



Reducing the Impact of Serious Organised Crime in Local Communities

The role and impact of organised crime in the local off-street sex market

BRIEFING 2

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Key Messages

- *In a single city 65 brothels, linked to 74 offenders, were identified over a two-year period. Over three quarters (77 per cent) displayed links to organised crime groups.*
- *There was a high level of turnover and movement of those working in brothels. In a third (29 per cent) of brothels there was evidence that sex workers' movements had been controlled.*
- *Organised crime pervades the off-street sex market but was not prioritised for a response by local police teams.*
- *No single agency took ownership of the problem of exploitation in the off-street sex market and there was very little proactive engagement with vulnerable sex workers.*

Introduction

Unlike the on-street sex market, which is more visible to the public, the more hidden off-street sex market has received relatively little attention from practitioners, policy makers and researchers. This is in spite of the heightened risk to those working

in brothels of exploitation and abuse at the hands of perpetrators seeking to control and profit from the sex market. Tackling trafficking and exploitation are key components of the government's Serious and Organised Crime Strategy¹, with the estimated cost to the UK being £890 million each year². However, little is currently known about perpetrators and organised crime groups (OCGs) operating in the UK sex market.

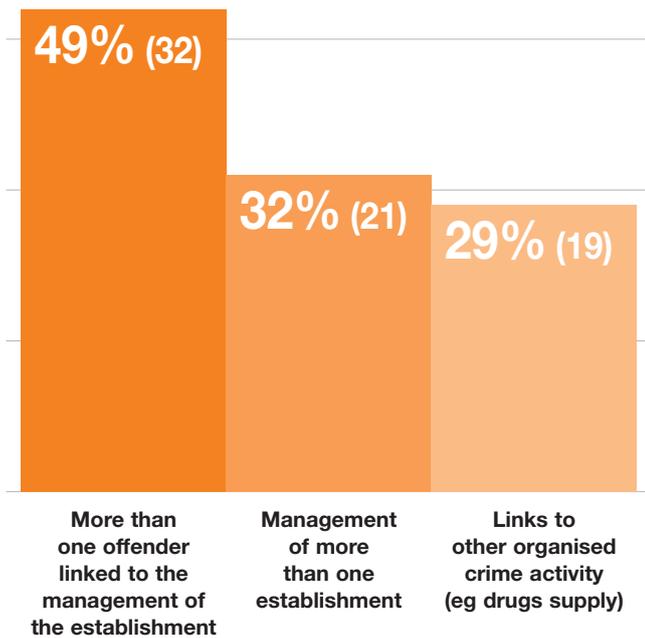
National agencies with a UK-wide perspective on organised crime have dominated policy debates on control in the UK sex market (often focused on human trafficking) but it remains unclear what this really means for communities and whether it is a problem that is significant enough to merit more attention from local practitioners. To address this gap in knowledge this study took a ground-floor view of the off-street sex market within a single city, with the aim of assessing:

- How much of the off-street sex market is controlled by OCGs and what this looks like.
- The impact it has in local communities.
- The response (including key challenges) from the police and other local agencies.

¹ HM Government (2013) Serious and Organised Crime Strategy. London: TSO.

² Mills, H., Skodbo, S. and Blyth, P. (2013) *Understanding organised crime: Estimating the scale and the social and economic costs*. London: Home Office.

Indicators of organisation – Percentage and number of brothels



Indicators of human trafficking – Percentage and number of brothels

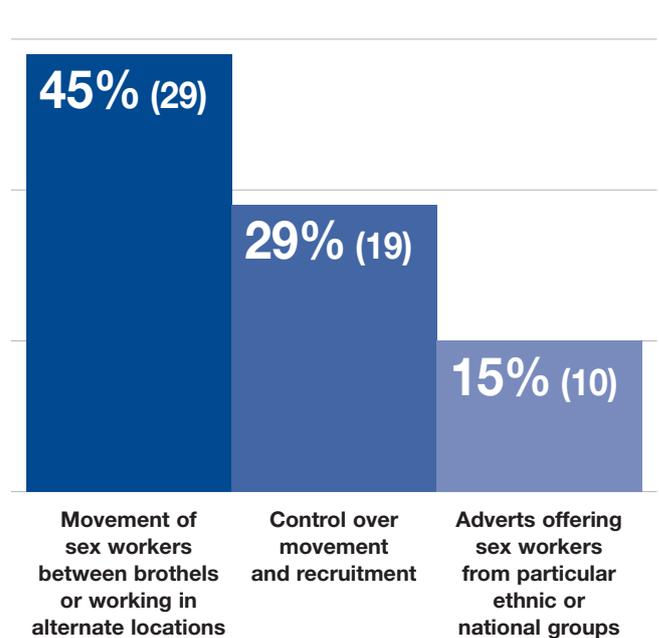


Figure 1: Organised crime indicators displayed by each establishment

Approach

Data linked to the sex market for the period 2013 and 2014 were extracted from the Avon and Somerset police force crime and intelligence database. This information was used to profile all known brothels operating during this period in Bristol, including the sex workers and offenders linked to each, and characteristics that indicated either organised crime or exploitation of sex workers.

In addition, over 100 interviews were completed with local and national practitioners from enforcement and support agencies.

The scale of the adult sex market controlled by organised crime

A total of 65 brothels were identified as operating in the city during 2013 and 2014, linked to 142 sex workers and 74 offenders who owned or helped to manage them. This reflects only the information recorded in the crime and intelligence databases and it is known much of the adult sex market goes unregistered by the police, so the actual number will inevitably be much higher.

The business-like structures required to manage brothels so they are profitable and avoid police attention are strong grounds to presume a link to organised crime³. This assumption was tested through the use of the indicators listed in Figure 1. Nearly half of brothels were managed by more than one offender (49 per cent). A third (32 per cent) were run by offenders who also managed other brothels and a similar proportion (29 per cent) had links to other types of organised criminality, predominantly drug supply.

Human trafficking is a serious and often complex crime, and is a prominent feature in the UK Serious and Organised Crime Strategy⁴. For this reason trafficking was adopted as an indicator for the involvement of organised crime in the sex market. Our analysis suggests the movement and recruitment of sex workers was controlled in one third (29 per cent) of brothels. Additionally, nearly half of the identified brothels (45 per cent) were linked to sex workers who moved between different brothels (the extent of control and coordination of these movements was unclear).

³ In terms of the definition for organised crime in the HM Government Serious and Organised Crime Strategy (2013).

⁴ HM Government (2013) Serious and Organised Crime Strategy. London: TSO.

What does it look like in communities?

The 65 brothels took one of three distinct forms:

Residential brothels

38 brothels were known to the police and located in addresses indistinguishable from all others, often in deprived residential estates. A third (34 per cent) of known sex workers and nearly two-thirds (64 per cent) of offenders were linked to these establishments. Nearly two-thirds (63 per cent) displayed at least one indicator of organised crime.

Commercial parlours

14 brothels advertised as legitimate businesses offering massage services, but with a clear indication they were brothels operating in plain sight. They were well known to police due to their relatively stable and overt presence on high streets. Nearly half of the known off-street sex workers (47 per cent) and approaching a third (30 per cent) of offenders were linked to commercial parlours, and all displayed at least one indicator of organised crime.

Pop-up brothels

13 were temporary brothels which established themselves for short periods of time (sometimes days) in hotels or short-term apartment lets in the city. Nearly all displayed at least one indicator of organised crime, most commonly the movement of sex workers between brothels.

Practitioners knew the least about pop-up brothels but considered them to present the greatest threat of trafficking. Their transient nature meant many did not come to the attention of the police so they are likely to have been much more prevalent than was indicated in police records. In all types of brothel there was a high degree of turnover, with few sex workers staying in one establishment for long; one brothel employing Chinese nationals saw new sex workers arriving every week. This, along with a limited understanding of how the market operates (for example, how sex workers are recruited), made

it difficult to develop a clear intelligence picture and assess the threat of exploitation.

What's the impact?

To counter the problem of under-reporting, practitioners rely on pre-established indicators to assess the likelihood that a person is being exploited⁵. The analysis presented here applied the same framework to assess places (ie each brothel) rather than people, using information recorded in police intelligence. Key findings include:

- One in five (12 brothels, 18 per cent) had forced, intimidated or coerced women into providing sexual services; this was most evident in residential brothels. Similarly, sex workers from nearly one in five (12 brothels, 18 per cent) had expressed fear or anxiety.
- In a minority of (mostly residential) brothels (eight brothels, 12 per cent), sex workers had reported being debt-bonded. Practitioners described debts having been imposed, to cover the costs of travel from their home countries as a common control mechanism used by smugglers or traffickers.
- There were multiple indicators of control or restrictions within the brothels. Approaching one in five (12 brothels, 18 per cent) employed sex workers who were unable to produce passports or other relevant documents, potentially restricting their ability to leave. In nearly a quarter (15 brothels, 23 per cent) the sex workers slept at the premises; in the case of one brothel, sex workers arrived for a number of days and did not leave the premises during their entire stay. There was also evidence of restrictions being placed on movements (eight brothels, 12 per cent) and third parties controlling the online accounts of sex workers on an adult website (seven brothels, 11 per cent).

The most commonly recorded nationality for known sex workers was Romanian (57 sex workers,

⁵ This assessment drew on a framework published by the United Nations International Labour Office (2009) *Operational indicators of trafficking in human beings*. Geneva: International Labour Office.

43 per cent); these were the only national group found to be working in pop-up brothels. British nationals made up a minority of sex workers in brothels (22 sex workers, 17 per cent), most of whom had worked in a commercial parlour. The remainder of sex workers were a mix of EU and non-EU nationals. A small number of residential brothels only employed women from an Asian background (one had strong links to Thailand). Consequently, many had few or no ties to the communities in which they were (often temporarily) working, which appeared to marginalise them and impede access to mainstream support services. In interviews, practitioners described how foreign nationals were personally threatened with violence, which could extend to their families at home, thus limiting the capacity of local police and other agencies to safeguard individuals who were understandably concerned for the welfare of themselves and their families.

Unlike the more visible aspects of the sex market that occur on the streets, the exploitation of those working in the off-street sex trade was not seen or experienced by the public to anywhere near the same degree. Where it was visible, practitioners described a tolerance of the off-street sex market within the community. For example commercial parlours were an accepted feature of some high streets and were populated in the main by itinerant sex workers who were not constituent members of the community. The result was a relative lack of public concern, which limited the pressure on public services to tackle the issue.

The local response

There was a tacit understanding within the police service that their efforts should be targeted at the harm caused (for example, by ensuring children were not employed and sex workers were not subjected to violence or exploitation) rather than on enforcement action against prostitution or associated organised crime. That said, information for identifying harm was largely unavailable. Most of the harm was experienced out of public view, often by victims who rarely made a complaint. Consequently there were few calls to respond to and little information to direct more proactive policing efforts. The consensus among practitioners was that 'if you don't go looking for it, you won't find it' and proactive effort was

seldom prioritised by local practitioners. Occasional welfare checks were completed at brothels by a local police team and partners, but sex workers rarely came forward for help and information on those managing the brothels was unforthcoming. These visits were sporadic and not core business for any local agency. Arguably, support agencies (rather than police) were better placed to meaningfully engage and identify safeguarding issues for this vulnerable group, but it was unclear which agency could take this on. High volumes of sex workers advertised their services on specialist websites and while one or two police officers had attempted to scan online advertisements for the threat of exploitation, this was not done systematically or regularly. The lack of information meant resource allocation was rarely harm-focused and tended to be steered (if at all) towards brothels that were known or most visible.

