



POLICE DATABASES:

How more than 900 staff abused their
access

A Big Brother Watch report

July 2011

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Introduction

For the first time, Big Brother Watch has uncovered the true extent to which Police abuse their access to confidential databases.

Between 2007 and 2010:

- **243** Police officers and staff received **criminal convictions** for breaching the Data Protection Act (DPA).
- **98** Police officers and staff had their **employment terminated** for breaching the DPA.
- **904** Police officers and staff were subjected to **internal disciplinary procedures** for breaching the DPA.

In Merseyside alone, 208 officers and Police staff received criminal convictions for breaching the DPA since 2007.

The areas with the largest number of officers and Police staff who had their employment terminated for DPA breaches since 2007 were: Kent (10), Merseyside (7), West Midlands (7), Northumbria (6), Derbyshire (5) and Humberside (5).

The areas with the largest number of officers and Police staff subjected to internal disciplinary procedures for DPA breaches since 2007 were: Merseyside (208), West Midlands (83), Humberside (62), South Yorkshire (42), and Northumbria (39).

A full breakdown of results by local police authority can be found from pages 4 and 5 of this document.

Notable cases

In **Merseyside**, a combined total of 208 Police officers and staff received legal cautions for “viewing a computer record relating to a high profile arrest”.

In **Dorset**, a member of police staff resigned after disclosing information about the supply of class A drugs to a third party. They later received a Police caution for violating the DPA and were referred to the Crown Prosecution Service for misconduct in public office.

In **Nottinghamshire**, a Police Sergeant was handed a twelve month jail sentence after being convicted of accessing police systems in order to obtain personal data for non-policing purposes.

In **Humberside**, action is still outstanding in the case of a member of staff who used Police systems to access information about a potential partner which they used to send harassing e-mails and letter.

In **Essex**, a Police Sergeant was given "advice" by a disciplinary panel after accessing confidential records systems to obtain his ex-wife's details and passed them to his solicitors.

In **West Mercia**, one police officer was handed disciplinary sanctions after using Police systems to access confidential information about their neighbour. Another was disciplined for conducting background checks on partner and a work colleague.

In **Norfolk**, a Police Community Support officer received a caution and was dismissed from their job after being found guilty of accessing details of a call to the Police and passing details of it to a family member.

In **Lancashire**, a member of police staff was dismissed after a disciplinary panel found her guilty of disclosing confidential policing information on Facebook. A Police officer in the same authority was given a final written warning for conducting 53 criminal records checks for “no obvious policing purpose”.

Methodology

Each Police force in England was sent a Freedom of Information request by Big Brother Watch on 1st June 2011. Statutorily, responses to this Freedom of Information request had to be provided to Big Brother Watch by 29th June 2011.

In order to accommodate the responses of authorities who had failed in their obligations to reply in a timely manner, responses received up to 8th July 2011 are included in this research.

The following questions were asked of each authority:

- 1. The number of a) police officers and b) civilian employees have been convicted for breaches of the data protection act in the past three years.*
- 2. The number of a) police officers and b) civilian employees have had their employment terminated for breaches of the data protection act in the past three years.*
- 3. The number of a) police officers and b) civilian employees have been disciplined internally but have not been prosecuted for breaches of the data protection act in the past three years.*

In each case, Police Authorities were asked to provide a clear, itemised list of the offences committed by the individual in question i.e. "*Abusing privileged access to the Police National Computer*" or "*Passing information to an unauthorised third party*".

For the purposes of this research, the definition of the "past three years" is the period up from May 2008 to May 2011. Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) have been included in our definition of a "Police officer".

About Big Brother Watch

Big Brother Watch was founded to challenge policies that threaten our privacy, our freedoms and our civil liberties, and to expose the true scale of the surveillance state.

Founded in 2009, we have produced unique research exposing the erosion of civil liberties in the UK, looking at the dramatic expansion of surveillance powers, the growth of the database state and the misuse of personal information.

We campaign to give individuals more control over their personal data, and hold to account those who fail to respect our privacy, whether private companies, government departments or local authorities.

Protecting individual privacy and defending civil liberties, Big Brother Watch is a campaign group for the digital age.

■ Results by Police Authority

Force	Data Protection Act			Employment Terminated			Internal Discipline		
	Police	Civilians	Total	Police	Civilians	Total	Police	Civilians	Total
Avon and Somerset Police	0	0	0	0	1	1	25	7	32
Bedfordshire Police	0	0	0	0	0	0	7	1	8
Cambridgeshire Constabulary	0	0	0	0	4	4	4	8	12
Cheshire Constabulary	1	0	1	3	0	3	23	7	30
City of London Police	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Cleveland Police	0	0	0	1	3	4	7	3	10
Cumbria Constabulary	0	2	2	1	1	2	13	9	22
Derbyshire Constabulary	1	2	3	3	2	5	11	4	15
Devon and Cornwall Constabulary	1	0	1	1	0	1	24	14	38
Dorset Police	0	1	1	0	2	2	10	4	14
Durham Constabulary	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	3	3
Dyfed Powys Police	Refused to provide information								
Essex Police	0	1	1	3	0	3	7	4	11
Gloucestershire Constabulary	1	0	1	1	2	3	3	5	8
Greater Manchester Police	1	0	1	0	1	1	3	2	5
Gwent Constabulary	0	0	0	0	1	1	4	3	7
Hampshire Constabulary	2	2	4	3	1	4	22	11	33
Hertfordshire Constabulary	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	3	4
Humberside Police	0	0	0	1	4	5	34	28	62
Kent Police	2	0	2	5	5	10	7	21	28
Lancashire Constabulary	0	0	0	0	4	4	16	9	25
Leicestershire Constabulary	Refused to provide information								
Lincolnshire Police	Failed to respond								
Metropolitan Police	2	0	2	2	1	3	8	1	9
Merseyside Police	208			7			208		

	Data Protection Act			Employment Terminated			Internal Discipline		
Norfolk Constabulary	2	0	2	2	1	3	8	1	9
North Wales Police	2	0	2	2	0	2	18	2	20
North Yorkshire Police	Failed to respond								
Northamptonshire Police	0	0	0	5	0	5	3	10	13
Northumbria Police	0	0	0	2	4	6	20	19	39
Nottinghamshire Police	1	0	1	1	0	1	7	1	8
South Wales Constabulary	Refused to provide information								
South Yorkshire Police	0	1	1	0	1	1	26	16	42
Staffordshire Police	1	0	1	1	1	2	4	6	10
Suffolk Constabulary	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	3	8
Surrey Police	0	0	0	1	1	2	14	15	29
Sussex Police	0	0	0	1	0	1	17	2	19
Thames Valley Police	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	7	8
Warwickshire Police	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
West Mercia Constabulary	0	0	0	2	0	2	26	6	32
West Midlands Police	7	0	7	7	0	7	69	14	83
West Yorkshire Police	Refused to provide information								
Wiltshire Constabulary	Failed to respond								