



*Housing Homeless People with Complex Needs*

# **The Housing Needs and Experiences of Homeless Women Involved in Street Sex Work in Stoke-on-Trent**

December 2009

**CRESR**  
Centre for Regional Economic  
and Social Research



# **The Housing Needs and Experiences of Homeless Women Involved in Street Sex Work in Stoke-on-Trent**

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December 2009

## Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the project steering group - Christina Harrison, Sarah Haydon, Gill Brown, Stephen Robbins, Vicki Yates and Nickey Jolley - for their assistance, guidance and support throughout the project. We are also indebted to the organisations and individuals in Stoke-on-Trent who were willing to give up their valuable time to talk to us, distribute surveys, and put us in touch with homeless street sex workers. Particular thanks goes to staff at the Women's Project . Without them, this research would not have been possible. Thanks also to colleagues in CRESR for their involvement early in the project including Mike Foden, Ryan Powell, Deidre Duffy, Kate Botteril, Emma Smith and Sarah Ward. But most of all we would like to thank the homeless street sex workers who gave their time and talked openly to us about their experiences.

This report is based on research undertaken by the authors and the content does not necessarily reflect the views of Stoke-on-Trent City Council or of any participating agencies. We do, of course, accept full responsibility for any inaccuracies or omissions.

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# Executive Summary

## About the research

On July 3rd 2007 a fire engulfed a derelict warehouse in Stoke-on-Trent resulting in the death of two young homeless people. This tragedy prompted the City Council and partners to closely scrutinise provision for homeless people in Stoke-on-Trent and consider ways in which this could be improved. As part of the drive to reduce homelessness and rough sleeping, Stoke-on-Trent City Council commissioned research exploring the housing needs of homeless people with complex needs. This focused on client groups thought to be particularly marginalised and vulnerable to rough sleeping including female street sex workers, people with drug and/or alcohol dependencies, and people with a history of violent behaviour. This report presents the findings relating to female street sex workers.

The research was conducted between July 2007- June 2008 and involved a questionnaire survey of 30 women involved in street sex work in Stoke-on-Trent who were homeless or at risk of homelessness, and in-depth interviews with 18 female street sex workers. These activities were supplemented by a 'street count' of, and short housing survey with female sex workers conducted over three nights, and discussions with stakeholders in contact with female street sex workers.

## Experiences of Street Sex Work

**Drug dependency emerged as the primary reason why women enter street sex work**, with nearly all those participating in the research reporting that they first started working as a sex worker to fund a drug habit. However, this does mask a more complex picture. The women interviewed had also been coerced into prostitution by pimps, worked to fund their partners' drug habits, to pay rent, buy food, service debts and secure emergency accommodation. Women had usually explored other means of raising money to buy drugs before considering sex work (typically shoplifting and other forms of theft) and moved on to street sex work once the risk of a prison sentence loomed.

**Homelessness can make women (particularly young women) vulnerable to entering street sex work**, bringing them into contact with people already working in the sex industry or intent on grooming that they are otherwise unlikely to have encountered. Most of the women interviewed were already homeless when they started sex working.

**Although drug dependency tends to drive women's trajectories into street sex work, the cessation of drug use does not necessarily provide a route out.** Many of the women interviewed had substantial debt (from fines, rent arrears, drug debts) which remained with them long after their drug use ceased. Entrenched in sex work after many years working in the industry, often with few qualifications or recognised vocational skills, with little or no prior experience of the formal labour market, and usually with criminal records and no permanent address, sex working sometimes remained the most viable way for respondents to earn a living.

**Women had rarely worked intermittently in sex work or for a short period only.** Many respondents were entrenched in a life of sex work, inextricably linked to the persistence of their drug dependency. For example, of those currently working, nearly 70 per cent had been involved in street sex work for more than 5 years.

**Sex working carries significant risks.** The women interviewed for this study reported significant physical damage and sexual health issues, with adverse weather conditions, constant standing and walking, and violence from punters all taking a toll on their health and well being. Extreme violence, including rape, was routinely experienced.

## **Housing and Homelessness**

The evidence from this study suggests that **the key triggers of homelessness** amongst women who are, or who become street sex workers are:

- an unplanned move from the parental home following problems or conflict (including sexual and physical abuse and neglect)
- domestic abuse from a partner
- an unplanned exit from local authority care where meaningful contact with Social Services ceases
- a traumatic experience, the personal impact of which eventually results in homelessness.

**Street sex workers tend to become homeless at a young age**, with 57 per cent of those surveyed for this study having experienced homelessness by the age of 16. Interview respondents reported leaving home as young as ten years old. The young age at which respondents tended to have become homeless may have increased their vulnerability to involvement in sex work.

**The housing and homelessness careers of the street sex workers participating in the study were characterised by insecurity, repeat and prolific homelessness and reliance on some of the most insecure and unsafe temporary housing situations.** For example:

- **rough sleeping was a regular experience** for the street sex workers surveyed and interviewed: more respondents had slept rough than had stayed in any other (temporary or settled) housing situation with 77 per cent of survey respondents reporting having slept rough and 46 per cent reporting having done so in the past month. Some of those interviewed reported sleeping rough for weeks or months on end.
- **the evidence suggests that street sex workers are a 'hidden homelessness' population** (this term denotes housing situations which are provided informally rather than by housing and other service providers). The majority of those surveyed had stayed in squats (59 per cent) and most had relied heavily on friends and family for a roof over their head. Some used clients as a means of obtaining a nights shelter as well as other homelessness people's temporary accommodation (for example a friend's hostel room). A significant proportion of the street sex workers interviewed spent more of their homelessness careers moving between hidden homeless situations than in hostels or other provider-led housing.
- **repeat homelessness was very common**, with 85 per cent of survey respondents reporting that this was not their first episode of homelessness. More than half had been homeless five times or more and 30 per cent reported having experienced ten or more episodes of homelessness. The experiences of the women participating in this study suggest that once street sex workers become homeless it proves very difficult for them to resolve their housing problems and permanently escape homelessness.

**Many of the street sex workers interviewed had periods of ostensibly stable accommodation (i.e. their own tenancy) but this was typically precarious and rarely long lasting**, representing little more than brief respite during a long homelessness career.

**Involvement in street sex work directly impacts on women's housing situations and the evidence from this study suggests that as long as a woman works as a street prostitute she is at risk of becoming or remaining homeless and is very likely to do so.** This risk travels in many directions including: street sex workers inevitable contact with the

criminal justice system which places them at a disadvantage in the housing market and facing difficulties sustaining tenancies during prison absences; their (necessary) reliance on the bottom end of the private rented sector where conditions are poor and tenancies are insecure; the financial imperative to pay court fines rather than housing costs; reluctance to access hostel accommodation, particularly that which is mixed or which operates night time curfews incongruent with their working hours.

## Social and Welfare Needs

**Analysis of the life histories and the personal, social and familial circumstances of the street sex workers' participating in this study indicates a very vulnerable population with significant and extensive welfare and support needs.** The street sex workers surveyed were extremely likely to have contact with the criminal justice system, issues relating to mental and emotional health were prevalent (including coping difficulties and self harm), and they reported a range of experiences likely to have impacted detrimentally on their psychological, emotional and mental well being (abuse, unsettled lives, conflict and separation from family). Specifically:

- 96 per cent had **a criminal record** and 70 per cent had **been in prison**
- 67 per cent had experienced **domestic violence** and 57 per cent had experienced **'other' forms of abuse**
- 44 per cent reported **mental ill health**
- 80 per cent had experienced **drug dependency** and 37 per cent **alcohol dependency**
- 30 per cent had been in the **care of the local authority**
- 20 per cent reported **self harming**
- 23 per cent had **literacy difficulties**

Issues which emerged in the in-depth interviews included:

- **disrupted and troubled childhoods.** Rejection, abandonment, neglect and abuse (sexual and physical) were commonplace and the street sex workers interviewed had rarely had the opportunity to deal with the psychological and emotional impact of these experiences.

- **experience of violence:** violence and abuse characterised the lives of many of those interviewed. they suffered physical and sexual abuse in their formative years from parents, other relatives, or bullies; went on to suffer violence from partners in adulthood; and from pimps and punters at work.
- **motherhood and separation from children.** Nearly all the sex workers interviewed were mothers of young children but none lived with their children. Some women's babies were taken directly into care at birth and quickly adopted while some women's' children lived with them for a while (months or sometimes years) before being taken into care. There were many examples of women trying to manage drug addictions and homelessness and look after their children before finally deciding they were no longer able to cope or it was not in the interests of the child to remain with them. A couple of these women placed their children in the care of the local authority but in most cases parents and other relatives were called upon. This was usually intended to be a temporary arrangement.
- **drug dependency.** The majority of survey and interview respondent were, or had been, dependent on drugs, typically heroin. Some had been introduced to drugs by partners and it was common for women to have started using drugs, or significantly increased their usage as a means of blocking out distress.
- **contact with the criminal justice system.** The street sex workers surveyed and interviewed had regular contact with the criminal justice system. This was almost entirely related to their sex working or drug use but some also had convictions for violence.

**The welfare and support needs the women participating in this research presented with were impacting directly on their housing situations,** on their capacity to access and sustain accommodation, and were increasing their risk of homelessness or continued/repeat homelessness. It was often not a woman's homelessness, or her situation as a sex worker which presented the biggest barrier to accessing appropriate accommodation. Rather, it was offending histories, drug addiction, mental ill health, coping difficulties or the presence of several of these issues in combination that prevented those interviewed and surveyed from accessing housing and sustaining it.

## Accessing Housing and Support

**Most of the street sex workers participating in this study had accessed housing and support services during their homelessness careers but few had been *regularly engaged*** with support services or actively pursued housing opportunities, particularly since working in the sex industry. Evidence from the survey suggests that many homeless street sex workers fail to access treatment, emotional support (someone to talk to, counselling) and practical forms of assistance such as housing and welfare benefits advice when they need it.

**Key barriers to accessing housing and support services** included:

- **limited capacity or motivation to resolve housing and other problems** amongst women deeply entrenched in a life of drug addiction, rough sleeping and sex work
- **limited knowledge about the assistance available** or how to access it
- **a perception that social housing is not a viable option for sex workers**, arising from assumptions that drug users, sex workers and/or people with criminal convictions are not eligible for social housing.
- **limited confidence or willingness to approach the local authority for housing**, particularly amongst those who had surrendered or been evicted from council tenancies previously (for example whilst in prison), or who had previously experienced poor treatment from front line staff.
- **reluctance to use mixed sex temporary accommodation**, particularly amongst those who had experienced violence from men
- **the rules and formalities of mainstream housing** (hostels for example tend to impose a night time curfew which precludes women from sex working)
- **long waiting lists, delays and limited contact from service providers regarding progress with applications and referrals**

**The importance of engagement with organisations of particular relevance to street sex workers cannot be understated.** Without them, a significantly higher proportion of the women surveyed would have sought no assistance whatsoever when they became homeless. The Women's Project, for example, was highly valued by the street sex workers participating in this study. The vast majority of those surveyed indicated a desire for ongoing support from the Project and all those responding to the question said the support received had 'helped a lot'. The specialised nature of the service was important here, with women being confident that staff understood and appreciated their particular situations. However, non-housing services are limited in what they can achieve with regard to preventing or resolving homelessness.

**All the drug dependent women surveyed had accessed drug treatment or support although there was evidence to suggest that women involved in street sex work can encounter difficulties in this regard.** For example: half the drug dependent women surveyed were not currently in contact with any drug treatment or support agency; 43 per reported having wanted, but not having received help or support regarding their drug use; some interview respondents were attempting to end their use of heroin by taking substitute medication like Subutex but, unable to access a formal programme, were purchasing their medication illicitly. **Some of the homeless street sex workers had resorted to actively seeking convictions and custodial sentences in order to access the drugs services available through the criminal justice system.**

**The women surveyed were overwhelmingly positive about the drug treatment and support they had received with all reporting this had helped them 'a lot' or 'a little'.** Relapse was common and the majority were still taking illicit drugs, sometimes in addition to prescription medication, but respondents' positive views of their treatment suggests this may reflect the difficulties of ceasing drug use more so than the nature of their treatment or support.

# Introduction

On July 3rd 2007 a fire engulfed a derelict warehouse in Stoke-on-Trent resulting in the death of two young homeless people. The couple had been sleeping in the premises when the fire took hold and were unable to escape in time. This tragedy prompted the City Council and other local agencies to closely scrutinise provision for homeless people in Stoke-on-Trent and consider ways in which this could be improved to reduce the number of people having to sleep rough in the City. To this end a Task and Finish Group was established, which sought to understand the causes of rough sleeping and identify priority issues to be tackled.

As part of this drive to reduce rough sleeping in Stoke-on-Trent, and to better understand and meet the needs of homeless people like those sleeping in the warehouse in July 2007, Stoke-on-Trent City Council commissioned the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam University to carry out research exploring the housing needs of homeless people with complex needs. The study was focused on several distinct subsections of the homeless population - client groups thought to be particularly marginalised and vulnerable to rough sleeping. These were female street sex workers; people with drug and/or alcohol dependencies; and people with a history of violent behaviour. The research culminated in a series of reports: one focused on each of the client groups; and an overarching report summarising key issues, linkages between drug and alcohol dependency, street sex work, violent behaviour and homelessness; and using case study material to explore respondents 'homelessness journeys'. The focus of this report is the housing needs of homeless women involved in street sex work.

## Context

The past decade has witnessed significant government investment in tackling homelessness and rough sleeping, driven by a stated commitment to homelessness prevention. The Rough Sleepers' Unit, tasked with reducing the number of rough sleepers by two thirds, was established in 1999 and by 2003 had met its targets. Legislative changes in the form of the 2002 Homelessness Act confirmed the Governments commitment to tackling homelessness by placing new obligations on local authorities to offer assistance to all homeless households and to produce homelessness strategies, as well as extending the main housing duty to additional vulnerable households. The importance of understanding the underlying causes of homelessness was acknowledged in the 2003 government report *'More than a Roof: a report*

*into tackling homelessness* and a target of halving the number of households in temporary accommodation by 2010 was set out in the national strategy for tackling homelessness published in 2005 (*Sustainable Communities: settled homes; changing lives*). Meanwhile the challenges and importance of meeting the housing needs of the multiply excluded have been recognised through the development of PSA 16 (the Public Service Agreement relating to socially excluded adults such as care leavers and offenders), and by the government's new rough sleeping strategy, launched in November 2008, which aims ambitiously to eradicate rough sleeping altogether by 2012. And non-governmental homelessness organisations and charities continue to highlight the needs of homeless people with complex needs. 'Making Every Adult Matter', for example, is a new coalition seeking to improve the way in which services are delivered to the most excluded, and which has developed a clear Manifesto for change.

