Response to disproportionality

I have looked today at the age and ethnicity profile of those who have died on the streets of Hertfordshire over the last two years as a result of serious violence. There were 22 victims between June 2018 and July 2020. The average age of victims was 39. Of those 22 we know the ethnicity of 15. I'm sure we could find the ethnicity of the others but this was analysis from this afternoon. 10 were white and 5 were BAME. Straight away you can see there is a disproportionality of those dying on the streets, violently.

The average age of the BAME victims is 22 years. The average age of the white victims is 47 years. I think that we do owe those who are at most risk of crime a duty of care, and some of that duty of care will be disproportionate. That may well be stopping and searching around knives. I think that we can't assume that we will have the same amount of people arrested as we have as a population.

We really are disproportionate in the amount of white women over the age of 60 who are stopped and searched. That's not because we are policing poorly. That's because white women over the age of 60 are very unlikely to be committing crimes of a nature where they are likely to be stopped and searched or arrested on the streets. I think that we do need in our discussions and thoughts to reflect on this, because there is a danger that we assume the resident population is a suitable comparator for stop and search. And that population is somewhat outdated as the latest information we have is the 2011 census. If we assume that that is the right level of search and arrest we are measuring the wrong thing.

I think what we are all trying to do is ensure that we are fair and that we are protecting people. I am convinced that we are aware of the concerns of the public, and that movements like Black Lives Matter are really important to listen to. There is a danger that people feel that they are being wrongly served by the police and we must ensure that we are rightly serving everyone. But some of that is in protecting people. Some of that is in ensuring that if there is a concern, and if there is good evidence that, for example, people are carrying knives, that we do something about it, rather than being concerned specifically about the ethnicity and the disproportionality.

So we do need to get it right. That is why we need to check the figures. That is why we need to have the independent stop and search scrutiny panel, and that if a stop and search does occur that we show that it is appropriate. We need to ensure that we get that right throughout. We will certainly not know if we just use crude figures and say it is disproportionate without contextualising it.

Disproportionality in itself doesn't prove bias in the application of powers, but it might provide the evidence to justify investigation, which is what we are doing. Whether or not that bias exists, and I recognise there is a strong perception in some communities that it does and that disproportionality demonstrates this, it is essential that we look at this issue honestly and rigorously.

I think the crude population comparisons are a lazy approach that makes it possible to pay lip service to any potential issue without any context for the intelligence and actions that may be required. We need to reflect on that. The current demographic of those stopped and searched bears little relation to the population make up of Hertfordshire in terms of numerous characteristics - age, gender, and ethnicity. This may be entirely appropriate, as I've already said.

I would ask the police to stop and search and justify it in a targeted manner and that means it will be used in a limited number of areas and it will inevitably focus on a population demographic that is different to Hertfordshire as a whole. We need to have all that in mind because it is a difficult subject and one that is heightened at the moment. But we will keep looking at it.