



Policy Brief:

Can we improve trust in the police?

How adaptations to police liaison program models can improve sex worker safety

Executive Summary

Safety is a significant issue for sex workers. In the UK, estimates suggest street-based sex workers are twelve times more likely to die from violence at work than other women, and almost half of all internet-based workers were victims of crime. Figure 1 shows the types of violence sex workers face. Sex workers are more likely to experience violence and abuse, yet less than 10% report their victimisation to the police. This means 90% of crimes against sex workers in the UK go unreported. This is well below the national average, with about 60% of crimes going unreported, but for sexual assault this increases to almost 80% of cases not being reported to the police.

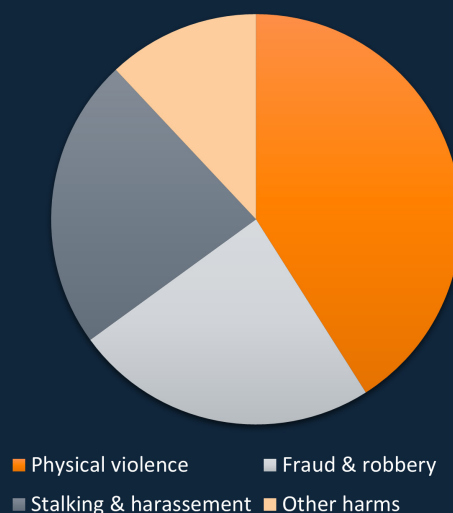
About the Research

The Creating Opportunities for Sex Worker Justice project was a collaboration between the University of Nottingham and POW Nottingham, a Nottingham-based sex worker support organisation, funded as part of a British Academy Innovation Fellowship. The project aimed to create a sex worker centred and trauma informed reporting system for serious violent crime and sexual assault and evaluate PLO program models.

Our main research questions asked:

- How can we improve sex workers experiences of seeking justice and reporting sexual and violent victimisation?
- What role can a police liaison officer play, and how does this differ with location (e.g., charity compared with the police)?

Figure 1: Types of crimes reported by sex workers. Source: Bowen et al., 2021, p. 886.



Physical violence comprises

41%

of crimes reported by sex workers.

This policy brief reports key findings and recommendations from 15 interviews with on and off-street sex workers evaluating the effectiveness of the PLO at POW.

Summary of Recommendations

- Commit to using a new police liaison program model that sees PLOs embedded in community organisations external to the police
- Repeal the laws criminalising aspects of sex work and create a regulatory framework to improve sex worker safety

Sex worker engagement with the police reduced by

20%

between 2012 and 2020.

Low trust policing context

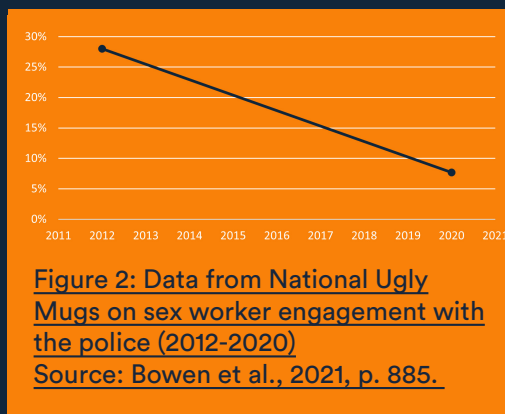
There has been a sharp decline in sex workers wanting to engage with the police – see Figure 2. Stigma and discrimination, the partial criminalisation of sex work and fear and mistrust of the police not only prevents sex workers from accessing police protection but also makes them a target because they lack access to the police and justice. UK data shows how sex worker victimisation is increasing, yet workers are not reporting this to the police. The partial criminalisation of sex work in the UK is significantly worsening relationships between sex workers and the police. We can see evidence of this in the reporting rates and the level of mistrust between sex workers and the police.

In low trust policing contexts, PLOs are an important service enhancement focused on building stronger, more supportive relationships between marginalised communities and police, but we really don't know if these programs do enhance the service these communities receive from police.

Australian research shows that liaison officers who are usually part of the police experience conflict as they are accountable to the police and not the marginalised community the officer is often part of, and, while there are high levels of awareness of PLOs, very few LGBTQI+ people seek support when they need it. A Leeds-based initiative on a sex worker police liaison service did lead to improvements in relationships between sex workers and police, but this was highly dependent on individual officers and ongoing support from the police hierarchy.

In this low trust policing context, can a PLO who is not part of the police:

- a) address barriers sex workers face with reporting; and
- b) improve relations between sex workers and police?



PLO as a 'Steppingstone'

Sex workers felt that POW should have a police liaison role. This was because of the lack of clarity about policing practices and sex work laws. Interview data shows how sex workers weighed up the options of reporting in relation to being prosecuted and the crucial role the PLO played in providing advice. Partial criminalisation means that while selling sex is legal, almost everything workers need to do to provide sexual services isn't. This means working legally can be challenging, and with POW's police liaison officer, sex workers can report crimes against them without fear of prosecution.

Sex workers also talked about how the PLO was a bridge between sex workers and the police, with a key benefit being sharing knowledge on violent individuals – information that wouldn't be shared if workers aren't reporting this to the police.



Image source: Tadas Petrokas on Unsplash

[The PLO is] someone that you could go to yeah, and say this is what happened. Am I going to be... is it worth going through it? Am I going to get prosecuted? Is there a way I can work around it without breaking the law? ... they're not working for the police and they're not going to [report me] (Alana, off-street worker).

She's not working for the police, she's working for POW. So, she's still a representative of POW, but that word police will straight away make, make a woman like weary of her, automatically, definitely we've all got trust issues when it comes to the police (Sarah, on-street worker).

