During the 1970s and 1980s, a number of vice squads emerged in different locations in England and Wales to respond to the growing public concern about street prostitution. They adopted an essentially enforcement approach which was aimed predominantly at female prostitutes. During the 1990s, however, the nature of police intervention has changed, as they have become increasingly involved in developing multi-agency responses to prostitution. There has also been a significant growth in the last decade of specialist agencies designed to support street prostitutes. This development has produced a changing regulatory framework in which the nature of prostitution and the conception of the female prostitute have been subject to re-examination. In this article, developments in the policing of prostitution over the last decade are reviewed and emerging trends in the regulation of prostitution are identified.

Introduction

In 1994, a survey of vice squads in England and Wales was carried out (Benson and Matthews 2000). This survey focused on the activities, attitudes and experiences of police officers attached to various forces in different locations in England and Wales. It examined both street and off-street prostitution. In particular, the research examined methods of enforcement, the strategies and tactics that were employed, as well as attitudes towards prostitutes and their clients.

Ten years on, this survey was repeated in order to identify changes in the ways in which female prostitution is policed and to identify, where possible, recent trends. As with the initial survey, the subsequent research involved in the distribution by post of semi-structured questionnaires to nominated vice squads. This survey was followed up by a series of telephone interviews with a number of police officers in order to check the data provided and to gather more detailed information on specific issues. Other forces were also contacted by telephone in order to identify developments in places that did not have a vice squad, but where prostitution was known to be an issue.

Changes in the Number and Operation of Vice Squads

The most immediate indication of a change in the police response to prostitution has been the winding down or disbanding of a number of vice units. The number of vice squads, identified as operational, decreased from 30 in 1994 to 14 in 2004 (see Figure 1). It is significant that in a number of major cities, including Liverpool, Manchester and
Cardiff, specialists squads, which were introduced in the 1970s and 1980s to tackle prostitution, have been phased out.

In Liverpool, the vice squad was disbanded as part of a general programme of reorganization in the late 1990s, when a number of specialist squads, including the drug squad, were disbanded and a more centralized and generalized incident unit was established. At the same time, responsibility for dealing with prostitution shifted to neighbourhoods, with the aim of linking police responses more directly to local concerns and issues.

In Manchester, the long-established vice squad was disbanded in the mid-1990s and currently there is one police officer who acts as a liaison officer between street prostitutes, relevant agencies and the local police. Although there are occasional operations directed at the street trade, the present position is described as one ‘tolerance’ towards prostitutes and their clients, as prostitution has moved down the list of police priorities.

Other places in which vice squads have ceased to operate during the 1990s include Luton, Blackpool, Northampton, Portsmouth, Ipswich, Leicester and Plymouth.

### FIG. 1  The number and size of vice squads in 1994 and 2004 in England and Wales

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Police Department</th>
<th>No. of Officers 1994</th>
<th>No. of Officers 2004</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clubs and Vice Unit, London</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Transport Police</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plymouth Special Ops</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derby Proactive Unit</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moseley Plain Clothes</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coventry Plain Clothes</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bradford Vice Squad</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hull Criminal Intelligence</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wolverhampton Vice Squad</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blackpool Plain Clothes</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digbeth Commercial Vice</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nottingham Anti-Vice Squad</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essex Special Inquiry Section</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luton Vice Squad</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cardiff Vice Unit</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Staffs Vice Unit</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norwich Vice Squad</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hampshire Vice Unit</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leicester Vice Squad</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheffield Plain Clothes</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northampton Special Unit</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doncaster Plain Clothes</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middlesbrough Licensing Unit</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bournemouth Vice Squad</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Other places in which vice squads have ceased to operate during the 1990s include Luton, Blackpool, Northampton, Portsmouth, Ipswich, Leicester and Plymouth.
Plymouth, for example, there were 18 police officers attached to the vice squad 10 years ago; now, there is only one officer who has responsibility for prostitution-related matters. Similarly, in Preston, the vice squad was replaced in 1997 by two community beat officers, working in areas in which there are relatively high levels of complaints from the public and in which crime and disorder are prevalent. In Coventry, on the other hand, the vice squad was disbanded in the mid-1990s and replaced by a neighbourhood crime team, who were set up to deal with a range of local issues, including prostitution.

Thus, in some areas, the demise of vice squads has been a consequence of changing styles of policing, involving an antipathy to specialist squads and a return to more localized and community-based responses. In other areas, it has been a function of internal reorganization or changing priorities. A number of respondents pointed out that the allocation of resources was increasingly tied to performance indicators and the achievement of government targets, and that prostitution did not score very highly on these assessment scales. Consequently, there was a growing pressure to concentrate on other issues.

