

'Score, smoke, back on the beat': An exploration of the impact of homelessness on exiting street sex working in Manchester

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Research Paper 2011/01

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to explore how and why women get into sex work and the factors which lead them to continue. The research looked at the issues for women wanting to exit sex work - and considered, in particular, homelessness and how this impacts upon the choices available. The research was undertaken using qualitative methods comprising interviews with women working in the industry and with accommodation providers.

Findings

- The majority of the women interviewed became involved in sex work as teenagers to fund drug use or to escape poverty and were often introduced by another working woman. The majority had unsettled and damaging experiences as children such as being in care, parental neglect/violence or sexual abuse.
- Drug use and sex work are closely inter-linked and all women confirmed they had sold sex to fund drug use at some point, if not throughout, their sex working 'career'.
- Homelessness is a common experience for sex working women, in particular repeated homelessness. When women were sex working and homeless, this inevitably meant an increase in both drug use and sex working.
- Many had spent time in custody. None of the women in adult prisons had their housing needs addressed on release and were often released to 'no fixed abode'.
- Drug using sex workers need to be engaged in drug treatment but the women reported that they are unable to remain stable in treatment without suitable housing as keeping appointments was difficult when homeless.
- Women felt judged and unsupported by some hostel staff. Staff from projects reported having no training around the issues and complexity of sex work.
- Individuals from accommodation providers were knowledgeable and had a good understanding of the women's needs, but this was often down to their own experience and not as a result of any specific training.
- A difficulty facing statutory accommodation providers is that of classing money earned from sex work as income and the consequences for housing benefit.
- Most women wanting to exit sex work felt they needed suitable housing as well as drug treatment, but additionally required a source of income to alleviate poverty. Criminal records, lack of qualifications and work experience and poor health from long-term drug use all act as barriers to employment.

Recommendations

- The provision of specialist housing specifically for female sex workers is imperative to work holistically with this client group. This should be staffed 24 hours with easy referral routes in, having provision for emergency access. In order to accommodate the most chaotic women there should be no curfew and good links with the local drug team. This project should be a 'one-stop' shop to address the health and social needs of the client group.
- Fast tracking into drug treatment is vital to begin to address reasons for sex working.
- Specific training should be provided for accommodation providers around the needs of female sex workers. This would promote understanding of the issues and would aim to increase the confidence of staff when dealing with, and responding appropriately to disclosures of working.
- The conflict around housing benefit needs to be addressed. It should be clearly defined that someone who is sex working to fund a drug habit cannot be considered to have an income; this should be pragmatically classed as a support need.
- The practice of multi-agency working cannot be overstated. One agency cannot meet all needs so referral to appropriate agencies should take place with regular multi-agency reviews to monitor progress and avoid duplication of work.
- Key-working sessions between housing worker and client are vital and these should be prioritised to fully support individuals.