

# High risk services offered by independent escorts advertising on the internet

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by

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## Summary

The present study explored the occupational risk factors faced by independent female escorts who solicit for clients on the internet. These women represent a cohort which have either been neglected by researchers or lumped into a much broader category of 'sex workers'. An anonymous online questionnaire was distributed to a sample of female escorts selected using strict inclusion and exclusion criteria. To qualify, women had to work alone, independently, advertise sexual services on the internet and sell sex within the United Kingdom. New escorts and those who did not appear to have been active within the last year were excluded from the sample.

A total of 269 women were contacted by email or telephone and asked to complete the questionnaire. Only 37 of these responded, representing a response rate of 14 percent. The data collected suggests that, although occupational risks certainly exist, they are less significant than previously supposed.

**Key words:** sex workers, sexually transmitted infections, independent escorts

## Introduction

Independent escorts advertising on the internet are a growing community of commercial sex workers and may pose new challenges to the sexual health of escorts, clients and the general public. Much existing research on prostitution in the UK has focused on street prostitutes or brothel workers who may differ in socioeconomic status, educational attainment and attitudes to health. This study utilised a quantitative approach facilitated by an online questionnaire to identify and characterise risks associated with this occupational group.

## Activities

### Questionnaire Development

In order to produce a suitable questionnaire, a list of objectives was first drafted and developed to include particular areas of questioning. Questionnaires used previously by researchers of the sex industry were perused for completion, but also to ensure

that collected data would be comparable with findings reported by other workers. I then met with Alan Dolan, an academic member of staff at the School of Health and Social Studies. With his experience of administering questionnaires, Dr Dolan advised how my questions might be restructured to ensure a more respondent-friendly experience. We also discussed the difficulties likely to be encountered with analysing responses from certain types of questions.

Once in possession of a draft questionnaire, I recruited a number of advisors through the discussion forum, in particular three escorts fitting the sample criteria and a male customer – or ‘punter’ – who had visited numerous prostitutes. These four individuals agreed to make comments on the draft questionnaire. This stage highlighted the need to clarify some of the questions and raised a number of methodological difficulties. Two of the escorts, for example, pointed out that respondents are likely to lie about their age. They suggested that providing ‘bands’ of ages would be more likely to elicit an honest response.

With all of this advice and information, I attempted to construct a questionnaire which was clear and simple to answer while continuing to thoroughly address the subject matter.

### **Optimising the Response Rate**

Preliminary investigations were undertaken in order to optimise the response rate. In particular, informal discussions were held at two prominent online escort forums, namely <http://www.punterlink.com/> and <http://www.puntingzone.com/>. Participants in this discussion felt that the response rate would be low for the following reasons:

- Escorts are approached by numerous academic and television researchers.
- Students do not publish their data and so completing the questionnaire would be a waste of their time.
- Some objected to a researcher investigating the ‘risks’ of their occupation as they saw this as a negative judgement that would prejudice any data.
- Clients have been known to pose as ‘doctors’ or ‘researchers’ and to obtain sexual gratification by talking to escorts.
- The study would be too limited by just focussing on independent escorts as it neglected street workers, agency escorts and those working in parlours.

It was agreed that the response rate could be optimised a) by shortening the questionnaire where possible and b) by considering very carefully the impact of the covering email. The covering email would have to be humbly constructed and should pre-empt each of the objections voiced by escorts on the discussion forums. It might, for example, include phrases such as “*I understand that you may receive many emails from researchers...*” and “*the reason that this study is different is that...*”. As many escorts complained that researchers never contacted them afterwards to let them know the outcome of their research, I resolved to give each respondent the chance to receive a summary of my findings later in the year.

### **Ethical Considerations**

When notified of my Reinvention Centre award, I was explicitly obliged to give greater consideration to the ethical implications of this study. The ethical obstacles which I foresaw were as follows:

- Sending unsolicited mail to potential participants.
- Blocking the ability of future researchers to work with this group of escorts.
- Offending or causing distress to respondents with insensitive or personal questions.

None of these obstacles could be absolutely eliminated. In particular, it would be impossible to proceed with this study design without sending unsolicited emails. On balance of harms, it was ultimately determined that quantitative data collected about the risks faced by independent sex workers outweighed the inconvenience of each escort receiving a questionnaire by email. Nevertheless, it was made clear in the covering email that there was no obligation to participate in the study.

In order to avoid damaging the relationship between these escorts and future researchers, I resolved to try, where possible, to ensure that participation in this study was a pleasant experience. Instead of sending reminder emails, only one further email was sent – a thank you message which, nevertheless, served as a reminder to those who intended to complete the questionnaire but had not yet done so. As already noted, those in the sample were given the opportunity to email me separately if they were interested in learning the results of the study at a later date. Escorts who had participated in my preliminary research had suggested this as a reason as why they are no longer interested in helping researchers.

