

# Practitioner Resource 2: Understanding the sex industry in England and Wales

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**A practitioner resource summarising content from the 2019 Home  
Office Report 'The nature and prevalence of prostitution and sex work  
in England and Wales today'**

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# Introduction

This resource explores six themes in relation to the sex industry in England and Wales. It is based on research carried out by a team of researchers at the University of Bristol who were commissioned by the Home Office and the Office of the South Wales Police and Crime Commissioner to report on the current 'nature' and 'prevalence' of prostitution in England and Wales. The research was carried out between May 2018 and June 2019 and used a working definition that took a broad view of the sex industry: *'Prostitution and/or sex work constitutes the provision of sexual or erotic acts or sexual intimacy in exchange for payment or other benefit or need'* (Hester et al., 2019, p.2). As part of this research project, the team of researchers carried out a systematic search for relevant academic literature and other publications; conducted a public online survey; carried out follow-up in-depth email questionnaires with survey respondents who identified as currently or recently involved in prostitution and sex work; sent questionnaires to NGOs to administer to their services-users or members; and held consultations and discussions with a wide range of organisations. Based on this data, they developed a typology to describe and classify contemporary practices. The typology has two elements: six cross-cutting themes and fourteen settings and services. They also explored data sources for estimating the national prevalence of those involved in sex work and prostitution.

This resource is based on Section 1, part (a) of the report and presents a summary of the six cross-cutting themes identified by the researchers. The six themes draw on the online survey responses, the follow-up email interview data and the stakeholder consultations. There were 529 respondents to the online survey who identified as being formerly or currently involved in prostitution and sex work; 42 of the 529 respondents completed a follow-up email interview and the research team received a further 16 individual service-user/member responses from questionnaires sent to NGOs plus 3 responses completed by NGO staff based on their work with service-users/members.

The researchers highlighted two groups whose voices were under-represented or absent within the research due to methodological and ethical constraints: (1) migrant sex

workers; and (2) British and non-British individuals who are/were forcibly coerced, who are/were trafficked, who are/were sexually exploited and/or who are traumatised in relation to their experience.

As the research demonstrated, there is great diversity in opinion and experience when it comes to prostitution and sex work and the language people use tends to signify conflicting political, ideological or moral positions. However, there is also much common ground. This resource has been created out of a desire to find that common ground and move forward to challenge the status quo of how people in the sex industry are treated and to improve the quality of services available. To this end, this resource is aimed at practitioners involved in commissioning and delivering support services to those involved in the sex industry as well as professionals who

come into contact with those who sell sex during the course of their work, such as police officers, housing providers, local authority departments etc. The language used in the resource reflects that used in the original research report. For more information about the research this resource is based on, see: [The nature and prevalence of prostitution and sex work \(Hester, Mulvihill, Matolcsi, Lanau Sanchez and Walker, 2019\)](#).

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# Six Cross-Cutting Themes

## 1. Language: what is defined as sex work and prostitution?

- The terms 'prostitute/prostitution' and 'sex worker/sex worker' are contested and tend to signify conflicting political, ideological or moral positions.
- Some individuals (and service providers) will identify with some terms and not with others.
- Individuals may not identify what they do as 'sex work': for example, those engaged in sugar relationships, or the unplanned exchange of sex for monetary or other benefit, or being sexually exploited on the street.
- The choice of language when talking about the sex industry is important because (a) decisions about which terms to use will determine what and whose experience is counted as sex work/prostitution and (b) individuals may wish to self-identify with a particular term rather than be categorised by services or policy-makers using terms they do not recognise for themselves.

## 2. Who is involved and what is their motivation?

- Of the 529 respondents to the online survey who identified as being formerly or currently involved in prostitution and sex work, the overwhelming majority were women. Only around 13 respondents explicitly identified as male and 8 as non-binary or trans. Sexuality was less often stated by female respondents whilst male respondents tended to state their sexuality as gay and that they provided services usually (or exclusively) to men.
- Financial difficulty was a common entry point for many of those selling sex, and those now exited, who responded to the study. Some respondents mentioned caring responsibilities (for children; for own parents; for grandparents; and for partners), mental or physical health needs or disability and spoke of how sex work gave them flexibility to work when they felt well. Trans respondents mentioned gender transition and the costs, the physical toll and experience of exclusion in the workplace, which led them to selling sex. A few participants identified as higher education students (as either precipitating entry into sex work or funding a return to education) and some identified their (legal) migrant status as constraining their options. The word 'survival' was used frequently.
- The study also found a cluster of respondents who rejected the problematisation of exchanging sex for money and stressed the pleasures, financial freedom, and satisfaction that sex work afforded them.

