

Executive summary

What this report is about

There is a group in London who are at least 12 times more likely to be murdered than the national average. Approximately three quarters of those within this category will also be subjected to violence, assault and rape. However this group often distrusts the police and are much less willing to report crimes against them than the national average.

The group referred to are sex workers and it is imperative we improve their safety in London. This report looks into how we can do this.

It focuses, first, on the policing of sex trafficking and, second, on the policing of sex workers – with specific focus on off-street sex work.

Why I wrote this report

This report was requested by the London Mayor Boris Johnson after I raised a number of concerns at Mayor's Question Time in 2010/11. My first question involved a decision by Safer Neighbourhood police to 'name and shame' six street sex workers online. The Mayor thought that this should never happen again. However this issue was an 'operational' one and the former Commissioner did not support this move.

As I became more concerned about the policing of sex workers publicly, more and more worrying individual cases were brought to my attention. I was informed that raids on brothels were increasing as the Olympics approached. Furthermore, I was given the impression that sex workers were becoming less willing to report crimes committed against them. The research I have carried out so far supports these judgements.

Policing of sex trafficking

THE OLYMPICS

The Olympics led to heightened media interest that trafficking and prostitution in London would rise. As a result, the Metropolitan Police Service has received additional funds to tackle sex trafficking.

However, I found no strong evidence that trafficking for sexual exploitation does in fact increase during sporting events nor that such trafficking or prostitution had increased in London. In fact my research found that a decrease in prostitution had been reported by police in London.

The data I have however reveals that raids have increased significantly overall in the Olympic host boroughs. This has not led to a large numbers of sex traffickers being caught nor victims found. This suggests that either sex trafficking is not taking place on as large a scale as suggested or, more worryingly, that the way we are policing sex trafficking could be more effective.

DEVELOPING GOOD RELATIONSHIPS

Many sex trafficking victims in the sex industry do not fit the presumed - almost idealised – role: whereby someone is tricked into being a sex worker against their will.

Both my interviews with service providers who work with sex workers and with academics highlighted that many sex trafficked victims are migrant women who choose to be sex workers. Their conditions of work, once here, may be very exploitative but they may only comprehend this exploitation gradually. Therefore if police behaviour damages the relationship with this type of sex trafficked victim before that comprehension takes place, then intelligence can be lost.

Therefore SCD9 – the police unit which tackle sex trafficking - needs joint strategies to tackle this crime and must work with sex workers and service providers, alongside borough police, to ensure their work is fully understood.

FOCUSING ON NON-ORGANISED SEX TRAFFICKING

While investigating the policing of sex trafficking I came across a new area of concern. The Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) unit which tackles sex trafficking focuses on organised crime – hence their focus on ‘brothels’. However while brothel raids discovered largely eastern European and Asian victims, one sex trafficking referral centre told me that their largest group of victims were from West Africa. Other data I found also supported this.

Some sex trafficking is not organised and does not take place in brothels. One trafficking charity said that many sex trafficking victims they work with had been sexually exploited by someone familiar to them within a closed community. I am concerned that not enough police resource is looking into this area and that policing of sex trafficking too narrowly focuses on brothels.

Evidence-based work needs to be done to work out where, when and how sex trafficking occurs and then police it accordingly.

Policing of brothels

BROTHEL RAIDS/VISITS AND CLOSURES

If residents have complained about anti-social behaviour linked to a brothel then the police should tackle the problem and possibly close down the premises.

However the information I have gathered from individual cases, service providers and borough police demonstrates that police have been proactively raiding sex establishments without complaints nor significant intelligence that exploitation is taking place.

This is a concern for two reasons. First, when police resources are stretched, should police be visiting establishments advertised in phone boxes, using seven officers a time?

Second, NHS projects had noted that 'brothel' raids and visits had led to the displacement of sex workers away from their support networks, which led to their lives and health being at increasing risk.

NOT PRIORITISING CRIME AGAINST SEX WORKERS

Sex workers feel that when they report crimes, police focus on their crimes related to sex work – such as having a 'brothel' - over the crimes they originally reported against them. Therefore sex workers told me they feel that they cannot safely report crime to the police.

The service providers I spoke to, who work with sex workers, all said that they had noticed a decline in the number of sex workers reporting crimes to police.

The best policing model I found to tackle this lack of reporting was in Merseyside. This included labelling attacks against sex workers as hate crimes as a way of acknowledging that they were a minority who were disproportionately targeted by criminals. It also included the police putting out a well-publicised message that crimes against sex workers would not go unpunished. This strategy was formed under the leadership of Bernard Hogan-Howe, the new MPS Commissioner.