

The Effect of Systemic Racism and Homophobia on Police Enforcement and Sexual and Emotional Violence among Sex Workers in East London: Findings from a Cohort Study

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Publication

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Abstract

There is extensive qualitative evidence of violence and enforcement impacting sex workers who are ethnically or racially minoritized, and gender or sexual minority sex workers, but there is little quantitative evidence. Baseline and follow-up data were collected among 288 sex workers of diverse genders (cis/transgender women and men and non-binary people) in London (2018–2019). Interviewer-administered and self-completed questionnaires included reports of rape, emotional violence, and (un)lawful police encounters. We used generalized estimating equation models (Stata vs 16.1) to measure associations between (i) ethnic/racial identity (Black, Asian, mixed or multiple vs White) and recent (6 months) or past police enforcement and (ii) ethnic/racial and sexual identity (lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) vs. heterosexual) with recent rape and emotional violence (there was insufficient data to examine the association with transgender/non-binary identities). Ethnically/racially minoritized sex workers (26.4%) reported more police encounters partly due to increased representation in street settings (51.4% vs 30.7% off-street, $p = 0.002$). After accounting for street setting, ethnically/racially minoritized sex workers had higher odds of recent arrest (adjusted odds ratio 2.8, 95% CI 1.3–5.8), past imprisonment (aOR 2.3, 95% CI 1.1–5.0), police extortion (aOR 3.3, 95% CI 1.4–7.8), and rape (aOR 3.6, 95% CI 1.1–11.5). LGB-identifying sex workers (55.4%) were more vulnerable to rape (aOR 2.4, 95% CI 1.1–5.2) and emotional violence. Sex workers identifying as ethnically/racially minoritized (aOR 2.1, 95% CI 1.0–4.5), LGB (aOR 2.0, 95% CI 1.0–4.0), or who use drugs (aOR 2.0, 95% CI 1.1–3.8) were more likely to have experienced emotional violence than white-identifying, heterosexual or those who did not use drugs. Experience of any recent police enforcement was associated with increased odds of rape (aOR 3.6, 95% CI 1.3–8.4) and emotional violence (aOR 4.9, 95% CI 1.8–13.0). Findings show how police enforcement disproportionately targets ethnically/racially minoritized sex workers and contributes to increased risk of rape and emotional violence, which is elevated among sexual and ethnically/racially minoritized workers.

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