PLO, POW & community responsibility

All participants said it was important for the PLO to be at POW and not the police. This is because they find it easier to talk to POW staff and trust them.

Sex workers spoke about lack of trust, which is a key barrier in reporting crimes directly to the police. FA, an on-street worker, put it simply when she said: “[When we report] we are looked at like we’re shit. Like we deserve it”.



Image source: Adobe

Low trust & risks when reporting to the police

Sex workers had mixed feelings about experiences of reporting. For some this was because they have struggled to get justice, while for others, intersecting forms of discrimination impacted on trust.

The police can hold stereotypes and prejudices about sex work. Whorephobic attitudes inform policing practices when they fail to assist sex workers who are crime victims, like not responding to victims, minimising the seriousness of their victimisation, blaming victims for their experiences, and harassing them when they seek assistance.

Sex workers also raised another point, with partial criminalisation, the police are responsible for implementing the laws. This means the police can act against, and not for, sex workers.

While sex work stigma was a central reason why sex workers did not trust the police, other forms of social discrimination, such as racism and homophobia, and sex work laws add to this mistrust influencing decisions to report crime and impacting on building trusting relationships.

Key recommendations

Recommendation 1: Provide ongoing support for Police Liaison Officers (PLOs) external to the police

An intervention based on the idea of flipping the current program model that sees a PLO based in a sex worker support organisation acting external to the police could dramatically increase sex worker safety and improve relations between sex workers, the police and service providers. It is an intervention that could improve the very low reporting rates and increase public confidence in the police.

Recommendation 2: Decriminalise sex work

UK sex work policy is not grounded in empirical evidence or based on best practice guidance. The global evidence base recommends the decriminalisation of sex work because it reduces risks to sex worker health and safety. Sex work policy in the UK needs to be evidence-based, and this means sex work decriminalisation, with regulation designed to improve sex worker health and safety and reduce harm.

Calling for New Laws

While sex work is legal in the UK, we can see the challenges sex workers face and the climate of fear it fosters. This deters workers from reporting violent crimes and makes them a target for violence. We need to create safer and more equitable working environments for sex workers and reform the systemic injustices they face.

Working with sex workers and support organisations like POW, the Home Office and Ministry of Justice can co-design a sex work decriminalisation bill. This could lead to more inclusive and informed sex industry policy and engagement with diverse stakeholders. By including those directly affected by the policy, co-design can improve understanding, increase legitimacy and successful implementation.

Every single girl ... has had bad experiences with [the police], right? Yeah, every single girl has been attacked, has very rarely got justice. (Sarah).

There are definitely some very good police officers or people employed by the police who are kind of coming at it from the right way. But I think it's the not knowing and the majority of them are White men ... I've had like racial incidents with the police ... because ... I am a sex worker and a mixed-race the chances of it being treated as it should be, it just doesn't seem worth it sometimes.

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Further Reading

[Policing in relation to sex work and trafficking for sexual exploitation in London](#), University College London

[Guidance on eliminating discrimination against sex workers and securing their human rights](#), OHCHR

[Guidance on understanding the key differences between decriminalisation and legalisation](#), Network of Sex Work Projects

[Policing and racialised sex workers in the UK](#), National Ugly Mugs

[Providing pathways and opportunities for sex worker justice](#), Institute for Policy and Engagement

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This policy paper was supported by the Institute for Policy and Public Engagement. Find out more via our website nott.ac/IPE or get in touch: theinstitute@nottingham.ac.uk

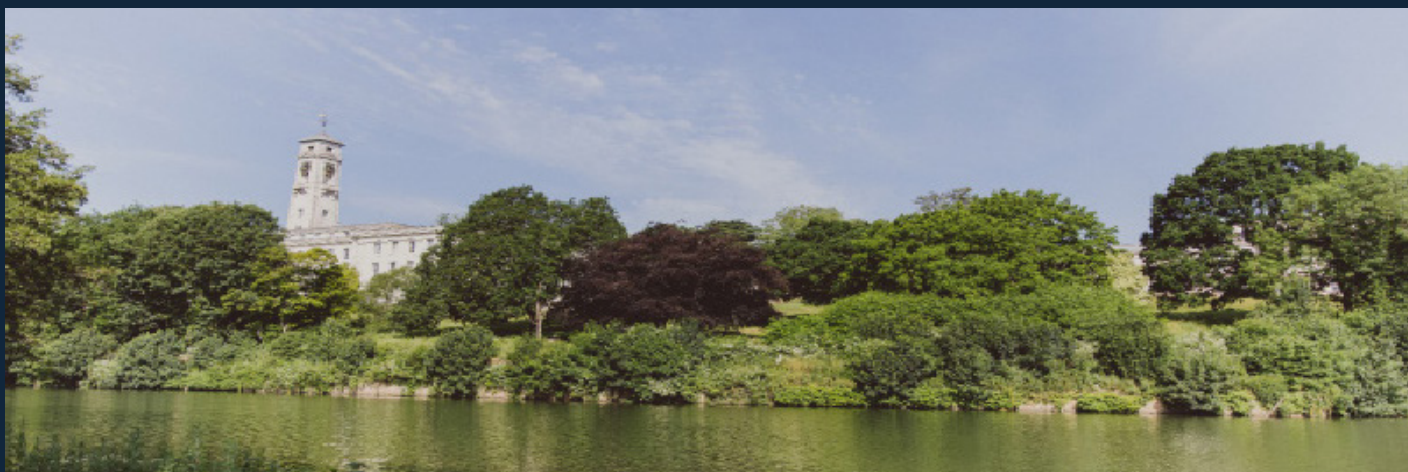


Image source: University of Nottingham image library