

# COMMENTARY & ISSUES

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*UK Network of Sex Work Projects*

## Wild guesses and conflated meanings? Estimating the size of the sex worker population in Britain

### *Abstract*

This paper reports the number of sex workers in Scotland and England who are in contact with specialist services for sex workers. Then, using methods and multipliers derived from the frequently quoted Kinnell study (1999) the paper provides various updated estimates of the wider population of sex workers. We point out the limits of our estimates and the methodological difficulties of estimating the size of this hidden population. The paper argues that many claims about sex work made by politicians and the media are misleading especially where they conflate sex work with trafficking and abuse.

**Key words:** hidden population, policy, prevalence, prostitution

### Introduction

The Home Office strategy on prostitution (Home Office, 2006) sought to reduce all forms of sexual exploitation. It aimed to reduce street prostitution and challenge assumptions about its inevitability by preventing people from becoming involved in prostitution, causing them to leave prostitution, tackling demand, tackling trafficking and 'taking action on' indoor prostitution. In order to pursue these aims, the Policing and Crime Bill (2008–09) introduces provisions for the 'punitive rehabilitation' of sex workers, closure of premises where sex work occurs and a new strict liability offence of paying for sexual services with someone 'controlled for gain'. A strict liability offence is one where liability is conferred without the need for the prosecution to

show intent or blameworthy conduct. Thus, a client would be guilty even if they do not know that a sex worker rents her 'working flat' and that therefore she could be deemed to be 'controlled for gain' by her landlord. Supporters of this proposal claim it will protect those who have been coerced but these clauses are based on unsubstantiated claims about the numbers of sex workers and the extent of trafficking or other forms of coercion. The proposed new offences are based upon an exaggeration of trafficking figures and claims about 'sexual slavery' yet there has been no comprehensive mapping of the sex industry and none is pending. The exaggeration of the number of sex workers is being used to enforce more punitive measures, and reinforce a stereotype of sex workers as exclusively female and vulnerable. This results in sexist practices which deprive male and trans workers of a voice in the debate, as well as denying them access to any positive service provision that is rolled out for women. The current situation is therefore that the prevalence of sex workers in the wider population is disputed; policy is being created and implemented without information to calculate either its financial costs or impact. For example, it is important to know how many sex workers there are for resource allocation of targeted health and support services. It is very important to know how sex workers are distributed across the differing sectors of the sex industry because needs of sex workers in different sectors vary e.g. street based and indoor sex workers, migrant sex workers, transgender sex workers, sex workers who are intravenous drug users. If some of the numerical claims referred to in this paper, that the majority of people in the UK sex industry are victims of trafficking, were taken as a guide to support service provision, then the majority of services would be structured to support victims of trafficking. Yet this would leave unaddressed the support service needs of the majority of men and women who *are* in contact with support services. Responsible governance and social policy should ensure service provision decisions are informed by reasonable estimates of the number, profile and distribution of people in the sex industry. An empirical evidence based approach is particularly critical for an area of social life which has been perpetually stereotyped and misrepresented, or partially represented, in media. Socially excluded/marginalized and oppressed communities have always had to struggle to be represented in cultural and political discourses. In current debates about citizenship 'inclusive citizenship' involves communities gaining not just formal rights but recognition of practices and identities (Lister, 2007). Pakulski (1997) argues that full citizenship involves a right to

full cultural participation and 'undistorted representation'. Whilst this takes us to wider debates about the cultural representation of sex workers and the inclusion/exclusion of sex workers in current policy debates, there is an important point to be made about how accurate and inclusive definition and representation of a community requires responsible authorities to facilitate an evidence based understanding of the size and socio-demographics of that community.

This paper sets an important precedent in these debates in being totally transparent in how the data were gathered and how the estimates were made. It shows:

- the difficulty of establishing any firm estimate of the sex working population;
- how policy is formulated without any attempt to obtain reliable figures; and
- how the figures for proportions of sex workers trafficked, using drugs, controlled by another person or forced to sell sex are exaggerated and used to promote punitive measures.