Locally, Stoke-on-Trent city council and their partners have been responding to the challenges of understanding and tackling homelessness and rough sleeping, particularly amongst those with complex and multiple needs. There are housing and support providers working with rough sleepers, with street sex workers and women at risk of sexual exploitation, with offenders, drug user and problematic drinkers. In 2009 Stoke-on-Trent City Council was named as one of 15 'ending rough sleeping' champions in England and in 2008 was awarded Enhanced Housing Options trailblazer status. In recognition that more needs to be done new services are being, or have recently been developed including a one stop shop for women offenders, a family Intervention project, and a new outreach service for young men and women at risk of sexual exploitation. These new services are likely to have a significant impact on tackling many of the issues and problems highlighted in this report.

## **Chapter Structure**

Following a description of the methods employed for this study in Chapter One, Chapter Two focuses on women's trajectories into, and experiences of street sex work. Chapter Three explores the housing situations and experiences of those participating in this study, identifying common routes into homelessness and highlighting the key features of street sex workers' homelessness careers. Attention turns in Chapter Four to the life histories of street sex workers and the personal experiences which culminate in a range of support needs. Finally, Chapter Five explores homeless street sex workers' experiences of approaching housing and support services in an effort to resolve their homelessness and meet their needs.

## Methods

This study was conducted between July 2007- June 2008 with data collection focused on two principle tasks:

- a questionnaire survey of 30 women involved in street sex work in Stoke-on-Trent who are homeless or at risk of homelessness
- In-depth interviews with 18 homeless women involved in street sex work in Stoke-on-Trent who are homeless or at risk of homelessness

In addition the study team conducted a 'street count' of, and short housing survey with female sex workers over three nights, as well as holding discussions with stakeholders in contact with women working in prostitution.

The 1996 Housing Act states that a person is homeless if they have no accommodation they are entitled to occupy or that it is reasonable for them to continue to occupy and this definition was applied, although not interpreted as rigidly as is sometimes the case. Women sleeping rough, in squats, hostels, staying temporarily with friends or family, and in all other forms of temporary accommodation were included. Women with a history of homelessness who were living in interim, or 'medium-term' supported accommodation were included in the sample. Interim supported accommodation refers to provision intended to provide a longer-term and more stable solution than emergency homelessness accommodation but from which people are expected (and assisted) to move on, usually within a specified timescale. A small number of housed were also included in the research on the grounds that they had a history of homelessness and (in all but one case) were deemed 'at imminent risk of homelessness', for example because they were under threat of eviction and had nowhere else to go.

### ***The survey of homeless women involved in street sex work***

A total of 30 women involved in street prostitution were surveyed using a questionnaire which collected information about their housing situations, homelessness careers, personal

characteristics, and histories. The majority (22) were known to be involved in street sex work and were targeted for inclusion in the study. The remaining eight respondents were drawn from a wider survey of homeless people (which included 41 people with known drug or alcohol dependencies, 24 people known to have a history of violent behaviour, and 69 respondents about whom nothing was known beyond their circumstance of homelessness). Women involved in street sex work were selected from this sample if they responded positively to the question 'Have you ever engaged in sex work to make ends meet?', indicated that they primarily worked on the streets, and were female.

The women targeted for inclusion in the study were all accessed through the Women's Project in Stoke-on-Trent (run by Brighter Futures). Remaining respondents were accessed through services working with homeless people, drug users, and rough sleepers. Surveys were completed in the following ways:

- face-to-face with a member of the research team
- face-to-face with a project worker
- self-completion

All but three respondents were under the age of 40, with most falling into the 31-40 age band (See Table 1.1). Nearly one third were in a relationship and, with the exception of two women who recorded their sexuality as 'bisexual', all were heterosexual. Very few respondents were of an ethnic minority with 83 per cent (24 respondents) recording their ethnicity as 'White British'. A further 13 per cent (four women) were White Irish and one recorded her ethnicity as Mixed Heritage (White and Black Caribbean).

**Table 1.1. Age**

	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>
<20	3	11
21-30	8	29
31-40	14	50
41-50	2	7
>51	1	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>28*</b>	<b>100</b>

\* two respondents did not specify their age

The women surveyed were living in a range of housing situations. Most commonly they were staying in hostel accommodation although this only accounted for one third of respondents (ten women). A total of 20 per cent (six respondents) were staying with friends or family, 13 per cent (4 women) were being temporarily accommodated by the local authority, and three

women were currently sleeping rough. A small number of women had their own social or private rented tenancies but were under threat of eviction.

The survey statistics presented in this report need to be treated with caution because of the small sample size. Numbers, rather than percentages are sometimes provided for this reason.

### ***In-depth interviews with homeless women involved in street sex work***

A total of 18 in-depth interviews were conducted with women involved in street prostitution. Interviews were flexible and informal, lasting approximately one hour (although some were considerably longer), and took a biographical approach, exploring respondents' life histories, their homelessness careers, and contact with services. Most respondents were accessed through the Brighter Futures Women's Project but three women were interviewed in services working with drug users. All interviews were transcribed verbatim.

All but three of the street sex workers interviewed were between the ages of 20 – 39 with most in their thirties (ten were aged between 30-39 and five aged between 20-29). Two were teenagers and one was aged 40-49. The vast majority of respondents were White British although one woman recorded her ethnicity as White Irish and another as Mixed Heritage (White and Black Caribbean). Seven women were in relationships and seven were single (the relationship status of four women was unknown) With the exception of two women who described their sexuality as bisexual all were heterosexual (the sexuality of three women was unknown). The street sex workers interviewed were living in a range of accommodation situations: five were currently accommodated in hostels; five were staying temporarily with friends; three were rough sleeping and three were under threat of eviction from social and private rented tenancies. The current housing circumstances of two women were unknown.

### ***A 'Count' and short survey of sex workers***

A count of female street sex workers was carried out on three nights in November 2008. Two members of the team accompanied Women's Project staff during their outreach work on these dates between 8pm and midnight, making a note of any sex worker sighted in an area of approximately 6 miles where they are known to conduct business. Women who approached outreach staff were also asked to complete a very short questionnaire about

their housing situation. A total of 16 surveys were completed and the results are presented in Appendix One.

***Discussions with stakeholders in contact with homeless street sex workers***

In addition to the core data collection activities (survey and interviews with homeless women involved in street sex work) the study team held regular discussions with local service providers such as hostel workers, drug support workers, staff at the Women's Project and Police Officers who work or have contact with women involved in street prostitution. These discussions provided contextual insight. Insights gleaned and observations made during the course of conducting fieldwork (for example 'hanging around' at the women's project hoping to identify women to interview, or carrying out the sex worker count) are also drawn upon.

## Becoming a Street Sex Worker, Remaining in Street Sex Work

None of the women participating in this study had made a positive choice to become a sex worker. All would exit sex work if they felt they had a viable alternative, if they had the practical, cognitive, and financial resources to do so, and if they felt they could survive without the income generated from it. Any notion that street sex work is entered into willingly and positively does not resonate with the biographies of the street sex workers interviewed, amongst whom sex work was little more than a means of basic survival. Issues of drug dependency, debt, homelessness, exploitation, poverty, and discrimination had combined to encourage women into street sex work, and to keep them there.

*I don't like doing it...if I want to survive I've got to. If I want to eat, if I want to drink, if I wanna have me drugs then I've gotta go out there and sell me body to get the money to do it" (Saskia)*

### 2.1. Pathways into Prostitution

Drug dependency emerged as the primary reason why the women participating in this study entered street sex work. Nearly all had first started working in order to fund a drug habit. Hannah's response to the question 'why did you start working' was typical:

*"Because I was on heroin and I had to fund it...because I started taking heroin, I had to start working to fund me heroin habit" (Hannah)*

It was common, however, for women to have explored other means of raising money to buy drugs before considering street sex work. Respondents had typically funded their drug dependency through theft (usually shoplifting but sometimes house burglary and fraud) before rejecting theft in favour of sex work. Two main reasons for this shift emerged: to avoid

a custodial sentence; and because of moral and ethical considerations. Some had entered street sex work when, having been caught repeatedly for shoplifting, a prison sentence loomed. In this context, sex work was considered preferable to other forms of criminal activity because a prison sentence was thought less likely if convicted. As Jane and Emma explain:

*“I started going out shoplifting and then I kept getting caught and kept going to prison and I’d come out and I thought ‘I can’t keep getting caught shoplifting’ so I started selling me body on the streets of Stoke” (Jane)*

*“I started working [as a sex worker] then because it was easier to work because you had less chance of going to jail working the streets than what you did shoplifting.”(Emma)*

Women in relationships with other drug users had sometimes entered street prostitution to help their partners avoid a custodial sentence, rather than to avoid prison themselves. Marnie is a case in point. Marnie and her partner, Steve, were funding their heroin dependency through theft (mainly shoplifting) for which they both had several convictions. Steve was at risk of receiving a custodial sentence if convicted again. Marnie started working as a prostitute so that he no longer had to shoplift, thereby reducing the risk that he would be sent to prison and they would be separated.

That many of the street sex workers interviewed had young children (see Chapter 4) increased their incentive to avoid custodial sentences, fearing that the limited contact they had with their children would then cease altogether. Ironically, street sex workers rarely evade prison for long and the majority of those participating in this study had served custodial sentences, often for offences relating to sex work (including non payment of fines).

Sex work was also considered *morally* preferable to other ways of generating income. Such ethical considerations did weigh heavy on some women, informing their choices about how to fund their drug dependencies. They explained that other means of securing funds, such as theft and fraud, have consequences for people other than themselves whereas they are the only victim of their sex work. Others found it morally reprehensible to spend money they received for their children (welfare benefits, child benefit) on drugs, and street sex work helped them to maintain a financial separation between the 'untainted' funds which supported their children and the 'tainted' funds which supported their drug habits. These issues are illustrated in the following comments:

*"that's [sex work] the only thing I can do because I can't steal, I can't do that, so the only thing that would actually bring in the money without hurting anyone else was to go on the streets" (Elaine)*

*"I had to [go on the game]. Once I left Manchester I didn't want to be burgling houses down here. I didn't want to be nicking cars...they weren't getting physically hurt but people were getting emotionally hurt because it's not nice being burgled" (Charlotte)*

*"I couldn't afford to have food in me cupboards, because of the babies, and I really didn't want to spend their money [on drugs] so I went out to work instead" (Amanda)*

So although the link between drug dependency and street sex work is clear, it is far too simplistic to attribute entry into sex work to drug dependency without further qualification. A woman's drug dependency is the reason she needs money. The reason she works as a sex worker to obtain that money is more complex, often based on an assessment of the relative risks (of being convicted; of receiving a custodial sentence; of being separated from her partner or children; of harming others) of her limited income generating options. And it also reflects that legal means of obtaining the funds required to maintain a drug dependency (i.e. reasonably well paid work) are out of reach, as well as the extreme difficulty holding down a paid job whilst homeless and/or drug dependent.

Very few interview or survey respondents had entered street sex work for reasons unrelated to their drug dependency, but a small minority had taken a different route. A couple of women entered street sex work to provide funds for their partner's drug habit, despite not taking or needing drugs themselves. Heidi, for example, has never used drugs but at the age of 17 started working periodically to support her partner's heroin dependency. Elaine was a little older than Heidi when she entered street prostitution and had already battled with heroin addiction but had finally accessed, and was complying with, a methadone programme. Her ex-partner was suffering withdrawal from heroin but, due to an injury which left him temporarily immobile, was unable to secure funds for drugs and he asked for her help. Having experienced withdrawal herself she felt compelled to help him, explaining that *"the thing is, you can't watch someone else rattle [withdraw from heroin. When you're gone through it yourself you can't watch someone else go through it, you have to help them"*. Selling her body was the only way Elaine could think of to raise money urgently in a way that did not negatively impact on anyone else. When we interviewed her Elaine had relapsed several times and was still working as a street sex worker, this time to buy Subutex (an alternative to methadone) which she was taking in an effort to end her use of heroin.

It was rare for women to have been coerced into sex work by a pimp but this was true for a small minority, including Saskia who explained that *"I got involved with a pimp when I was 16 and he forced me to work"*. Megan's journey into prostitution also began young, when she was groomed by a pimp at the age of 15. Both women were homeless (or rarely spending any time at the parental home) when they met their pimps. Their experiences suggest, then, that while homelessness may not be a direct trigger for women to enter street sex work it can make women vulnerable to it. Heidi, Anna and Megan's stories are presented in the box below to illustrate the ways in which homelessness, sexual exploitation and routes into sex work are inextricably linked. Their stories exemplify the homeless experiences of many of the street sex workers interviewed, with housing and sex work careers which are varied and interspersed with periods of homelessness and institutionalisation (typically local authority care homes and prison). In particular, their stories illustrate that homelessness makes women vulnerable to entering sex work, bringing them into contact with people already working in the sex industry, or intent on grooming, that they are otherwise unlikely to have encountered.

The relative youth of these women is also of some relevance (the high proportion of street sex workers who had experienced homelessness by the age of 16 is discussed in Chapter Three). Vulnerable because of their age and unable to access most homelessness services and temporary accommodation, women who become homeless before the age of 16 may be particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation by adults.

As well as illustrating the way in which homelessness can be a contributory factor in women's entry to sex work, placing them in situations where they meet other sex workers, Anna's story also illustrates that the way in which sex workers 'learn the ropes' by knowing or observing other street prostitutes. Having made the decision to start working as a prostitute to avoid further prison sentences Jane, for example, explained that *"one of me friends was doing it already and I was always listening to her and I took notice once day and I asked her if I could go out with her that night and I ended up going to work"*. Other women described similar process by which they 'learnt' how to be a street sex worker:

*"this girl, she lived in the hostel and...she was working and I watched 'er and that's how I got into it, watching her"* (Charlene, on becoming a sex worker at the age of 17)

*"Where I was, I was living in X street at the top of X street, that's where they work...so you see girls walking around and that and think, well, you know what I mean, thought some day I'd have to do it"* (Elaine)

## Pathways into Prostitution

**Heidi's Story:** Heidi is 17 years old and has been in residential care since she was 12. She made a request to enter temporary respite care following on-going arguments with her mother and stepfather and her stay was extended indefinitely when her mother refused to take her back. Heidi explained that *' I agreed to go at first...and then at the end of the six weeks I wanted go home cos I hated it but me mum didn't want me home so I ended up staying there.'* She moved through five residential care homes none of which she liked. When she was 13 years old she started truanting and was soon befriended by an older girl who took Heidi to the house of a 46 year old man. They began to 'hang out' there on a daily and he soon put pressure on her to have sex with him. Fortunately Heidi came to the attention of a local organisation running a project for young women at risk of sexual exploitation and, considering Heidi to be at risk of exploitation by this older man, worked with her. At the time Heidi was reluctant but is now grateful for their intervention. She does now, however, work intermittently as a street sex worker to fund her boyfriend's drug dependency.

