



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

AUTOMATED RACISM

How police data and algorithms
code discrimination into policing



Amnesty International is a movement of 10 million people which mobilises the humanity in everyone and campaigns for change so we can all enjoy our human rights.

Our vision is of a world where those in power keep their promises, respect international law and are held to account.

We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion and are funded mainly by our membership and individual donations.

We believe that acting in solidarity and compassion with people everywhere can change our societies for the better.

Automated Racism: How police data and algorithms code discrimination into policing

AI Index Number: EUR 45/8992/2025

© Amnesty International UK
Published February 2025

Amnesty International UK, Human Rights Action Centre,
17-25 New Inn Yard, London EC2A 3EA

www.amnesty.org.uk
sct@amnesty.org.uk

Cover photo: Unsplash/Timon Studler

Executive summary

‘a lot of policing claims to be predictive [...] police make a prediction about who they should stop, who they should search, who they should question based on some kind of prediction, sometimes informed by evidence, often not. What is now being called predictive policing is the automation of those forms of prediction.’

Dr Adam Elliot-Cooper, Queen Mary, University of London¹

‘[W]hat we’re doing is shifting from a society or a space within which we respond to the needs of individuals, and what we do is present them this risk that needs to be managed [...] rather than responding to those needs that individuals may have, it repackages it algorithmically, you literally shift these individuals into risk to be managed.’

Dr Patrick Williams, Senior Lecturer, Manchester Metropolitan University²

‘the way in which these systems work is that you’re guilty until you can prove yourself innocent. [...] criminalisation is a justification for their existence [...] There is the presumption that people need to be surveilled and that they need to be policed.’

Zara Manoehoetoe, Kids of Colour and Northern Police Monitoring Project³

Almost three-quarters of UK police forces are using data-based and data-driven systems to attempt to predict, profile, and assess the risk of crime or criminalised behaviour occurring in the future. The use of such approaches is influencing decisions in policing and the criminal legal system and people’s access to essential services.

The use of these so-called predictive policing tools in policing and the criminal legal system violates people’s rights, including the right to a fair trial and the presumption of innocence, the right to privacy, the right to freedom of assembly and association, and the right to equality and non-discrimination. These systems are, in effect, a modern method of racial profiling, reinforcing racism and discrimination in policing. They also risk violations to people’s economic, social and cultural rights, such as the right to social security.

Police forces use these systems to attempt to predict where alleged crime will occur and to predict and profile who will commit crime in the future or who is at ‘risk’ of committing crime or other criminalised behaviour. Police use these so-called predictions, profiles, and risk assessments to target specific areas, and people and groups in those areas, with increased policing. The aim is to target certain individuals and intervene before the predicted behaviour has occurred.

These predictions, profiles and risk assessments influence a wide range of policing, including surveillance and monitoring of areas and individuals, police patrols and other targeted operations, including stop and search and arrest. Police forces also share these predictions, profiles and risk assessments, and related data, with other criminal legal system authorities including the Crown Prosecution Service, prison and probation services; with essential public service providers such as councils and local

authorities, and the Department for Work and Pensions; and with unspecified third-party agencies and organisations.⁴ Predictive policing systems are contributing to racist and discriminatory policing and criminalisation of areas, groups and individuals, perpetuating institutional racism in policing and society.

Their use is leading to the repeated targeting of more deprived areas, including areas with higher populations of Black and racialised people, and the targeting of individuals from Black and racialised and more deprived backgrounds. There are strong parallels between the racism of police profiling in the 1970s and 1980s in the UK under ‘Sus laws’, and the use of predictive policing systems to profile people, communities, and neighbourhoods today. These data-based systems are the modern face of racial profiling.

