

What works: improving police contact with suspects

Exploring the impact of improving police contact with suspects on public perceptions.

First published 22 April 2025

There are several police activities that have been shown to have a direct impact on public perceptions. The police have a higher degree of influence over these activities, which could form the basis of a public service model of policing.

Improving police contact with suspects

Police-initiated contact tends to have a very lop-sided impact on trust and confidence. Like victims and witnesses, the odds of suspects having confidence in the police are much reduced if their contact with officers is unsatisfactory. However, unlike victims and witnesses, they are no more or less likely to trust the police if they are satisfied with their experiences of specific police contacts.

In other words, a person may grudgingly accept being stopped, searched or arrested if the officer explains why and is respectful. However, that person is unlikely to feel more positively about the police as result.

Negativity biases are likely to mean that bad experiences have more of an impact than good experiences, especially if those experiences do not meet people's expectations. People are inclined to notice things that are 'wrong', to remember those things and to tell other people.

Survey research tends to show that the asymmetrical effect that contact has on trust is much worse when people are subject to multiple police-initiated encounters. Distributive justice is likely to matter more to these people than procedural justice.

A systematic review of the research highlights that [police stops can have adverse effects](#) for the people – particularly young people – who are stopped. This includes adverse impacts on their perceptions of the police. However, police stops can also have crime reduction benefits for communities.

The negative consequences of police-initiated contact are likely to be more pronounced for people who are disproportionately subject to police enforcement activity.

What works

Improving police encounters with suspects is a challenge. Officers and staff must deal with difficult, unpredictable and dangerous incidents, using discretion to apply the law to countless situations. Traditionally, there are few occasions when contact outside the police station is open to direct supervision and scrutiny.

Body-worn cameras may change the operating environment in this respect, as well as how officers and suspects interact. Studies, mainly from outside the UK, show that [body-worn cameras tend to have a positive impact](#) by increasing trust in police fairness and public confidence, as well as reducing complaints.

College research also shows that the use of force by police officers and staff can be reduced through [training that uses realistic role-play scenarios](#) to develop the decision-making and communication skills needed to de-escalate conflict.

Resources

- [Evidence-based guidelines on conflict management](#)
- [Authorised professional practice on stop and search](#)
- [Authorised professional practice on public and personal safety training](#)
- [College evidence review on what works in conflict management](#)

You can also search for examples of police practice on the College's [practice bank](#).

Tags

Evidence-based policing Community engagement