

THINK



# Selling SEX for survival

Adult sexual exploitation and prostitution  
in the North East and Cumbria



## Introduction

We have been researching sex work and prostitution across the North East and Cumbria since 2006 and are now able to present a regional picture<sup>1</sup>. In these studies we have found nearly 1700 people involved in prostitution in the 13 local authority areas that make up the region. If we estimate that two transactions take place each day (bearing in mind activity will vary from occasional to multiple daily transactions), it equates to 3400 men buying sex each day and over a million transactions each year in the North East and Cumbria alone.

We have found that about half of the women (and some of the men) involved in prostitution do so to survive and not out of choice. Most of our research focuses on these women and men who sell sex for survival.

### Sex work or prostitution?

Some would say the first term legitimises what is essentially violence against (mostly) women and girls (although it does include boys and men). Most people who work in routine jobs do not have rape and violence as a constant threat. These say it is better to say 'people involved in prostitution', although they would not use the term 'prostitute' as it is laden with extremely negative and degrading connotations. Many of those involved would reject both terms as they do not see their exchanges as such. Others, particularly those involved in survival sex, use the term sex worker precisely because it gives their activities some legitimacy. In our eight years of research, we have learnt that, the people involved can choose which name they prefer. For us however, we have seen much of survival sex as violence against women and girls, so we prefer to use people involved in prostitution.

## The methodology

We collected the information for our studies by: mapping of the knowledge of frontline professionals working for agencies we judged likely to come into contact with those involved with prostitution or exchanges of sex; and by Internet searches as much sex is advertised online. The professionals we interviewed came from agencies such as housing providers, sexual health services, police, probation, drug and alcohol services and many more. We then asked those professionals who else should we talk to, and then we went and interviewed them too. We engaged with these via focus group interviews, often team meetings, and individual in depth interviews. We interviewed 555 professionals from over 200 organisations in this way.

We asked professionals a series of questions about their knowledge of exchanges of sex and of exploitation amongst their client group. They were asked how many people they were aware of who were involved, what type of exchanges or exploitation happened and how they knew this. We only counted people as being involved when the professional had direct experience of working with that person. We did not document gossip, rumour or anecdote.

<sup>1</sup>To see a peer reviewed methodology, see: [www.barefootresearch.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Knowledge-mapping-sex-work-paper.pdf](http://www.barefootresearch.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Knowledge-mapping-sex-work-paper.pdf). To see the individual area reports, see: [www.barefootresearch.org.uk/publications/library/](http://www.barefootresearch.org.uk/publications/library/) or [www.nr-foundation.org.uk/resources/sexual-exploitation-research-reports/](http://www.nr-foundation.org.uk/resources/sexual-exploitation-research-reports/)

# Selling sex for survival

We can divide the practice of selling sex into two parts: commercial prostitution and survival sex (see following boxes for our definitions of these). We found approximately 900 women and men involved in commercial and almost 800 involved in survival sex. We know most about survival sex because those involved tend to be known by community organisations unlike those involved in commercial prostitution.

Therefore, although we have information on the numbers involved in the latter, we are presenting our knowledge here, of what life is like for those involved in survival sex. However, it should also be noted that sometimes these boundaries are blurred and people involved in one can become involved in the other.

Survival sex is mostly hidden in the North East as it takes place 'off-street' in brothels, houses, flats and in a range of other locations such as fast food outlets, lap dancing clubs and bars.

There are some more visible 'on-street' markets, with the main areas being in Stockton and Middlesbrough. Sex is also sold across the region through encounters outside of a variety of venues such as railway stations,

shops and bars, through the practice of *Tapping*, where women will walk around on the street rather than stay in one place, ask for a cigarette light for example and then offer 'business'.

Also included are people who have been coerced into prostitution, including those who have been trafficked into this country. We have found Asian and African women who have been trafficked into the region to work in brothels and we have found a number of women being forced into prostitution to pay off drug debts.

