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# Practitioner Resource 3: Understanding existing prevalence data on the UK sex industry

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**A practitioner resource summarising content from the 2019 Home  
Office Report 'The nature and prevalence of prostitution and sex work  
in England and Wales today'**

Authored by Professor Marianne Hester, Dr Natasha Mulvihill, Dr Andrea  
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# Introduction

This resource provides an overview of existing prevalence data on prostitution and sex work in England and Wales. It is based on research carried out by a team of researchers at the University of Bristol who were commissioned by the Home Office and the Office of the South Wales Police and Crime Commissioner to report on the current 'nature' and 'prevalence' of prostitution in England and Wales. The research was carried out between May 2018 and June 2019 and used a working definition that took a broad view of the sex industry: *'Prostitution and/or sex work constitutes the provision of sexual or erotic acts or sexual intimacy in exchange for payment or other benefit or need'* (Hester et al., 2019, p.2). As part of this research project, the team of researchers carried out a systematic search for relevant academic literature and other publications; conducted a public online survey; carried out follow-up in-depth email questionnaires with survey respondents who identified as currently or recently involved in prostitution and sex work; sent questionnaires to NGOs to administer to their services-users or members; and held consultations and discussions with a wide range of organisations. Based on this data, they developed a typology to describe and classify contemporary practices. The typology has two elements: six cross-cutting themes and fourteen settings and services. They also explored data sources for estimating the national prevalence of those involved in sex work and prostitution, concluding that currently in the UK, 'no source of data allows for the production of representative population estimates for this group' (Hester et al., 2019, p.3).

This resource is based on Appendix 7 of the report and provides an overview of existing estimates of the numbers involved in the sex industry, together with information on the methods used to obtain these estimates. We wish to acknowledge foremost the work of Dr Alba Lanau-Sanchez who led this strand of the work.

The researchers highlighted two groups whose voices were under-represented or absent within the research due to methodological and ethical constraints: (1) migrant sex workers; and (2) British and non-British individuals who are/were forcibly coerced, who are/were trafficked, who are/were sexually exploited and/or who are traumatised in relation to their experience.

As the research demonstrated, there is great diversity in opinion and experience when it comes to prostitution and sex work and the language people use tends to signify conflicting political, ideological or moral positions. However, there is also much common ground. This resource has been created out of a desire to find that common ground and move forward to challenge the status quo of how people in the sex industry are treated and to improve the quality of services available. To this end, this resource is aimed at practitioners involved in commissioning and delivering support services to those involved in the sex industry as well as professionals who come into contact with those who sell sex during the course of their work, such as police officers, housing providers, local authority departments etc. The language used in the resource

reflects that used in the original research report. For more information about the research this resource is based on, see: [The nature and prevalence of prostitution and sex Work in England and Wales today \(Hester, Mulvihill, Matolcsi, Lanau Sanchez and Walker, 2019\).](#)

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# The Problems with Trying to Count

Estimating the prevalence of sex work is challenging. Key reasons include:

- Hidden nature of the sex industry – activities often occur in private
- Stigma – means some people involved in the sex industry may avoid self-identifying
- Multifaceted nature of the sex industry – spans a wide range of activities
- The transience of activities – people move in and out, as well as across settings and places
- Illegality of some activities – an additional barrier to self-identification and information sharing

As a result of the above factors, research on sex work and prostitution tends to have low response rates, meaning that generalisation can be problematic. **Prevalence data should always be accompanied by caveats.**

## A Data Collection Tool

Drawing on the experience of previous studies and best practice outlined below, the University of Bristol team developed a data collection tool. The tool provides a structured template for organisations to collect and evaluate the quality of data on those involved in the sex industry in their local area. It helps organisations to identify limitations with the data that is available to them and potential gaps in the existing information. This is essential to be able to generate more accurate estimates of the numbers of individuals involved.

Having an accurate understanding of how many people are involved in the sex industry in the local area, and the different settings and services in which they are involved, is important for the design and delivery of specialist support services. It enables organisations to assess the reach of existing support services, adapt and develop new services to meet the needs of different groups, and establish a case for funding requirements.

More information on the tool is available in Appendix 9 of the Home Office report.

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# Methods of Counting

## Census and Enumeration Methods

A census counts all members of the population e.g. all sex workers in the country, or all female sex workers working in brothels.

A census would identify all locations where sex workers work and count each individual at each location.

Enumeration methods apply the same principle but to a selected area(s) and multiply the observed values to create a total estimate.

Both methods require a known sampling frame - for example, a comprehensive list of venues or hotspots.

When a sampling frame is readily available, census and enumeration methods are straightforward to implement and can be less resource consuming than other methods.

However, when the population is hidden, geographically dispersed and/or highly mobile - often characteristics of the population involved in selling sex - the methods do not perform as well, and a sampling frame may be difficult to define.

UK studies to date have typically omitted the second step and instead approximated the multiplier using a range of approaches. This means the estimates produced are not robust.

