

Tackling the demand for prostitution: a rapid evidence assessment of the published research literature

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This rapid evidence assessment of the published research literature is part of the Tackling Demand for Prostitution Review (Home Office, 2008a), which aimed to assess what further action the Government and other agencies could do to reduce the demand for prostitution.

Research studies from selected countries were included in this review (220 studies were reviewed and 181 met the inclusion criteria). The findings presented highlight the characteristics and motivations of those who procure sex, the contexts in which they procure sex, and 'what works' in tackling the demand for prostitution.

The report found that methodological difficulties plague research into clients of prostitutes. There are many gaps in the research and much of the evidence is weak or inconclusive, particularly with regard to 'what works' in reducing demand. It was also noted that prostitution is a policy domain for which the 'right' answer may not be determined solely by reference to the evidence. There are moral, political and other influences that need to be considered when tackling the demand for prostitution.

Key findings

- Because of the often hidden and stigmatised nature of the prostitution, it is very difficult to produce reliable and accurate estimates of the number of people who procure sex – estimates vary depending on the method of calculation.
- Suggested motivations for paying for sex include:
 - desiring sexual variety;
 - dissatisfaction with existing relationships;
 - sexual gratification;
 - loneliness, shyness or incapacities (mental and physical);
 - having no other sexual outlet;
 - being separated from a partner by travel; and
 - curiosity, risk or excitement; to exercise control.
- Efforts to reduce demand seem to have mixed results, although the evidence is weak. It appears that the consequences of policy change are often hidden or practically unmeasurable. Also, the risk

Contents

Key implications	i
Summary	ii
Full table of contents	v
1. Introduction and methodology	1
2. Prevalence and characteristics of those who procure sex	2
3. Contexts and settings for procuring sex	5
4. Drivers and motivations for procuring sex	5
5. What prevents and deters those who procure sex?	6
6. Conclusions and points for consideration	14
Appendices	15
References	49

Keywords

Prostitution
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of displacement threatens to negate any gains of enforcement activity by making prostitution an even more hidden and secretive enterprise.

- Although the evidence base is weak and largely inconclusive, the review highlights a number of interventions.

- road management schemes in the UK, as part of a co-ordinated strategy, appear to reduce street prostitution at least in the short-term, but the impact on overall demand is unknown;
- naming and shaming’ tactics appear to offer potential in reducing demand, but there is a lack of robust evaluation of their impact, and of the consequences on family members;
- the research suggests that arrest of the client may be the single biggest specific deterrent, likely because of clients’ fear of the informal ramifications of exposing their behaviour, but that the risk of arrest is so low that there is little, if any, general deterrence;

– educative approaches, such as ‘John schools’, have demonstrated attitude change but have not changed behaviour;

- in Sweden, criminalisation of demand appeared to coincide with a reduction in street prostitution although some findings suggest a decline in the working conditions of street prostitutes and an increase in size of the indoor market.

This review highlights the major gaps in the evidence base and that the evidence provided is largely weak and inconclusive. Given finite resources, policy makers need to decide whether they wish to tackle all demand (including buying sex abroad), all domestic demand, or the demand for street prostitution. That decision will have significant implications for the strategies adopted and resources needed in terms of policing and delivering.