Commercial prostitution, which is not included in survival sex, takes place as 'outcalls' or 'incalls' from online escort agencies and 'independents', or in brothels. Across the region, there are around 15 escort agencies with between 10 and 50 people per agency, and almost 100 brothels which have between three and 20 people in each.

The use of social media and smartphone apps with which to communicate and negotiate exchanges has "*become huge*" as reported by Changing Lives (see box on page 8). This did not exist when we first began the studies, but has now become a key feature of sex markets.

## What is survival sex?<sup>2</sup>

This is sex in exchange for essential resources such as accommodation, food, drugs and alcohol, cigarettes and money for these resources. Those involved can be found on the street soliciting or begging, on the Internet (mostly Adultwork.com), in bars and fast food outlets and most commonly in the region's urban areas. Those involved in survival sex are often exchanging sex for low payments of money or essential commodities, such as accommodation, and most experience severe vulnerabilities, for example, to violence, poor health including risk of death, poor housing or homelessness, low income and substance abuse. There are varying degrees of control over their involvement, with some who seem to exercise a high degree of control, to others who are controlled by another, coerced or otherwise exploited via pimps or partners and others for whom circumstances mean they do not have any other options.

## What is commercial prostitution?

This includes individuals advertising on the internet, escorts and brothels and includes both the high and middle end of sex markets. The latter has significantly higher numbers, with only small numbers involved in high end prostitution with high associated fees. There are many who are 'independents', those advertising on the internet as individuals selling sex and these are found in both rural and urban areas. In commercial prostitution there is a more formal transaction between seller and purchaser and elements can be presented as businesses, such as brothels or escort agencies. Those involved are more likely to see themselves as working in prostitution. There are varying degrees of vulnerability and exploitation experienced, some people having total control of their involvement and no perceived vulnerabilities and some with high vulnerabilities such as insecure accommodation, substance abuse and poor health, which may affect their control over their involvement. Some may be coerced or exploited with high vulnerabilities such as exposure to violence and poor health (these are often found in brothels but can also present as independents).

<sup>2</sup>This term was first coined by a group of peer researchers: Hidden for Survival: Peer Research into the Lives of Sex Workers within Newcastle, Gateshead, Sunderland, South Tyneside and North Tyneside, 2007, the Voices Heard Group, Tyneside Cyrenians and Counted 4.

## Women or men?

Unsurprisingly, most people who sell sex are women, although there are small numbers of men involved. It has been harder to find men involved in survival sex but we know it is there. For example, we know because of the proactive work of Changing Lives, that in Newcastle there is a street-based male survival sex area. Those men involved in this area exhibit the same general characteristics as women involved in survival sex. There are also small numbers of transgendered people, some of whom are involved in order to generate funds for gender reassignment. This in itself raises questions of access to appropriate health services, both mental and physical, to deflect having to become involved in selling sex.

“When I got raped I just felt like men could just use us like that. And that’s how I think I found sex work.”