**Megan's story:** Megan is 44 years old and has been a sex worker for 28 years. She started periodically running away from home at the age of 10, and *"just doss[ing] down with friends all the time"*. Her journey into sex work began when she was groomed by a pimp at the age of 15. Megan explained: *"[my friend] was going out with this man and I wanted to go out with them and he'd got a friend so I just went along so I could have a drink, go to the pictures. I was 15 at the time and he was nice to me. He was buying me presents, taking me places. And then he started beating me up..."* He forced Megan to work as a street prostitute and repeatedly beat, threatened and raped her. By the age of twenty three Megan had two children fathered by her pimp, who forced her to carry on working. He *"was still wanting his money so I had to find babysitters"*. She did successfully prosecute her pimp but in her late 20s Megan was introduced to drugs by a friend, and began taking heroin in an attempt to lose weight. This quickly spiralled into heavy use, perpetuating her sex work to fund her drug use and resulting in an 18 month prison sentence for drug offences. She now has her own tenancy but is still drug dependent and has recently discovered that her 18 year old daughter is dependent on heroin. Keen to ensure her daughter does not have to work as a prostitute, Megan continues in sex work to fund own and her daughter's heroin dependency.

**Anna's Story:** Anna was abandoned by her mother at a young age and left in the care of her chronically alcohol dependent father. She left home at the age of 16 and moved to Nottingham and then Manchester with a group of women, some of whom were sex workers. Coming back to Stoke at the age of 17 she found herself homeless and 'sofa surfing' in a number of friends houses. Never staying anywhere too long for fear of overstaying her welcome, Anna also slept rough and stayed with her father periodically. She managed to secure a place at a hostel in Stoke-on-Trent and became friendly with another resident, Sophie, who was a sex worker and at 20 was older than her and more 'street-wise'. Within a few short weeks of living at the YMCA Anna began accompanying Sophie to the area where she worked the streets, at first to keep her company and to be around in case of trouble with clients. Anna then became involved in sex work herself.

## 2.2. The Challenges of Exiting Street Sex Work

The Evidence from this study suggests that once a woman has started working as a street prostitute, she tends to continue to do so. Those participating in the study rarely worked intermittently or for a short period of time and many were entrenched in a life of sex work, inextricably linked to the persistence of their drug dependency. Of those currently working, 69 per cent of survey respondents had worked as a street sex worker for more than five years and most worked at least several times a week (15 per cent worked every day and a further 46 per cent worked a few times a week). A further 15 per cent could not remember how long they had been working, leaving just 15 per cent who had worked for less than 5 years. Only 8 per cent had been working for less than a year. For those who did work intermittently becoming pregnant, the birth of a child or meeting a new partner were common reasons for taking a break from sex work.

Maintaining a drug dependency emerged as the primary reason why women remained in street sex work but the situation is not quite as clear cut as this. Although drug dependency tended to drive women's trajectories into prostitution, the cessation of drug use did not necessarily provide a route out. This suggests that the cessation of (illicit) drug use may be necessary for a woman to exit street sex work, but will not always be sufficient. The women interviewed generally expressed an intention to stop working once they accessed a methadone or other relevant drug treatment programme, perceiving a straight forward relation between their need for drugs and their involvement in street sex work. They were very clear that as soon as they no longer required money for drugs they could and would stop working:

*"I can't wait to be on the [drugs] programme so that I can actually sit in at night, and when the soaps come on, soon as comes 6 O'clock I dread it because I know I've got to go out there. When I've got some money I love it because I'm 'I've not got to go out there tonight'" (Megan)*

*"as soon as I get scripted I'll stop working...the money I get from working obviously goes straight on the drugs...and if I'm off drugs on a script then there's no need for me to go out there working" (Elsa)*

But women who had accessed treatment programmes, or had stopped using drugs did not always exit sex work. And some of those who did exit sex work, returned to it later in their

lives. Many women had substantial debt (from court fines, rent arrears, outstanding drug debts) which remained with them long after their drug use ceased. Entrenched in sex work after many years working in the industry, often with few qualifications or recognised vocational skills, with little or no prior experience of the formal labour market, and usually with criminal records and no permanent address, sex work remained the most viable way to earn a living. It transpired that addressing their drug dependency was just the first step in a long process. Hayley is a case in point. When we interviewed her she was living in a local authority tenancy and had resolved her heroin dependency by complying with a methadone programme. She had recently stopped taking methadone and for the first time in many years was completely 'clean'. However, she was at risk of imminent eviction (the eviction notice had been served) and still works regularly as a sex worker. She explained her current situation

*"I'm still off heroin but I'm still being forced out to work on the streets because of my financial problems...I'm getting no help, except for the Women's Project I'm getting no support or anything with me debts or anything like that...Obviously in court, because of working, they give you a fine – how are you supposed to pay it on Income Support? You can't work [in formal employment], coz I've just come off methadone, got to be clean for six months to get back into training, back to college, get me skills up and ready...I've paid £100 off the gas, it's coming down, it's just when you're getting £67 a week and it's supposed to be £15 out of that, how am I supposed to live, I'm supposed to eat...so it's forcing me back out there [working the streets] and then I go to court and they give me a fine which is forcing me back out there which is making financial problems worse...it's alright saying 'yeah, shove them on a script', they've still got problems, financial problems, so we still go back out there" (Hayley)*

It is important to acknowledge, then, that women rely on the income from street sex work to pay for basic necessities as well as to fund drug addictions, and that this can become the overriding factor preventing them exiting prostitution. Amongst drug users and the drug free alike, problems associated with benefits claims (delays, not having ID or other necessary documentation, or living such a chaotic life that dealing with bureaucracy seems impossible) sometimes left women with no income. In other cases (like Hayley's) women could not manage their essential outgoings as well as servicing their debts from the income they had. The evidence from this study suggests that, in these circumstances, women with a history of sex working will often remain in street sex work or return to it as a source of income with which to pay for basic necessities such as food, clothing, and incurred housing costs. When we interviewed Jane, for example, she had recently been released from prison but there had

been a delay processing her benefit claim (reportedly relating to the prison service failing to fax through details of Jane's release date). The money she was provided with on release soon ran out and Jane was staying temporarily with friends who expected board money while she was there.

*Jane* I've started back on the streets. Not that much, only a couple of times a week and I've been going out earning me own money, selling my body and then taking the money back so we got cash

*Interviewer* is that just to fund your housing, bits of rent you're paying, and food?

*Jane* Yeah, it is

In Jane's case, (like Hayley) it was her prior experience of prostitution that prompted her to return so readily to it, or consider it as an option, when she found herself in financial difficulty. This was true for women in other circumstances too, many of whom stayed in or returned to sex work even when the initial impetus for entering prostitution no longer applied. Having worked in the sex industry already, sex work was considered as an option where it may not have been (or not as quickly) by women without a history of sex work. We reported earlier, for example, that Saskia was initially coerced into prostitution by a pimp. He was eventually convicted and imprisoned but after a short break from prostitution she returned to it. She explained why:

*"after I finally got him locked up and everything I didn't work but then I thought 'I did all that working and gave me money away [to the pimp]' so I carried on so I could keep the money myself" (Saskia)*

Some years later, following a relatively long break from sex work, Saskia became addicted to heroin. Sex work was an option she considered very quickly as a means of funding her dependency.

Many of the street sex workers interviewed frequently used sex work to fund their partner's drug dependencies, as well as their own. Danielle, for example explained that *"it wasn't just my habit, it was two habits I was feeding. If he [partner] had a mate with him or summat then it'd be three habits I were feeding"*. The women interviewed tended not to view these circumstances in terms of exploitation, coercion, pimping, or abuse, although a case could clearly be made for all. Rather, they talked in terms of partnerships, where drugs were shared, but glossed over the means through which they were paid for. For example,

*“I’ve supported ‘em [partners], like when I’ve gone out and got the money and got drugs obviously I’ve shared the drugs with them and that” (Elsa)*

*“H`e doesn’t have money off me. I’ll buy the drugs, I’ll share it with him... We’re a couple so I buy it and share it with him” (Hannah)*

*“He’s not made me work, it’s just what I’ve got I’ll share it” (Saskia)*

But of course the drug using partners of street sex workers (all of whom were male in our study) remain reliant on them long after they have addressed their own drug habits. With no acknowledgement that their situations represented a form of exploitation some sense of obligation, love, or empathy it proved very difficult for respondents to cut off their partners' supply of drug money during periods of time when they were no longer in need of it.

Street sex work can also be a means of securing emergency accommodation and, although no woman interviewed reported this as their primary motivation for continuing to work, it was sometimes used by respondents to provide a roof over their head and to avoid sleeping rough. Two types of clients were relied upon by the women interviewed to provide temporary accommodation: ‘regular’s and ‘one-off’ clients. Regular clients were trusted and relied on to provide emergency, occasional and regular accommodation for a minority of the women who would usually be paid for the time they were working but allowed to stay longer. Regulars were known to the women, sometimes over many months, and provided a much needed bed and bath ‘with no strings attached’ when needed. ‘One off’ clients provided a night’s shelter here and there on a purely commercial basis. Women did report actively seeking out clients likely to provide accommodation.

### **2.3. The Risks and Realities of Street Sex Work**

The discussion above has shown that women enter into street sex work reluctantly, sometimes through coercion, sometimes of their own volition but always in desperation. Most were already homeless when they started working in prostitution and, with a couple of exceptions, went directly onto the streets to conduct their business. All worked for the sole purpose of generating income – whether for their own or their partners drugs, for their pimps, to service debts or cover basic outgoings – but very few earned a substantial income from it. Rather, women reported standing in freezing conditions for hours on end, sometimes going home in the morning with just £20 or £30.

*"Oh god, I've been walking the street for seven hours in -6 [degrees] sometimes, standing freezing in a doorway and literally can't move me jaw...I can't go home, got no bus fare, no taxi fare, nowhere to go so stuck there until I've done something with a punter...stood there for seven hours in the cold...you walk everywhere as well, I've got a shadow at the top of my spine and I've got really bad memory problems as well".*  
(Elaine)

Several women commented that values had fallen over the years, making it increasingly difficult to earn the money they need, and forcing them onto the streets for longer, or more frequently. Interview respondents reported that because some women were now charging as little as £10, and would agree to punters' (apparently quite common) requests for sex without a condom, business was becoming much harder to secure.

Women were not asked specifically about their physical and sexual health but several reported significant physical damage and sexual health issues arising from sex work activity. Adverse weather conditions, constant standing and walking, and rough treatment by punters all took their toll on women's health. An issue many talked about was the difficulty associated with living with the constant threat of violence. Women were acutely aware that they put their lives at risk every time they went to work and that, as Emma explained, *"you don't know if that car's the last car you're going to get into, you know you don't know that, and that's the scary thing of it"*. Many women had suffered serious physical attack and/or rape.

*"Held at knife point, me money taken off me" (Elsa)*

*"If I didn't work as a sex worker I wouldn't be in danger of getting raped and murdered. I got raped, I've been attacked twice. See that scar there? That was last year" (Hayley)*

Street sex work is considered to be the most dangerous form of prostitution. Parlours are not without their problems but are generally regarded as safer, and definitely warmer and more comfortable. But homeless sex workers, particularly those sleeping rough, can struggle to get work in parlours. Saskia explains why:

*"I couldn't get a job in one [a parlour]...I'm too here there and everywhere, I've got no clothes and living on the streets I'm scruffy and everything. It's not that easy...You get different types of guy coming in there, they don't want a girl dressed like I am, scruffy*

*and that. They don't want to see you, they want you in skirts and stockings, all clean and nice" (Saskia)*

In some regards, then, homelessness (rough sleeping in particular) may expose sex workers to greater risks of violence by virtue of their necessary location on the streets rather than in parlours.

## **2.4. Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the reasons why women enter and remain in street sex work and their experiences of doing so. It has shown that drug dependency remains the primary reason why women work in street prostitution but that this masks a far more complex picture. Women are also coerced into prostitution by pimps, they work to fund their partners' drug habits, to pay rent, buy food, service debts and secure emergency accommodation. And in doing so they expose themselves daily to the risk (and reality) of violence.



## Housing and Homelessness Careers

This chapter explores street sex workers' housing situations and experiences, identifying common routes into homelessness and highlighting the key features of street sex workers' homelessness careers.

### 3.1. Routes into Homelessness

Exploring respondents' trajectories into homelessness revealed surprisingly little diversity. Certainly every woman's story was unique, but analysis of the circumstances under which each became homeless<sup>1</sup> suggests a relatively limited number of key 'causes' or triggers of homelessness amongst women who are, or who subsequently become street sex workers. These are:

- an unplanned move from the parental home following problems or conflict
- domestic abuse from a partner
- an unplanned exit from local authority care where meaningful contact with Social Services ceases
- a traumatic experience, the personal impact of which eventually results in homelessness.

Most commonly, the street sex workers interviewed had first become homeless following an unplanned move from the parental home. This was true for nearly half of the women who provided information about the circumstances leading to their first episode of homelessness. More often than not, women were seeking to escape abuse, neglect or other family

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<sup>1</sup> For this exercise we were interested in the reasons why woman had first become homeless. However, we also included instances where women had become homeless again following lengthy and sustained periods of settled housing (i.e. where they had apparently successfully and permanently resolved their homelessness but then became homeless again).

circumstances which had become intolerable. Several women were being sexually abused by parents, grandparents, or their mother's partner while others were struggling to deal with the consequences of parental alcoholism. In a couple of cases general family disputes (for example regarding choice of partner by either the young person or their parent) prompted a young woman's move from the family home. Danielle, for example, reported that when she was 15 years old her mother's partner threatened to leave if Danielle remained in the family home (Danielle's mother had led a very chaotic life characterised by many years of homelessness) so she was asked to move out. Danielle explained the consequence for her housing situation:

*"I had to go. Basically then I was living in a tent and then ended up living in a hostel and then I ended up getting kicked out of the hostel so I ended up having to sleep in pub cellars. I've slept in doorways, I've slept everywhere." (Danielle)*

This exposes the prevalence of disruptive and abusive experiences in childhood amongst this group of women (an issue we return to in Chapter 4) but also highlights that many street sex workers first experience homelessness at a very young age. This is not unique to street sex workers but the survey data suggest it is more common amongst them. For example, those participating in the survey were much more likely to be homeless by the age of 16 (57 per cent) than respondents who had never engaged in sex work (39 per cent of whom were homeless by the age of 16). This also, of course, suggests that women who become homeless at a very young age may be particularly vulnerable to involvement in street prostitution, a possibility also touched on in the previous Chapter.