## 3. Patterns of Engagement

- The study found that it is common for individuals to move between settings and services. Reasons for such movement included perceived safety (e.g. from street into brothels); avoidance of intermediary payments (e.g. out of brothels into escorting); to obtain cash quickly (e.g. into street); frustration with slow payment (e.g. out of webcamming); as a side-line to existing work (e.g. into clip-making); to earn more per hour (e.g. into BDSM); and to establish regulars (e.g. into sugaring). Movement for some was facilitated by a chance encounter or peer recommendation but it could also be determined by trafficking or coercion.
- The researchers found that respondents described a range of engagement patterns. For some it is their only income; others are studying, doing other paid work, volunteering or are caring for others. Engagement can be intermittent, such as at the end of the month or 'touring' for periods of several weeks; it can be yo-yo-ing while trying to address substance misuse or homelessness; it can be as needed to fund travel or study; or it can be during stable periods of mental or physical health. Some respondents described their engagement as 'survival sex' and NGOs and sex worker collectives reported changes in social security benefits to be a driver for many, either in returning to sex work, or entering for the first time. Some individuals may sell sexual services once in their lifetime while others may be involved (continuously, or on and off) for decades.

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#### 4. Advertising and Payments

- The majority of advertising in England and Wales is now online with a handful of large online platforms providing a listings service and a search function for services or for seller attributes. Dating and other apps may also be used to arrange meetings and there are specialist sites available for 'sugar dating' and escorting. Follow up contact is organised by text, email, phone or Skype.
- Brothels, parlours, strip clubs and escort agencies tend to have a web presence, and many offer a walk-in service. Some individuals selling sex outdoors also use phones or online platforms to arrange meetings; others simply walk their 'beat'.
- Where third parties are involved in payment transactions, fees can range from 10% to 50% and upwards.
- There are a wide variety of payment methods. The most commonly used is cash, which is generally taken at the start of an off-street booking or outdoor encounter. For high cost services or where a regular relationship is established, bank transfer and debit and credit cards are also used. Other methods include online marketplace vouchers, buying items on wish lists, dedicated payment or money transfer services, or gifts in kind. Deposits are usually required for out-calls in hotels and for BDSM. Sex can also be exchanged for shelter/rent, drugs/alcohol, food or transportation.

#### 5. Managing Safety

Survey and email respondents identified the following issues in relation to risk, harm and safety:

- Fear of, and experience of, physical and sexual violence. The majority linked this fear and experience with a problematic legal environment in England and Wales, which it was felt undermines safety and deters reporting to police, as well as violence against women and girls in society more broadly
- Robbery and payment with counterfeit money
- Being held against one's will and stalking, or clients becoming 'obsessed' or 'emotionally involved'
- Psychological harm, particularly where financial need or coercion meant it was not possible to pick and choose clients
- Issues around body image
- Sexually transmitted infections
- The closure of support services in recent years under austerity
- The risks of chemical sex or 'chemsex'
- Problematic use of drugs and alcohol by sellers and buyers
- Loneliness
- Social stigma
- Fractious political and social media debates

Individuals selling or advertising sex online are increasingly using technology to manage their safety, through feedback and review systems or screening clients via Skype, for example.

#### 6. Who is purchasing sex?

- A number of sex buyers responded to the online survey and five completed follow-up email interviews. All were male.
- Sex sellers were asked in the follow-up email interviews if they had, or would consider, paying for sex. While a few said they may pay e.g. for erotic dances, to support their fellow sex workers, or pay to learn new techniques, the majority said they would not pay for sex.
- All follow-up email interview respondents were also asked to describe the demographics of their clients. The most common demographic cited was "White, middle class men, aged 30s-50s" – although there is clearly diversity, depending on e.g. location - with respondents adding that clients tended to be married.
- Motivations for buying sex were varied and could be grouped into three broad categories: (1) personal, (2) practical, and (3) sexual. They included loneliness, being single or widowed or separated, no commitment required, being in a 'sexless' marriage or long-term relationship and looking to explore a fantasy.

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## Centre for Gender and Violence Research

The aim of the Centre is to conduct high quality research to inform policy, practice and action on gender-based violence. Our history of researching violence against women and gender-based violence, feeds into policy and practice nationally, internationally and locally. We offer a range of consultancy, teaching and training, including research dissemination events and tailor-made seminars for professionals. To find out more about our work visit our website: [www.bris.ac.uk/sps/research/centres/genderviolence](http://www.bris.ac.uk/sps/research/centres/genderviolence)

## Beyond the Streets

Beyond the Streets partners with women on their journey out of sexual exploitation. We want to see a world where people are free from sexual exploitation, and where those in prostitution have the option to pursue genuine alternatives. We work directly with women selling sex to support them to find routes out of prostitution as well as equipping and supporting other projects across the UK to tackle the sexual exploitation that happens in every community. To find out more about our work visit our website: [www.beyondthestreets.org.uk](http://www.beyondthestreets.org.uk).  
Registered Charity Number: 1178421

### **This briefing forms part of a series of three publications:**

Practitioner Resource 1: Settings and services of prostitution and sex work in England and Wales

Practitioner Resource 2: Understanding the sex industry in England and Wales

Practitioner Resource 3: Understanding existing prevalence data on the UK sex industry

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This resource was prepared in collaboration with Dr Katie Thorlby at Beyond the Streets.

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