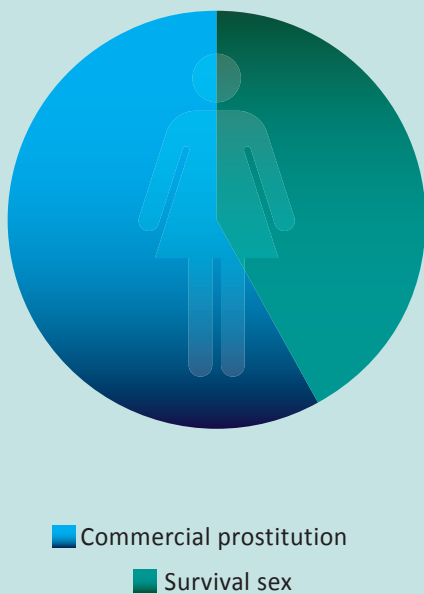
Woman from Newcastle

## Statistics

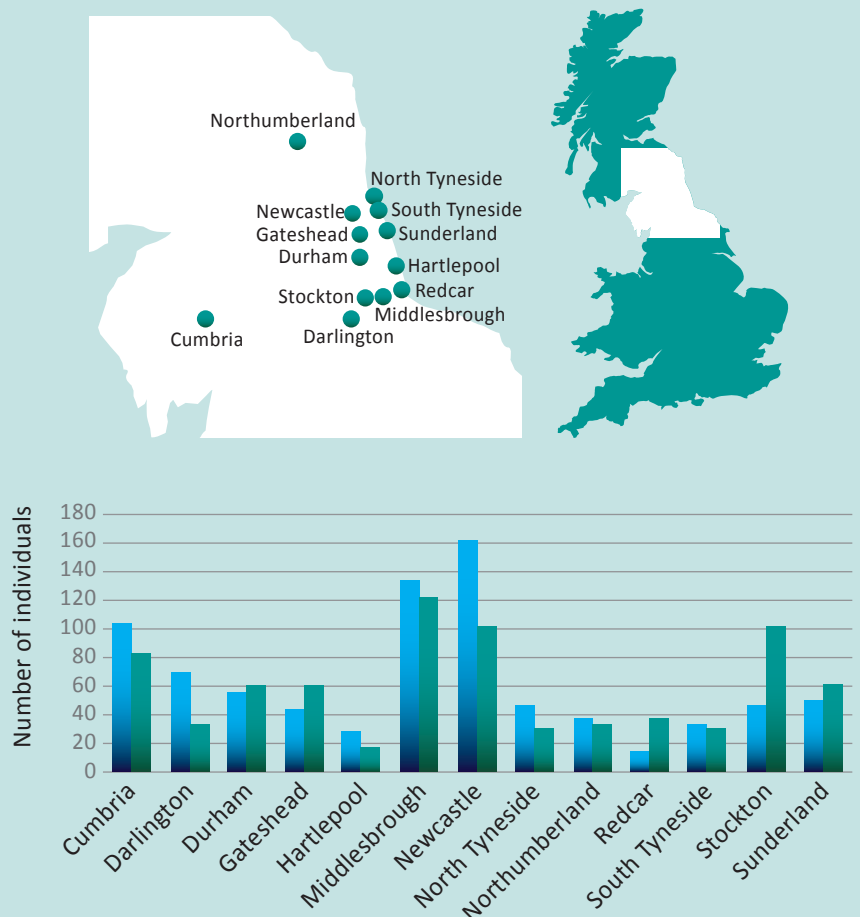
The data used here have been extracted from each individual area report. The research in each locality was presented as a snapshot, i.e. extent and theme in the most recent year which corresponded with the fieldwork. Those individual reports were published between 2006 and 2015 and so situations in some of those areas may have changed since the research took place. For example, we know that the numbers of people involved in Tyne and Wear are significantly higher than when we carried out the initial fieldwork. However, presenting our figures is useful as an exercise to demonstrate extent of prostitution across the region, even if they are conservative estimates.

We found a total of 1468 women and 221 men involved in prostitution in the North East and Cumbria. For the women, 48% of these are involved in survival sex and 52% in commercial prostitution; and for the men, the proportions are 37% and 63% respectively.

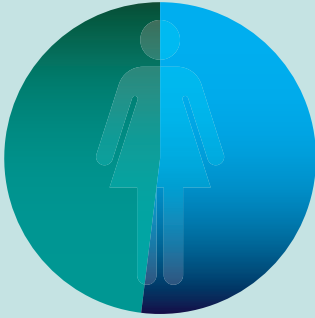
Women involved in survival sex and commercial prostitution in the North East and Cumbria