These systems are developed and operated using data from policing and the criminal legal system. That data reflects the structural and institutional racism and discrimination in policing and the criminal legal system, such as in police intelligence reports, suspect data, stop-and-search or arrest data. There is inherent bias in that data. For example, areas with high populations of Black and racialised people are repeatedly targeted by police and therefore crop up in those same police records. Black people and racialised people are also repeatedly targeted and therefore over-represented in police intelligence, stop-and-search or other police records. This is the data which is then used in police predictive, profiling and risk assessment systems – to develop them, train them, and operate them. These biases lead the systems using that data to predict that crime will occur in those areas, or that individuals from those backgrounds are likely to commit crime.¹⁹² These outputs lead to further repeated targeting of those areas and individuals, creating a cycle of discrimination and criminalisation.

People in this report spoke of being repeatedly targeted and stopped by police in the areas where they live, of being targeted by police because of where they live, of being questioned, stopped and searched, and being subjected to violence by police. Others spoke about the trauma of being repeatedly targeted by police, both on an individual and a community level.

This report focuses on multiple aspects of predictive policing in the United Kingdom (UK), including the systems themselves, the policing outcomes or decisions they influence, and the impact on individuals, groups and communities in the UK.

The research for this report took place between October 2022 and November 2024. Amnesty International sent Freedom of Information requests to all UK police forces, and reviewed publicly available documentation relating to forces’ use of predictive policing systems. In areas where police have used predictive policing systems Amnesty International conducted discussions with groups, as well as with individuals profiled by police, and members of community groups. Amnesty International also interviewed experts and academics with relevant knowledge, including a former police chief scientist and a member of a police data ethics committee.

The human rights impact of predictive policing

Discrimination

Use of predictive, profiling and risk assessment systems in policing is leading to racial profiling, discrimination and discriminatory treatment, in breach of the UK’s national and international human rights obligations.

The use of these systems by police results, directly and indirectly, in racial profiling, and the disproportionate targeting of Black and racialised people and people from lower socio-economic backgrounds. This in turn leads to their increased criminalisation, punishment, and exposure to violent policing.

As the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has acknowledged, ‘predictive tools carry an inherent risk of perpetuating or even enhancing discrimination, reflecting embedded historic racial and ethnic bias in the data sets used, such as a disproportionate focus of policing of certain minorities.’⁵

Police and criminal legal system data reflects the structural and institutional racism and discrimination that exists in society. This data is then used in police predictive, profiling and risk assessment systems at all stages; to develop them, train them, and operate them. These systems thus lead to discriminatory outputs, exacerbating discrimination that already exists in policing and the criminal legal system. The geographic-focused crime prediction and hotspot mapping systems lead to the same areas and communities, often more deprived areas, and areas with high populations of Black and racialised people, being racially profiled and repeatedly targeted by police. This leads to people in those communities being frequently monitored and subject to stop and account, stop and search, and even use of force. It leads to a greater likelihood of engagement with police and therefore increased risk of encounters escalating into violence and sometimes serious harm at the hands of the police.

Individual-focused prediction, profiling and risk prediction systems similarly lead to people from the same backgrounds – often Black and racialised people and people from lower socio-economic backgrounds – being racially profiled and repeatedly targeted by police. This also results in those people being monitored, subject to stop and account, stop and search, use of force and an increased likelihood of engagement with the police.

These systems also influence other decisions in the criminal legal system, such as licence conditions. Profiles are shared with the Crown Prosecution Service, probation service, the Department for Work and Pensions, local authorities and unspecified third-party agencies or organisations.

The policing and criminal legal system outcomes for, and impacts on, Black and racialised people are entered into police and criminal legal system data, creating feedback loops of policing, discrimination and criminalisation.

A fair trial and the presumption of innocence

Predictive policing systems produce predictions, profiles and risk assessments. These amount to suspicion of criminality or actual labels of criminality, about a person or group in a particular area. That suspicion or label is based on data which does not amount to evidence of a criminal conviction, or amount to formal suspicion in the form of a charge, but merely reflects a profile, or opinion, of potential guilt. These predictions can lead to policing interventions and consequences for individuals and groups profiled or labelled. This risks violating the presumption of innocence and the right to a fair trial.

