

An Evaluation of the Northamptonshire Police
Reasonable Grounds Panel

REGULATING POLICE STOP AND SEARCH

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The police use of stop and search powers have a long and contentious history in England and Wales. Stop and search is a set of powers laid out in legislation that enables the police to detain members of the public and search them for prohibited or stolen items. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMICFRS) has described stop and search as one of the 'most intrusive' and 'contentious' powers available to police. "For decades the inappropriate use of these powers, both real and perceived, has tarnished the relationship between constables and the communities they serve, and in doing so has brought into question the very legitimacy of the police service" (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (2013) *Stop and Search Powers: Are the Police Using Them Effectively and Fairly?* London: HMICFRS, at. 3).

The Reasonable Grounds Panel (RGP) of the Northamptonshire Police is an innovative approach to regulating police stop and search powers. The Panel provides a model for community-involvement in the regulation of officers' use of their powers, one that provides useful lessons for other jurisdictions dealing with concerns over the lawful and fair use of police powers.

NORTHAMPTONSHIRE'S REASONABLE GROUND PANEL

The county of Northamptonshire has approximately 1,200 officers serving a population of just over 733,000. The Reasonable Grounds Panel was designed to meet the requirements set out in the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984. It establishes a mechanism for assessing the use and supervision of stop and search powers, while meeting the requirement for public scrutiny.

The Reasonable Grounds Panel incorporates two key innovations that support community participation in decision-making:

- **The Panel involves members of the public as equal partners** in decisions about whether individual officers have met the legal requirement for reasonable grounds to conduct stop and search.
- **Panels are held in different community venues across the county** to diversify public participation and promote open dialogue. Each panel contains two police officers (including a senior officer) and a minimum of five community members. Some panels have contained as many as 15 community members. Panel meetings are facilitated by the coordinator who is a police officer.



WHAT REMEDIAL ACTIONS ARE TAKEN BASED ON PANEL DECISIONS?

When the grounds recorded by officers are deemed not to have met the required legal standard, the searching officer and their supervisor are subject to an escalating process of professional development:

FIRST PANEL FINDING	SECOND PANEL FINDING	THIRD PANEL FINDING	FOURTH PANEL FINDING
<p>Advice provided to officer by RGP coordinator in e-mail</p> <p>Offer of support and mentoring</p>	<p>Advice provided to officer by RGP coordinator in e-mail</p> <p>Attendance of mandatory training and coaching</p>	<p>Officer requested not to carry out stop and search until the completion of a mandatory development plan</p>	<p>Officers referred to strategic lead for stop and search to discuss the way forward</p>

HOW DID RESEARCHERS EVALUATE THE PANEL?

From October 2014 to March 2017, researchers collected data through:

MIXED METHODS	ASSESSING IMPLEMENTATION	MEASURING IMPACT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Observation and in-depth interviews with key stakeholders Independent assessment of recorded grounds Quantitative analysis of stop data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluating how police and community participants/stakeholders felt about the Panel process Lessons for implementing police-community scrutiny panels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of stop-searches Quality of grounds Arrest rates

THE RESULTS

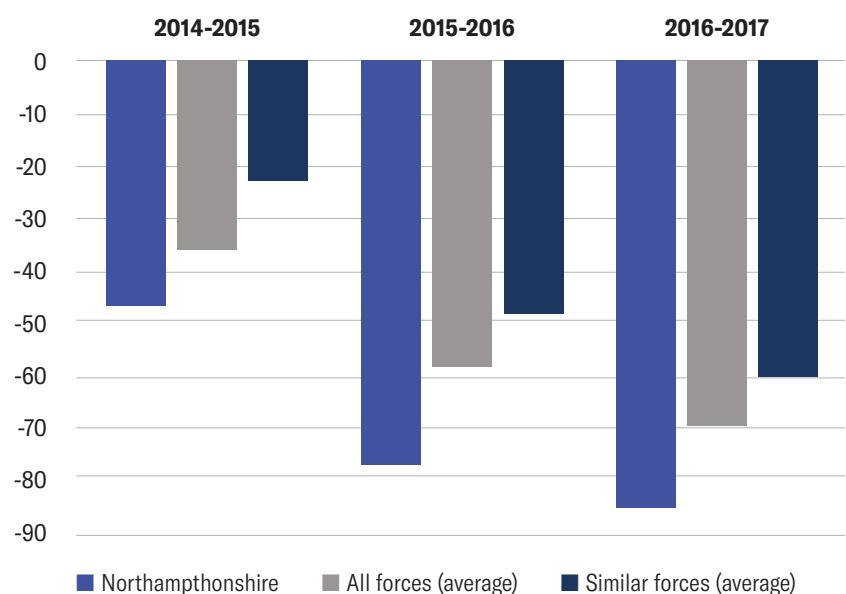
- Panel considered grounds from 348 stop-searches that the coordinator had identified as being problematic: 81 percent were deemed not to be reasonable.
- 244 identifications were issued to officers (161 searching officers, 83 supervising officers).
- 41 officers received a coaching requirement (18 searching officers, 23 supervising officers).
- 5 officers were effectively suspended from using powers (4 searching officers and 1 supervising officer).