In interviews, women described leaving home as young as ten years old. The early homelessness career of someone so young is very predictable: with very few options, not yet able to secure their own tenancy or access hostels, they can only stay with friends, in squats or sleep rough. Charlotte explained that by age 11 she had effectively left home and *"I'd just hang around with me mates. I'd go and stay at friends houses, I'd do anything I could not to go home...."* The situation in which these young women (or children) found themselves rarely seems to have come to anyone's attention. There was little mention of contact with Social Services by those interviewed, and the parents of the friends with whom they stayed apparently failed to register that their son or daughters' guest was, effectively, homeless. Some young women, but by no mean all, were returning home periodically (or even once a day, briefly) to change their clothes, wash and such like. This served to validate the perception of people around them that they were still living in the parental home. By moving

frequently, only staying with the same friend for a night or two, or staying with older acquaintances, they could maintain this façade.

Another group whose homelessness careers began very young were those in the care of the local authority, several of whom first became homeless directly from or very soon after leaving residential care homes. In some cases women would have remained the responsibility of the local authority, but were never again accommodated by them. It is not clear how these young women were able to leave care, in an unplanned way and (apparently) have no further meaningful contact with social services (the young women in question may have made every effort to avoid such contact) but this does seem to have been the case. Respondents described leaving care in rather vague terms, as if they had simply walked out into independent living, never to return again. Charlene explained that:

*“I haven’t been at home since I was about 8. I went into residential [care] till I was about 15 and then I just started doing my own thing” (Charlene)*

Hayley was taken into Care at the age of 13, following a difficult childhood and early adolescence in which she was sexually abused by her stepfather and neglected by her mother. She described her exit from the care home in similar terms as Charlene, as if she simply walked out of the care home to stay with friends and had no further contact with, or support from Social Services:

*“[the care home] was horrible, one of the worst places I’ve ever been in...I hated it, I couldn’t wait to be 16, to look after myself [so when I turned] 16 I went to stay with a friend from school for two weeks, then I went to stay with me mates sister’s older friend who’d got a flat...(Hayley)*

Hayley spent the next ten years moving through the full range of homelessness accommodation situations – hostels, squats, rough sleeping, staying with friends, in refuges, interim supported housing, and serving two prison sentences. Along the way she developed a heroin addiction, started working as a street prostitute and had two babies taken into care and adopted.

Domestic abuse is acknowledged to be a key risk factor, or trigger of homelessness and, since 2001, this has been reflected in the homelessness legislation in England<sup>2</sup>. Experience of domestic abuse was alarmingly common amongst the street sex workers participating in this study, who were nearly twice as likely to have been a victim of domestic violence than those who had never engaged in street sex work (67 per cent compared with 33 per cent). It is perhaps no surprise, then, that domestic abuse emerged as a significant cause of homelessness amongst street sex workers, as Charlotte, Jennifer and Elaine's descriptions of becoming homeless illustrate:

*"I've been in the [hostel] three months, since end July. I left an abusive partner who was physically, emotionally and sexually abusive" (Charlotte)*

*"I had a private tenancy but I had to move out because I had a violent partner" (Jennifer)*

*"It's always the same, using my son as well to get at me, stupid horrible stuff...you can't live like that...he was being horrible to me in front of my little 'un...I've got nowhere else to go and no-one else to go to so I ended up [sleeping] in an outside toilet" (Elaine)*

Approximately one third of the street sex workers interviewed had become homeless for the *first* time, or following a lengthy and sustained period of settled housing, escaping domestic abuse from a partner. There were, however, many more examples of women leaving temporary, short-term, or insecure accommodation for the same reason. Some had become homeless multiple times as a result of domestic abuse, often from several different partners.

*"I've had domestic violence recently, from me ex-partner I've just split up from...the partner I've just split up from now isn't the partner I had the domestic violence from in Newcastle, this is another one I got in with....I had to have the police out the week before last because he came to the house...he gave me a black eye and a broken finger". (Elsa)*

A total of 12 per cent of women surveyed had left their *last* accommodation (whether temporary or settled) to escape domestic violence compared with just 4 per cent of

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<sup>2</sup> The Homeless (Priority Need for Accommodation) (England) Order 2001, and the Homelessness Act 2002 extended the priority need categories to people who are vulnerable as a result of escaping violence.

respondents who had never engaged in sex work. Amongst the repeated reports of domestic abuse by interview respondents, in no case did a woman manage to escape domestic abuse and remain in her accommodation. Examples of women approaching and being offered secure accommodation by the local authority to enable them to escape domestic abuse and avoid homelessness were also very rare. Most women endured a sustained period of homelessness following the loss of their accommodation.

Sex workers are also at risk of losing accommodation or having to move to escape other forms of violence, or violence from people other than their partner. This includes women attempting to escape pimps and drug dealers. These situations were more common *during* women's homelessness careers (or during insecure and chaotic housing careers involving homelessness and short periods of settled housing), rather than as a trigger of a first episode of homelessness.

The significance of domestic violence in street sex workers trajectories into homelessness is likely to be a reflection of gender rather (or more so) than their involvement in prostitution, domestic violence being a particular trigger of homelessness, and a more prevalent experience amongst women. Indeed the women interviewed were rarely working as street prostitutes when they first became homeless. The extent to which this link is a product of gender alone is not certain, however, so the apparent relationship between domestic violence and subsequent involvement in street sex work certainly deserves more attention by research and policy.

Jane and Megan's descriptions of how they became homeless illustrates the role of traumatic life experiences as a significant contributory factor in homelessness amongst street sex workers. In each case it was a form of bereavement which 'triggered' the chain of events leading to homelessness: a late miscarriage, cot death, or death of a close relative.

*"once me son died that was it, things went pear shaped, started getting myself into drugs and then I started going into prison" (Jane)*

*"Then me father died, j just gave up I think, I just hated everybody. I didn't want help of nobody, fell out with me sisters, ended up losing the house...I ended up going to a Trust in Newcastle for homeless people and battered wives" (Megan)*

Exploring each woman's trajectory from trauma to homelessness reveals that homelessness, in these circumstance, is a transition rather than an abrupt 'event' and that the transition from

'housed' to 'homeless' can be gradual, and multi-factorial. The link between the events described above and women's subsequent homelessness was very clear but by no means direct or immediate. Rather, women moved through some combination of drug and/or alcohol abuse, depression and other mental ill health, aggressive behaviour, and offending and somewhere along the line they lost the settled accommodation in which they lived. Pinpointing the precise time and way in which women moved from being housed to being homeless proved difficult, respondents themselves not always being entirely clear about this. Had they been evicted, for rent arrears or anti-social behaviour associated with their drug dependencies? Had they abandoned the property by handing the keys in or simply walking away? Had they given notice on their accommodation or been served with an eviction notice whilst in prison or psychiatric hospital? These were all possibilities, from the stories women told, but they were rarely able to clarify the precise circumstances under which they became homeless, describing instead a chaotic time, where things 'fell apart', 'went pear shaped' or when they were 'all over the place'. Saskia sums this up in her response to the question about how she finally lost her home and became homeless: *"I can't even remember, I lost me house or summat, I don't know, it's all a bit of a daze"* (Saskia).

Interestingly, it was rare for women to become homeless *for the first time* following a traumatic event in their lives. In fact most of the women whose homelessness stemmed from a traumatic event had first experienced homelessness early in their lives (by the age of 16, having left home) but subsequently escaped homelessness for a sustained period of time. Saskia, for example, first became homeless at the age of 13, running away from home where she had been sexually abused by her stepfather. Over the next eight years she moved in and out of homelessness, staying temporarily with friends, relatives, spending some time in a bail hostel and having several short-lived private rented tenancies. She was introduced to heroin by a boyfriend and was soon shoplifting and working as a street sex worker to fund her dependency. She had two children but by the time she was 20 they had both been adopted. Saskia met a new partner when she was about 21, addressed her drug dependency and moved into a private rented house with her partner where they lived for six years, having two children together. Saskia explained that she was settled, clean (drug free), and enjoying being a mother to her children until:

*" it all went wrong....me youngest [child] died of cot death and then I ended up turning back to drugs, and that's where I am now.....I'd got me house but then I ended up living on the street, it all just went wrong"* (Saskia)

This suggests that street sex workers who have experienced homelessness may always remain at risk of repeat homelessness, with 'trigger events' more likely to result in the loss of a home than would be the case amongst those who had never been homeless.

### **3.2. Routes through Homelessness**

Tables 3.1 and 3.2 present information about all the housing situations (secure and temporary) in which the street sex workers surveyed had ever lived, providing an indication of the types of accommodation most commonly relied upon during episodes of homelessness and episodes of housing stability. Through discussion and examination of the figures provided in these tables we can unpick some of these issues and explore street sex workers routes through and experiences of homelessness. In so doing, some key features of street sex workers homelessness and housing careers are highlighted.

Table 3.1. shows that street sex workers do access formal homelessness provision in Stoke-on-Trent, with 72 per cent of survey respondents reporting that they had stayed in a homelessness hostel. They were, however, slightly less likely to have done so than the homeless people surveyed who have never engaged in street sex work (82 per cent of whom had stayed in a hostel) suggesting that street sex workers may encounter greater difficulties accessing hostels or may be more reluctant to do so than other homeless people. It is also likely that the survey statistics regarding access to hostels will, in some cases, relate to periods of time when respondents were homeless but were not (or not yet) working as street prostitutes. Evidence from the in-depth interviews suggests that the longer some women work as street prostitutes the more distanced they can become from formal homelessness provision (and other services) and the less they rely on hostels for accommodation. The night time curfew imposed in some hostels also acts a deterrent. We suggest, then, that the proportion of women who have accessed hostels while also working as a street prostitute is likely to be lower than indicated in Table 3.1. We return to these issue in Chapter 5 when we examine the barriers encountered by street sex workers accessing housing and support services.

Table 3.1 also suggests that homeless street sex workers may live in some of the most insecure, sometimes dangerous, temporary accommodation situations. It is of great concern, for example, that rough sleeping was the most commonly replied upon accommodation situation amongst the street sex workers surveyed, with 77 per cent stating that they had slept rough. And street sex workers do not, apparently, just sleep rough occasionally. Rather, rough sleeping was a regular experience amongst those surveyed, with nearly half (46 per

cent) reporting having slept rough *in the past month*. Nor was it always a short-term measure, for a night or two until a more suitable alternative could be found. Women described having to sleep rough regularly, in appalling conditions, and sometimes for weeks or months on end. Alana, for example, explained that *“at the moment it couldn’t be any worse. Basically been homeless for the best part of a year but full blown rough sleeping has been two months...on the streets, in the rough”*. Women reported sleeping in tents, abandoned cars, disused public toilets, skips, parks, car park, doorways, fields, tents and sheds. Some preferred to sleep alone, as hidden as possible, some preferred the company and safety of larger groups and others slept rough with their partners. All talked about the practical and emotional difficulties associated with rough sleeping. For example:

*“I haven’t had a bath for eight months, serious, I have washes...but I haven’t had a bath for ages. Me hands are black, me nails are black, it’s not right, shouldn’t be in this situation.” (Alana)*

*“I’d got nowhere else to go and no-one to go to so I ended up in an outside toilet...on Christmas night, I’d got a candle and two digestive biscuits. And the police came and moved me on, it was Boxing day morning, 2 o’clock....if you’d come out and seen a dog there you would take that dog to the RSPCA and give it a meal....but they woke me up and moved me on...you can’t imagine how that makes you feel. It’s Christmas and you’ve just been moved on from an outside toilet that no-one’s using... I’d got no money, I’d got no food, no shelter, no anything...and it was freezing and you can’t even wash or anything like that to make it more bearable. And like when you’ve got your period, it’s awful, you’ve got no Tampax, I just had to sit holding an old sock down there” (Elaine)*

*“you can’t really sleep, you can’t call it sleep, it’s more like a cat nap cos you hear a noise and you’re straight away looking round so it’s not really sleeping” (Sarah)*

Rough sleeping was not considered preferable to other accommodation situations by the street sex workers participating in this research. It was a last resort. The prevalence of rough sleeping, then, must reflect that street sex workers reach their last resort regularly and quickly. That this should be the case clearly raises questions about levels of engagement with and access to housing and support services.

**Table 3.1. The homelessness accommodation in which survey respondents have lived**

Homeless accommodation situation	N	%
Rough sleeping	23	77
Homeless hostel	21	72
Squatting	17	59
Temporarily with friends	17	59
Temporarily with family	15	52
B&B	14	48
Temporarily with a partner	12	41
Night shelter	5	17
Bail / probation hostel	5	17
Refuge	3	10

n= 30

Table 3.1 highlights the extent to which street sex workers may be a ‘hidden homeless’ population. We use the term ‘hidden’ to denote accommodation situations which are provided informally, rather than by housing or other service providers and where women are therefore less likely to be on the radar of agencies providing accommodation, support, or advice to homeless people. The table shows, for example, that the majority of the street sex workers surveyed had stayed in squats and most had also stayed temporarily with friends or relatives. Other hidden homeless situations which emerged in the in-depth interviews included staying with clients, and in other homeless people’s temporary accommodation (for example hostel rooms), or rooms in residential care homes (LA children’s homes and elderly people’s sheltered housing schemes) without the knowledge of the service provider. The street sex workers surveyed were more likely to have stayed in squats than those respondents who had never been involved in street sex work (59 per cent and 40 per cent respectively). These were empty, often partially derelict residential or commercial buildings, sometimes awaiting demolition and usually with no running water, electricity or heating. Women sometimes stayed in squats alone, with a partner, or sometimes with group of friends. It was not uncommon, however, for women to ‘turn up’ at a squat they had heard about and stay there with people they don’t know. Saskia provides a relatively typical description of conditions in a squat:

*“You just find ‘em [squats], or somebody else finds ‘em and you get wind of it and turn up there...yeah, with about eight or nine other people sometimes in one room. Some of ‘em have got electric and water but 90% of ‘em haven’t...I went in a squat the other night and there was loads of people in there. It depends” Saskia*

Women explained that that the properties they squatted were sometimes secured while they were out so they could never leave possessions inside, or be sure the squat would provide a

roof over their head for another night. Although some women did describe better conditions (running water and electricity, houses with a few pieces of furniture inside, where they could stay with a partner or friend, undisturbed by others) typically squatting represented a form of rough sleeping or was only a short step away from it.

Table 3.1 shows that the women surveyed relied heavily on friends and family for a roof over their head. In contrast to some squats and to rough sleeping, staying with friends or relatives usually provides accommodation which is warm, relatively comfortable (compared, for example, to sleeping rough), and safe. However, women reported often only being able to stay with friends or relatives for a few days at a time, never know when they might have to leave, and that relying on the good will of others could place a strain on important relationships. A couple of cases were identified of low level exploitation of sex workers by the friends on whom they relied for temporary accommodation. Several complained that they were expected to support the household with whom they were staying, providing all the food, paying the bills and sometimes paying rent (even where this was covered by Housing Benefit and the guest was sleeping on the sofa or floor). Jane and her boyfriend, for example, were sleeping on a friend's sofa temporarily and were paying rent for the privilege. She also reported that:

*“they’re taking the mick out of me and I’m going out, buying food, loads of different things...I’m buying say £40 worth of food and they’re eating it and then starting on their own food, leaving me without” (Jane)*

Respondents’ friends reportedly perceived their work in the sex industry as an easy means of securing extra income for the household and were quick to exploit this. Elaine explained that *“when you’re [sex] working they expect you to keep them as well, it was making me sick”*. With nowhere else to go, women rarely had any choice but to agree to their friends’ demands despite this requiring an increase in client numbers and time spent working.