Numbers involved in the local authority areas

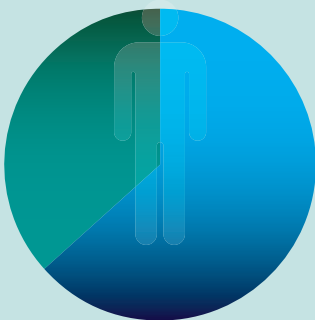


## Women

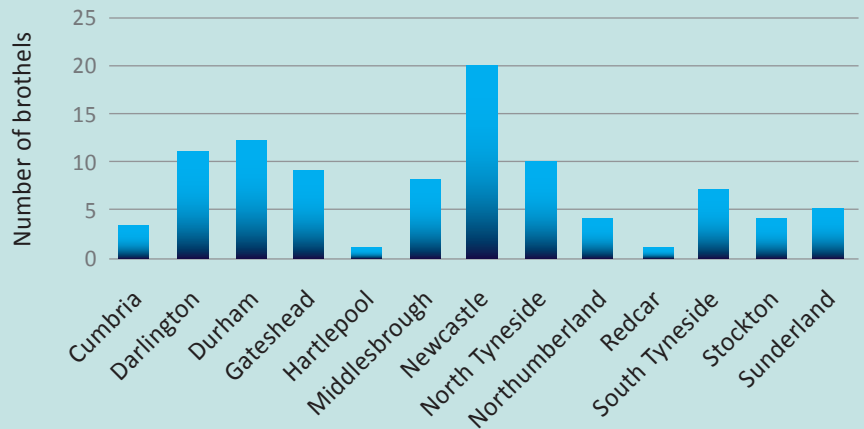


■ Commercial prostitution  
■ Survival sex

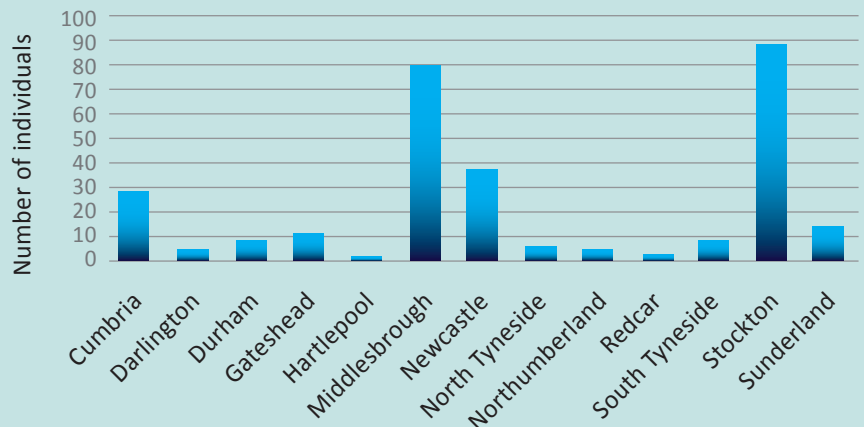
## Men



## Numbers of brothels by area



## Numbers of women on the street by area



“Services are cheap, some girls will charge £5, some £25, others will do it for a bottle of cider, cigarettes, somewhere to sleep.”

Drug support worker from Newcastle

## The journey into selling sex

We have developed a good understanding of how people become involved in selling sex. The majority of those involved in survival sex have experienced childhood trauma or abuse, may have grown up in care and have weak attachment; we have called this having a ‘history of abuse’.

A familiar pattern then develops that starts in the early teenage years, of disruptive behaviour, alcohol and drug use and inappropriate relationships with adults, often engaging in sex from a young age<sup>3</sup>. Drug use often progresses in severity, both type and quantity of drug, and becomes more entrenched. An increase in drug and alcohol use mirrors the decrease in quality of life, including the descent into mental ill health. Substance use increasingly fulfils a self medicating role as people try to manage historical complex trauma and current levels of physical and emotional deprivation and trauma.

“People don’t just turn 18 and decide they want to become involved in prostitution, many of them have been exploited as children.”

