

Provision of support for imprisoned adult female street-based sex workers

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Abstract

The aim of the research was to look at what specialist support services exist in prison for street-based sex workers. The main objectives were: to ascertain what specialist services exist in prison for sex workers; to explore how the services are accessed and delivered; to assess the awareness amongst prison based staff of the needs of sex workers in their care; and to examine prison-based strategies for supporting the needs of sex workers in prison..

Findings

The mixed response to the research by prisons in terms of both initial engagement, facilitating support and communication, meant a lower than hoped for sample. However, the data that was gathered supports the following findings:

The knowledge amongst prison staff that there may be sex workers in their care varies within prisons.

The consistency of knowledge amongst prison staff on what support and services may be available in their prison varies and the level of knowledge is predominantly weak.

None of the contacted prisons had a policy or definitive strategy for meeting the needs of sex workers. Some staff did not know if there was a strategy or policy within their prison.

None of the prison staff had been given awareness training on sex work and the related needs of the women.

None of the prisons had funding to support sex workers and the majority of projects which supported sex workers did not have specific funding for work in prisons.

All prisons wanted more services, better links and awareness.

All projects wanted to deliver more services to women in prison and resources.

All sex workers wanted staff to have more awareness and to provide more information on support.

Recommendations

- There should be awareness training for prison-based staff, to incorporate specific training for male sex work awareness and youth and juvenile awareness training. This could be developed as a pilot project initially and then rolled out across all prisons.
- ‘Safer Working Awareness’ groups should be provided for women in prison. Group work should be well supervised by a professional to prevent misinformation being shared and to ensure a safe emotional environment.
- The Ugly Mug scheme (files of descriptions of perpetrators of violence or assault that working women have encountered) should be extended into prisons. Developing a procedure for the files to be brought into prisons could prevent potentially life threatening incidents.
- Every prison should have at least one specialist sex worker project providing advice and support to the women in its care.
- Area networks of specialist projects should be developed. Networks would also be able to offer a consistent service in prisons, provide expertise for developing other recommendations and could also attract regional funding for such partnership work.
- A coherent policy should be developed to enable a professional response to the needs of sex workers in prison.
- Prison Service Order 4190 should be fully implemented in all prisons. The order’s requirements are vital tools in assisting with the knowledge of what services are available in each prison.
- The support needs of sex workers must be budgeted for by all establishments.
- There should be a wide range of counselling services in all women’s prisons. This would benefit all women prisoners and support their mental well-being.
- Every prison (including male prisons) should have an identified person who has a good knowledge of services available and a professional understanding of the issues and needs of sex workers.