Although homeless women who are, or who become sex workers clearly do access formal provision (as the table shows) and so are by no means solely a hidden homeless population, a significant proportion of the street sex workers interviewed spent more of their homelessness careers moving between hidden homeless accommodation situations than in hostels (or any other form of provider-led accommodation). Elsa, for example, explained that until about a year ago when she *‘started sorting myself out’* and moved into a hostel, she spent over ten years sleeping rough and staying with friends. During that time she only spent a few nights in hostel accommodation. Danielle similarly described ‘years’ spent sleeping

rough and squatting, never staying in hostels or even with friends. And Saskia offered a similar description of her homelessness career when she said *“just staying on a friends sofa at the minute [for] about four nights. [before that in] squats, streets, different squats, streets, anywhere” (Saskia)*

Hidden homeless situations tend to provide very short term accommodation only. Friends and relatives were rarely willing or able to accommodate respondents for long, clients could only be relied upon for a night at a time, and rough sleeping and squats were situations of last resort that women moved on from as soon as an alternative could be secured. Danielle, for example, reported that the longest she had spent in any one situation whilst homeless (she now has a private tenancy but is under threat of eviction) was a couple of weeks, in a squat. And Amanda described her own situation in similar terms when she reported that *“I used to struggle at night. You say to yourself ‘well where do I go tomorrow?’...I’d always be worried”*

The extent to which street sex workers’ housing situations are characterised by housing insecurity and frequent mobility is further illustrated by the survey findings. One third of survey respondents had no idea how long they could remain in their current accommodation, and only 16 per cent reported with confidence that they could remain there for six months or more. In total, 63 per cent had been in their current housing situation for less than two months and one quarter reported that they would have leave within two months. Of those reporting that they had to move in the near future, most had nowhere else to go, placing them at risk of rough sleeping.

There were examples of women experiencing a degree of housing stability whilst homeless, staying in a hostel or other temporary supported housing provision for six months or more but this was relatively rare. More often, women moved frequently between different forms of housing provision. If we look again at Table 3.1, this time at the *count* of sex workers reporting having stayed in each accommodation situation, we find 132 separate temporary accommodation episodes (23 episodes of rough sleeping, 21 stays in a hostel, and so on). On average, then, each of the 30 survey respondents had moved through more than four different types of temporary housing provision. Drawing on the interview data, most commonly this would involve moving between friends, hostels, rough sleeping and squatting. However, if we then consider that most respondents reported having stayed in each type of homelessness provision *more than once* then a picture emerges of very frequent mobility and housing insecurity. It also suggests that hostels and other formal homelessness

provision are not currently providing a sustained route out of homelessness for many sex workers. The survey findings reveal that<sup>3</sup>:

- 72 per cent of the survey respondents who had stayed in a hostel had done so more than once, and 33 per cent had done so on five or more separate occasions.
- all the survey respondents who had relied on friends for temporary accommodation had done so more than once and 70 per cent had stayed with friends on five or more occasions
- 86 per cent of respondents who reported having squatted had done so more than once, and 43 per cent had squatted five or more times
- of the survey respondents reporting having slept rough, 93 per cent had done so more than once and 71 per cent had slept rough on five or more separate occasions

Despite housing careers quite clearly characterised by long periods of homelessness, during which women moved frequently from place to place, often in 'hidden' accommodation situations, the street sex workers participating in this study were also very likely to have lived in 'settled' accommodation. Table 3.2 shows that the majority of those surveyed had lived in their own private or social rented tenancy. In fact they were more likely to have done so than the homeless people surveyed who had never worked in the sex industry (only 28 per cent of non sex workers had held a social housing tenancy and 44 per cent a private rented tenancy compared with 52 per cent and 65 per cent of street sex workers). Evidence from the in depth interviews suggests that some of these tenancies would have been held prior to women's first experience of homelessness (and before they became involved in street sex work) but by no means all. Interview respondents' homelessness careers did frequently include periods of time in 'settled' accommodation.

Exploring this further, however, reveals that sex workers tend to be vulnerably housed even when accommodated in ostensibly secure (i.e. with their own tenancy) housing. The precarious nature of respondents' housing and personal circumstances frequently placed women with their own tenancies at risk of homelessness. Two of the three women living in

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<sup>3</sup> These statistics do have to be treated with caution. Most survey respondents indicated whether they had stayed in each of the accommodation situation listed but not all indicated how many times they had done so. These figures therefore represent very small numbers. The survey results do, however, chime with the experiences of the street sex workers interviewed in depth and so are unlikely to be significantly off the mark.

their own tenancies at the time they were interviewed were under threat of eviction, and a number of respondents reported having had several, typically short lived, tenancies since first becoming homeless, effectively moving in and out of homelessness over a long period of time.

**Table 3.2. The 'settled' accommodation situations in which respondents have lived**

Settled housing situation	N	%
private rented tenancy/house	19	65
Private rented tenancy with floating support	4	14
council or HA tenancy	15	52
Council or HA tenancy with floating support	5	17
Owner occupied	3	10

n= 30

This chimes with findings from the survey data which show that repeat homelessness is very common amongst street sex workers, with only 15 per cent of the survey sample reporting that this was not their first episode of homelessness. More than half had been through five or more episodes of homelessness (compared with 22 per cent of survey respondents who had never worked in the sex industry) and 30 per cent reported having experienced homelessness 10 times or more (compared with 13 per cent of non sex workers)<sup>4</sup>. That street sex workers appear to remain at risk of homelessness having secured settled accommodation is likely to reflect a number of issues of particular relevance to this population, as well as certain features of their housing careers, including the following:

- debt was a significant problem for the street prostitutes interviewed. Accrued from court fines, credit from drug dealers, and bureaucratic complications with benefit claims, rent arrears and threat of eviction were relatively common. Fines for soliciting and loitering as well as victim charges<sup>5</sup> are debts regularly incurred by sex workers and these were often prioritised over other financial commitments, such as housing costs. If women do not pay their court fines they incur further fines (or risk a prison sentence), and possibly a curfew, thereby restricting their capacity to earn money, so these debts tended to take precedence over other payments. The threat of eviction for rent arrears, in turn provided an ongoing impetus for women to remain in prostitution.

<sup>4</sup> This is based on respondents' estimates regarding the number of times they had experienced homelessness and as such may be based on varying definitions of homelessness. If a rigid definition of homelessness was applied then these figures may decrease

<sup>5</sup> The 'victim surcharge' ranges from £5-£10 for a fixed penalty notice to £15-£30 for more serious crimes

- reliance on the private rented sector for accommodation - and on a particular segment of this market - appears to be contributing significantly to the housing insecurity, and consequential extent of repeat homelessness, experienced by women involved in street prostitution. Respondents tended to reside in the low cost, easy to access, high turnover segment of the private rented market, often located within the area where street prostitutes work. There was evidence of unscrupulous landlord practices such as insisting that women vacate properties at very short notice, or moving them from one property to another. Hannah's landlord, for example, moved her into 'temporary accommodation' while he carried out repairs to her flat but would not allow her to return. She explained:

*"he come round with some workers...and said 'I'm sorry I'm going to have to move you so I can do some work' and also he told me that he'd put me into temporary accommodation... all the work's done now and then they turned round and said I can't move back in" (Hannah)*

Tenancy agreements were apparently a rarity and the arrangements through which women accessed private rented tenancies were often fragile, organised through friends or partners and dependent upon ongoing relationships with these people. Elsa, for example, reported that during a homelessness career spanning 16 years *"I have had me own place, but it's only been like short tenancies and before, like, they sold the properties. This place where I am now it was through an ex-partner, it's his friend and because me and me ex-partner have separated that's why I've got to get out...he [landlord] turned funny and that over it"*. There was also anecdotal evidence that some landlords renting properties to women involved in street sex work were requesting sex in lieu of rent although this was not corroborated.

- prison featured prominently in the housing and homelessness careers of the street sex workers surveyed and interviewed for this study, with 79 per cent of survey respondents reporting having served a prison sentence. Two thirds of those who had served a prison sentence had done so more than once, and one third had been in prison five times or more. This is concerning but perhaps not surprising. Soliciting is a criminal offence and prostitution is considered to constitute 'nuisance behaviour'. Street sex workers therefore rarely evade arrest for long and/or find themselves subject to Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) the conditions of which typically prohibit them from entering the red light

district. With court fines and victim charges to pay, no other source of income<sup>6</sup> and, in many cases, drug habits to support, custodial sentences for breach of ASBOs, non-payment of fines, or (in attempt to keep to the terms of an ASBO or avoid incurring more fines) alternative offences committed to secure funds for drugs are almost inevitable. It is well documented that a prison sentence frequently triggers homelessness amongst those who were adequately housed at the start of their sentence, and sustains it amongst those who were not. Homelessness, then, is disproportionately visited on those groups (including street sex workers) who have regular contact with the criminal justice system, and prisons in particular.

This picture is certainly confirmed by the circumstances of the street sex workers interviewed. Most commonly, they were released from prison to a situation of homelessness (rough sleeping in some instances) having received little advice or assistance about securing housing (see Chapter 5 for further information about accessing housing and support whilst in Prison). Those with private or social rented tenancies when they were sentenced struggled to sustain them. Unable to pay the rent (Housing Benefit is only payable for 13 weeks) some women handed in their notice, others were evicted for rent arrears while in custody or shortly after release and, assuming erroneously that incarceration rendered her ineligible for housing, one woman handed her keys back to her landlord. Some failed to formally terminate their tenancy, not realising this is necessary, and accrued rent arrears while in custody. Generally speaking, women did not expect to retain housing while in prison, even when serving relatively short sentences. There was a common expectation that people lose or have to relinquish accommodation when in custody, illustrated by Elsa's comment that *"you go into prison and then you automatically lose your property anyway"*. This statement is (legally) untrue but amongst a population who reside in the bottom end of the private rented sector it is probably more accurate than it should be. Reliance on this housing market, combined with their regular incarceration, may therefore dramatically increase street sex workers' risk of homelessness (or repeat homelessness).

Serving a prison sentence was not a common trigger of a *first* episode of homelessness amongst the street sex workers participating in this study, but it was certainly a key factor in *sustaining* their homelessness (if homeless prior to serving a prison sentence they were typically homeless on release), and in prompting repeat episodes of homelessness.

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<sup>6</sup> Some of the street sex workers interviewed were not in receipt of any welfare benefits so street sex work was their sole source of income.

Some women had sustained social or private rented tenancies for some years but during this time they ceased working (and using drugs) so stable housing and sex working rarely coincided.

### **3.4. Conclusion**

Street sex workers' homelessness careers are characterised by insecurity, repeat and prolific homelessness, and a reliance on some of the most informal and unsafe temporary housing situations. The experiences of the women participating in this study suggests that once street sex workers become homeless it proves extremely difficult for them to resolve their housing problems and permanently escape homelessness. Many have had periods of ostensibly 'stable' accommodation (i.e. their own social or private rented tenancy) but this is often precarious and rarely long lasting, representing little more than brief respite during a long homelessness career. Involvement in street sex work directly impacts on women's housing situations. As long as a woman works as a street prostitute she is at risk of becoming or remaining homeless and is very likely to do so. This risk travels from many directions including: street sex workers' inevitable contact with the criminal justice system; their (necessary) reliance on the bottom end of the private rented sector; and the financial imperative to pay court fines rather than housing costs.

## Identifying Welfare Needs: Personal Circumstances, Life Experiences

This study was focused on identifying and exploring the *housing* situations and needs of women involved in street sex work, with a view to making recommendations about improving housing provision for this client group. But it is impossible to consider housing needs without also considering the range of support needs which street sex workers present with, and the additional vulnerabilities which impact on their housing situations and requirements. It is obvious, from the discussion in Chapters 2 and 3, that providing a street sex worker with a house would certainly improve her situation markedly, but is not going to radically change her circumstances. It is often not a woman's homelessness, or even her situation as a sex worker which presents the biggest barrier to accessing appropriate accommodation. Rather, it is offending histories, drug addiction, mental ill health, coping difficulties or the presence of several of these issues in combination that prevents homeless street sex workers from accessing housing, and sustaining it.

### 4.1. Overview

Survey respondents were provided with a list of statements about their personal and life experiences, such as 'I have been in local authority care' and 'I have experienced domestic violence, and asked to indicate which applied to them. The results are presented in Table 4.1. The table shows that street sex workers are extremely likely to have contact with the criminal justice system with nearly all survey respondents having a criminal record. Issues relating to mental and emotional health are prevalent (including coping difficulties and self harm), and they have a range of experiences likely to have impacted detrimentally on their psychological, emotional and mental well being (abuse, unsettled lives, conflict and separation from family). The street sex workers surveyed were also more likely than those who had never worked in prostitution to report each and every one of these experiences.

Particularly stark contrasts between homeless sex workers and the remainder of the sample were evident in relation to experience of domestic and other abuse, various forms of contact with the criminal justice system, and drug dependency.

