Statistics pertaining to the sex industry are often conflicting and contested and it can be difficult to understand what is most reliable/useful in policy contexts. This briefing note offers a guide on deciphering statistics, presents some limited statistical data and outlines some additional areas of concern.

1. **Key Home Office documents on sex work**

   It is important to note that previous to this inquiry, the Home Office published a number of papers on sex work:

   2004: Paying the Price: A Consultation Paper on Prostitution
   2006: A Coordinated Prostitution Strategy and Summary of Responses to Paying the Price
   2008: Tackling the Demand for Prostitution: A Review
   2009: Tackling the Demand for Prostitution: A Rapid Evidence Assessment of the Published Research Literature
   2010: Guidance on Section 17 Policing and Crime Act 2009: Engagement and Support Orders
   2011: A Review of Effective Practice in Responding to Prostitution

2. **Deciphering sex industry statistics.**

   The following points are important to consider when deciphering statistics pertaining to the sex industry:

   2.1. **Definitive/absolute statistics on the sex industry do not exist:** Most studies which have been undertaken are small-scale and/or relate to specific groups of sex workers, particularly female or street-based sex workers. As it is not possible to generate a definitive sampling framework, conclusive statistics do not exist.

   2.2. **Be wary of overarching statistics:** The sex industry is very diverse. Although street sex work is often the most visible manifestation of the sex industry, it is also one of the smallest sectors with a majority of work taking place in varied off street spaces (see Section 3). Although there is some overlap, sex workers operating in different sectors tend to face different issues in relation to their work. Therefore any statistic which refers to all sex workers or a majority of sex workers is likely to be flawed simply because experiences are very diverse and vary greatly between sector. Variation can also be due to other factors including but not limited to gender, sexuality, migration status etc.

   2.3. **Be wary of claims of representativeness:** For example, one statistic given as oral evidence as part of the inquiry was: that ‘approximately 50% of women in prostitution became involved when they were children’¹. The person giving evidence said this came from a ‘Home Office report’; this statistic was cited in Home Office (2004)². If this statistic is analysed for representativeness, it can be found that the original sources cited by the Home Office used to make this point relates only to female street-based sex workers - excluding workers in varied off street spaces, as well as male and transgender workers; much of the research is old (6 of the 9 sources are pre 1999, and the report itself is 12 years old) the sample sizes of the sources vary and at least one source only had participants under the age of 18, offering a foregone conclusion. Therefore it cannot possibly be the case that 50% of women in prostitution became involved when they

---


were children.

2.4. **Number of respondents:** Research with sex workers tends to have low response rates so sample sizes tend to be small. Response rate should therefore be considered when analysing statistics.

2.5. **Methodology:** How the data informing the statistics was collected should be scrutinized. For example if data was only collected with transgender escorts working in the ‘higher end’ of the market, the findings and therefore statistics are unlikely to be applicable to other groups of sex workers.

2.6. **Ethics:** It is important to consider whether the research from which the statistics are drawn has undergone sufficient ethical scrutiny and followed appropriate ethical rules, regulations and protocol.

2.7. **What to look out for:**


2.7.3. Academic analysis reveals themes if results from studies are triangulated, especially according to sector. It is therefore possible to make some cautious generalised points about specific types of sex work.

2.7.4. Statistics do not reflect diverse experiences of sex workers across sectors, so it is important to also consider qualitative studies which are grounded in sex workers’ experiences and knowledge.

3. **Numbers of sex workers, proportion per sector and gendered demographics.**

3.1. Research\(^4\) for the Office of National Statistics estimates the total number of sex workers in the UK to be ‘72,800 comprising of approximately 32,000 in London and 41,000 outside London.’ In terms of sector this translates as:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Regional Distribution</th>
<th>London Distribution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female street sex workers (low income)</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female street sex workers (migrant)</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female off street (middle income)</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female off street (high income)</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male and transgender (low income street)</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male and transgender (occasional independent)</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male and transgender (regular independent)</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male and transgender (high income)</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2. Similarly, estimates by Pitcher (2015)\(^5\) indicated that ‘the total number of estimated sex workers in the UK in areas where there are known to be project services would be 85,714 of which 28 per cent would be street-based workers’. Street based sex workers thus constitute a minority of UK

---

\(^3\) Whilst taking response rates into consideration.


sex workers. Estimates from different sources indicate that women constitute between two-thirds to 80% of all sex workers, and men between 17% to a third, with a smaller proportion of transgender workers. The proportions of male and transgender sex workers may be higher in independent sex work: for example Smith and Kingston’s analysis of 27,408 online UK escort profiles on one major website found 63% were female, 32% were male and 4% were transgender. Of these three-quarters (n=20,804) of escorts advertised to male clients, two-thirds (n=18,136) advertised to female clients and over two-thirds (n=18,932) advertised to couples.