People in areas targeted by these systems are presumed guilty. Police are predisposed to seeing their behaviour as criminal or dangerous, increasing their risk of criminalisation. Police using these systems have sought to highlight how predictions have led to targeted patrols of areas, stop and account, stop and search and arrests.

Even more directly, individuals profiled by individual-focused predictive policing systems are not presumed innocent. Individuals are profiled and labelled as criminals based on intelligence reports and mere suspicion of involvement in crime, without objective evidence. An individual can be profiled without having committed a crime.

These profiles lead to monitoring and interventions by police, including stop and search and home visits, continuing the cycle of criminalisation. Profiles are shared with the Crown Prosecution Service, probation, and prison authorities, potentially influencing criminal legal system outcomes such as charging decisions, licence conditions, sentencing and prisoner categorisation. Profiles have also been shared with other agencies, including the Department for Work and local authorities, where they may affect people's ability to access essential services such as welfare and employment, and other local authority-run services.

The use of these pre-emptive systems to target people and groups before they have offended risks infringing on the presumption of innocence and the right to a fair trial. As these systems can also be used in sentencing, they risk undermining the principles of consistency of sentencing.

Privacy and data

The use of predictive policing systems leads to heightened police activity in particular locations, and a greater possibility of interference and unwarranted intrusion by the state. These systems erode people's right to privacy, targeting them in their local area and targeting them because of the area they live in.

Individuals' profiles are shared with other state agencies, including the Crown Prosecution Service and probation services, Department for Work and Pensions, local authorities and unspecified third-party agencies or organisations, increasing concerns about the proportionality of the interference with people's rights. The stigma of suspicion or guilt can follow individuals as they interact with local services, including employment, housing and education. The data sharing can also lead to negative outcomes in other areas of people's lives, such as withdrawal of welfare.

Predictive policing systems necessitate the widespread monitoring, collection, storage and analysis or other use of personal data, including sensitive personal data, without individualised reasonable suspicion of criminal wrongdoing (as distinct from data on previous offending history).

This report provides evidence that UK police use of these systems disproportionately targets Black and racialised people and people from more deprived backgrounds, at scale. This amounts to indiscriminate mass surveillance. Mass surveillance can never be proportionate interference with the rights to privacy, freedom of expression, freedom of association and of peaceful assembly. Amnesty International considers that all indiscriminate mass surveillance fails to meet the test of necessity and proportionality and therefore violates international human rights law.

The use of systems that necessitate such widespread monitoring, collection, storage and analysis or other use of such data is therefore a violation of the right to privacy.

Freedom of association and the chilling effect

The use of predictive and profiling systems to target both geographic areas and individuals and communities can have a chilling effect on people's ability and willingness

to exercise their right to freedom of association and assembly. This research evidences how people who live and reside in areas targeted by predictive policing will seek to avoid those areas as a result, leading to a chilling effect.

As noted above, predictive policing is a form of mass surveillance. Mass surveillance – and even the threat of such surveillance – can have a chilling effect on people’s ability and willingness to exercise their right to freedom of association. This is especially so when the mass surveillance is discriminatory.

Lack of transparency

There is a significant lack of transparency around police use of predictive policing systems in the UK. People do not know about their use in policing and their influence on the policing of the areas where they live, or how they are affected or targeted. People do not know when they have been targeted by police as a result of a predictive, profiling or risk assessment system. And people do not know how to challenge such a prediction, profile or risk assessment. Even when people do seek information, for example about whether they have been profiled, they are met with legal refusals, rebuttals and exemptions from police.

Not provided by law

Predictive policing is premised on the concept of predicting criminal behaviour and intervening before it happens.

These systems are used to generate predictions and profiles, labels of potential crime and criminality, and suspicion of crime and criminality, against individuals, communities, and areas, resulting in policing intervention or enforcement. Police have huge discretion over what intervention or enforcement action is used. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, for people to adjust their behaviour to avoid this unwarranted and disproportionate state intervention. This raises serious concerns about how far the use of these systems complies with the principle of legality and is adequately provided by law – and hence serious doubts about whether these systems are lawful.

