**The Harms of Police Frisking in Times of Pandemic**

Ghaith Aljayyoussi1

1. Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, Pembroke Place, Liverpool, UK, L3 5QA, Email: ghaith@lstmed.ac.uk

Dear Editor,

The lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) among health staff workers in the UK has been an integral part of the debate on the government’s failure in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic1. Similar to the close contact that is expected between patients and healthcare staff which could put both at risk of transmissible disease in the absence of appropriate measures, members of the public can also come in close contact with police staff during the process of frisking. The chances of being stopped and frisked by the police are dramatically (up to 10-20 fold) increased for Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) individuals2 in the UK who are also disproportionately affected by the risks of COVID-19 disease3.

On the afternoon of 11/06/2020, I was stopped by two officers from the Merseyside Police Force in Liverpool, UK. The officers were wearing civilian clothing and claimed that I had been walking at an “unusually slow pace” which had seemingly raised their suspicion. The officers insisted on keeping a very close distance to me as I was being questioned despite my pleas to keep a two-meter gap between us. They then demanded a full body search. I was surprised that they were going to search me without using PPE, so I demanded that they at least wear gloves if they were to search me. Because the officers had no gloves available at the time, I was walked to a police van which was some 200m away where PPE was available. I was forced to enter the police van which had other personnel inside it who were also not wearing PPE. One of the officers picked a pair of gloves with their bare hands and handed them to another officer who wore them and immediately started frisking me without disinfecting them.

I made an official complaint to Merseyside Police about the health risks involved in their current stop and search practices. The police dismissed the complaint and casually informed me that “they’ll make sure officers use PPE more properly in the future”. No apology was issued. The official guidance on the use of PPE among the police force in the UK4 recommends their use to protect police staff but critically, the four-page document pays no attention to the safety of the public who are especially exposed during body searches.

It is important to mention that I was speaking in Arabic on the phone before I was stopped. The two officers seemed very interested in my origins asking where I was from on multiple occasions. In the UK, Stop and Search is only authorised when there are reasonable grounds to do so5. It is up to the reader to judge whether walking pace, spoken language or refusal to answer where one is from count as reasonable grounds to search one’s body. However, what this incident displays is an alarming synergy between the evidenced institutional racism in the British Police Force6, the disproportionate vulnerability of BAME individuals to COVID-193 and the police’s preferential interest in the safety of its own disproportionately white British staff7, over the public’s safety.

A review of the police’s stop and frisk practices in the time of COVID-19 is urgently required in the UK. George Floyd’s chilling last words “I can’t breathe” might well be uttered in hospital wards by a different police victim as they literally suffocate from a disease that was brought to them by no more than a casual police search for a mere bag of cannabis.

**References**

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