**Table 4.1**

	<b>Sex workers (%)</b>	<b>Not sex workers (%)</b>
has a criminal record	96	76
is drug dependent	80	52
has been on probation	73	57
has been in prison/YOI	70	47
has experienced domestic violence	67	33
Sometimes find it difficult to cope	60	51
had an unsettled life while growing up	60	54
has little contact with family	50	50
have forms of abuse other than domestic violence	57	34
has experienced mental ill health	44	32
has been in local authority care	30	27
has experienced alcohol dependency	37	45
has literacy problems	23	17
Sometimes self harms	20	23
has a learning disability	17	15
has been the subject of an ASBO	17	5
has a physical disability	13	8

n = 30

The full sample included 50 individuals who were targeted for inclusion in the survey because they were drug users or had a history of violent or offending behaviour (the two client groups in addition to street sex workers that the research programme was concerned with). This will have skewed the figures in table 4.1 regarding levels of drug dependency and extent of contact with the criminal justice system amongst those who have never been involved in street sex work. That stark contrasts should be evident with regard to these issues *despite* this, is noteworthy. If we compare the circumstances of street sex workers with those of the 69 homeless survey respondents who were *not targeted* for being drug users, sex workers, or offenders (although some were) then the contrast is even starker. For example, street sex workers were nearly twice as likely to be drug dependent (80 per cent compared with 46 per cent of the 'non targeted' sample) more than twice as likely to have been in prison (70 per cent compared with 29 per cent), and significantly more likely to have been on probation (73 per cent compared with 45 per cent) and have a criminal record (96 per cent compared with 65 per cent)

If we then consider that the majority of street sex workers surveyed reported multiple issues, and that these are in addition to their situation of homelessness and experiences as a sex worker, then the picture which emerges is of a very vulnerable population indeed, with significant welfare needs. These needs and experiences impact very directly on street sex workers' housing situations, on their capacity to access and sustain accommodation, and can increase their risk of homelessness or continued/repeat homelessness. To provide just a few examples, some of which are touched on further in the next chapter:

- As we saw in chapter 2, domestic violence is a very common trigger of homelessness amongst women who are, or who become street sex workers, and unsettled childhoods play a key role in women's routes into homelessness. We also saw the role that prison plays in street sex workers homelessness careers, sometimes triggering homelessness amongst women with tenancies and sustaining it amongst those were homeless on entering custody.
- Some housing providers are reluctant or unwilling to accommodate people with criminal records, or subject their application to greater scrutiny.
- Drug dependency can precipitate homelessness and can also sustain it. For example, women are asked to leave home by parents at the end of their tether, they prioritise the purchase of drugs over the payment of rent and are evicted for rent arrears, or their accommodation becomes a magnet for other drug users and dealers and they are evicted for anti-social behaviour. Homelessness is then sustained by drug dependency, it proving very difficult for drug users to resolve their housing crisis once homeless. For example landlords and housing providers can be reluctant to accommodate drug users (because they are deemed undesirable tenants, because their support needs are too high, or because of concerns about tenancy sustainment), or their lives are so chaotic and focused on obtaining drugs that addressing their housing problems takes low priority. Drug dependency can also increase the risk of rough sleeping for similar reasons – some temporary or interim supported accommodation is closed to active drug takers; a chaotic lifestyle focused on drug use can prevent women seeking out temporary as well as secure accommodation; and drug users are frequently evicted from temporary accommodation back onto the streets for failing to comply with hostel regulations regarding drug management.
- Low literacy levels can deter or prevent women from applying for (temporary or secure) housing. This can prevent homeless street sex workers from accessing secure

accommodation and prevent rough sleepers from accessing formal temporary provision such as hostels.

- Mental health issues, including depression and coping difficulties, can make it difficult for women without support to manage and sustain their own tenancy. Again, some housing providers may be reluctant to accommodate women with diagnosed mental health issues if a support package is not in place.

In the remainder of this section we will expand a little on some of the issues highlighted in Table 4.1, and others which emerged in interviews with street sex workers. .

## 4.2. Childhood

Table 4.1 shows that 60 per cent of the survey respondents reported having had an unsettled childhood and 50 per cent had no contact with their family. Drawing on the reported experiences of the street sex workers interviewed it is safe to conclude that most women had unhappy childhoods, and these early experiences have left their mark. Rejection, abandonment, neglect and abuse were commonplace and the street sex workers interviewed had rarely been given the opportunity to deal with the psychological and emotional impact of these traumatic life experiences. The consequences cannot be overstated, with women frequently tracing their mental health issues, drug or alcohol dependency, and homelessness to these early life experiences. Hannah for example reported that:

*“I’m paranoid schizophrenic, I suffer from psychosis...that wasn’t after the drugs though...it was the background I had from a child. I had a really rough childhood, I got abused in the family and things like that” (Hannah)*

Common themes which emerged in the interviews include:

- Sexual abuse, usually by women’s father, grandfather, or mother’s partner. Some women had attempted to inform their mother, the police, or social services but were ignored, not believed, or no action was taken to protect her.
- Being or feeling abandoned or neglected by parents (mothers in particular). Several women reported that their mothers had chosen to remain with a partner, knowing that the consequence of this decision was separation from their daughter. Others were still feeling the rejection associated with their mother ‘leaving them behind’

when she separated from the respondent's father, often to move in with a new partner. And some described parents who neither knew, nor (according to respondents) cared where they were from one day to the next.

- Violence from parents or step-parents
- Dealing with parents who themselves have complex needs such as alcoholism, experience of abuse, and long histories of chaotic homelessness.

Charlotte and Danielle's experiences illustrate some of these issues. Charlotte was being sexually abused by her step-father. When his previous offences against children came to light Social Services acted quickly and Charlotte's mother was given the option of retaining her children if she separated from her partner. She chose to let Social Services take her children into care. In Charlotte's words:

*"Social Services came round one day, just before my 13<sup>th</sup> birthday and turned round to my mum and said 'we found out your boyfriend's a paedophile, it's either your kids or your boyfriend. If you don't kick him out, your kids go into care. Kick him out and keep your kids'. My mum put us in care. Social Services didn't take us, she put us in care cos she wanted to keep her boyfriend"* (Charlotte)

Charlotte persisted in running away from each of the 15 children's homes in which she was accommodated over a three year period before being placed back with her mother at the age of 16 (the precise details of how and why this occurred are unclear but Charlotte remained a ward of the court and her stepfather was still living in the house). She became pregnant soon after and *"when me daughter was 6 weeks old me mum kicked me out on the streets with me baby"*. With nowhere else to go Charlotte went to stay with her father, who is an alcoholic. Danielle also reported that her mother 'chose' her boyfriend over her. Her mother had been homeless since Danielle was three years old and *"from the age of three I've been from pillar to post. I've been here there and everywhere"* spending some time with her mother in temporary accommodation and some time with foster parents. But *"from the age of 15, 16, I become homeless then. Me mum, it was me or her boyfriend and she picked her boyfriend so I had to go"*. Danielle was told to leave home and, having nowhere to go, started sleeping in a tent.

### **4.3. Experiences of Violence**

We saw in Chapter 3 that domestic violence is a key trigger of homelessness amongst women who are, or who subsequently become street sex workers and Table 4.1 above shows that 67 per cent of survey respondents had experienced domestic violence and 57 per cent had experienced 'other' forms of abuse. The violence sex workers had suffered at the hands of pimps and punters was highlighted in Chapter 2 and the abuse they had suffered in childhood was highlighted above. Bringing these together reveals the extent to which violence and abuse characterised the lives of many street sex workers. Many suffered physical and sexual abuse in their formative years from parents, other relatives, or bullies; went on to suffer violence from partners in adulthood; and from pimps and punters at work. They ran away from or leave home to escape abuse from relatives only to find it waiting round the corner for them in the shape of a partner or punter.

### **4.4. Motherhood**

Nearly all the street sex workers interviewed were mothers of young children. None of the street sex workers interviewed lived with their children. At the same time a source of distress and a source of motivation, separation from their children was a dominant issue in the lives of the street sex workers interviewed. The circumstances under which women had become separated from their children, the arrangements under which their children are currently living, the level of contact they had, and the scope to be reunited with them varied. Table 4.2 details the 'parental status' of each respondent. It suggests that motherhood is very common amongst street sex workers but that few manage to retain custody or guardianship of their children.

Some women's babies were taken directly into care at birth and quickly adopted. These decisions will almost certainly have been taken prior to the birth. The street sex workers interviewed were reluctant to divulge much information about these events, so the extent to which they consented willingly (or at all) was often unclear. Nor do we have information regarding the reasons Social Services made these decisions and took the action they did but, knowing something about the women's circumstances, their drug addiction and impact on their ability to care for their babies is likely to have been a factor.

**Table 4.2. Parental Status**

<b>Respondent</b>	<b>Parental status</b>
Danielle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 child who lives with Danielle's father</li> <li>• 2 children adopted at birth</li> </ul>
Hannah	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No children</li> </ul>
Sarah	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 son, with Sarah's parents</li> <li>• 1 daughter, with Sarah's aunt</li> <li>• 1 child taken into care (possibly adopted) at birth</li> </ul>
Elaine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2 children, both with their father</li> </ul>
Charlene	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 child adopted at birth</li> <li>• 1 child, taken into care or with Charlene's mother (not clear which)</li> </ul>
Hayley	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 child, placed into care by Hayley and adopted</li> </ul>
Megan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No dependent children (3 adult children, one of whom lives with Megan)</li> </ul>
Marnie	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2 children with Marnie's mother</li> </ul>
Charlotte	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 daughter with Charlotte's mother</li> </ul>
Jennifer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No children</li> </ul>
Emma	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2 children with Emma's mother</li> </ul>
Rochelle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No children</li> </ul>
Jane	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 daughter with Jane's father</li> <li>• 1 daughter with Jane's brother</li> </ul>
Saskia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2 children adopted</li> <li>• 1 daughter with her god parents</li> </ul>
Elsa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3 children taken into care</li> </ul>
Amanda	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Currently pregnant</li> </ul>

Some women's' children lived with them for a while (months or sometimes years) but were then taken into care, usually against her wishes. But there were many examples of women trying to manage drug addictions, homelessness, violent relationships, and look after their children before finally deciding they were no longer able to cope or it was not in the interests of the child to remain with them. They were sometimes trying to avoid visiting on their own children the neglect they had experienced themselves. A couple of these women placed their children in the care of the local authority but in most cases parents and other relatives were called upon. Hayley and Megan explained why they placed their children with someone else:

*I couldn't look after myself. If I can't look after myself I can't look after a baby either and I couldn't cope anyway. She weren't being neglected but it was not long from that stage...in the end I had to turn round and say to me mum 'look, you're going to have to take her because I can't look after her'. I didn't want her to be neglected because that wouldn't have been fair on her" (Charlotte).*

*“I felt too much guilt. I weren’t clean [of drugs], I didn’t think I could have him. Made the hardest decision I’ve had to make but it was the right decision for him. I put him in care”*  
(Hayley)

Where children were being looked after by relatives, and in some cases by the local authority, women usually intended this to be a temporary arrangement and hoped to be reunited with their children and live with them once again.

Megan’s situation is worth reflecting on briefly. All her children are over the age of 18 but her youngest daughter does live with her and all three of her children were brought up by her. Megan has a heroin dependency and works daily as a street prostitute and in this respect is no different to any of the other women interviewed. The one thing that distinguishes Megan from the other women participating in this study is that she has a settled home where she has lived for many years<sup>7</sup>.

#### **4.5. Drug Dependency**

Drug dependency has been a common thread running through this report. Playing a key role in women’s pathways into street sex work and into homelessness, drug dependency also contributes significantly to the persistence of these issues in their lives. In total, 80 per cent of survey respondents were current drug users (including those on methadone programmes). Amongst those interviewed, only one woman was not and had never been drug dependent. The majority of survey respondents were heroin users (61 per cent) but 50 per cent were currently taking methadone (via a programme and/or illicitly). All of those currently on methadone will have previously been heroin users and many were still taking heroin as a ‘top up’ to their methadone. Over one quarter of survey respondents were current users of crack cocaine.

Three main ‘causes’, or routes into drug dependency emerged from discussions with the street sex workers interviewed:

- many women were introduced to, or encouraged to take drugs (typically heroin) by boyfriends. These tended to be young women, although not exclusively.

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<sup>7</sup> Megan did not fit the criteria for inclusion in this study but we decided to interview her because she had been homeless when she entered street sex work and was one of the few women we encountered who had been coerced into sex work by a pimp. We felt that important insights could be gleaned from her story even though she had been in secure accommodation for some years now.

- in at least two cases, women were given heroin by their partners over a period of time without their knowledge. Elaine thought the daily injection she was receiving from her partner was medication for her severe back and pelvic problems, and Emma was unaware that her cannabis joints were being laced with heroin. Both Emma and Elaine were addicted to heroin before they realised they had ever taken any. Neither knew their partners were drug users.
- It was very common for women to have started taking drugs, or significantly increased their drug use as a means of blocking out distress (including experience or memories of abuse, the death of child or removal of children into care). In this context the anaesthetic qualities of heroin were much needed and the quotes below illustrate this point:

*“I got into drugs because I kept thinking about him [grandfather], because obviously he was messing with me when I was younger. That’s what got me on drugs...I just wanted to block it out and it was doing me head in” (Danielle)*

*“What people don’t realise is when you’ve had a taste of it [heroin]...when you’re going through a really hard time and you have that taste of it and you know it can make you forget everything, it’s easily drawn back into it if you’re not in the right situation, and it just sucked me in... I was doing really well. I cut right down. I was doing one bag a day, a £10 bag a day... and when they took the kids I just fell to pieces, really I fell to pieces...because I lost my life without me kids, to me I’d lost everything...I went proper off the rails.”.. (Emma)*

*“it [heroin] depresses all your feelings, do you know what I mean? it’s easier to live, it’s not as cold, you know what I mean? it just numbs all that stuff. (Elaine)*

#### **4.6. Contact with the Criminal Justice System**

Women working in street sex work have regular and prolific contact with the criminal justice system. Virtually all survey respondents (96 per cent) had a criminal record and the majority (70 per cent) had served prison sentences. Interview respondents talked of regular contact with the police while ‘on the beat’ (being arrested or moved on). Their contact with the criminal justice system was almost entirely related to their work as a street sex worker or to their drug taking, although some also had convictions for violence. This was reflected in the

convictions reported by survey respondents, nearly 80 per cent of whom had convictions for shoplifting, and 32 per cent for drug offences. In relation to drug use, women were often more likely to have convictions for crimes committed in order to obtain money for drugs (shoplifting, theft, burglary) than for offences relating to taking, selling, or being in possession of drugs. The full list of criminal convictions reported by the street sex workers surveyed is as follows:

- 79 per cent of survey respondents had a conviction for shoplifting
- 39 per cent of survey respondents had a conviction for theft
- 32 per cent of survey respondents had a conviction for drug offences
- 29 per cent of survey respondents had a conviction for burglary
- 29 per cent of survey respondents had a conviction for soliciting
- 25 per cent of survey respondents had a conviction for fraud
- 21 per cent of survey respondents had a conviction for violent offences
- 11 per cent of survey respondents had a conviction for robbery

There is a link between street sex workers' housing situations and the penalties they incur for working as a prostitute. Street prostitutes who are sleeping rough are in a difficult position when it comes to avoiding arrest. Elsa's comment points to the difficulty street sex workers face, in particular the increased risk of arrest, when they do not have immediate access to accommodation to which they can retreat after an encounter with the police:

*"I've been warned by the police to go home and if they see me out again that night then obviously they'd arrest me and charge me" (Elsa)*

With no permanent address it can be difficult to qualify for tagging unless a bail hostel place is available, and getting bail can be problematic too. Curfews are used as an alternative to additional fines, but these are only imposed when women have an address they can be at every night for the length of the curfew. If not, they are in danger of receiving a harsher punishment.

#### **4.7. Conclusion**

The analysis of street sex workers' life histories and their personal, social and familial circumstances presented in this chapter suggests a very vulnerable population with significant and extensive welfare and support needs. These support needs, in turn, will impact on street sex workers' housing situations, and on their capacity to access and sustain accommodation.