KEY OUTCOMES

Outcome 1

The number of stop-searches fell sharply across England and Wales (reflecting national reforms), but the fall in Northamptonshire was sharper than the average reduction for all forces and its most similar forces.

Percentage reduction in the number of stop-searches since 2013-2014



Note: Data is based on administrative years from April to March. The panel started to operate half-way through 2014/15, so that 2015/16 was the first full year that it was in operation.

Outcome 2

There was significant improvement in the quality of the grounds given for stop-searches.

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMICFRS) inspections:

2013

grounds review:

Northamptonshire was the only force in the UK with

100% fail rate

2017

grounds review:

Northamptonshire was the only force with a

100% pass rate

Independent Assessment:

Proportion of searches meeting "reasonable grounds" test:

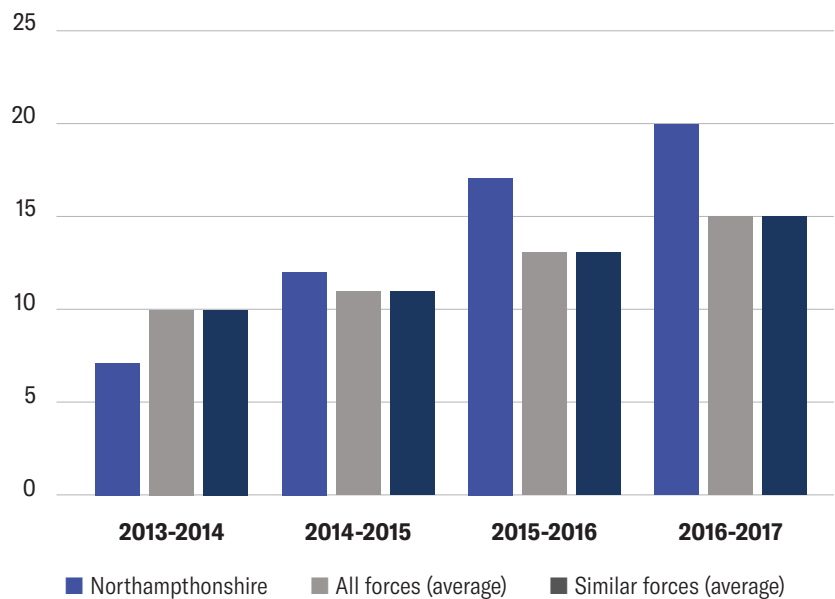
63% before panel

86% after panel

Outcome 3

The percentage of stop-searches resulting in arrest doubled in Northamptonshire after the introduction of the panel, climbing above average for all forces and its most similar forces.

Percentage of stop-searches resulting in arrest



DISPROPORTIONALITY

The panel was not designed to deal with disproportionality. Ethnic disparities in stop-searches increased in line with national trends, indicating that this increase should not be attributed to the panel.

- Black/white disproportionality increased from 3.1 (2013/14) to 8.7 (2016/17).
- The increase in arrest rates in stop-searches was particularly sharp for black people. Disproportionality in arrests resulting from stop-search increased from 4.1 (2013/14) to 12.9 (2016/17).

PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

OFFICER EXPERIENCE:

Officers were suspicious of the panel at first, but initial resistance was largely overcome:

“I think any change is difficult to start with and I felt it was an effort to frustrate the job we were doing and it was going to make it easier for criminals really to go out with knives and drugs. But over time I came more on board with it and thought well actually it is better than what we had before: it should be more accountable.”

Frontline officer

“I thought it’s going to be two hours of being lambasted by the community, which I don’t mind. It’s part of the job. But then, it was brilliant. I said to her afterwards, “I’ll do those again, that was really good. I’ll do them again”... I thought it was going to be two hours of hard work.”

Middle-ranking officer

COMMUNITY EXPERIENCE:

Positive evaluations from participating community members

“I will openly admit it restored a little bit of my faith... You know, there’s all sorts of things that the police might do that I might not necessarily approve of in some ways... but we need the police. We need them. We need them to be with us together.”

Community panel member

“They [the police] humanised themselves. They were normal people. We sat and... chatted about the job, which is not something we’d do normally because I don’t know many police officers on a personal front if you know what I mean.”

Community panel member

CHALLENGES

1. **Pockets of resistance to the panels**, particularly among highest users of stop and search in proactive teams.
2. **Panels were not linked to wider strategic oversight** of stop and search use or monitoring of disproportionality.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **The Reasonable Grounds Panel shows that officers' conduct responds to regulation** when outcomes are clear and the process is perceived as fair.
2. **The principle of coproduction should be built into community engagement**, creating systems that share power and decision-making between the police and the public.
3. **The Panel should appoint a coordinator from the local community** to share all aspects of the role. This would address concerns about bias in the design of the panel and support wider understanding of the Panel.
4. **The Panel should be situated within broader regulatory mechanisms** to ensure strategic oversight of stop and search activity.
5. **Addressing ethnic disproportionality requires specific innovations**, focus and safeguards that are explicitly designed to address the issue.

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For more information about the Open Society Justice Initiative and to download the full report, please visit: osf.to/RGP

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The Policing, Security and Innovation Initiative is part of the IDPU and focuses on the policing of illicit markets in different regional contexts. It pays particular attention to the impact on marginalised communities, governance, accountability and organisational change.



