

The Equality and Human Rights Commission confirmed today that it has written to five police forces requesting more information about their use of stop and search powers.

The Commission's action follows its Stop and Think report, published on March 15th 2010, which concluded that a number of forces were using the stop and search tactic in a way that is disproportionate and possibly discriminatory.

The report was a comprehensive review of the use of stop and search powers across England and Wales, looking at 42 policing areas over the past five years. The results showed that nationally, black people are at least six times more likely to be stopped and searched as white people. Asian people are about twice as likely to be stopped and searched as white people.

In 2007/2008 there were over 170,000 stop and searches conducted on black people. If they had been stopped at the same rate as white people, there should have only been around 25,000 stops undertaken.

Police forces with some of the most disproportionate use of stop and search powers were Dorset, Leicestershire, West Midlands, Thames Valley and the Metropolitan police forces. The Commission has now written to these organisations asking them to justify this disproportionality and asking them to provide information about how they are meeting their obligations under the Race Relations Act. Obviously, the Commission's concern is to ensure they are taking appropriate steps to address the imbalance.

The forces have been given 21 days to respond. The Commission has a number of enforcement powers at its disposal which it could decide to use if either a force does not co-operate with its inquiries, or if any response does not satisfactorily explain how in using stop and search the forces complies with the RRA.

John Wadham, Group Director Legal, said:

"The Commission's statutory role includes a duty to investigate possible breaches of race discrimination law and take action where appropriate. The five police forces that we have written to can avoid further enforcement action if they can provide satisfactory justification for this disproportionality and by taking steps to address their requirements under the Act.

"The police have a difficult job to do, but evidence from other police forces shows that fairer use of stop and search can go hand-in-hand with crime reduction and increased public confidence. We are all entitled to expect police services to work both fairly and effectively, and it's the Commission's job to ensure that human rights and discrimination laws are respected and obeyed."