Disproportionate

UK police use of predictive policing systems is disproportionate: their interference with human rights, and the harms they exacerbate, outweigh any alleged effectiveness in preventing and detecting crime.

Substantial numbers of people are targeted: more than one system profiles hundreds of thousands of people in a single police force area. It cannot be proportionate to indiscriminately profile hundreds of thousands of people to assess their potential future risk of criminality.

The police create these tools using an extremely broad definition of crime or criminality or offending, using a broad swathe of data. The use of these systems cannot be considered proportionate when their use disproportionately impacts and affects Black and racialised people and people from more deprived backgrounds.

Right to effective remedy

Individuals subject to police predictive, profiling and risk prediction systems must have access to effective remedy.

But people have no way of knowing if they have been profiled, risk assessed or are the subject of a prediction because there is no meaningful transparency regime, and because of obfuscation by police forces.

The law offers little or no protection against the predictions, profiles, and risk assessments, and the action they lead to.

Key recommendations

Prohibition

Predictive policing systems used by police in the UK are leading to violations of people's rights to equality and non-discrimination, fair trial and the presumption of innocence, privacy, and freedom of assembly and association.

Amnesty International has called for a ban on the use of predictive policing, in relation to both individual-focused and geographic-focused systems.⁶ In 2023 Amnesty International called for predictive policing systems to be prohibited in the European Union's Artificial Intelligence (AI) Act. Amnesty International was also a signatory to a joint statement along with 114 other human rights and civil society organisations in Europe, which said that the European Union must prohibit all forms of predictive and profiling systems in law enforcement and criminal justice, including systems which focus on individuals, groups and locations or areas.⁷ The EU AI Act includes a prohibition on predictive policing systems.⁸

Amnesty International believes the use of data-based predictive, profiling and risk assessment systems by police, law enforcement and criminal justice authorities in the UK to predict, profile or assess the risk or likelihood of offending, re-offending or other criminalised behaviour, or the occurrence or re-occurrence of an actual or potential criminal offence(s), of individuals, groups or locations, should be prohibited.

Transparency

All data-based and data-driven systems used by police and in the criminal legal system must be subject to clear transparency requirements. This must be in addition to a ban on the above, most harmful, systems which attempt to predict, profile and assess the risk of future criminality. These transparency requirements are necessary to ensure that people can exercise their rights, and to ensure that the prohibition described above can be monitored and enforced.

There must be a clear legal obligation that requires police forces and other law enforcement authorities to publish full and explanatory details of the data-based and data-driven systems they develop and use.

At a minimum, there should be a statutory obligation on UK police forces and other law enforcement authorities across England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, including criminal legal system authorities (such as the Ministry of Justice and prison and probation services), to register and publish details about all the predictive, profiling and risk prediction systems they are developing or using on a publicly available and accessible register.

This publicly accessible register must include:

- What the intended purpose of the system is;
- How the system is operated in practice, including a standard operating procedure;
- All data types that the system uses, including the sources of that data;
- What decisions or outcomes the system influences;
- Any internal reviews or evaluations.

Accountability: Effective redress and remedy for people and communities affected

People and groups who have been subject to data-based and data-driven systems, including any predictions, profiles or risk assessments by police, law enforcement or criminal legal system authorities, should have clear and meaningful routes to challenge those decisions.

The lack of transparency, and obfuscation and opacity in police forces' use of these systems, can make it challenging to evidence and establish when automated systems have indirectly affected an individual, group or area.

In the context of law enforcement use of data and automated processing and decision-making, safeguards under data protection law are limited to the processing of personal data⁹ and to solely automated processing which produces legal or significant consequences.¹⁰

There must be a statutory obligation on UK police forces and other law enforcement authorities across England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, including criminal legal system authorities (such as the Ministry of Justice and prison and probation services) using data-based predictive, profiling and risk assessment systems to provide accountability to people affected by those systems or by the decisions those systems influence.

