



Scottish Biometrics  
Commissioner  
Coimiseanair  
Biometrics na h-Alba

# SCOTTISH BIOMETRICS COMMISSIONER

## PUBLIC ATTITUDES TO POLICE USE OF BIOMETRIC DATA



*Safeguarding our biometric future*



## Foreword

In 2021 in collaboration with ScotCen Social Research, the Scottish Biometrics Commissioner for the first time [examined peoples' views on biometrics in Scotland](#). From obtaining a robust baseline measure in 2021, it is now important for us to reassess any change(s) to these views, over time. The research, focusing on policing and criminal justice helps build a better and layered understanding of people's opinions on biometrics and informs our future engagement with stakeholders.

The results from this repeated modest and small-scale research project suggests that there is maintained, and in some instances improvement in levels of public confidence in the use of biometric data and technologies for policing and criminal justice purposes in Scotland.

The results are statistically significant and the nature of the research means that the findings are representative of those living in Scotland. The report is aimed at a diverse audience including academics, policy makers, the Scottish and wider UK population. It could also inform international research, which has an eye on Scotland's progressive development in this area.

An important feature of the report, amongst many other variables of interest, is the exploration of questions on the legal understandings of biometric data collection. The survey also explored questions which have occupied socio-legal minds for some time, including retention periods of biometric data and the use of facial recognition technologies. A second important feature of the survey is that it measures these factors across personal characteristics including age and sex.

I would like to thank the Scottish Police Authority, in their partnership with Diffley, for their support in conducting this research on behalf of the Scottish Biometrics Commissioner.



**Dr Brian Plastow**  
Scottish Biometrics Commissioner



## Scottish Biometrics Commissioner

[The Scottish Biometrics Commissioner Act 2020](#) established the office of Scottish Biometrics Commissioner and provides for its functions. The Commissioner's general function is to support and promote the adoption of lawful, effective and ethical practices in relation to the acquisition, retention, use and destruction of biometric data for criminal justice and police purposes. The Scottish Biometrics Commissioner is an independent public authority appointed by Her Majesty the Queen on the nomination of the Scottish Parliament. Dr Brian Plastow is the first Biometrics Commissioner in Scotland.

### Why we did the research

[Section 2\(3\)\(b\)](#) of the Scottish Biometrics Commissioner Act 2020 states that in exercising their general function, the Commissioner is to promote public awareness and understanding of the powers and duties the police have in relation to the acquisition, retention, use and destruction of biometric data and how these powers are exercised. We wanted to understand what the Scottish population **know and feel** about such issues. However, as this is a self-report study and although respondents 'agreed' to understanding why the police collect biometrics data, we have no way of testing the degree of that understanding i.e. testing their knowledge. The survey very much focusses on how people think and feel.

This research contributes to the Commissioner's general function and in the planning of our upcoming Strategic Plan 2025/29. It informs our future work on the promotion of public awareness and understanding in relation to biometric data as a key priority for this office.

### The research

Diffley partnership were commissioned to undertake public polling on a six-monthly basis by the Scottish Police Authority (SPA), aligned to the Authority's mission of overseeing Scottish policing in the public interest. In agreement with the SPA, the Scottish Biometrics Commissioner requested [previously asked questions](#) on the policing use of biometric data to be included. Due to the nature of the questions, they would also generated value for the SPA, Forensic Services and Police Scotland. Fieldwork was conducted during January 2025 and involved the inclusion of six SBC-specific questions within the Diffley Panel.

Citizen's views about the use of biometrics by the police, and their attitudes towards the collection and retention of biometric data are relevant to policymakers. For the SBC, having a more informed understanding of those views allows for better debate and engagement in this area. The research is particularly helpful in informing our functions and key questions on the law, human rights and ethics. It is our aim to safeguard and maintain the balance between lawful intrusion, specialist oversight and societal expectations.

We hope this report is useful and enlightening for future debates and new research in this area, both in Scotland and overseas. The research explored people's understanding of the legal framework and the reasons for collecting biometric data by the police. It also reviewed public attitudes towards facial recognition technology and retention mechanisms. The results allow the SBC to compare and contrast findings from 2021 and to analyse any changes in public opinion, over the last 4 years.

Data and infographics have been included where findings were statistically significant. The infographics highlight important differences in peoples' views which are shown according to a range of characteristics including age and sex.



There are however, limitations in this research which restrict the extent to which we can make generalisations from the findings with regards to people's attitudes and opinions to biometrics. It might be worth noting that the research gives an insight into people's level of confidence in understanding, but not whether their actual understanding is accurate. Qualitative research would be needed to explore this, as well as people's attitudes to emerging technologies used in criminal justice.

The term 'biometrics data' used was defined as **fingerprints, photographs and DNA samples.**



## What is the Diffley Panel?

The Diffley Panel collects information on the experiences and opinions of a representative sample of adults in Scotland, utilising the *ScotPulse* platform. The Panel comprised of adults (18 + years old), with 2582 people participating in the fieldwork.