Support worker from Redcar

Prostitution is a key way of funding drug and alcohol habits, along with shoplifting. People are often encouraged to sell or exchange sex for drugs by others, such as boyfriends, drug dealers and even other family members. People involved in survival sex are often funding two people’s drug and alcohol habits through their activities. There are those who do not match this pattern, who come from non-abusive backgrounds and have become involved in selling sex through the association with others. However, the gateway to their involvement is mostly substance misuse.

We have found that it is very difficult to leave prostitution for those involved, for a series of reasons, including: the difficulty in stopping using drugs and the high rate of relapse; the difficulty in disassociating with other people involved as they may be the only social relations that they have even if the majority are damaging; and limited other means of accessing money or resources. We found people going back into prostitution because of running up debts and having no other means to pay and this led to recommencing a life of prostitution and drug use.

<sup>3</sup>We have produced a report on Child Sexual Exploitation across the region to correspond with this study. This report can be found on [www.barefootresearch.org.uk/publications/library/](http://www.barefootresearch.org.uk/publications/library/) or [www.nr-foundation.org.uk/resources/sexual-exploitation-research-reports/](http://www.nr-foundation.org.uk/resources/sexual-exploitation-research-reports/)

## Histories of abuse

Involvement in survival sex is often borne out of personal histories of neglect, abuse and poverty. We received countless reports of people who had been raped as children, been the victims of domestic violence perpetrated by parents and family members and who lived within otherwise dysfunctional and abusive family units.

It would appear that once a precedent of suffering abuse has been set, it makes it easier to engage in survival sex and to perpetuate that abuse. There were many reports from those involved concerning being raped and losing self respect, which meant engaging in prostitution became somehow easier to do.

**“After I was abused I lost all respect and kindness to myself, I felt like all I was good for was being abused.”**

Woman from Sunderland

## The realities of life

### Drug and alcohol addiction

Those with substance misuse problems engage in sex work in order to fund their drug addiction. The drugs they use are often of many different types, from stimulants such as crack, amphetamine and legal highs, to depressants including zopiclone, gabapentin and heroin. Drug use is often combined with alcohol and tobacco, the former of which is often used to manage withdrawals from opiates and crack. Their drug addictions shape their lives because of the incessant need for money with which to fund often considerable daily drug spends which can run into hundreds of pounds each day. There is a vicious cycle here, with people needing more drugs and alcohol to cope with selling sex; we know that daily drug and alcohol spends are much higher for those selling sex than users who do not sell sex<sup>4</sup>.

**“I need to get out of it all the time, I can't live with a straight head.”**

Woman from Northumberland

### Lack of basic needs

As most available money goes on drugs, there is little for anything else, including the basic needs of food and shelter. These also become an important currency for exchange, with people exchanging sex for accommodation, food, clothes, cigarettes and laundry. Many involved in survival sex are either homeless or stay with boyfriends, pimps or drug dealers and as such lack a stable home. Prison and hostels also feature regularly, the former playing an important 'respite function' where women can be free of exploitation and receive medication for their drug addictions. As one woman said "I get clean in prison, like a detox." However, once leaving prison and being housed in homeless hostels or B&Bs or going straight back to live with drug dealers or pimps, people quickly relapsed back into prostitution.

**“I have nothing, no home, no food, no love, just pain.”**

Woman from Gateshead

### Victims of violence

People involved in prostitution often experience severe and persistent violence and sexual abuse, including serious assault, attempted murder, rape, torture and kidnap. They are sometimes targeted because they are selling sex. Associations between violent offenders, sex offenders and dangerous individuals are common (as partners, living together or through coercive relationships) although attacks are also common from strangers.

These situations and associations are best illustrated through reports, which include:

*“We had a girl with a history of sex work, she suffered a serious assault from a punter who beat her and began to bury her, she woke in the shallow grave and managed to escape after the punter panicked. He got a suspended sentence.”*

Housing worker from Middlesbrough

*“She was extremely vulnerable because of alcohol ... when she was drunk and out of it she didn't know what was happening. She was raped, strangled and left for dead by the river, she came here just after that happened, she was petrified, she kept saying sorry ... there was no conviction.”*

Probation officer from Stockton

<sup>4</sup>Hidden for Survival, Op. cit. 2007.