The background to the debates on this issue includes a list of government consultations and reviews informed by a strong prohibitionist lobby which asserts that all sex work is exploitation. This lobby is informed of three strands of ideological thought. The first is radical separatist lesbian feminism which argues *all heterosexual sex is exploitation* (Dworkin, 1987). The second is *Marxist feminism which argues that all work is exploitation.*<sup>2</sup> The *final strand is religious evangelism which argues that all non-procreational sex is wrong.* The ideological alliance pursuing the hypothesis that prostitution is exploitation is interesting because the groups have conflicting stances on other issues like abortion or same sex partnerships.<sup>3</sup> The uneasy alliance is not unlike that which led to the calamitous Meese Commission decision in the USA with a number of important differences in the contemporary policy climate which meant the decision has dominated policy making on prostitution throughout this century.<sup>4</sup> Firstly, there was a critical mass of female parliamentarians eager to be seen to be doing something for women, and who used trafficking rhetoric and inflated trafficking figures which exploited migration fears, and immigration statistics and practices.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, these were conveyed by a news media dependent on 'client journalism' and news agencies producing 'churnalism' from government press releases (Davies, 2008).<sup>6</sup> Third, there were significant vested interests of politicized senior police officers who, using

pseudo-scare tactics lobbied for more power (Brain et al., 2004) and pressure groups influenced by USA prohibition research who supported the rise of 'spin' as an integral political tool. It was easy to spin material on sex work to a public who have little experience of or access to research material on sex work.<sup>7</sup>

The Policing and Crime Bill (2008–09) is presented using the terms 'prostitute' and 'prostitution' which re-enforce the stigma of workers, especially women, within the sex industry. Henceforth, this paper will refer to sex workers and sex work. This paper also refers to specialist services for sex workers, services which provide outreach and/or drop-in facilities for a range of health and welfare services for sexual health, drug treatment, primary health care, protection from violence, housing and education. These may be health authority-managed, sex worker-led, charities or other voluntary organizations.

In this paper we explain the origin of one of the most frequently mentioned statistics, that of 80,000 sex workers in the UK and review some of the wilder statements about the size and the increase of the sex worker population and problems associated with it. We then present some new estimates of the number of sex workers who are in contact with specialist services, based on monitoring data from these services. We describe the limitations of these data and offer some suggestions as to how a more comprehensive mapping exercise might be undertaken.

### *The Kinnell survey 1999*

The figure of 80,000 sex workers (which included those based on the streets and indoors; women, men and transsexuals) in the UK was first suggested in 1999 in a Europap-UK<sup>8</sup> briefing paper (Kinnell, 1999). In the Kinnell (1999) study, 16 services estimated the number of sex workers thought to be operating in their geographical areas, based on the number of sex workers who used their services, local knowledge and research known to them. The average number of sex workers per reporting service was 665. This figure was then multiplied by 120, which was the number of services in the UK then known by Kinnell to be working with sex workers, giving an estimate of 79,800 sex workers. These 120 services included specialist projects for sex workers and non-specialist agencies such as Genito-Urinary Medicine (GUM) and drug services.

Despite its speculative nature, the estimate of 80,000 is widely reported as a firm figure, often applying only to women and often in the

context of claims that the sex industry is expanding rapidly, which cannot be the case if the figure of 80,000 has remained the same for ten years.

### *Wild guesses and conflated meanings*

In 2008, without evidence, *The Independent* (2008) reported that of 'the 80,000': 8,000 sex workers are working against their will; 20,000 have come from abroad; and that 85% of those working in brothels came from overseas. By 2009, in *The Guardian*, the 80,000 were all reported as being women, with 80% of all of them coming from overseas and 'most' of them being trafficked (*Guardian*, 2009). Another report claimed that '70% of the 88,000' sex worker 'women in England and Wales are under the control of pimps and traffickers' (Hunt and Nealon, 2009).

Research on problematic drug using sex workers is often misrepresented to suggest that drug problems saturate all sex markets. High proportions of problematic heroin and crack users are reported in many studies of female street sex workers. Yet high levels of drug use and addiction are not found in studies of indoor sex work markets (Cusick, 1998; May et al., 1999; Sanders, 2004). Still, the Home Office (2009) website declares that, 'nearly all sex workers are addicted to drugs or alcohol'.

As regards trafficking, 71 trafficked sex working women were known to the police in 1998 (Kelly and Regan, 2000) which led Professor Kelly to speculate that, there might have been 142 or 1,420 victims trafficked into the UK during the same period. For 2003, the Home Office reported to the Joint Committee on Human Rights that it estimated 4,000 people had been trafficked into prostitution in the UK. This 4,000 (Home Office, 2003) figure is repeated in the review of demand final report (Home Office, 2008: 6) and is referred to as 'the most recent Home Office analysis'. At the time of writing we are still waiting for the Home Office to respond to our enquiry about the source of this figure. Labour MP Denis McShane has been widely quoted as stating that there were 25,000 victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation (Craddock, 2008; Kirk, 2003; Porter, 2007; Taylor, 2008).

