

**Research Paper**

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## **Resettlement experiences of street sex-working women on release from prison**

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**Executive Summary**

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## Executive Summary

### Background:

Since 2010 I have been employed as a Criminal Justice Caseworker at One25, a Bristol-based street sex work project. Within this role I provide intensive, one-to-one support to street sex-working women in the criminal justice system, both in prison and in the community. During my employment I have witnessed first hand and heard the accounts of women who have experienced extreme levels of violence in the course of their sex working. I have also supported women who have struggled with the on-going impact of extensive experiences of abuse throughout their childhood and adult lives. Street sex-working women occupy a marginalised position within society, levels of homelessness and substance misuse are particularly high and contact with the criminal justice system, including periods of imprisonment are common. As a front-line practitioner in this field I have learnt that leaving prison is clearly a challenging process for women. For street sex-working women in particular, these challenges are exacerbated by the complexity of their needs.

### Research Aims and Objectives:

This research explores the lived experiences of resettlement for street sex-working women alongside the views of professionals from community-based projects who have supported this group in their transitions from custody to the community. This study considers the challenges facing women on the day they leave prison and also the wider resettlement process: what preparation and planning takes place prior to release and the experiences and difficulties encountered by women once they have returned to life in the community.

In order to achieve these aims I ask the following questions: 'What are the resettlement needs of street sex-working women on release from prison?' and 'What factors are helpful to the resettlement process and what are any areas for development?'

### Methodology:

As my research questions are exploratory, when considering research design, I chose qualitative methodology and semi-structured interviewing. I used purposive sampling techniques to access potential participants. I invited professionals from community-based projects to participate with the assistance of Women's Breakout, a national umbrella organisation for those who support women in the criminal justice system. I extended my invitation to sex work projects throughout England and Wales, also requesting that they promote my study to street sex-working women known to their project. My sample comprised six professional participants (five from sex work projects and one

from a housing project supporting women at risk of offending) and nine service users, all except one of whom were recruited through drop-in centres. Each interview was transcribed in full. I then undertook a process of thematic analysis to identify key findings and patterns. Although this is a small-scale study, interviews were in-depth and contained rich data which has provided an invaluable insight into the needs and experiences of street sex-working women around resettlement and release from prison.

#### **Key Findings and Conclusions:**

My findings have highlighted that, not unlike many women who have spent time in prison, street sex-working women have multiple and complex needs which inevitably impact on the process of resettlement and their transitions from custody to the community. Undoubtedly, women need to be supported around each stage of the resettlement process: in preparation for leaving prison, on the day of release and once they have returned to the community. The resettlement needs of street sex-working women and the support they require could be categorised into four main areas: housing, trauma, substance misuse and safety.

All service user participants in my study had experienced leaving prison homeless, with many of them having been homeless before entering custody. Where service users had left prison homeless and also had no benefits in place, this increased the likelihood of them reoffending. For street sex-working women who were homeless, it was not uncommon for them to return to sex working as they had nowhere else to go. My research also highlighted the need for risks facing street sex-working women to be assessed before they left prison and to be taken into account when deciding where women would be accommodated. My findings clearly emphasised the need for women to be housed in safe and supported accommodation on the day of their release.

The findings evidenced past trauma in the lives of street sex-working women. Substance misuse was a way of coping with the on-going effect of these experiences. This group of women were re-traumatised through their on-going experiences of abuse and their involvement in street sex work. Not all service users thought they would feel safe enough to take up therapeutic support in criminal justice settings. However, it was generally perceived that therapeutic support should be made available to women throughout the resettlement process, given the inter-relationship between trauma, substance misuse, street sex work and crime.

The service users who took part in my research disclosed on-going substance misuse issues. All participants stressed the importance of substance misuse specific support, taking into account the underlying causes of addiction. Opiate substitute prescribing and harm minimisation advice should

be made available to women in prison and after release to reduce the risk of relapse and overdose. Detoxification from illegal and prescribed substances in prison was a particularly vulnerable time, when negative emotions related to past traumatic experiences re-emerged. Without support to help manage these emotions, women were seen to be at greater risk of relapse into substance misuse once they had been released.

My research contributes to the existing literature concerned with the high levels of violence experienced by street sex working women, not only through street sex work itself, but also through substance misuse, interpersonal relationships and periods of homelessness. For some participants, being in prison was a preferable alternative to living with the dangers they faced on a daily basis in the community.

Once they have returned to the community, street sex-working women require access to services such as housing, health and benefits. This study found that service providers did not always understand the issues facing street sex working women, and consequently, services were not designed to meet their needs. Women found themselves unable to adhere to lengthy assessments and appointment-based systems. Without support in place to meet their resettlement needs, my study found that there is an increased likelihood of women returning to street sex work, drug use and crime after leaving prison.

The recommendations I have made relate to practice, procedures, legislation and policy. As a small-scale study, it has been beyond the scope of my research to address these recommendations in full. However, this study provides a foundation for future research into the development of policy and practice relating to street sex working women and their experiences of custody, release and resettlement.

### **Recommendations:**

**Recommendation 1:** Street sex-working women require support around their substance misuse issues throughout the resettlement process.

**Recommendation 2:** Further consideration should be given to the practice example contained within this study with a view to replicating this model across other geographical areas.

**Recommendation 3:** Street sex-working women need access to safe and supported housing on the day they are released from prison.

**Recommendation 4:** Therapeutic support needs to be made available to street sex-working women in prison and continued after release in the community.

**Recommendation 5:** Awareness training should be made available to all professionals who are involved in supporting street sex-working women.

**Recommendation 6:** Service design needs to be adapted to reflect the needs and circumstances of street sex-working women.

**Recommendation 7:** Changes need to be made to the current welfare benefits system to allow prisoners to be able to apply for benefits before the day of their release.

**Recommendation 8:** Street sex-working women should be recognised as a vulnerable group and given priority access to services on release from prison.

ENDS

