◐	●	●	◐	◐	●	●	◐	◐
Mobile devices	◐	●	●	●	●	●	●	◐	●
Body worn video	○	○	○	○	○	◐	◐	○	○

KEY: ● High performance ◐ Moderate performance ○ Poor performance or inconclusive evidence

IMPLEMENTATION AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Recording police stops poses challenges beyond the technicalities of creating the right record. These challenges are rooted in both human and systemic factors. Foremost among the human challenges is officers' resistance to change. Resistance to recording stops is a recurring theme in this study, and interviewees emphasised the importance of police leadership, messaging, and ownership as key factors in overcoming resistance. Systemic factors relate to the infrastructure required to create, store, and use stop records for their intended purpose, including questions about procurement, software development, the role of corporate interests, and important cost considerations.

Concerns about police bias are driving the trend towards recording stops, and research shows that the public, and particularly ethnic minority communities, value stop recording as a means of enhancing accountability. Stop recording, and particularly the recording of ethnic data, remains controversial in many settings, and it is essential that the introduction of these practices reflects community as well as police concerns and input into the development and design processes. Systems must be rooted in a solid understanding of specific community concerns if they are to respond to those concerns. For example, in jurisdictions where there are concerns about bias in stop practises, stop data collection systems that do not collect ethnic data risk further exacerbating mistrust. Yet the collection of personal data, particularly ethnic data, is complex and must be negotiated with local communities to respect the right to self-identification, meet national data protection standards and build public confidence in the data collection process.

Simply making a record of police stops does little to address the potential problems; the value depends on what is subsequently done with the resulting information. Records can improve supervisors' understanding of how their individual officers are using stops, and can provide managers with valuable information for operational and strategic decisions about resource allocation and choice of tactics. The data – in the form of anonymized statistics – must also be shared with the public if it is to build trust in and the legitimacy of police. In practice, external accountability is often framed in corporate terms, whereby police simply put out general statistical information with little meaningful analysis or exchange about what that data means, or means to incorporate community feedback into police management and practices. Ideally, stop data should be used as the basis for a discussion of local policing practices and priorities. Several police agencies have developed innovative review panels that allow member of the public to use stop data to consider how stops are being used and, in some cases, to assess individual records to review the quality of specific stops.

BASED ON THE EXPERIENCE OF AGENCIES THAT COLLECT DATA, THE UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE OUTLINED THE BENEFITS OF A WELL-PLANNED TRAFFIC-STOP DATA COLLECTION SYSTEM:



Police forces committed to improving legitimacy find that measurement of police activity is a critical first step toward effective management.



Data collection sends a clear message that racial profiling is inconsistent with effective policing and equal protection.



Having available data moves the conversation within the community away from rhetoric and accusations to a discussion about the effective deployment of police resources.



In contrast to a rigid set of guidelines, the data collection approach allows a fluid and local determination of how to deploy law enforcement resources.



The process of collecting data begins to change behaviour of line officers and supervisors.

Ramirez, D., McDevitt, J., and Farrell, A. (2000) A Resource Guide on Racial Profiling Data Collection Systems: Promising Practices and Lessons Learned, Washington: US Department of Justice.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **All police departments should collect data on their use of identity checks, stops, and searches.** Data collection is essential in order to monitor and track disproportionate impacts and to assess the effectiveness with which these powers are used. The collection of such data also provides a useful management tool for police leadership.
2. **Systems for the collection, analysis, and storage of stop data, should be designed to include safeguards sufficient to comply with national and regional data protection standards.**
3. Systems for collecting stop data should be carefully analysed to ensure they respond to the local context and concerns and in order to make sure that the system weaknesses are understood and explicitly compensated for in the design and adoption process. **Considerations around accountability ('on-the-spot,' supervisory or corporate), bureaucracy and compliance should be factored in from the beginning of the design process.** Procedural justice insights should inform the design and adoption process, including consideration given to transparency, voice, neutrality, consistency and impartiality.
4. **The collection of statistical data on police stop-searches and ethnicity** is essential to determine whether, where, and why ethnic profiling is occurring and support measures to reduce it. Detecting and monitoring ethnic profiling require anonymized ethnic statistics that allow for comparison of minority and majority groups' experiences of policing.
5. **Ethnic data categories must be negotiated with local communities** to respect the right to self-identification and build public confidence in the data collection process.
6. **Stop data collection systems should include the following data categories at a minimum, to allow for meaningful analysis of ethnic disparities and to manage the fair and effective use of police powers:** personal information/vehicle registration, ethnicity (self-defined or officer-perceived), the grounds/reasons for the stop (in free text), the law used, the outcome of the stop, officer name or identification number, time, date and place of stop. Analysis can be enhanced by including further factors that might indicate any disparities in post-stop treatment such as length of the stop, extent of any follow-on search and whether force was used during the encounter.
7. **A full record of the stop form should be made available to the person stopped as easily and rapidly as possible.**
8. **Transparency around the data collection process and all data collected is essential to support police legitimacy.** Anonymised statistics based on the stop data collected should be released in full to the public at regular intervals. The raw, anonymised complete data sets should also be released to allow for independent and academic analysis that can increase public trust and confidence.
9. **Police departments should engage with the public around stop data to build dialogue, and shift practices to gain greater community support and reflect community priorities.**

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