## Poor health

Our findings show that the health of people involved in prostitution is generally extremely poor in all areas.

- **Dental health:** very poor oral hygiene and tooth decay caused by poor cleaning and untreated cavities, trauma (broken teeth through injury) and chemical damage from drugs, smoke and alcohol. People commonly are not registered with a dentist and often self treat, removing rotten or decaying teeth themselves.
- **Sexual health:** hepatitis, chlamydia, sexually transmitted infections are all common and more serious blood borne viruses such as HIV are an ever present risk. Infections are made more likely as a result of internal anal and vagina trauma.
- **Physical health:** poor nutrition, poor sleep patterns due to homelessness, the experience of physical trauma and injuries and constant possibility of overdose and other risks associated with heavy drug and alcohol use.
- **Mental health:** Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Complex Personality Disorders, psychopathic tendencies, depression, anxiety and a multitude of other serious mental health conditions.

“I was very worried about her risk of death.”

Sexual health nurse from Cumbria

## Children

There are many women involved in prostitution who have children. For reasons of safety, these children are often removed into the care of local authority. A pattern can then develop of some children in care going on to be victims of exploitation and abuse and some becoming involved in prostitution in later life and we have seen examples of this. There are some women who manage to keep their children for several years before they are removed and we found some instances of generations of women being involved in prostitution. However, there are also some success stories of women who have exited prostitution and with specialist support, have been reunited with their children.

“If I didn't get abused, I don't think I'd have went on that path.”

Woman from Hartlepool

## Contact with services

Despite most agencies in the community professing to know little of sex work, the majority of those involved in survival sex are known to services, with many being known to several, such as the police, A&E, housing, drug services and women's services. This can be either as a client/service user/recipient of support or as a focus of enforcement, such as eviction or prosecution. Many of those involved may represent a significant load on these services and be a major concern, for example, to health services, due to injury, drug overdose or mental ill health. Others who may be early in their involvement may rarely be in contact with community services.

“We know who they are, but referring on is always the easy option.”

Probation officer from North Tyneside

## Victim or perpetrator?

People involved in survival sex may also be perpetrators of a number of crimes, including soliciting, drug-related crimes, theft, fraud, violent crimes and public order offences. They are also victims of crimes of sexual and physical violence and theft. It is well known that those involved will rarely report crimes to the police and indeed when they have, they have often been accused of not being credible witnesses. In relation to their involvement in prostitution, unlike those under 18 years who are treated as victims of abuse, they continue to be treated mostly as criminals.

It is the cumulative experience of this research that those involved are victims of multiple and serious crimes which have rarely seen any justice or reparation. They continue to be victims of serious crime and feel they have no recourse to defense or protection. Because of their substance misuse, damaged mental states and poor physical conditions (e.g. homeless), they perpetrate crimes in order to survive.

“They are very hard to work with, prison may be the best place for them.”

Police Officer talking about the difficulty of working with people involved in prostitution and explaining the safety of prison, being free from drugs and violence.

## Services to support those involved

There are a small number of charities that provide specialist support to people involved in prostitution in the region: A Way Out in Stockton on Tees; Barnardo's in Middlesbrough; Rock Solid in County Durham; and Changing Lives in Tyne and Wear and County Durham. Together, they support around 210 women each year and a handful of men. These charities provide an excellent service, helping people stay safe, deal with the trauma they have experienced and exit prostitution where possible. There is also an Independent Sexual Violence Adviser<sup>5</sup> service which has just been funded to work in two areas in the region that will support women involved in prostitution who have been raped and abused, through the Criminal Justice System.