People should have a right and a clear forum to challenge a decision not only when it has been solely automated and produces significant and/or legal effects or consequences, but also when a data-based predictive, profiling or risk assessment system has influenced or indirectly resulted in significant consequences or legal effects.

In particular, this mechanism must:

- Ensure the right to an effective remedy against UK authorities and against a deployer for the infringement of rights;
- Ensure the right to information and explanation of predictive, profiling or risk assessment-supported decision-making for people affected, including about the use and functioning of the system;
- Ensure people affected have access to judicial and non-judicial pathways to remedy for violation of their rights by predictive, profiling or risk assessment systems;
- Ensure public interest organisations have the right to support people seeking remedy, as well as to lodge cases on their own initiative.

Endnotes

- 1 Interview with Dr Adam Elliott-Cooper, Senior Lecturer in Public and Social Policy, Queen Mary, University of London, 8 May 2024.
- 2 Interview with Dr Patrick Williams, Senior Lecturer, Manchester Metropolitan University, 9 July 2024.
- 3 Interview with Zara Manoehoetoe, Kids of Colour and Northern Police Monitoring Project, 12 September 2024.
- 4 Essex Police, Knife Crime and Violence Model – Fearless Futures – Specific Privacy Notice, Version 1.4, June 2021 <https://www.essex.police.uk/police-forces/essex-police/areas/essex-police/au/about-us/privacy-notice/knife-crime-and-violence-model--fearless-futures/>; Avon and Somerset Police, Data Science, undated <https://www.avonandsomerset.police.uk/about/policies-and-procedures/data-science/>; Metropolitan Police Service, *Violence Harm Assessment (VHA) Data Protection Impact Assessment*, 31 January 2024 <https://www.met.police.uk/SysSiteAssets/media/downloads/met/about-us/violence-harm-index/violence-harm-assessment-data-protection-impact-assessment.pdf>
- 5 UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, ‘*The right to privacy in the digital age*’, 2021. A/HRC/48/31, page 7 <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g21/249/21/pdf/g2124921.pdf>
- 6 Amnesty International, *Recommendations to the Parliamentary Assembly and Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on the Draft Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence, Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law*, Annex I – Amnesty International Recommendations on AI Regulation, 11 April 2024, Index: TIGO IOR 10/2024.5404, <https://www.amnesty.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Amnesty-International-Recs-draft-CoECAI-11042024.pdf>
- 7 Amnesty International, ‘EU policymakers: regulate police technology!’, 2023 <https://www.amnesty.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Regulate-police-technology-EU-AI-Act-Statement-19-September.pdf>
- 8 Regulation (EU) 2024/1689 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024 laying down harmonised rules on artificial intelligence: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2024/1689/oj>
- 9 Data Protection Act 2018, Part 3.
- 10 Data Protection Act 2018, Part 3, Section 49.

AUTOMATED RACISM

How police data and algorithms code discrimination into policing

UK police are using data and algorithms to ‘predict’ who they believe will go on to commit crimes and where. The data they use is biased, particularly against Black and racialised communities in deprived areas. It is no surprise what this leads to.

Through primary research and freedom of information requests, analysis of public sources, first-hand accounts from people in affected areas, and interviews with academics, experts and community organisers, this report investigates the harmful impact of predictive policing.

The research finds that this increasingly widespread data-based policing is leading to the criminalisation, punishment and violent policing of Black and racialised people, and people from deprived areas, based on who they are, their backgrounds, where they live, who they associate with. This is the new face of racial profiling.

In the words of one interviewee: ‘Rather than “predictive” policing, it’s simply, “predictable” policing. It will always drive against those who are already marginalised.’

Amnesty International finds the use of these data-based systems to predict, profile and assess people’s ‘risk’ of being involved in crime breaches the UK’s human rights obligations and should be prohibited.

READ THE FULL REPORT

[amnesty.org.uk/predictive-policing](https://www.amnesty.org.uk/predictive-policing)

Amnesty International United Kingdom Section
The Human Rights Action Centre
17-25 New Inn Yard
London EC2A 3EA

www.amnesty.org.uk

AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL

