

Is sex work still the most dangerous profession? The data suggests so

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Sex workers deserve justice and protection, too. Shutterstock

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Romina Kalachi, a 32-year-old woman, was stabbed to death in her own home on May 29, 2017. She was killed in her flat in Kilburn, London and is the latest known sex worker to be murdered in the UK.

In 2007, Hilary Kinnell wrote a book chapter, *Murder Made Easy*, followed by her important book *Violence and Sex Work in Britain*, an accumulation of research and practice-based knowledge about the extent of violent crimes and homicides against sex workers in the UK. She reported comprehensively the nature of violence against sex workers, who the perpetrators were and heavily criticised the legal context in which sex workers worked.

A decade on, the reality is that those working in the commercial sex industry likely remain the most at risk of violent crime.

As part of a Wellcome Trust funded project reviewing the occupational risks of sex workers compared to those in other “risky” professions, my colleagues Dr Lucy Platt, Stewart Cunningham, Pippa Grenfell and Dr PG Maciotti and I analysed a database of sex worker homicides in the UK between 1990 and 2016. The data are curated by National Ugly Mugs, a reporting mechanism for crimes against sex workers. In the absence of a comprehensive police database, we believe that it may be the most accurate existing resource for understanding these extreme crimes. Of the 180 victims in the

database, we classified 110 as known occupational homicide cases – that is to say, they were murdered while engaging in sex work.

We found that women accounted for the clear majority of victims (105), with only two male and three trans victims. Overall, the vast majority of victims (85) were also street-based sex workers.

This trend remained consistent during the decades 1990-1999 and 2000-2009 even when total number of reported homicides nearly doubled (from 28 between 1990-1999 to 50 in 2000-2010), reflecting the increased vulnerability of street-based sex workers.

Recent trends

Since 2011, proportionally more indoor sex workers have been murdered (ten, or 59%) than street-based sex workers (seven, or 41%) – and the majority of murdered indoor workers were working alone. This is likely to be because most sex work now happens indoors as street markets have declined and the internet has become the preferred place for advertising and marketing. It may also be the case that working alone indoors presents greater risks.

Overall, the numbers killed whilst working in the current decade (2011-2016) is suggesting a decreasing trend with 18 homicides (16 of them cisgender women victims) compared to other decades. Since 2011, there has been a significant shift to indoor working only, and different forms of online sex work, such as webcamming, that do not require physical contact. There were also fewer serial killer murders reported than in the previous decade.

The static nature of murders so far this decade reflects the overall homicide rate in the England and Wales which been stable for a similar period – ranging from 533 to 574 recorded murders a year, apart from a spike in 2015-16 when the number rose to 723.

Our other key finding is that the proportion of homicide victims with a migrant background has increased in recent years. In the 20 years between 1990 and 2009, only 6% (five individuals) of sex work occupational homicide victims (where nationality/migration status is known) were migrants, compared to 94% (77) who were British born. Since 2010, however, the proportion of migrant victims has dramatically increased with eight of the last 18 victims coming from a migrant background.

This may reflect changes in the overall makeup of the sex industry, with increasing numbers of migrant workers working in it, and/or suggest that offenders are specifically targeting migrants because of their potentially increased vulnerability.

One positive finding was that the solve rate for sex worker occupational homicide improved substantially in the 2000s. Since 2006, all 34 occupational homicide cases were solved with the offender in question convicted and given lengthy and sometimes multiple life sentences.

But there should be no perpetrators to sentence. These homicide patterns must be considered against the broader evidence of how the justice system in the UK (and other jurisdictions) increases the risks and vulnerabilities faced by those involved in the sex industry. Laws that make involvement in the sex industry criminalised means that safety can never be prioritised.

Where a legal system stigmatises, marginalises and pushes into the shadows those in the industry, sex workers are made vulnerable by their treatment as partial citizens. Hate crimes against sex workers are prevalent on an everyday basis through physical attacks, online abuse and harassment, largely because sex workers are not treated as equal citizens worthy of the same protection and rights as those working in other professions.

Policing strategies also have to be scrutinised when we question why sex workers are considered “easy targets” who will not report crimes against them. It is clear that for both street and indoor sex workers, enforcement led policing creates barriers to reporting crime and the law offering adequate protection.

Without legal reform, which moves on from the simple ideology that “prostitution is wrong” and towards a legal and policy framework which addresses the practicalities of sexual labour in the 21st century, such tragedies will continue to occur.

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