The only official published report on trafficking in the UK comes from the police operations Pentameter 1 and Pentameter 2. These show that despite 55 forces conducting intelligence led operations searching for victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation, only 88 people (revised from 84)<sup>9</sup> were found to be trafficked in Pentameter 1 and in Pentameter 2, 167 trafficked people were discovered,<sup>10</sup> an unstated

number of whom were not in the sex industry but in domestic labour.<sup>11</sup> One academic expert stated:

How is it that this vast number of women and girls are so readily available to male clients and yet simultaneously so difficult for the police to detect? When 515 indoor sex work establishments were raided by police as part of Operation Pentameter last year, only 84 women and girls who conformed to police and immigration officers' understanding of the term 'victim of trafficking' were 'rescued'. At this rate, the police would need to raid some 150,000 indoor prostitution establishments to unearth McShane's 25,000 sex slaves. The fact that there are estimated to be fewer than 1,000 such establishments in London gives some indication of how preposterous McShane's claim is. (O'Connell-Davidson, 2007)

In the context of the current policy debates, politicians and the media are saying that there are massive numbers of sex workers so the aim of this study is to investigate whether this is the case.

### *Methodological challenges*

The overall methodological problem in estimating the size of the sex worker population is that it is hidden. This is linked to the enduring stigma attached to sex work and the criminalization of certain sex work related activities. A capture–recapture study design (Frischer et al., 1991; Kruse et al., 2003; Mastro et al., 1994) could potentially produce a reasonably accurate estimate but multiple discrete sources of overlapping data would be required. This paper points to problems in using specialist service data and no other national data have been collected. The capture–recapture method has been adapted for use in human populations from techniques to estimate the prevalence of animals in the wild. It estimates the size of a hidden population by identifying its members in (at least) two samples and working out the extent of overlap between the samples using the formula below where:

$N$  = total number of cases in the study population

$M$  = number of cases found in the first sample

$C$  = number of cases found in the second sample

$R$  = number of cases found in both samples

$$N = \frac{(M+1)(C+1)}{R+1} - 1$$

Alongside practical problems, there are theoretical problems in estimating the sex worker population which include establishing what a sex worker is. Should the wider definition of sex workers include all those in the sex industry such as erotic dancers and phone sex operators? Should we include those with just one 'sugar daddy' client? What is a 'professional mistress'? Is police or court labelling more or less valid than self-identification? Prostitution is, in and of itself, legal so the criminal justice system is not troubled to distinguish prostitutes from non-prostitutes. However, if we shift the focus from legal to epidemiological questions and concern ourselves with counting the population of prostitutes then for the purposes of our count we would need to be able to establish that the motive for sex was money. Otherwise prostitution could not be distinguished by an observer from the majority of other sex relationships in which money is passed between partners as they buy each other dinner and pay mortgages together. Add to this, the confusion caused by policy discussion about overlapping and poorly defined terms: trafficked, exploited and abused 'women and children' (Wood, 2009) are routinely conflated with adults in sex work of their own volition whilst male and transgender sex workers are largely ignored. Estimating the size of the sex worker population is thus fraught with theoretical and methodological difficulties. In the Kinnell (1999) exercise and the current one, the data upon which we base our estimates did not include the wider sex industry or other areas of sexual exchange. The majority of specialist services are working primarily with sex workers working on the streets, in massage parlours, and flats, and in some cases 'escorting'.

## Methods

The study was carried out on behalf of the UK Network of Sex Work Projects (UKNSWP). The UKNSWP is an umbrella organization representing and sharing information on good practice between projects that offer specialist support services to people involved in sex work. Funded by the Big Lottery, it published the 'Directory of Services for Sex Workers in the UK' (UKNSWP, 2007). The chair of the UKNSWP identified the services within this directory that were specialist services (providing a dedicated service for sex workers or with dedicated staff working with sex workers) in Scotland and England and these 54 specialist services were asked to participate. The directory also lists 99 other projects whose remit is wider, for example sexual health and drug

treatment projects and have sex working clients as part of a broader clientele accessing general services.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of the West of Scotland Research Ethics Advisory Group. Letters, emails and follow-up phone calls asked all specialist services for sex workers in Scotland and England to report the number of sex workers with whom they were in contact and the sector they worked in during a one year period (2007/8). Responses were received from 38 of 54 specialist services listed in the UKNSWP services directory. Non-responding service figures were estimated as averages of the responder data, taking into account whether the service was provided for women, men or both. To estimate the number of sex workers not in contact with specialist services the mean average number of sex workers in contact with specialist services in the current study was compared with the mean average number of sex workers *thought to exist* in the area of specialist services in the Kinnell (1999) study. These figures suggested a multiplier of 1:2.1 to move from sex workers in contact with services to a wider estimate of sex workers in Scotland and England. The following tables compare the approaches used by Kinnell (1999) and by the current study.