4. **Trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation.**

4.1. There are 4 key sources in the UK providing limited statistical information on trafficking: 1. **Pentameters 1 and 2** was coordinated national police operations seeking people trafficked for sexual exploitation. Pentameter 1 (2006) found 84 trafficked people and Pentameter 2 (2009) found 164. 2. **Project Acumen** (2010) estimated numbers of trafficked women in off-street UK sex work. Based on their estimate of 17,000 migrant women operating in off-street markets, they suggested 2600 were trafficked. 3. **The UK Human Trafficking centre** (2015) reported 3266 potential victims of trafficking referred into the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), with labour exploitation being the most prominent exploitation type; 863 cases were sexual exploitation of adults, 112 cases of minors (non-UK National), and 105 of minors (UK national). Over 50% of the total number of cases (N=3266) are pending an outcome. 4. **The largest piece of academic research** on migration and trafficking in the UK sex industry with 100 participants (female, male, transgender) found that 13% of female participants had experienced some sort of exploitation from trafficking to more ‘consensual arrangements’ and 6% of females felt they had been deceived into sex work without control or consent.

5. **The Swedish Model**

5.1. Claims, such as those made in the first oral evidence session, that since the change in the law in Sweden sex work has significantly reduced are unreliable and not founded in evidence. There were no baseline figures of the number of sex workers in Sweden prior to the law change and despite a reported initial reduction in visible street sex work due to inevitable displacement; the Swedish Board of Health and Welfare concluded in 2008 that “It is difficult to discern any clear trend of development. Has the extent of prostitution increased or decreased? We cannot give any unambiguous answer to that question.”

5.1.1. In addition, contrary to the aims of the law, research has found that the Swedish Model had actually led to an increase in prices in indoor sex work which had led to some sex workers actually migrating to Sweden to sell sex for this reason. Ironic given the stated aim of the law is to discourage and reduce levels of prostitution (Levy & Jakobsson, 2014).

5.2. There is a body of evidence to suggest that the Swedish Model has had a negative impact on sex workers and their safety. The law is selectively enforced, with the main focus being the street, thus impacting heavily on the most marginalised sex workers. Street sex workers have been displaced from known safer spaces of work, regular clients

---

7. [http://www.uknswp.org/wp-content/uploads/Setting%20the%20Record%20(Project%20ACUMEN)%20Aug%202010%5B1%5D.pdf](http://www.uknswp.org/wp-content/uploads/Setting%20the%20Record%20(Project%20ACUMEN)%20Aug%202010%5B1%5D.pdf)
9. See [https://metranet.londonmet.ac.uk/fms/MRSite/Research/iset/Migrant%20Workers%20in%20the%20UK%20Sex%20Industry%20Policy-Relevant%20Findings2.pdf](https://metranet.londonmet.ac.uk/fms/MRSite/Research/iset/Migrant%20Workers%20in%20the%20UK%20Sex%20Industry%20Policy-Relevant%20Findings2.pdf)
who are often considered ‘safer’ become fewer because of increased policing and the threat of criminalisation, this can lead to a drop in custom resulting in a driving down of prices, quicker transactions, greater risk taking and greater stress and danger in street markets. In addition, some women working off-street have altered work practices and are now operating in more risky ways (via taxi drivers for example) and are now more vulnerable to different types of exploitation (for example economic); conviction rates are low and a majority of investigations are discontinued. In sum rather than demand being tackled sex workers have re-structured how they operate, this has the potential to increase vulnerability (Scoular, 2010).  

5.3. Sex workers have also been denied access to health and condoms, criminalised under brothel keeping legislation for working together, migrant sex workers have been deported and ‘outed’ as sex workers to their country of origin and there have been numerous accounts of police not taking reports of violence and rape against sex workers seriously and, crucially, clients are now far less likely to report to police if they come into contact with sex workers who have been exploited or trafficked (Levy & Jakobsson, 2014).  

5.4. The harm perpetuated by the Swedish Model is even recognised in Sweden by officials: As the Head of Sweden’s anti trafficking unit, one of the architects of the Swedish Model, said: “Of course the law has negative consequences for women in prostitution but that’s also some of the effect we want to achieve with the law”.  