## Executive summary

The 2025 survey results suggest there is maintained high levels of public confidence in the use of biometric data for policing and criminal justice purposes in Scotland, since the previous survey was conducted in 2021.

- The public's understanding of the rationale for retaining fingerprints, DNA and photographs of people who have been arrested in Scotland is high, with **92%** of people saying that they understand the reasons
- The public also overwhelmingly thinks that retaining fingerprints, DNA samples and photographs of people arrested by the police helps to solve crime, with **92%** of people giving this view
- Additionally, the public overwhelmingly thinks that collecting forensic evidence at crime scenes (fingerprints and DNA) helps the police to solve crimes, with **95%** of people expressing this position
- The public also believe that there is a strong case for retaining the fingerprints, photographs or DNA of people convicted of a crime in Scotland:
  - 64% of people say such material should be kept forever
  - 14% of people say such material should be kept for more than 30 years but not forever
  - 9% of people say such material should not be kept for more than 15 years or not retained at all
  - 6% of people said that they did not know
- There is also strong support among the public for the police taking fingerprints, photographs and DNA from children and young people under 16 years of age where they have been arrested in Scotland - **73%** agree with this position
- Support is also strong for the use of technology by police in public spaces to help recognise faces and identify persons who may be wanted by the police
  - 72% of people agree with this
  - women are more likely than men to support this technology - 77% versus 67%

Overall, the survey found that most people think they have a good understanding of the reasons why police collect biometric data and the legal powers behind this. However, also of equal importance is the significant percentage of people that do not understand the legal framework or the reasons why biometric data is collected. This makes the case for the need for greater legal clarity. At the broadest level, a significant majority of people agree about the effectiveness of biometric data at helping the police solve crimes.



## What we will do next

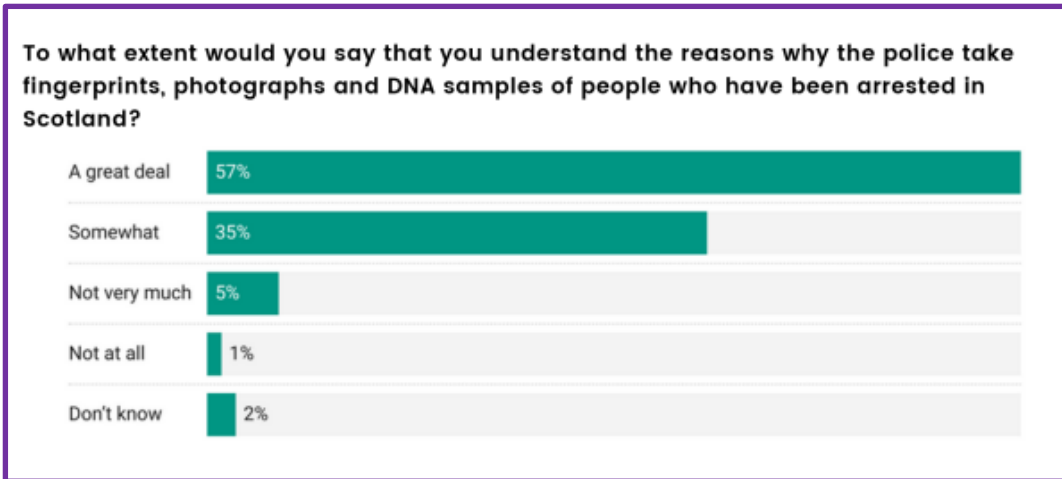
- We will share the findings from this research to help inform ongoing debates in Scotland, including the shape and form of our public consultation on our [Code of Practice](#)
- We will continue to raise awareness of both the benefits and the risks of using biometrics data, so the public fully understand everything involved in the collection, retention, use and destruction of biometric data for criminal justice purposes
- As the survey covered already 'established types of biometrics', further research is needed to understand public attitudes around new and emerging forms of biometrics
- Furthermore, we will continue conducting our own research into advancements in biometric technologies including the adaptability and scalability of facial recognition, which presents great technological benefits - it can now do far more than it was originally designed to do which brings with it significant human rights considerations and ethical risks



## Questions on effectiveness

Qu 1. To what extent would you say that you understand the reasons why the police take fingerprints, photographs and DNA samples of people who have been arrested in Scotland?

- more than half of all respondents (57%) had a great deal of understanding of the reasons why evidence is collected in Scotland, in comparison to 32% in 2021
- 92% demonstrated some level of understanding, identical to 2021