### *Deriving base figures from services*

*What type of service?* The Kinnell study sought data from various types of service known to provide services for sex workers whereas the current study sought data only from specialist services.

*What were services to report?* The Kinnell study asked services to estimate the number of sex workers operating in their geographic area whereas the current study took recorded data on the number of self-reporting sex workers using services in a one year period.

### *What multiplier?*

Kinnell multiplied the average estimated number of sex workers per reporting service by the number of services that she knew to be working with sex workers. Mean  $665 \times 120 = 79,800$ .

Both studies recognized that service use data as routinely collected by services would exclude those who did not identify themselves as sex workers. To get round this Kinnell asked projects to estimate the number of sex workers that they thought existed in their area. She found an average figure per project of 665. This is 2.1 times the 316 sex



**Table 1** Type of service?

	<i>Advantages</i>	<i>Disadvantages</i>
Kinnell	Greater variety of services gives greater geographical coverage	Non-systematic inclusion criteria for services – data were requested from only a small proportion ( $n = 120$ ) of health promotion, GUM and drug services along with some specialist services and data were gathered from only 16 of these services Risks double counting of those using more than one type of service
Current study	All specialist services included in survey 38 of 54 responded	Risks excluding some categories of sex workers especially indoor workers who are less targeted and less likely to be known to services

**Table 2** Service reporting what?

	<i>Advantages</i>	<i>Disadvantages</i>
Kinnell	Estimate includes those who do not identify as sex workers to services Estimate of 10,640, average 665 per service	Unreliable as regards accuracy and consistency across service estimates
Current study	Ensures base figures consistently count self-identifying sex workers with minimal double counting 12,215 <i>known</i> sex workers, average 316 per service	As in Table 1, excludes sex workers not known to services

workers that the current study found using specialist services. Using this multiplier we can go from the number of sex workers using services (17,087) to an estimate of the sex worker population (35,882) that takes account of local knowledge. Mean  $316 \times 2.1 \times 54 = 35,882$ .

**Table 3** What multiplier?

	<i>Advantages</i>	<i>Disadvantages</i>
Kinnell		Non-systematic inclusion criteria for full service list Data available from only 16 of 120 services known to Kinnell
Current study	Obtains a multiplier based on differences between the two studies: the number of sex workers using services and a wider estimate of the sex worker population thus compensating for current study's weakness of excluding sex workers not known to specialist services	

## Results

Fifty-four specialist services listed in the UKNSWP directory were contacted. Of these, 38 responded and between them reported 12,215 sex workers using services in 2007–2008. Of these, 11,134 were female and 1,081 were male. The estimate of non-responder service figures from averages of responder data, gives a further 3,373 women and 1,493 men in contact with non-responding services: a total of 17,081. This figure is therefore the total number of sex workers thought to be in contact with specialist services (an arithmetic mean of 316.3 sex workers per project).

The results by sector show:

4,173 street based women and 5 street based men = 4,178  
 6,953 indoor based women and 1,076 indoor based men = 8,029  
 unknown sector women reported by projects = 8  
 unknown sector and unknown gender from estimates = 4,866  
 Total = 17,081

It is important to point out the limitations of specialist service client contact data; the most obvious one is that the data do not include sex

workers who are not identified by a project, choose not to access or are unaware of the service. The provision of sex work support services varies across the UK, there are many areas where no services are commissioned. There are few projects commissioned to provide services to male sex workers. Many specialist services target, and offer services to street sex workers and those working in massage parlours and flats; fewer target services at escorts. Sex workers in such sectors are likely to be under-represented.

### *Unknown sex worker calculation*

The current estimate of 17,081 gives an overall mean average of 316.3 sex workers in contact with each project (54 projects). Kinnell's figure of 665 was the mean average of estimated numbers of sex workers in the areas where responding services were located: a factor of 1:2.1. Using this factor, the current population of sex workers in areas where there are specialist projects would number  $(17,081 \times 2.1) = 35,870$ .