5.5. Crucially, harm reduction is wholly incompatible with the Swedish Model.  

6. **Existing Legislation**  

6.1. Sexual, violent and other types of criminality committed against sex workers is already outlawed in England and Wales; as is trafficking for sexual exploitation, the abuse of adults and children, pimping and the exploitation of others for gain and having sex with a sex worker (or any person) without consent. It is illegal to purchase sex from someone who is coerced or exploited even if the purchaser had no knowledge of this. Exploitative aspects of commercial sex are already illegal. Yet, their illegal status does not prevent these types of victimisation from occurring within diverse parts of the sex industry. Evidence suggests that criminalising any aspect of consenting commercial sex has the potential to impact on sex workers’ vulnerability to violence. Hence, arguing that the sex industry should therefore be further criminalised, based on the existence of acts which are already criminal (and not prevented through their criminalised status) is illogical and simply demonstrates the extant failure of the law to ensure the public protection of sex workers.  

7. **Northern Ireland**  

7.1. In 2015, Northern Ireland brought in legislation to criminalise the purchase of sex. Since its introduction only one client has been prosecuted and, at the same time, contrary to claims that sex workers have been decriminalised, two sex workers were arrested under brothel keeping legislation for working together for safety. If the inquiry is seeking to ‘shift the burden’ onto sex buyers, evidence from Northern Ireland suggests that this is clearly ineffective with sex workers feeling this burden in very real ways. The police in Northern Ireland were also opposed to the introduction of this legislation and are reluctant to enforce it.

---


8.1. We have a number of concerns about the above group:

8.1.1. The group formed in 2008 had a purpose which was twofold: (i) to raise awareness around the impact of the sale of sexual services on those involved and (ii) to develop proposals for government action with a focus on tackling demand for the sex trade. It is problematic that the group, began from the premise that demand should be tackled. This suggests that the foundation of the group is ideological rather than couched in evidence. That the group therefore makes this conclusion is unsurprising, given that they began from this premise in the first place.

8.1.2. The report made by the group ‘Shifting the Burden’ does not adequately recognise the diversity of the sex industry in terms of gender and sector of work.

8.1.3. In the report misleading quotes are presented as sensationalist headlines. For example a quote from Ruth Jacobs on the current laws states: ‘What it sends out is it's absolutely fine to have sex with children, as long as you pay them, and it's absolutely fine to rape anybody in prostitution...’ All of these activities are criminalised in England and Wales. It is problematic that they presented as otherwise. In addition, Ruth Jacobs strongly and publicly opposed the recommendations of the report and stated that much of her evidence (as well as that of other contributors) was taken out of context.\(^{13}\)

8.1.4. The report states that: ‘The language of ‘choice’ assumes a range of options. More often the decision to enter prostitution is led by poverty, drug or alcohol dependency, or patterns of abusive behaviour’. Given that a vast majority of sex work takes place off street and the factors described in the sentence most commonly apply to street sex workers who represent one of the smallest sectors of workers in the UK, it is deeply problematic to assume that this is actually the case ‘most often’ for sex workers, robust evidence to support this statement is not provided.

8.1.5. There is a presumption of inherent harm in commercial sex which is not adequately, evidenced in the report. In addition, positioning prostitution as inherently harmful has the potential to negate actual experiences of violence and also is violent in its silencing of sex workers who consent to commercial sexual transactions.

8.1.6. The conclusions are ideological rather than evidence based in the extreme - with the suggestion that ‘measures and language that demonstrate prostitution to be a form of violence against women and girls’ should be adopted by the government and the police. Not only does this deny the victimisation experienced by male and transgender sex workers, its paternalism silences the voices of sex workers who consent to commercial sexual transactions.

8.1.7. The notion that criminalising clients has the potential to contribute to gender equality is demonstrative of lack of understanding evidenced in the report of the composition and diversity of the sex industry.

8.1.8. The suggestion that criminalising clients will reduce harm is deeply flawed. Evidence from sex workers, specialist practitioners and sex workers demonstrates that the criminalisation of clients will only serve to exacerbate the potential for harm. A recent survey completed by NUM and Northumbria University, which is the largest of its kind

\(^{13}\) [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/ruth-jacobs/violence-against-women_b_5102413.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/ruth-jacobs/violence-against-women_b_5102413.html)
in the UK, drawing on the views of over 200 sex workers (mostly independent) and over 50 organisations (mostly providing services to street based sex workers) found that:

75% of organisations said the purchase of sex should not be criminalised.
83.3% of organisations said criminalising clients would make sex workers feel less safe
Only 2 organisations would support the introduction of legislation to criminalise clients.

96.2% of sex workers said the purchase of sex should not be criminalised.
81.5% of sex workers said the criminalisation of clients would make them feel less safe.
Only 5 sex workers would support the introduction of legislation to criminalise clients

Dr. Mary Laing (Northumbria University, and Joint Academic Representative for National Ugly Mugs); Alex Feis-Bryce (National Ugly Mugs); Prof. Teela Sanders (Leeds University) and Dr. Jane Pitcher (University of Strathclyde).