Changing Lives also supports women who work for Escort agencies, who have a different set of needs. All this work is intensive, long term and poorly funded. If properly resourced, these services could increase the numbers of people they support, including men and transgendered people. Targeted and specialist work is incredibly important in working with a highly vulnerable group of people. The police deserve a particular mention here as they have been extremely supportive and proactive in addressing the issue of both adult and Child Sexual Exploitation across the region. Their continued support is essential to the work of those targeted services that help those involved exit situations of exploitation and recover from their involvement.

## Conclusion

Whilst there will always be the exceptions to rules (and these are often particularly vociferous and loud), the majority of people are not involved in prostitution out of choice; it is borne out of poverty, desperation and a lack of choices. It is because all other forms of legitimacy and currency have either been removed or are unavailable that someone will use their body as a means of exchange and we have found that this starts from an early age.

Although the research began as adult studies, agencies were telling us of people under the age of 18 years old who were involved in exchanges. In the case of children, exchanging sex for resources or if they are themselves exchanged for the purposes of sex, it is understood to be sexual exploitation and a form of abuse. But from 18 years old, there is no such label and exchanges are considered to be through choice and driven by free will.

The area reports we produced were presented in two parts or as two distinct studies: one on adult sex markets; and the other on child sexual exploitation<sup>6</sup>. The research reports or sections on children created significant interest, controversy and action. However, this was not mirrored with the adult studies. It would appear that as a society, we are interested in protecting children, but not young adults.

Finally, if those involved in prostitution are considered to be hidden, the men who purchase sex are even more hidden. Although we do know that they are common amongst us in our communities, bearing in mind the one million annual transactions in the North East and Cumbria and the most recent National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles that said 11% of men have paid for sex. Common yet hidden.

## Changing Lives

In 2006, we knew about three women who were regularly selling sex so we started a drop-in at a church and called it the Girls Are Proud (GAP) project. The women invited their friends in similar situations and soon the numbers snowballed. Those women did not meet the stereotypical view of a 'sex worker' and the women certainly did not identify with the label - they were exchanging sex for somewhere to stay, to fund their own and their partner's drug habits, for tobacco, a bottle of cider, even getting their laundry done. We became very good at engaging women who were generally extremely reluctant and difficult clients to others. However, we found that many often remained stuck in entrenched substance dependency, abuse, violence, edges of homelessness and offending. When progress was made it was extremely fragile. We understood that, almost without exception, women had experienced childhood trauma and abuse and this was a

considerable obstacle to sustained change. We learned it was vital to work in a way, which could to some extent undo the damage in order to form future relationships and

sustain genuine internal transformations necessary to lead a fulfilling life. Our work with women has highlighted another hidden issue of men selling sex. Male sex workers are doubly stigmatised and rarely share their problems, exacerbated by the fact that the majority are straight men selling sex to other men as a means to survival. The trauma-informed and person-centred approach which has proved effective with women involved is equally as important with men. Indeed, we see the links between homelessness, substance dependency and childhood trauma are as prevalent with this group of men as it is with women.



<sup>5</sup>Delivered by the charity, Arch, [www.archnortheast.org](http://www.archnortheast.org)

<sup>6</sup>Again, to see the individual area reports and the regional CSE study, see: [www.barefootresearch.org.uk/publications/library/](http://www.barefootresearch.org.uk/publications/library/) or [www.nr-foundation.org.uk/resources/sexual-exploitation-research-reports/](http://www.nr-foundation.org.uk/resources/sexual-exploitation-research-reports/)

## Case study one

Linda

My name is Linda and I am 24 years old. I grew up in care, in foster homes and care homes. They took me away from my mam because my dad sexually abused me. He used to beat my mam too and me. He used to drink a lot, he was an alcoholic. My mam did too, but she didn't beat me, she tried to protect me, but couldn't. She used to take heroin. Social services put me in a foster home when I was eight years old.

I used to run away a lot, even went back to my mam, but she was with other people or off her face and didn't have time for me. I was raped when I was 10 by a guy I met when I had run away. Nothing got done about it.