## Accessing Housing and Support

Most of the street sex workers participating in this study had accessed housing and support services during their homelessness careers. But few had been *regularly* engaged with support services or actively pursued housing opportunities, particularly since working in the sex industry. The majority were now in contact with the Women's Project in Stoke-on-Trent<sup>8</sup> which provided a key source of support and had served to assist many women with their housing and other problems. Prior to their engagement with this project, however, many were virtually disengaged from the housing and support available in the City. In this respect, homeless street sex workers are a particularly marginalised population. Without appropriate support street sex workers struggle to escape homelessness or sustain settled accommodation but without adequate housing it can prove impossible to address other problems such as drug addiction and family breakdown. In this chapter we explore homeless street sex workers' experiences of housing and support services and their patterns of service use. In doing so, some of the key barriers they face to accessing housing and support are highlighted.

### 5.1. Service Engagement

We saw in the previous chapter that homeless street sex workers present with a wide range of support needs in addition to their homelessness and involvement in street sex work. Drug abuse, mental ill health, coping difficulties and offending histories were commonplace and most had been victims of violence, abuse and/or neglect. The women surveyed were asked to specify those issues for which they had never received assistance, despite wanting such help or support. The results are presented in Table 5.2 and suggest that many homeless street sex workers are failing to access treatment, emotional support (someone to talk to, counselling) and practical forms of assistance such as housing and welfare benefits advice.

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<sup>8</sup> Most survey and interview respondents were accessed through the Women's Project

The sex workers surveyed were more likely than respondents who had never worked in prostitution to have wanted someone to talk to (43 per cent compared with 18 per cent), to have wanted help contacting their children (18 per cent compared with 3 per cent), settling into a new home (21 per cent compared with 10 per cent), resolving relationship difficulties (25 per cent compared with 12 per cent), and addressing drug dependency (36 per cent compared with 19 per cent). These differences partly reflect the greater prevalence of some of these experiences amongst the street sex working population.

**Table 5.1. Unmet Needs: help wanted but not received**

<b>help wanted but not received</b>	<b>%</b>
Finding a home	50
Someone to talk to	43
Drug use	36
Counselling	25
Relationship difficulties	25
Claiming Benefits	25
Mental health	25
Settling in to a new home	21
Budgeting	21
Contacting your children	18
Returning to education	18
Domestic violence	18

n= 28

Table 5.1 shows that nearly half of survey respondents reported having wanted but not received assistance finding a home. The survey data also show that, facing homelessness for the first time, some survey respondents approached a housing provider or other relevant organisation for assistance but this failed to resolve their imminent housing crisis. Nearly one third (31 per cent) sought no advice and assistance at all but, of those who did, a total of 44 per cent approached the local authority. It was rare for respondents to approach a housing association (only one did so) or voluntary sector advice centre (such as a CAB). Interestingly, more women asked for assistance from non-housing agencies (55 per cent of those who sought assistance) than approached the local authority. Most of these specified the Women's Project as the organisation from which they sought assistance although a couple had asked their drug treatment provider for help. This will partly reflect women's existing service engagement. Already aware of and in regular contact with these agencies, they provide a 'first port of call'. The importance of engagement with organisations of particular relevance to street sex workers cannot be understated. Without them, a significantly higher proportion of the women surveyed would have sought no assistance whatsoever when they became homeless. However, non-housing services are limited in what they can achieve with regard to preventing or resolving homelessness. This is echoed in one interview respondents'

comment that *“The Women’s Project are brilliant, they helped me, they’re fantastic, but they can only help with so much” (Emma)*

All the drug dependent women surveyed had accessed drug treatment or support although there was evidence to suggest that women involved in street sex work can encounter difficulties in this regard and are regularly without the support or treatment they require and are keen to avail of. Half of those surveyed were currently in receipt of support to help them end or reduce their drug use, most commonly through specialist prescribing (typically of methadone) although several were attending day programmes, drugs counselling, and group therapy. Some of those not currently accessing treatment or support had done so in the past (although it is not clear whether they were homeless and/or working in street prostitution at the time), some had been subject to assistance on several occasions and some were benefiting from more than one intervention, often through the same provider. Details are presented in Table 5.2. Numbers rather percentages are used because the total number of women who were drug dependent and in receipt of support is too small (13) for percentages to be meaningful.

**Table 5.2. Drug treatment and support received**

	<b>No. of drug users currently receiving support n=13</b>	<b>No. of drug users ever received support, now or in the past n=22</b>
Specialist Prescribing	9	13
Day programmes	2	3
Counselling	4	6
Group therapy	3	5
Residential rehab	1	4
In-patient drug treatment	0	7

The women surveyed were overwhelmingly positive about the drug treatment and support they had received with all reporting this had helped them 'a lot' or 'a little'. Relapse was common and the majority were still taking illicit drugs, sometimes in addition to prescription medication, but respondents' positive views of their treatment suggests this reflects the difficulties of ceasing drug use more so than the nature of their treatment or support.

Despite these encouraging statistics, there was also much evidence to suggest that women involved in street sex work often fail to access the support they require to address their drug dependencies. For example:

- half the drug dependent women surveyed were not currently in contact with any drug treatment or support agency
- there is a discrepancy between the proportion of survey respondents taking steps to address their drug dependency (90 per cent) and those receiving support or assistance to do so (50 per cent)
- the long term nature of respondents' drug addiction: 87 per cent of the drug dependent street sex workers surveyed, for example, had been using heroin for more than 10 years. This compares with 54 per cent of the homeless people surveyed who were not involved in street sex work
- 43 per cent of the drug dependent sex workers surveyed reported having wanted, but not having received help or support regarding their drug use
- some interview respondents were attempting to end their use of heroin by taking substitute medication like Subutex but, unable to access a formal programme, were purchasing their medication illicitly.

Survey respondents were asked what drug treatment or support they would like in the future. A discrepancy emerged between the forms of intervention women were most likely to have benefited from (see Table 5.2), and those they would most like to access. The reason for this discrepancy is unclear but could indicate that women are not accessing the support they most want. Of the 18 women who answered this question, for example, nearly half reported wanting in-patient drug treatment; 39 per cent wanted drugs counselling; 28 per cent wanted to go into residential rehabilitation; and only 17 per cent wanted specialist prescribing.

All the women surveyed were in contact with support services for street sex workers, reflecting that nearly all had been accessed through the Women's Project, an organisation offering support to female street sex workers in Stoke-on-Trent, operating a street outreach programme and drop in-sessions. The Women's Project is the only such support service in Stoke-on-Trent and so it is not surprising that no other specialist organisations were specified by respondents as providing them with support regarding their involvement in prostitution. The exception was one woman who reported having benefited from specialist victim support. The Women's Project was highly valued by the women involved in street prostitution participating in this study. The vast majority of those surveyed indicated a desire for ongoing

support from the Project and all those responding to the question said the support received had 'helped a lot'. The specialised nature of the service was important here, with women being confident that staff understood and appreciated their particular situations.

## 5.2. Experiences of Approaching Services: Barriers to Accessing Housing and Support

The survey data presented in the preceding section shows that homeless women involved in street sex work do engage with housing, support and treatment services and do receive assistance during their homelessness and sex working careers. Exploring this further with in-depth interview respondents suggests, however, that they also spend prolonged periods of time virtually disengaged from services, seeking but failing to access the help they urgently require, or being turned away from the services they approach without any meaningful assistance.

A small number of the women interviewed had never, or only rarely, sought advice or assistance. A few were so deeply entrenched in a life of drug addiction, rough sleeping and prostitution that their capacity and motivation to actively resolve their housing and other problems were limited. Satisfying a drug dependency was the overriding priority and their energy was spent on this and on getting by each day. Elaine, for example explained why she had not claimed benefits or applied for housing for over 18 months in the following terms:

*"I don't even feel like I've got the energy to go out and do things like claiming benefits"*

These individuals also tended to report feeling confined by institutional rules and suspicious of service providers, particularly when previous contact with 'authorities' had proved traumatic (removal of children by social services for example). Others would have welcomed advice or assistance but had no idea this was available to them or knowledge of how to access help. This was true for Jennifer, who became homeless escaping domestic violence:

Jennifer: *I've had a private tenancy but I had to move out because I had a violent partner*

Interviewer: *Did you get any help?*

Jennifer: *No*

Interviewer: *Did look for any help?*

Jennifer: *I've never known how to go about it, I've never....no*

Interviewer: *So where did you go?*

Jennifer *To me family's, that's why I was staying back and forth*

Elaine similarly described not know how to 'go about it'. She was aware that services exist to assist people with their housing and support needs but was less knowledgeable about how to access that assistance:

*"I don't know what to do. It's alright for people to say 'oh there's help there if you want it' but you've got to get to it. How do you get to it?" Elaine*

Many women, however, had actively sought assistance, were keen to engage with services and were motivated to address and resolve their homelessness and other needs. Unfortunately such efforts infrequently yielded solutions. Accessing social rented housing, for example, proved problematic for the street sex workers interviewed who, by and large, did not perceive the social rented sector as a viable housing option. Applications from people with criminal convictions (most of the street sex workers participating in this study) are subject to greater scrutiny and investigation and, until a few years ago, people subject to ASBOs were excluded from the waiting list. Former rent arrears were also posing an insurmountable barrier to being re-housed by social landlords where these were substantial.

But sex workers need not be actively excluded to face barriers accessing the social housing sector. Frequent spells in prison meant that many of the street sex workers interviewed had held and lost council tenancies. This was deterring them from reapplying, assuming (sometimes correctly) that surrendering or being evicted from a council tenancy would render them ineligible or be held against them in some way. Many had experienced previous poor treatment from staff within housing offices, particularly once their profession or associated offending history became known. This had a lasting effect on their confidence and willingness to approach the local authority again for accommodation. Elaine is a case in point. She re-enacted her conversation with the housing officer who first interviewed her when she approached as homeless in December 2007:

*"She [housing officer] was going like this: 'right, so what's your problem?' I says 'well I've got nowhere to live'. 'Right, have you got children?' 'Yeah, that's the problem see, I can't get my children till I've got a house'. She's gone 'right, so where are the kids now?' 'At their dad's so they've got a stable life'. And then she goes 'so they're not living with you are they?' I says 'well technically they are, technically yeah because I'm*

*supposed to be with them, I'm supposed to have them, I raised them but I've got nowhere to stay so of course they're with their dad because I'm not dragging them on the street, of course I'm not'. But she just said 'so they've got a roof over their head then, haven't they? They're not actually homeless'. But of course they're homeless because they should be with me, so they're not treating me like a mum" (Elaine)*

Elaine reported not making an application for housing on this occasion, nor approaching the local authority for assistance since. She reflected that she had been penalised for making a responsible and considerate parenting decision (placing her children with their father until she had a stable home).which prioritised the interests of her children, pointed out that retaining her children and sleeping rough with them would have been judged by Social Services as an irresponsible act of parenting.

Other women erroneously believed they were ineligible for council housing because of their involvement in street sex work or their associated drug dependency or criminal record. They failed to approach social housing providers as a result. Our discussion with Elsa illustrates this:

Interviewer *Did it ever occur to you to apply to the council before?*

Elsa *I've been involved with the drugs and everything haven't I so... I wanted to sort myself out and obviously I'm not getting any younger now, I'm getting older and that, I want to settle down, get off the drugs and that.*

Interviewer *So you deliberately didn't apply to the council before now...?*

Elsa *Well I know I wouldn't get on the council, the council aren't going to give a place to someone on drugs are they really?*

Interviewer *So in those 16 years did you ever apply to the council for a house before?*

Elsa *No not at all till recently...I've been in and out of prison and stuff as well, that's why.*

Elsa was not excluded from housing by the local authority but her assumptions about eligibility criteria and her perception of herself were acting as (self) exclusionary mechanisms. Forms of 'self exclusion' from housing (temporary and permanent) were relatively commonplace and several women described how the rules and formality of mainstream housing (hostels in particular which tend to impose an evening curfew and sometimes require residents to leave the building during the day) precluded them from continuing with sex work, leaving them with few options but to continue squatting or sofa surfing. Working as a street sex worker and adhering to the rules of hostel residency can be

difficult. The consequence was that some women rejected hostel provision in favour of other forms of temporary accommodation, typically more dangerous and more removed from agencies able to assist them.

*“There was a squat, they were a lot better than the hostels, I’ve done better in squats...I didn’t get in I think till eight in the morning and you’re out of your room by 10 and you’re not allowed back in your room until after, well at that time 5 o’clock. [In squats] I could sleep all day then. It was one of those, if you go out and work any time from four in the evening till 8, 9 in the morning you bloody well want to sleep through the day...it was easier to fit around your lifestyle” (Emma)*

Hostels were avoided for other reasons also. The high level of violence perpetrated against street sex workers (by their fathers, other male relatives, pimps, punters and partners) prompted some to avoid mixed sex hostels, unwilling to share living space with men unknown to them. Several interview respondents who had experienced particularly violent encounters with clients said they would continue sleeping rough rather than move into a mixed hostel. The absence of women only temporary housing in Stoke-on-Trent is an issue in this regard.

Long waiting lists, delays, and limited contact from service providers regarding progress with applications and referrals was a common theme in respondents' accounts of their contact with services and attempts to access assistance. Jennifer's story reveals a catalogue of service contact amounting to no positive outcome or continued assistance. There are likely to be reasons for this: agencies may have written to her but she is homeless so moves frequently; her name may not yet have moved to the top of waiting lists; or the bureaucratic machine may simply be taking longer than Jennifer expected. She explained that when she moved into the hostel in which she is currently accommodated four months ago she completed some housing application forms:

*“When I first moved into this hostel I went to see this guy, I filled out the forms for [X and X supported housing projects] and other housing associations but I haven’t heard anything. (Jennifer, emphasis added)*

Approximately 6 months before we interviewed her, Jennifer had been raped. She reported this to the police but:

*“they interviewed us and I had swabs and everything but I haven’t heard anything off that since then. (Jennifer, emphasis added)*

And a little later in the interview she talked about the outcome of her application for counselling:

*“they [the counselling service] rang me up a couple of ... months ago, and asked me that they’d got an appointment for me [on Wednesday]...I said I’d be at college on a Wednesday and they said they’d get back to me but they haven’t (Jennifer, emphasis added)*

The long wait for drug treatment programmes emerged as a particular problem. Women would become motivated to address their drug dependency and seek help but that motivation passed quickly if they were unsuccessful in securing treatment promptly. Danielle explained that she had to wait three months for a Methadone prescription:

*I asked ‘em for it, if they could put us on [methadone], me and me fella went in there and he actually filled in the forms that day but it took three months for me to get scripted...my fella were the same as well...you could lose your motivation to do it for a start” (Danielle)*

Jane never did access the treatment she asked for. She started taking heroin to cope with the loss of her young son to cot death and was soon working as a street sex worker to fund her growing drug dependency. At risk of losing custody of her two young children, Jane was desperate to address her drug problem and stop sex working. She approached a relevant organisation for assistance but without success. She explains what happened:

Jane: *It was so hard because I wasn’t getting any help off, like, the drug places and that so it was hard for me to come off [heroin]*

Interviewer: *Did you try to get help for drugs? For your drug habit?*

Jane: *A lot of times....I got in [to the service], I can’t remember who it was but he did a questionnaire with me, did that, sat down, spoke, and I never got a reply after that.*

Interviewer: *Did you go back?*

Jane: *Yeah, I went back about three times after that, begging them for help.*

Interviewer: *and they didn't?*

Jane: *No, nothing at all....they didn't respond.*

Jane's parents were awarded custody of her two daughters and a chaotic period of homelessness, rough sleeping, and continuing drug dependency followed. Jane did eventually access a drug treatment programme during one of the many prison sentences she served for shoplifting but continues to struggle with her dependencies, using heroin occasionally, drinking daily, and working as a street sex worker.