## **Discussion**

There are methodological difficulties in estimating the size of any hidden population and it is not sensible to base policy on sex work upon figures that have no credible origins. Nor is it legitimate to create policy that ignores the wide differences between sex markets. One thing that is certain from the academic literature and which is obvious to even the casual observer is that the conditions of street sex markets are very different from those of indoor markets. There are problems with all of the figures presented in this paper but they are based on valid counts of self-reporting sex workers. We estimate 17,081 sex workers in contact with specialist services and using a multiplier of 2.1 derived from a comparison between our data and Kinnell's (1999) data of sex workers believed by projects to be working in their areas, we conclude that there are probably 35,870 sex workers in Scotland and England in the areas covered by the 54 specialist services.

We also recognize as did Kinnell (1999) that sex workers may use other kinds of services such as GUM or drug treatment services. To obtain her 80,000 estimate, Kinnell multiplied the mean average of 665 sex workers for 16 reporting projects by 120, the number of agencies that she knew to be working with sex workers in the UK at

that time. If a similar exercise were done here, we could multiply the 316.3 average number of sex workers in contact with specialist services by all of the 153 services in the UKNSWP directory and a tentative estimate of 48,393 sex workers in the UK would emerge. As with the 1999 calculation, this does not take account of the lower numbers likely to be in contact with non-specialist agencies, nor address the problem of double counting sex workers who access more than one agency. If we then multiplied this by 2.1 – this time estimating all sex workers from sex workers in contact with all agencies, we would find 101,625 sex workers in the UK. However, these extrapolations from our estimates for sex workers in areas where there are specialist projects are increasingly speculative.

Our conservative estimate of the sex worker population in Scotland and England, in areas covered by specialist projects for 2007–2008 is therefore approximately 36,000 and given the methodological challenges of this task and the limitations of the data, it is possible that two or even three times this number of sex workers are operating in the UK. In comparison with the widely reported 80,000 sex workers found in the Kinnell study in 1999, there cannot have been a huge increase in the number of sex workers in the UK in the last ten years.

### Competing interest statement

The research leading to this paper was suggested by the UK Network of Sex Work Projects. No funding was provided. Data gathering and analysis was carried out by Linda Cusick and Rosie Campbell. Linda Cusick, Hilary Kinnell and Belinda Brooks-Gordon are associate members of the UKNSWP and Rosie Campbell is chair of the board.

### Notes

1. The authors are grateful to James Bartholomew, senior fellow of the Institute of Economic Affairs (2008), for comments made on a draft of this paper.
2. Ministers Harriet Harman and Fiona McTaggart have informed the debate or been responsible for policy and have backgrounds in Marxist feminism.
3. Examples of this alliance include a new All Party Parliamentary Group on Prostitution chaired by ex-minister Fiona McTaggart and funded by a

Christian anti-prostitution group. The first meeting was addressed by a radical separatist feminist from Sweden whose expenses were met by the Christian group.

4. Also known as the Attorney General's Report on Prostitution 1986. It was revealed that initial biases and strongly held beliefs influenced the Commission decision and while the Commission found no direct cause and effect relationship between pornography and violence, it chose to infer one out of 'common sense'.
5. Including Equalities Minister Harriet Harman, Home Secretary Jacqui Smith, Solicitor General Vera Baird, Barbara Follett, ex-minister Fiona McTaggart, and Maria Eagle. These female parliamentarians are fiercely loyal to each other and, Harriet Harman in particular, was keen to regain feminist credentials after removing benefits from single parents in 1997 and later cutting pensions; moves which disproportionately affected women.
6. Davis (2004) shows how cuts in newsroom budgets for investigative journalism and fact-checking, high turnover of staff and hungry 24-hour news cycles have changed news-gathering and enabled scare stories to flourish and grow.
7. For example, the Home Office gave £5.8 million of public money to the Poppy Project (Charities Commission, 2008) enabling it to lobby the government and write numerous studies on 'exploitation', and furnish the public with prohibitionist tools such as 'objector packs' against lap dancing clubs. Both the Home Office and the Equalities Office were linked to the project through studies commissioned or drawn upon heavily for policy despite the methodological critiques made of the reports (cf. 'An Academic Response to "Big Brothel"', by Sanders et al., 2008; Brooks-Gordon, 2005).
8. Europap: European Network for HIV/STD Prevention in Prostitution. This network was funded by the European Commission, Europe Against AIDS programme. At that time this included funding for networks within member countries. Europap-UK has since been reconstituted as the United Kingdom Network of Sex Work Projects (UKNSWP).
9. BBC News (2006) 'Sex Slavery under Police Scrutiny' [[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/south\\_yorkshire/5383386.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/south_yorkshire/5383386.stm)].
10. Home Office, Pentameter 2 [<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/about-us/news/pentameter-2>].
11. House of Commons Hansard, 15 July 2008, Column 261W.

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