

## 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  
Kerb crawling  
Sex crime  
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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.

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### Introduction and aims

This rapid assessment of the 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.

This review of the published research aimed to answer the following research questions, which were framed by the Tackling Demand for Prostitution Board:

- What are the characteristics of those who procure sex?
- What are the contexts and settings for procuring sex?
- What are the drivers and motivations for procuring sex?
- How do the reasons for procuring sex relate to situation and context?
- What has been tried elsewhere to deter and/or hinder those who procure sex – what works to tackle the demand for prostitution?

### Methodology

The review included all relevant post-1990 English language studies conducted in a small number of selected countries: Australia, Finland, the Republic of Ireland, the Netherlands, North America, Sweden and the United Kingdom (UK).<sup>1</sup> A total of 220 studies were reviewed, and 181 studies<sup>2</sup> form the basis of this review.<sup>3</sup>

- 1 As there are cultural, legal, and social differences between the UK and other countries, and consequently differences in the nature of prostitution, it is unclear to what extent this evidence can or should be applied to prostitution policy in the UK. This should be taken into account when considering findings from non-UK countries.
- 2 Details of the 181 studies that formed the basis of the review are presented in Appendix 7.
- 3 The remaining 39 studies were excluded from the review because they either failed the inclusion criteria or did not report any new empirical data (see Appendix 1 and Appendix 8 for further details).

The review included academic studies that were relevant to one or more of the key research questions. A quality assessment of each study's design and related findings was undertaken.

### Key findings

It is important to note that methodological difficulties plague this area of research. There are many gaps in the evidence base and much of the evidence, especially when assessing 'what works in reducing demand', is low quality and mostly inconclusive.

The majority of studies reviewed were concerned with male clients of female street prostitutes. Much less is known about the clients of prostitutes who work from home, hotels, saunas or brothels.

### Characteristics and number of people who procure sex

Because of the often hidden and stigmatised nature of the prostitution, it is difficult to produce reliable and accurate estimates of the number of people who procure sex. Estimates of the proportion of men in the UK paying for sex vary depending on method of calculation.

Survey-based methods<sup>4</sup> have produced varying estimates for the proportion of men who procure sex in the UK, with around five to seven per cent reporting they had ever paid for sex and between one and six per cent reporting to have done so in the last five years. These figures suggest a client population of around 870,000 and more than 2.4 million males using prostitutes,<sup>5</sup> although the true figure could be higher or lower.

- 4 Surveys on this topic suffer from methodological weakness as they assume respondents are being honest in their responses, and by implication are admitting to what many people would regard as a highly stigmatised activity.
- 5 Based upon 2001 Census data (males aged between 15 and 79).

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Calculative-based methods tend to produce higher estimates, for example, one study suggests around 64 million transactions.<sup>6</sup>

Estimates of the clients' average age vary between 33 and 41, with the first visit to a prostitute typically taking place during late teens to mid-20s. A large proportion of men visiting prostitutes appear to be in stable relationships, and are employed or self-employed, with all occupational groups represented. Some key differences exist between men who pay for sex and those who do not, with some findings suggesting those who are less happy in their marital relationship have an increased likelihood of participating in the sex industry. However, overall differences tend to be modest.

### **Contexts and settings for procuring sex**

The sex market can be classified into submarkets consisting of the on-street sex market and various indoor environments. The on-street market appears to form a relatively small sector compared with indoor markets.

### **Drivers and motivations for procuring sex**

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.

A study using economic predictive modelling identified the main opportunity-related variables to purchasing sex as:

- working away from home; and
- recent arrival (within the past five years) in the geographical area.

### **What works in tackling the demand for prostitution?**

Efforts to reduce demand seem to have mixed results, although the evidence is weak. Indeed, it appears that the consequences of policy change are often hidden or practically unmeasurable. Also, the risk of displacement

threatens to negate any gains of enforcement activity by making prostitution an even more hidden and secretive enterprise. Also, few strategies to reduce demand are without potential negative consequences for prostitutes (for example, increased exploitation and risk).

Efforts to reduce demand thus far seem to have mixed results, although the evidence is often weak. The following key interventions were highlighted in the research:

- 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.
- In Sweden, criminalisation of demand appeared to coincide with a reduction in street prostitution although there is some evidence of a decline in the working conditions of street prostitutes and an increase in size of the indoor market.
- Educative approaches, such as 'John schools' in the US and elsewhere, have demonstrated attitude change but have not changed behaviour.
- The research seems to suggest that arrest of the client may be the single biggest specific deterrent, likely because of the clients' fear of the informal ramifications of exposing their behaviour, but the risk of arrest is so low that there is little, if any, general deterrence.