Specialist enforcement capabilities for developing the intelligence on and targeting OCGs were largely unavailable for tackling this area of crime. There were only two groups operating within the sex market that were formally recognised as OCGs by the police force. One had been known about for a long time but had not been prioritised for a response, partly because it was not considered harmful enough when viewed against other OCGs. There was a lack of awareness among practitioners within neighbourhood police teams about what information could usefully be collected and recorded, with a tendency to view trafficking and exploitation as the preserve of specialist police units. Equally, there was little intelligence flow or instruction from central teams or the National Crime Agency to help steer the work of neighbourhood police teams on the ground.

Organised crime operating in the off-street sex market was described by a national-level practitioner as *'too hard [to tackle] for the amount of harm it causes'* and enforcement activity against brothel owners/managers was rare. High evidential thresholds presented challenges to mounting successful prosecutions for trafficking or controlling prostitution with a high risk of resource-intensive investigations culminating in a case collapsing or a low sentence (for a lesser offence) being received by the offender. This left officers questioning the value of such work.

Conclusions and recommendations

Analysis of police data suggests that organised crime has a significant presence in the highly lucrative off-street sex market, where the operating model varies, as does the nature and degree of harm it causes. Practitioners were unanimous that exploitation in the off-street adult sex market was much more prevalent than was recorded on police systems (or indeed that of any agency). However, as long as the off-street sex market is not a priority for proactive intelligence gathering to address the information gaps, the true extent of the harms that result will continue to remain largely hidden, hindering harm-based prioritisation of enforcement and safeguarding activities. The relative impunity with which pimps and traffickers operate within the adult sex market, combined with the almost total exclusion of many off-street sex workers – particularly foreign nationals – from mainstream society, requires a radical reconsideration of what the police and other relevant agencies should and could be doing.

Recommendation 1

The Home Office, together with the National Crime Agency, should develop guidance on tackling the off-street sex market, including how best to target pimps and traffickers and support sex workers in brothels.

Recommendation 2

Local authorities should develop a multi-agency strategy to tackle trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation (or review any that already exist).

There is a need to improve how intelligence is managed; information that is already known should be used to increase understanding of the problem locally. The proficiency of practitioners in developing more information should also be improved. This research applied existing information and undertook a systematic place-based risk assessment (the locations were more of a stable feature in communities than the workers) to identify where the threat of exploitation was greatest and where the gaps in knowledge were. But information was scant, largely due to low reporting and little being done proactively to build on it. More clarity is needed over

which agencies in local areas have the powers to intervene when necessary, and also which are in a position to raise the awareness and profile of the issue to increase visibility of the problem. New approaches need to be developed for collecting robust intelligence, targeting criminals that exploit sex workers, helping victims and witnesses to come forward and protecting them when they do.

Recommendation 3

Police forces, together with local authorities and representatives of the voluntary sector should jointly produce locally-tailored strategies for assessing and targeting the off-street sex market.

Recommendation 4

The police and other local agencies need to do more to identify the hidden victims exploited in the off-street sex market and facilitate investigations for which no victim comes forward.

Organised crime in the adult sex market is rarely confined to a single police force area, with many perpetrators and sex workers moving across multiple borders in the UK. However, the harm is experienced within communities, and local agencies need to take responsibility for ensuring the safety of those who are at risk of exploitation in their area. Any local activity needs to be effectively coordinated with the regional and national response to ensure that it adds value. Without someone in charge of developing the local response to trafficking and exploitation, including coordinating activity across borders, and without a clear and simple local narrative that raises public awareness and concern, efforts to tackle trafficking and exploitation are at risk of being superficial and ineffective.

This work is one component of a wider research project looking at organised crime and its impact on local communities. Further papers, as well as a single consolidated report, are scheduled for publication this year.

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