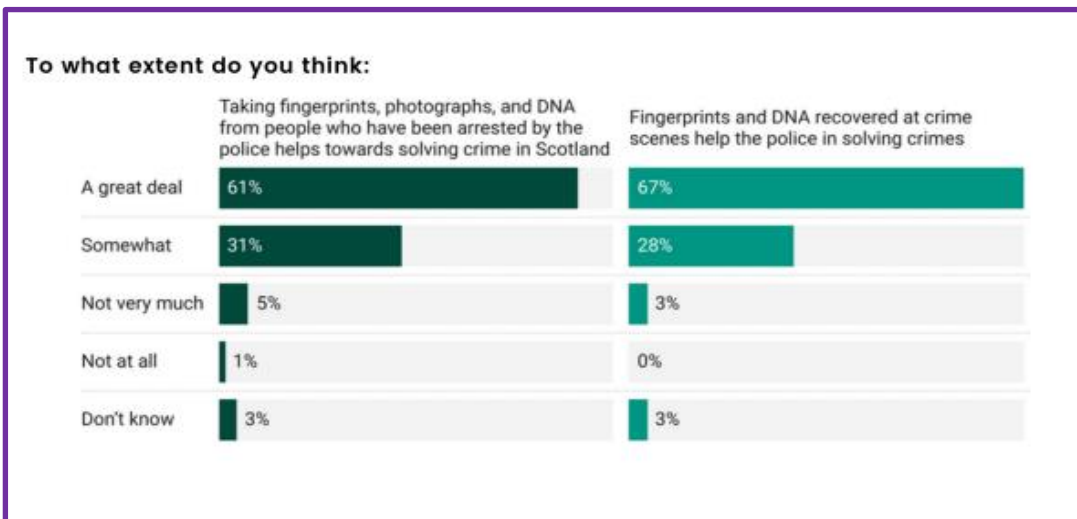


Qu 2. To what extent do you think taking fingerprints, photographs and DNA from people who have been arrested by the police helps towards solving crime in Scotland?

- 92% believed that evidence collected from those arrested by the police helped towards solving crime in Scotland, a 1% decrease from 2021

Qu 3. To what extent do you think fingerprints and DNA recovered at crime scenes help the police in solving crimes?

- almost two-thirds (67%) believed that the evidence collected from crime scenes helps a great deal towards solving crime in Scotland - a drop from 77% in 2021
- 95% of responses indicated that evidence collected from crime scenes was of some help towards solving crime in Scotland, an increase of 2% from 2021





Qu 4. For how long do you think that the police should be able to keep the fingerprints, photographs or DNA samples of people who have been convicted of a crime in Scotland?

- almost two thirds of respondents (64%) believe evidence should be retained forever - 14% increase from 2021
- 29% of respondents believe there should be time limits imposed on retention
  - 8% believe evidence should be kept for less than 15 years
  - 14% believe evidence should be stored for more than 40 years, but not forever

## Questions on public attitudes

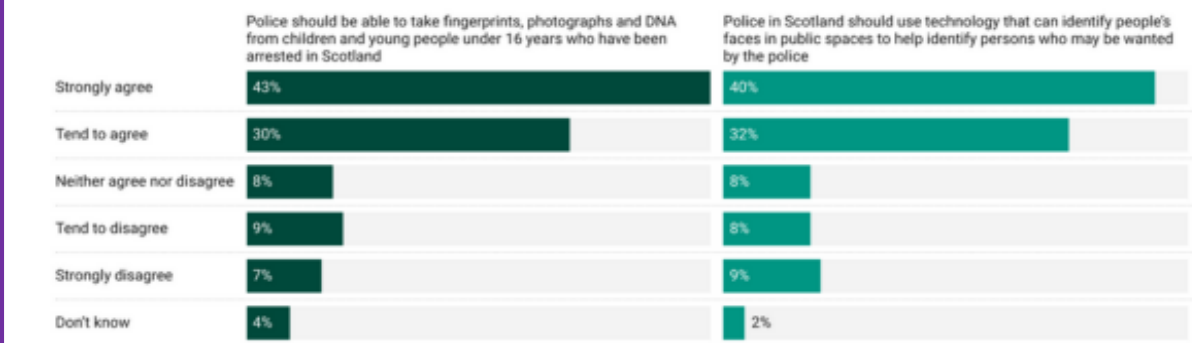
Qu 5. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following: Police should be able to take fingerprints, photographs and DNA from children and young people under 16 years who have been arrested in Scotland?

- almost three quarters, 73%, of respondents agreed (strongly agree/agree) police should be able to collect biometric data from under 16's that have been arrested, a 7% increase from 2021
- only fewer than a sixth (16%) disagreed with this

Qu 6. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following: Police in Scotland should use technology that can identify people's faces in public spaces to help identify persons who may be wanted by the police?

- there was strong support for the use of technology to identify persons of interest to the police
- 72% of respondents agreed that police in Scotland should use technology that can identify people's faces in public spaces to help identify persons who may be wanted by the police, an increase of 6% from 2021
- 17% disagreed with the use of such technology, remaining stable from 16% in 2021

### To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following:







- however, the strength of this agreement varied by gender
  - 77% of female respondents were supportive (an increase from 69% in 2021)
  - only 67% of males were supportive of its use (an increase from 61% from 2021)
  - a similar disparity was evident in 2021, perhaps confirming a trend that females may feel more comfortable, or safer, with facial recognition technology in Scotland, than males would. Given the majority of Scottish offences – [2022/23](#) saw 84% of general crimes and 81% of domestic abuse crimes being perpetrated by males, this perhaps should come as no surprise.

