

Effect of police enforcement and extreme social inequalities on violence and mental health among women who sell sex: findings from a cohort study in London, UK

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Publication

Elmes J, Stuart R, Grenfell P, Walker J, Hill K, Hernandez P, *et al.* Effect of police enforcement and extreme social inequalities on violence and mental health among women who sell sex: findings from a cohort study in London, UK. *Sex Transm Infect* 2022;**98**:323–31. <https://doi.org/10.1136/sextrans-2021-055088>

Abstract

Objectives

To examine legal and social determinants of violence, anxiety/depression among sex workers.

Methods

A participatory prospective cohort study among women (inclusive of transgender) ≥ 18 years, selling sex in the last 3 months in London between 2018 and 2019. We used logistic generalised estimating equation models to measure associations between structural factors on recent (6 months) violence from clients or others (local residents, strangers), depression/anxiety (Patient Health Questionnaire-4).

Results

197 sex workers were recruited (96% cisgender-women; 46% street-based; 54% off-street) and 60% completed a follow-up questionnaire. Street-based sex workers experienced greater inequalities compared with off-street in relation to recent violence from clients (73% vs 36%); police (42% vs 7%); intimate partner violence (IPV) (56% vs 18%) and others (67% vs 17%), as well as homelessness (65% vs 7%) and recent law enforcement (87% vs 9%). Prevalence of any STI was 17.5% (17/97). For street-based sex workers, recent arrest was associated with violence from others (adjusted OR (aOR) 2.77; 95% CI 1.11 to 6.94) and displacement by police was associated with client violence (aOR 4.35; 95% CI 1.36 to 13.90). Financial difficulties were also associated with client violence (aOR 4.66; 95% CI 1.64 to 13.24). Disability (aOR 3.85; 95% CI 1.49 to 9.95) and client violence (aOR 2.55; 95% CI 1.10 to 5.91) were associated with anxiety/depression. For off-street sex workers, financial difficulties (aOR 3.66; 95% CI 1.64 to 8.18), unstable residency (aOR 3.19; 95% CI 1.36 to 7.49), IPV (aOR 3.77; 95% CI 1.30 to 11.00) and alcohol/drug use were associated with client violence (aOR 3.16; 95% CI 1.26 to 7.92), while always screening and refusing clients was protective (aOR 0.36; 95% CI 0.15 to 0.87). Disability (aOR 5.83; 95% CI 2.34 to 14.51), unmet mental health needs (aOR 3.08; 95% CI 1.15 to 8.23) and past eviction (aOR 3.99; 95% CI 1.23 to 12.92) were associated with anxiety/depression.

Conclusions

Violence, anxiety/depression are linked to poverty, unstable housing and police enforcement. We need to modify laws to allow sex workers to work safely and increase availability of housing and mental health services.

Funding

This publication was funded by the Public Health Research programme as a part of award number 15/55/58.

This article reports on one component of the research award A participatory mixed-method evaluation on how removing enforcement could affect sex workers' safety, health and access to services, in East London. For more information about this research please view the award page [<https://fundingawards.nihr.ac.uk/award/15/55/58>]

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.1136/sextrans-2021-055088>