### **Conclusions and points for consideration**

This review highlighted 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.

Furthermore, prostitution is a policy domain for which the 'right' answer may not be determined solely by reference to the evidence. There are clearly moral, political and other influences that need to be considered when tackling the demand for prostitution.

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<sup>6</sup> 'Calculative methods', are based on a series of calculations, typically starting with estimates of the number of prostitutes (not an easy task in itself) multiplied by the average number of clients they are assumed to see in a year, summed to equate to the total estimated number of commercial sex transactions that take place annually.

This review suggests a number of points for consideration by those seeking to develop policy and practice to tackle the demand for prostitution. When considering these points, careful consideration should be made as to whether it is feasible to tackle demand for prostitution, given the resources required to tackle it effectively and also the research limitations in policy formulation.

If demand for prostitution is to be tackled, then the following actions are likely to be needed:

- tailored interventions to target specific motivations for procuring sex;
- strategies to increase the real and perceived risk of arrest;
- co-ordinated action across different market sectors to address the risk of displacement;
- supply-side interventions enforcing existing prostitution laws and restricting advertising;
- publicity to clarify the legal status of prostitution and related activities;
- support for prostitutes wishing to exit and consideration of the impact of policy change on prostitutes and their dependents; and
- innovative research, including systematic approaches to measuring the extent of demand and supply, and the impact of policy change.

## Contents

Key findings	i
Summary	iii
Introduction and aims	iii
Methodology	iii
Key findings	iii
Characteristics and number of people who procure sex	iii
Contexts and settings for procuring sex	iv
Drivers and motivations for procuring sex	iv
What works in tackling the demand for prostitution?	iv
Conclusions and points for consideration	iv
1. Introduction and methodology	1
Introduction	1
Methodology	2
2. Prevalence and characteristics of those who procure sex	2
Prevalence	2
Calculative methods: UK	2
Social survey methods: UK studies	3
Frequency of client visits: UK studies	3
Summary and reflections: prevalence in the UK	4
Client characteristics	4
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
Arrest and other enforcement strategies	7
Criminalising the purchase of sex (Sweden)	7
John schools and other educative approaches	8
Awareness raising/health risks	10
Community action	11
Naming and shaming	11
Road management and other traffic measures	11
What do men think?	12
Summary and reflections: what works to reduce demand?	12

6. Conclusions and points for consideration	14	Appendix 5: Motivations for procuring sex	29
Appendix 1: Detailed methodology	15	Typologies of male clients	29
Use of terminology	15	Motivations for procuring sex	30
Criteria for inclusion and exclusion of studies	15	Girlfriend experience	30
Search strategy	16	No strings attached	30
Search results	17	Difficulties with conventional relationships	30
Quality review and data synthesis	17	Separation from regular partner	30
A note on the literature	17	Sexual gratification and entitlement	31
Appendix 2: Estimating prevalence	19	Honour and status	31
Methods of estimation	19	Capacity to request specific sex acts	31
International literature: prevalence	19	Related to business	31
International literature: frequency of client visit	20	Curiosity, excitement and risk	31
Value of market	21	Violence and control	31
Appendix 3: Client characteristics	22	Opportunity, demand and price	32
Age at arrest/interview	22	Appendix 6: Policy approaches that can impact	
Marital status	22	on demand	32
Sexuality	22	Legalisation	32
Sexual activity	22	Tolerance zones	33
Clients occupation, income and education	22	Appendix 7: Studies included in the review	34
International studies	23	Appendix 8: Studies excluded from the review	47
Ethnicity	24	References	49
Mobility	24		
Drug and alcohol use	24		
Client sexual attitudes	24		
Differences	25		
Appendix 4: Context of procuring commercial sex	26		
Sex markets	26		
On-street market	26		
Off-street market	26		
Buying sex abroad	27		
Prevalence and characteristics of clients			
buying sex abroad	27		
Female clients	27		
Male clients of male prostitutes	28		
Enforcement and displacement	28		
Links between context and procuring sex	29		
Ethnicity and context	29		
Influence of peers and soliciting	29		