

Update 10 October 2018

Work has continued on this project over the summer. As a reminder, we were commissioned by the Home office in Spring 2018 to (1) develop a typology of prostitution as it operates currently in England and Wales and (2) to identify robust sources for estimating the prevalence of those involved.

We have not been asked to report on, or make recommendations in relation, to government policy.

As such, we are trying as far as possible to confine our work to documenting what is going on, rather than what ought to be going on, in relation to prostitution and sex work in England and Wales today.

Key messages so far:

- The scope of this work includes the breadth of sexual/erotic services for payment/benefit
- Work is currently underway to cross-refer survey responses with existing published evidence to work up descriptions of different settings of prostitution and/or sex work
- In the coming weeks, we plan to follow up with a sample of survey respondents, and others identified through NGO contacts, who have experience of different settings
- We are in discussions with adult online platforms, police, NGOs and others and have received some preliminary anonymised data on prevalence
- We will be publishing first drafts for consultation in the new year

Literature Review

In terms of investigating the nature (or a typology) of prostitution and sex work in England and Wales, we were asked by our funders first to carry out a systematic review of the literature. Using key words, we searched the international academic and grey literature (for example, reports published by organisations) for relevant work post-2000. We worked in pairs to sift through this work, retaining only publications that met specific criteria i.e. that discussed the practice of prostitution and sex work (for example, drawing on interviews with individuals involved) or attempted to categorise or characterise aspects of the sex industry.

We have not included work that is focused narrowly on normative (how things ought to be) or policy issues (unless they include significant descriptive content), because we have not been asked to report on, or make recommendations in relation, to government policy.

We are currently in the process of coding that literature, identifying key themes and, crucially, identifying the different settings and types of prostitution and sex work discussed (e.g. independent escort, BDSM and fetish or street-based). We will then be able to cluster the literature and consider what existing evidence says about the nature of these different settings. This will include issues such as routes in and out; characteristics of buyers and sellers; how contact and payment is organised, and so on.

Online survey

At the same time, we are going through the survey responses and similarly coding the different settings and experiences that respondents talked about. Within each cluster, we will follow up with a sample of individual respondents by email, where they gave us consent to do so, to ask for further information. In this way, our typology will pull together the existing evidence base with our survey responses. We can already see how the survey responses are ahead of much of the literature, in terms of describing new and emerging practices.

We are conscious that an online survey reaches a particular demographic and so we are working with relevant organisations to ensure the voices of those who are harder to reach, are heard.

We recognise the debates around the terms 'prostitution' and 'sex work'. We are keen that the scope of this work includes a breadth of sexual/erotic services for payment/benefit. Too often, debates on this issue give a partial view or draw selectively examples to fit pre-held political positions.

The survey responses suggest similarities and differences within and between settings; that some individuals may move between settings; and that experiences and/or motivations may change over time.

Once we have drafted content for each setting, we will think about how best this could be presented as a typology. We want to produce something practical and best fit, which makes sense to different interested groups.

We will then consult with a wide range of groups (including drawing on the survey suggestions) to get feedback and to refine this work further. We hope that people will find a fair reflection in the work that we produce: but we also accept that such work cannot meet every criticism.

Stakeholder data

In terms of the prevalence strand of this work, we are using the literature review to consider similar attempts internationally.

We are mindful of the risks of our best estimates, offered with careful context and caution, being presented as nationally accurate figures. However, we can develop tools for the collection and quality assessment of such data. In addition, we will be able to provide reasonable estimates using a case study approach, where we can triangulate data held by different sources within a specific geographical area.

As such, we are using the online survey to follow up respondents' suggestions and offers of support. We are working with adult online platforms, police, NGOs, sex worker networks and others to explore what is possible. Some have already provided useful data.

A key issue is to collect the data from different sources in a way which we can harmonise. Our ideal is to work with raw anonymised data, collected over time, so that we can look at trends and cross-refer with other sources. For organisations supporting those involved in prostitution and/or sex work, we have developed (and revised following feedback) a table to complete. For the police, we will shortly be surveying Special Points of Contact to establish data held. Some individuals have also flagged small-scale or niche studies, that they or others have carried out, which all add to the picture.

Again, we will be consulting on this work once drafted.