Similarly, all recipients of the initial email read a paragraph which included the words *“given the sensitive nature of the questionnaire, I would like to prepare you in advance that some of the questions might seem explicit or judgemental. This is because I am trying to explore all possibilities and I do understand that some questions may only apply to a small number of respondents. You are, of course, welcome to simply leave blank questions that you feel are unnecessarily intrusive”*. It is hoped that this respectful and low-pressure tone will have gone some way towards avoiding offence.

## Outcomes

Despite the considerations shown above, the response rate was extremely weak. Of 307 women contacted by email, 38 had gone out of business or had ceased working. This is, however, in itself an important finding as it suggests a high rate of turnover (12.3% per annum) among independent escorts. Nevertheless, of 269 who were contacted, only 37 chose to complete the questionnaire. This is a response rate of 14 percent.

The data collected has been omitted from this document in order not to prejudice future publication. Instead, I have included below a sample of the emails sent to me by a number of escorts who felt that they wanted to contribute beyond simply completing the questionnaire. I am, however, happy to release the quantitative data to the Reinvention Centre on request.

### *Low response rate*

The unusually low response rate may be attributed, in part, to spam protection software. This seems likely as a number of emails were returned automatically by systems requiring further verification that the email was legitimate. The second factor underlying the lack of responses was that women had ceased working and had abandoned their websites, often only leaving a brief message to explain their

absence. The few women who replied to confirm that they would *not* complete the questionnaire indicated that they felt judged by the nature of the questionnaire or that they believed the project to be “*pointless*” because they were not at risk. As one escort replied, “*I do not wish to do this survey... there are no risks when you use a condom*”.

#### *Class differences*

The data adduced during this study strongly suggest that independent escorts differ in socioeconomic status – as measured by their father’s occupation – to those working in massage parlours or on the street. This is further reflected in the average level of academic achievement. Indeed, many women were eager to emphasise this point in emails sent to me independently of the questionnaire. As one escort wrote, “*I certainly think that the sex trade is very much portrayed as a very seedy scene always.. Even though you will find most independent girls are very well to do and intelligent*”. Another believed that these differences extend beyond socioeconomic status and approved of the current project because “[*I was*] *not tarring escorts with the same brush as street workers, on the whole, [they] are very different types, and do this job for very different reasons*”. Escorts were very enthusiastic about explaining this point to an outsider and some sent very long emails articulating their views. As one wrote “*we are respectable working girls... ladies who do not do drugs, and behave badly in public. Would it surprise you to know that when I leave my flat, I call in at the supermarket and go home and make tea for my children? That I cook, bake and clean my house in the same way as ‘respectable women’... that I teach my children the difference between right and wrong?... the problem we have as sex workers is that there is a deep misunderstanding of the mode in which we work and how society perceives what we do*”.

#### *Unprotected oral sex*

Although the results indicated that escorts took seriously their sexual health by using condoms during intercourse, considerably fewer used protection during oral sex. Questionnaire respondents indicated that this was primarily because they considered fellatio to be a low risk sexual activity but also because clients expected oral sex to be unprotected. The former is further supported by the escort already quoted as writing “*there are no risks when you use a condom*”. As condoms do not protect against spread of herpes, syphilis or genital warts during oral sex, this indicates a lack of awareness among escorts about the risks associated with oral sex. Indeed, the survey indicated that warts and herpes were the STIs most likely to have been contracted from clients.

## **Dissemination**

Despite the low response rate, there remains the potential to write up the current project as a poster to be presented at a conference or as a research letter for a peer-reviewed journal. I am in the process of preparing the following publications:

- **Independent escorts may represent a low risk category of commercial sex workers.** To be prepared as a research letter submitted to the journal *Sexual Health*. This publication will briefly summarise the findings of the present survey and shall suggest that independent escorts should be distinguished from other sex workers in future work. This will act as a call for further research. This paper is awaiting formal approval by the Biomedical Research Ethics Committee at the University of Warwick.

- **Occupational risks faced by independent female sex workers.** A poster proposal has already been submitted to the Royal Society of Medicine for their research presentation evening on Friday 9<sup>th</sup> November 2007.
- **Occupational risk factors among independent escorts.** A conference paper to be prepared and submitted, in the first instance, to the Royal College of Physicians Annual Research Conference. The next conference has yet to call for research abstracts.

Once the research data has been subjected to peer review then I shall prepare an abstract for dissemination to those interested in public health and genitourinary medicine at the Warwick Medical School. Furthermore, a number of escorts have requested a summary of my questionnaire findings. In order to share the findings with those that they are most likely to affect, I shall similarly prepare a summary for dissemination to these women. One escort blogger in particular has offered me the opportunity to prepare an article on this subject which she will promote to her readers.

## **Further Research**

In order to validate these findings, I propose to continue this project with a website analysis of independent escorts advertising on the internet. This survey will use the same cohort of escorts but will attempt to profile their occupation by an analysis of information on their websites (e.g. rates, services offered etc). As information used for this project will already be in the public domain, ethical committee approval will not be sought on this occasion. This paper will ultimately be submitted to the journal *Sexually Transmitted Diseases*.