In the absence of easy (or speedy) access to drug treatment there is evidence that some homeless street sex workers resort to actively seeking convictions and custodial sentences to access the drugs services available through the criminal justice system. Several interview respondents talked about actively exposing themselves to the criminal justice system with the express purpose of accessing drug treatment. One woman, for example explained that she solicited when she knew the police were watching her because *"it was the only way to do it, I knew if I got caught by the police I'd get scripted up"*. Others talked about wanting to go to prison, asking for custodial sentences when convicted, or committing crime in the hope of receiving a custodial sentence because they felt this was the only way they would receive support with their drug dependency.

*"And then I ended up getting arrested from shoplifting and I begged 'em to send me to jail for get off heroin and that."* (Jane)

Prison was also described by some in terms of respite from the realities of homelessness and rough sleeping, and as means through which to meet basic daily needs such as warmth, shelter, food and washing facilities:

*"you've got a warm bed. It's a bit really like you're safe there because you've got your three meals a day, you've got a roof over your head, you've got your bed there, you've got your washing facilities"* (Elsa)

Although prison did provide many respondents with an opportunity to access drug treatment and basic necessities, housing assistance was apparently far more difficult to come by. Most commonly, the street sex workers interviewed were released from prison to a situation of

homelessness (often rough sleeping) having received very little advice or assistance about securing housing despite repeated requests. The extracts below from Elsa and Jane's interviews are illustrative of the experiences of many:

Interviewer *Did anyone ever give you any housing advice or...?*

Elsa *No nothing, they told me to go to places like [X supported housing project]*

Interviewer *They just give you a sheet of paper with contacts?*

Elsa *Mmm, contact numbers and all that on.....all different places to get in touch with them.*

Interviewer *But they wouldn't help you get in touch with them before you came out?*

Elsa *No they never phoned up places to try get me in anywhere or anything like that.*

Interviewer *So every single time you came out of prison you were homeless?*

Elsa *Mmm.... I'd come out and wouldn't have a roof over my head and obviously have to go round trying to sort things out for meself.*

Interviewer *And how much money would you get into your hand when you...*

Elsa *You get £42 when you come out, a week's money, that's it.*

Interviewer *And would you have to....start signing on again?*

Elsa *Yeah...takes weeks to sort out [so] ...you're back in the same situation again. I do think seriously that the prisons should help you more with your housing and things, especially if they know the circumstances, that you're homeless when you went in there, they know you're going to be homeless when you go out.*

Jane *I did try me best in there [prison] this time to get in touch with the housing people but I kept putting apps [applications] in after apps to see 'em and not once did they come to me door and ask to interview me or nothing.*

Interviewer *Is this in prison?*

Jane *Yeah*

Interviewer *But nobody came?*

Jane *No*

Interviewer *So basically when you came out you'd got nowhere to stay?*

Jane *No*

Many of the examples presented above illustrate that active requests for assistance frequently fall on deaf ears. The result is limited contact with housing and support

services. At the other end of the spectrum were those in contact with multiple agencies. But the end result is often the same- namely a failure to access the assistance women needed most. This was true for Charlotte who, at the age of 17 was living with her mother and baby daughter and battling an amphetamine addiction.

*"I was asking my mum what the hell to do and she wouldn't tell me – 'you make your bed you lie in it' – and I was 'I've got a child to look after, I don't know what to do' and I'd got the health visitors on my back, I had social services on my back and I said 'look, I'm asking for fucking help and I'm not getting nothing'" (Charlotte)*

The absence of help at key time has detrimental consequences, perpetuating homelessness, drug abuse and street sex working. Charlotte continues with her story, talking about a time a little later in her life when she needed but did not receive support:

*"I'd gone from ¼ oz a day of amphetamines to ½ oz. It doubled over night. The chemicals doubled overnight, the drink doubled overnight because I weren't getting no support off no-one.... All me habitual habits, drink and drugs and everything doubled overnight and I started working more and more in the parlours." (Charlotte)*

### **5.3. Conclusion**

This chapter has focused on the extent to which homeless street sex workers engage with key services. It has shown that women do benefit from, and feel positively about the assistance and treatment available when they are able to avail of it, but that accessing help can prove extremely difficult. Yet access to advice and support is crucial: the absence of help at key times can result in a perpetuation of homelessness, street sex working, drug abuse, and offending, hampering women's efforts to escape homelessness and resolve other personal issues.

# Recommendations

The evidence presented in this report has provided detailed insight into the housing needs and experiences of street sex workers in Stoke-on-Trent who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. It has highlighted the detrimental housing circumstances in which many street sex workers live and revealed some of the barriers they face accessing housing and support services. These findings point to some important issues worthy of consideration by service providers, commissioners, and policy makers. This research was commissioned with the express aim of identifying ways in which the housing and related needs of street sex workers could be better met. This section presents series of recommendations for ways in which this could be achieved<sup>9</sup>.

Drawing on the evidence gathered and presented in this report, it is possible to identify a series of broad principles which should guide service development. In particular, there is a need to:

1. develop models of service delivery capable of providing clear **pathways** through services to independent living, and of **'tracking'** individuals at risk
2. develop **flexible** supported housing provision, offering a range of accommodation and levels of support within a single service
3. Provide **direct and fast access** housing, support and advice services
4. develop **specialist housing services** which are explicitly targeted at, and understand the needs of street sex workers
5. develop **outreach and in-reach** services in recognition that homeless street sex workers will not always make independent efforts to seek help, or know how to go about doing so
6. twin the development of specialist services with **improved access to mainstream housing**

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<sup>9</sup> A full set of recommendations for better meeting the needs of homeless people with complex needs can be found in the allied report, *'The Homelessness Journeys of Homeless People with Complex Needs in Stoke-on-Trent'*. Here, only those recommendations of particular relevance to homeless street sex workers are presented

7. acknowledge that **homelessness and related issues such as substance misuse and criminal activity are faced before people reach adulthood** and that services must adapt to address this fact
8. develop a programme of **preventative initiatives**, including building organisational capacity to respond rapidly to emerging indicators of 'risk'
9. acknowledge that **meeting the welfare and support needs of people with complex needs is as important as meeting housing need.**

Specific ways in which services can be developed within these broad principles are presented in the 14 recommendations which follow.

**Recommendation 1. The work of the Priority Needs Group should be built on and extended and efforts should be made to ensure that street sex workers are benefiting from it.** This could take the form of a multi-agency panel, comprising representation from different services who come together at set intervals to discuss individuals known to be particularly vulnerable and homeless or at risk of homelessness. Current issues pertaining to these individuals could be discussed, emerging needs and problems identified, and appropriate responses actioned. Particular attention could be paid to clients experiencing transition (from care, from custody, from rehab, into independent living, exiting sex work). Ideally the panel would be co-ordinated by someone whose explicit role it is to do so; would be established as a formal initiative rather than an informal gathering of interested parties; and would be fully multi-agency to span the broad spectrum of needs which female street sex workers present with. The benefits of such an intervention include: providing a means through which women can be tracked through housing and other life changes; enabling early intervention to prevent homelessness or rough sleeping; and providing a means through which tailored packages of support can be delivered.

**Recommendation 2. There is a need for a women only hostel in Stoke-on-Trent.** A number of bed spaces should be allocated for street sex workers and/or referrals from the Women's Project. Such provision would need to take account of the particular needs of the client groups it is serving (for example the prohibitive nature of curfews for street sex workers and the fact that many women will be mothers and will require spaces where they can see

their children). Some of the bed spaces should be direct access and consideration should be given to attaching some 'emergency' housing provision to any new hostel facility.

**Recommendation 3. A 'fast track' system into drug treatment should be developed**, so that female sex workers can access treatment when they are motivated to address their dependency.

**Recommendation 4. Consideration should be given to ways of improving street sex workers' access to counselling services.** This might include a combination of efforts to increase awareness amongst street sex workers and staff working with them of available counselling services, increasing provision, and offering priority access to this population.

**Recommendation 5. Update training should be provided to all Local Authority housing staff** so they are fully cognisant of the policies and legislation to ensure compliance. Alternatively, a review or audit of Local Authority front-line housing practices could be carried out to ensure all staff are complying with the homelessness legalisation and local policies.

**Recommendation 6. Efforts should be made to provide greater support to homeless street sex workers with children**, in a practical sense (making contact spaces available, providing legal advice) and emotionally (counselling, peer support).

**Recommendation 7. Steps should be taken to raise the profile of the rent deposit scheme alongside continuing with efforts to address poor conditions in the private rented sector.** This might involve intensifying enforcement activity and efforts to engage with local landlords, and generating an approved list of accredited landlords.

**Recommendation 8. Consideration should be given to ways in which street sex workers' access to specialist advice services can be improved (particularly in relation to debt, welfare benefits, housing, and issues relating to their children).** One option would be for advice workers to run weekly sessions in services frequented by street sex workers and in which they feel conformable (for example the Women's Project), or to fund a part time advice worker post within the Women's Project.

**Recommendation 9. Consideration should be given to developing supported housing provision targeted specifically at women with a history of street sex working** (or a broader client group which includes street sex workers such as 'homeless women with complex needs'). Street sex workers require housing provision targeted at them and staffed

by people who understand their needs. The need for specialist services stems partly from the complexity of the issues street sex workers present with (and therefore demand specialist expertise) but also from the reluctance of general needs providers to accommodate them. The ideal model of supported housing provision for this client group, some of which already exists in Stoke-on-Trent and was found to be highly effective, is one which combines the following features:

- a single provider offering a range of accommodation and levels of support, for example 24 hour staffed (hostel type) accommodation; more independent 'studio flats' attached or near to the core hostel; single (and/or small group) tenancies with intensive floating support; and single tenancies with limited floating support.
- allowing respondents to move around within the service and being able to respond rapidly to changing circumstances - i.e. moving residents from the 'cluster' or single tenancy back to the core.
- a facility for residents to re-contact or remain in contact with the service after they have moved on, acting as a safety net in the event of a change of circumstances and risk of tenancy breakdown in the future.

**Recommendation 10. Meaningful housing advice and support should be available to all women leaving prison.** No-woman should be released from prison without being offered extensive assistance with their housing and the outcome should be followed up on release. Assistance should also be available on entry to prison so that homelessness can be prevented. A housing link worker or similar post would be beneficial – liaising between prison officials, prisoners, housing and support agencies, and drug and alcohol treatment services to ensure smoother transitions from prison to independent living. A new floating support service targeted at people making this transition would also be beneficial.

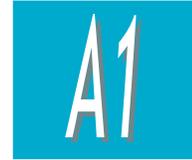
**Recommendation 11. It is essential that existing outreach services such as the Rough Sleepers' Team and the Women's Project outreach service continue to receive funding.** Assertive outreach is crucial for engaging with homeless streets sex workers, particularly those sleeping rough.

**Recommendation 12. Steps should be taken to develop services for homeless minors and adolescents** such as emergency housing provision and drug and alcohol treatment. Such provision currently falls within the remit of 'adult services' but is needed by many young women who are or who become homeless street sex workers.

**Recommendation 13. Social Services and the Housing Department should explore whether closer joint working and additional protocols need developing,** to ensure that no young woman has to sleep rough. Assertive efforts to engage reluctant care leavers in after-care support would also be of benefit in this regard, as would work exploring the reasons why some young women disengage from this support.

**Recommendation 14.** Efforts should be made to **educate and raise awareness amongst all relevant service providers (including schools) of common trigger points,** risk factors, and indicators of impending homelessness. Training, or written information sheets are two ways in which this could be achieved. A programme of activity **educating young people** about homelessness and related issues would also be beneficial. Peer education initiatives are worth exploring in this regard (some peer mentoring already exists in Stoke-on-Trent)





## Appendix 1: A 'Count' of Street Sex Workers

A 'count' of female street sex workers was carried out on 3<sup>rd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> November 2008, presenting a 'snap-shot' of the numbers of women working over a two-week period. Two members of the research team accompanied staff from the Women's Project on their Outreach work on these three occasions, from 8pm – to Midnight. The count involved driving around an area of approximately 6 miles where sex workers are known to work and making a note of any Sex Worker that was sighted (whether or not they approached the car, or filled out a sex workers survey). Table A1.1 show the numbers of sex workers recorded on each of the 3 dates:

**Table A1.1 Number of street sex workers recorded**

<b>Date</b>	<b>No's of sex workers</b>	<b>Repeat sightings</b>	<b>New sightings</b>
Monday 3 <sup>rd</sup> Nov	10	NA	NA
Thursday 6 <sup>th</sup> Nov	11	9	2
Monday 10 <sup>th</sup> Nov	13	9	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>6</b>

The number of sex workers seen over the 3 nights was 34, of which 18 were repeat sightings. In total, 16 individuals (i.e. the number of sex workers minus the repeat sightings) were counted over the 3 nights. The Women's Project Outreach Workers were of the opinion that the dates on which the count was conducted were quieter than usual for a number of reasons: the Prostitution Unit were particularly active; a number of sex workers were on a curfew preventing them from working between 8pm and 8am, and the weather was inclement. This figure may, therefore, under-estimate the numbers of street sex workers currently working.

A short survey about housing circumstances was conducted with each of the 16 individuals 'counted' across the three nights. Information was recorded about where they had slept in the three nights prior to completing the survey, and where they were intending to sleep on the

night of the survey and following two nights. Table A1.2 presents the information from this survey and shows that the majority (12 out of 16) had been homeless in the three nights preceding the survey, and expected to be homeless for the three nights following the survey (ten out of 16). The most common housing situation in which the street sex workers surveyed were living was staying temporarily with friends or family.

**Table A1.2**

Where did/will you sleep?	Number of sex workers		Total no.
	...for the last 3 nights?	...for the next 3 nights?	
Council house/flat (own secure tenancy)	3	4	7
House/flat - private landlord (in your name)	1	2	3
Hostel	2	1	3
Staying in a squat	1	1	2
Staying with family/friends temporarily	8	5	13
Rough sleeping		1	1
Other	1	2	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>32</b>

**N=16**

# Sheffield Hallam University

*The housing needs and experiences of homeless women involved in street sex work in Stoke-on-Trent*

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