They said it served me right because I ran away. I think it was from this point on when I stopped caring for myself, I had been abused so much I just felt that it was my life, I thought 'I am here to be abused'. I started drinking and taking drugs, like crack and heroin, and having sex with men for drugs and when there were no drugs, for money to buy drugs.

I have been beaten and left for dead, so out of it that I was gang raped and then beaten and left. I have had nothing all my life. Whenever I have needed anything else, like food, cigarettes, a drink when there were no drugs, I have just had sex for it. That's what I do.

## Case study two

Janice

My name is Janice and I am 34 years old. When I was eight I was sexually abused by my uncle, this carried on for two years before anyone found out. When my mam did find out, all hell broke loose and she ended up leaving my dad, moving house and going to live in another place. I loved my dad and I was really upset about leaving him, more upset I think than the abuse I suffered. After all that happened, my behaviour went pretty bad, shouting, breaking things and running away. When I was about 12 or 13 I was hanging around with older girls and I started drinking and smoking. I met this guy who was about 30 and who was really nice to me, I thought I was in love with him. We started having sex.

Not long after that, I had my first try of heroin and I got addicted. I didn't have any money to buy the heroin, so I started sex working. I was young and pretty and so it was really easy, loads of men wanted to have sex with me and would give me £20, £30 or £40, each time. I couldn't stay with my mam any more, so I went into care, first foster homes which never worked out and then a care home. I left all of those when I was 16 and was staying with this guy I met. He used to get me drugs but when I needed more and he wouldn't give me any, I would go sex working to get more money to buy heroin. I left him after a while and would stay with other men, anyone who could get me drugs really.

By the time I was 18 or 19, I was taking anything, crack, pills, heroin ... anything to get out of it. I was sex working a lot, on the street, in trucks stops, anywhere I could, and it was easy, always there are men who want to have sex with you. When I was 19, I was raped and beaten by this guy, who I didn't know. It scared me a lot and I even thought about stopping the drugs and sex work, but only for a bit. It wasn't long before I was back on the street. When I was 21, I robbed this guy, took his wallet and beat him up pretty bad. He pressed charges and I got two years in prison. It was the first time I had been clean since I was 12. When I got out I went straight to this guy I knew for heroin and then I was back on the game. I started seeing the same guy I met when I was 12, he would get me drugs, but like always I would have to do sex work to get more. I'm in prison again now for GBH and I'm clean again. My life has been so awful that I can't think of it, I have just been abused all my life by men. The only time I have been happy is when I'm off my head.

# THINK



This report has been produced by Barefoot Research and Evaluation ([www.barefootresearch.org.uk](http://www.barefootresearch.org.uk)) and funded by Northern Rock Foundation ([www.nr-foundation.org.uk](http://www.nr-foundation.org.uk)).

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**Barefoot**  
Research and Evaluation



**northern rock**  
foundation

## **Afterword from Northern Rock Foundation**

Northern Rock Foundation has been an independent funder focused on specific issues as they impact on communities in the North East and Cumbria. Between 2006 and 2015 the Foundation commissioned a series of studies looking at the prevalence and nature of sexual exploitation and sex work amongst adults across the region. This report pulls together knowledge from those studies and identifies cross-cutting themes.

Independent funders occupy a unique place in the wider social policy arena and are often able to resource work and commission research that other agencies are unable to.

The Foundation was always careful to not only commission research to identify unmet need, but also to work with voluntary sector organisations to provide services to support those affected. We are pleased to see some of those services now leading the field in the development of national responses.

As we also funded work focused on child sexual exploitation, we are particularly struck by the prevalence of women (and men) who were exploited as children and then went on to be exploited as adults. Clearly we need to continue to improve our responses to both children and adults caught up in this dangerous and frightening world.

**Cullagh Warnock & Penny Wilkinson**  
Northern Rock Foundation  
January 2016