## Capture-Recapture Method

Capture-recapture is often considered as the gold standard to count hard to reach populations.

The method estimates the total population by contrasting the overlap between two independent samples.

For example, a team would collect data on sex workers in a set of locations and carry out a second independent count a week later.

Capture-recapture methods can be relatively easy to implement. The method does not require much data or statistical expertise.

However, the accuracy of the estimates rests on a range of assumptions that can be hard to meet, particularly for hidden and mobile populations such as sex workers.

## The Multiplier Method

Several studies in the UK have used a simplified version of the multiplier method to estimate the prevalence of prostitution and sex work. The multiplier method relies on two sets of good quality data:

- (1) Organisations and services aimed at the population of interest in a defined area are asked to disclose how many sex workers attended over a defined period (e.g. the number of sex workers who attended a named STI clinic in the last 30 days)
- (2) A survey of sex workers in the area is carried out, e.g. by visiting all parlours and street locations in the defined areas and workers are asked specifically whether they attended a named STI clinic in the last 30 days.
- (3) Prevalence is then obtained by dividing the number who received the service (calculated in (1)) by the proportion of the total surveyed who reported receiving the service (calculated in (2)).

By tailoring questionnaires appropriately, this method can also be used to reduce double counting by identifying the population who are in contact with several services.

# Previous Prevalence Estimates (1999-2018)

The table below provides a summary of existing estimates of the number of people involved in sex work and prostitution in the UK. It provides details on who was included in the estimate (population) and the methods used in each study to arrive at the estimate. With all of the estimates below, there are some caveats: (1) none are based on studies which contained data

on all sexual services and settings; (2) existing data is likely to severely under-estimate figures for groups who are less likely to be in contact with prostitution and sex work support services, such as escorts, victims of trafficking and exploitation, migrant and or highly mobile populations; and (3) certain groups such as those involved in sugaring or BDSM, as well as people who

engage in opportunistic sex for payment, do not necessarily view themselves as part of the sex industry, thus they are likely to be excluded from any counts.

**Full references for the studies listed in the table are available in the 2019 Home Office report.**

Source	Year	Estimate	Population	Method
Import.io, 2017	2017	104,964	People involved in selling sex advertising online (all genders) in one single platform	Collected front end data from one online platform.
Brooks-Gordon, et al., 2015	2009/2013	72,816	People involved in selling sex in the UK (all genders, but men likely to be under-represented)	Surveyed service providers. Complemented data with previous studies for under-represented populations (e.g. males).
Harworth et al., 2012	2010	1000 (sub-national)	People involved in selling sex in Northumberland	Local mapping through extensive qualitative interviews with local professionals and providers.
Pitcher, 2015	2009-10	85,714	People involved in selling sex on the street or indoors in the UK	Surveyed service providers. Multiplier estimating the difference between service users and estimated sex workers in the area.
Cusick et al., 2009	2007-08	35,882 (x3 =107,656)	People involved in selling sex in the UK (all genders, but men likely to be under-represented)	Surveyed service providers. Prioritised services working primarily with street, massage parlours, flats and in some cases escorting. Multiplier based on previous research. The authors acknowledged the figure could be three times higher than their estimate.
Abramsky and Drew, 2014	2004	58,000	Women selling sex in the UK (indoors and street)	Estimate drawing on Dickson (2004) and Metropolitan Police estimates for London and extrapolated to the UK.
Kinnell, 1999	1999	80,000	Sex workers in the UK (all genders, but men likely to be under-represented)	Surveyed service providers (included specialist projects for sex workers and non-specialist agencies such as Genito-Urinary Medicine (GUM) and drug services). A multiplier was used to estimate the difference between service users and estimated sex workers in the area.

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The aim of the Centre is to conduct high quality research to inform policy, practice and action on gender-based violence. Our history of researching violence against women and gender-based violence, feeds into policy and practice nationally, internationally and locally. We offer a range of consultancy, teaching and training, including research dissemination events and tailor-made seminars for professionals. To find out more about our work visit our website: [www.bris.ac.uk/sps/research/centres/genderviolence](http://www.bris.ac.uk/sps/research/centres/genderviolence)

## Beyond the Streets

Beyond the Streets partners with women on their journey out of sexual exploitation. We want to see a world where people are free from sexual exploitation, and where those in prostitution have the option to pursue genuine alternatives. We work directly with women selling sex to support them to find routes out of prostitution as well as equipping and supporting other projects across the UK to tackle the sexual exploitation that happens in every community. To find out more about our work visit our website: [www.beyondthestreets.org.uk](http://www.beyondthestreets.org.uk).  
Registered Charity Number: 1178421

### **This briefing forms part of a series of three publications:**

Practitioner Resource 1: Settings and services of prostitution and sex work in England and Wales

Practitioner Resource 2: Understanding the sex industry in England and Wales

Practitioner Resource 3: Understanding existing prevalence data on the UK sex industry

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This resource was prepared in collaboration with Dr Katie Thorlby at Beyond the Streets.

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