

East London Project: a participatory mixed-method evaluation on how removing enforcement could affect sex workers' safety, health and access to services in East London

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Published September 2024
DOI: 10.3310/GFVC7006

Plain language summary

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Public Health Research 2024; Vol. 12: No. 10
DOI: 10.3310/GFVC7006

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Some sex workers experience greater levels of violence, anxiety, depression and drug use than people who do not sell sex. This research evaluated the effects of removing police enforcement on sex workers' safety and health (violence, depression and anxiety) and access to health and social care in East London. The study was participatory: co-researchers with lived experience of sex work or of working closely with sex workers worked with university-based researchers to design, conduct and disseminate the research. We conducted qualitative research (interviews and neighbourhood walks) to understand how police enforcement affected sex workers' safety, health and service access. We measured how much enforcement affected levels of violence, through a cohort study (recruiting participants and following up with them over time). We then developed a mathematical model to simulate the effects of removing enforcement.

In this urban locality, we found that women (cisgender and transgender) who worked on the street experienced far higher levels of police enforcement and reported more violence from all perpetrators, including police themselves, than those working indoors. They reported higher levels of anxiety and depression and were less likely to be getting help for these problems. In our study, sex workers' safety and mental health were affected by entrenched poverty, insecure housing, police enforcement and service cuts. Cisgender and transgender women who worked on the street, used drugs, were migrants and/or were women of colour were particularly targeted for enforcement, denied justice and affected by funding cuts to specialist health and support services. Ethnically and racially minoritised sex workers more frequently worked in lower-paid, street-based settings and, regardless of work setting, were more frequently arrested and imprisoned. Our mathematical modelling suggested that stopping the displacement of street-based sex workers alongside the provision of housing could result in a significant (71%) reduction in client violence. Participants recommended redirecting funds from enforcement towards respectful, peer-led services. Findings add weight to existing international evidence on ending enforcement against sex workers and the need to address other of violence and poor health, including reducing poverty, providing housing and commissioning appropriate, community-led services for sex workers.

Public Health Research

ISSN 2050-439X (Online)

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This article

The research reported in this issue of the journal was funded by the PHR programme as award number 15/55/58. The contractual start date was in February 2017. The draft manuscript began editorial review in May 2021 and was accepted for publication in June 2022. The authors have been wholly responsible for all data collection, analysis and interpretation, and for writing up their work. The PHR editors and production house have tried to ensure the accuracy of the authors' manuscript and would like to thank the reviewers for their constructive comments on the draft document. However, they do not accept liability for damages or losses arising from material published in this article.

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