

# FACTS ABOUT SEX WORK

English Collective of Prostitutes  
prostitutescollective.net  
ecp@prostitutescollective.net  
Tel: 020 7482 2496  
Twitter: @prostitutescoll

**There are approximately 72,800 sex workers in the UK** — 88% are women, 6% men and 4% transgender.<sup>1</sup> (No research we have found distinguishes between trans women, trans men and non-binary sex workers or asked those who identified themselves as female or male whether they identified as the gender they were assigned at birth.)

**Most sex workers are mothers working to support families.**<sup>2</sup> 74% of off-street sex workers “cited the need to pay household expenses and support their children”.

**More than 70% of UK sex workers have previously worked in healthcare, education or the voluntary sector.**<sup>3</sup>

**Prostitution is increasing because of austerity.** A 60% increase in street prostitution recorded in Doncaster is primarily attributed to destitution caused by benefit sanctions.<sup>4</sup> A quarter of young homeless women have engaged in sex

work to fund accommodation or in the hope of getting a bed for the night.<sup>5</sup> 86% of austerity cuts have targeted women.<sup>6</sup>

**The majority of sex workers are not trafficked or on drugs.** A study of migrant sex workers found less than 6% had been trafficked, many said they prefer working in the sex industry rather than the “unrewarding and sometimes exploitative conditions they meet in non-sexual jobs”.<sup>7</sup> For more information on trafficking see [Trafficking Briefing](#). Claims that over 95% of women in street prostitution are problematic drug users comes from a 2004 study of 71 women, contacted through an outreach project in Bristol, who were particularly vulnerable (2/3 were homeless).<sup>8</sup> Sex workers who don't use drugs have little contact with such projects and are unlikely to be surveyed. There is no evidence that drug use among sex workers is higher than other jobs.<sup>9</sup>

**The average age of entry into prostitution is 19 for outdoor workers and 23 for indoor workers.**<sup>10</sup> The claim that 75% of sex workers became involved in prostitution as children is false. It comes from small surveys (e.g. 30)<sup>11</sup> of street-based women and is not representative of the sex industry as a whole. In one often cited study, participants were chosen because they were under 18 when they entered prostitution.<sup>12</sup>

**Sex workers face a lot of violence.** A global systemic review of violence against sex workers reported that 45-75% of sex workers experienced workplace violence over a lifetime.<sup>13</sup> It is much safer to work indoors with others but this is illegal.<sup>14</sup> A survey of online sex workers found that 49% were unconfident that police would take reports of violence seriously.<sup>15</sup>

**There is evidence to indicate that violence from the police is a significant problem.** A New York study found that 30% of sex workers had been threatened with violence by police officers, while 27% actually experienced violence at the hands of police.<sup>16</sup> In a 2015 US study, nearly nine out of 10 (86%) trans sex workers who had interacted with the police reported being harassed, attacked, sexually assaulted, or mistreated in some other way by officers.<sup>17</sup>

**But criminalisation increases violence.** Attacks on sex workers doubled in Scotland after kerb-crawling laws were introduced which criminalised clients.<sup>18</sup> A 2014 survey found that

where arrests of sex workers and clients were high, only 5% of sex workers who were victims of a crime reported it. This compared to 46% of victims in areas where police adopted a harm reduction approach.<sup>19</sup> 63% of sex workers in Sweden said a law which criminalised clients created more prejudice.<sup>20</sup>

**Decriminalisation works.** New Zealand decriminalised sex work in 2003 with verifiable success.<sup>21</sup> Over 90% of sex workers said they had additional employment, legal, health and safety rights. 64.8% found it easier to refuse clients and 70% said they were more likely to report incidents of violence to the police.<sup>22</sup>

**Prosecutions of sex workers on the street and in premises are increasing.** For example, brothel-keeping convictions (the charge used against women working together collectively) rose from 55 in 2014 to 96 in 2015.<sup>23</sup>

**The police profit from raids, arrests and convictions for prostitution.** The police get half of all assets and cash seized under Proceeds of Crime law.<sup>24</sup>

**The prostitution laws are implemented in a racist and discriminatory way** with people of colour, migrant and trans people being targeted for arrest. Statistics from the US show that Black people are 13.2% of the population but make up 42% of all prostitution arrests.<sup>25</sup> Trans women, particularly women of colour, are targeted for arrest under the prostitution laws whether or not they are actually working. In a survey of Latina trans women in Los Angeles, 60% said they were profiled by officers.<sup>26</sup> Qualitative evidence from the UK indicates a similar story of discrimination, but this has not yet been quantified.

**Research has found high levels of condom use among sex workers.**<sup>27</sup>

**Using possession of condoms as evidence of prostitution makes it harder for sex workers to practice safer sex.**<sup>28</sup> Since police raids in Edinburgh in 2013 condom use among sex workers had fallen and the prevalence of STIs had increased.<sup>29</sup>

**The stigma associated with prostitution prevents sex workers getting appropriate health care.** A 2007 study found that 62% of street sex workers and 90% of parlour workers had not disclosed their work to their GP.<sup>30</sup>

**Decriminalisation could reduce new HIV transmissions by up to 46% globally over a decade.**<sup>31</sup>

**Public opinion polls show that the majority of people are in favour of decriminalisation.** Other polls found that the public do not support the criminalisation of clients.<sup>32</sup>

**Decriminalisation is supported by prestigious organisations** such as: Royal College of Nursing, Women Against Rape and internationally by Amnesty International, World Health Organisation, UNAIDS, Human Rights Watch, Global Alliance against Trafficking in Women among others.

**NB Decriminalisation is different from legalisation.** Decriminalisation involves the removal of all prostitution-specific laws; sex workers and sex work businesses operate within the laws of the land as other businesses. Under legalisation the sex industry is controlled by the government and sex work is legal only under certain state-specified conditions, creating a two-tier system where the most vulnerable sex workers remain illegal and outside of the protection of the law.<sup>33</sup>

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More information on prostitution:

[\*Decriminalisation of Prostitution: the Evidence\*](#)

[\*Why decriminalisation?\*](#)

[\*Fact and Fiction – Debunking Common Myths on Prostitution\*](#)



# References

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