One of the most dramatic examples of changing police priorities involving a decrease in the number of officers attached to the vice squad is provided by the British Transport Police. The number of officers allocated to vice and prostitution—most of whom were based in Kings Cross—fell from 25 in 1994 to just two in 2004. Alongside changing police priorities and pressure on resources, there has been a tendency in some of the remaining vice squads to broaden or redirect their focus towards such issues as paedophilia, internet crime and other sex offences. Thus, in a number of locations, including Sheffield and Northampton, the time spent by vice squads on prostitution has been steadily decreasing.

In other force areas, the reason given for the demise of the vice squads has been a decrease in the visibility of prostitution or decline in public complaints. In Luton, for example, a concerted enforcement strategy directed against street prostitution during the 1990s virtually eradicated street prostitution from the town, with the consequence that there was no longer any justification for maintaining a vice squad. As we shall see below, the visibility of street prostitution has decreased in many areas of England and Wales over the past decade.

From Police to Policing

If it is the case that the number of vice squads is steadily decreasing and that the number of officers attached to them is also in decline, the question arises of how prostitution is currently being regulated. The answer to this question is threefold. First, as has been suggested, there has been a shift toward more localized and generalized police responses. Secondly, there has been a shift from a police-centred response to prostitution in many localities towards a broader strategy, which includes the growing array of specialist agencies which have been established over the past decade to provide support services specifically for those involved in prostitution. This development involves a shift from a police-centred approach to a wider and more diverse strategy of policing. Thirdly, and relatedly, there has been a growth of multi-agency forms of policing in which a wide range of agencies have taken on a degree of responsibility for the regulation of prostitution.
While there has been a decline in the number and size of specialist vice units in many areas and a decrease in the number of police officers directly involved, there has been a significant increase in a number of support agencies in the United Kingdom who are involved more or less directly in the provision of services for female prostitutes. The first wave of these support agencies centred on the provision of health and medical services, and was funded primarily in relation to the growing concerns with HIV/AIDS in the late 1980s. Since then, a range of agencies have been created to meet the perceived economic, social, housing and personal needs of those involved. As these agencies have grown in number and influence, they have become organized both locally and nationally into a network which currently involves an estimated 120 agencies and organizations. Of these, 69 are members of the UK Network of Sex Workers Projects (UKNSWP) and share a set of values and priorities (UKNSWP 2002). The establishment of the UKNSWP constitutes the development of a new and important political force, which is able to influence how prostitution and prostitutes are perceived in different localities, while engaging in lobbying and policy formation at both the regional and national levels.

Historically, of course, the police have held a deep-seated ambivalence towards prostitution and working in ‘vice’ is generally seen as low-level work and not ‘proper’ police work. Police involvement in the regulation of prostitution has rarely been driven by internal demands but mostly by public pressure and political directives. Consequently, the police have little reluctance in sharing responsibility for the regulation of prostitution with these recently formed agencies.

During the 1980s, when many vice squads were established, police involvement in prostitution was largely a response to growing public pressure; consequently, interventions were often sporadic and patchy and, as a result, tended to have a limited effectiveness. By engaging in a series of ‘crackdowns’, the police were able to show that they were addressing the issue and could claim that they were responding to public complaints. Apart from being intermittent and inconsistent, these enforcement strategies were often short-term, with no real likelihood of radically reducing street prostitution, and were, at best, only going to ‘keep a lid on’ the issue.

Against this background of limited effectiveness, the proliferation of agencies specifically set up to support and take some responsibility for the regulation of prostitution during the 1990s has provided the police with unexpected but useful allies. Engaging with these new, increasingly active and influential partners, however, has meant that the use of strict enforcement strategies had to be reviewed, alongside the established approaches and attitudes towards the prostitute and prostitution.

This newly established network of agencies is different in many respects from old-style campaigning groups, such as the English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP) and the American campaigning group Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics (COYOTE), who advocated a laissez-faire market model in the exchange of commercialized sexual services, favouring the decriminalization of prostitution (Weitzer 2000; West 2000). These groups were, however, far too removed from their constituents, who, in turn, had problems identifying with their self-directed ‘representatives’. In contrast, the new network of agencies are directly involved, on a day-to-day basis, with their clients and consequently have a closer personal and organizational affinity with ‘sex workers’. The term ‘sex worker’ has come to increasingly replace the stigmatized notion of the prostitute.
amongst agency workers in their attempt to develop a non-judgmental approach to their clients.

There is also a recognition among its many support agencies that street prostitution can have a negative impact on the quality of life of local residents in certain locations—particularly young females. Consequently, they are frequently involved in working with the police and local residents to try to assist those involved in prostitution, while limiting the potentially negative impact which street prostitution can have in particular areas. As such, they have, in many cases, become part of an increasingly complex form of multi-agency policing.

**Multi-Agency Policing**

Just as the police in many areas in England and Wales have relinquished sole responsibility for the regulation of street prostitution and increasingly come to share the task with specialist support agencies, so they have simultaneously become more involved in multi-agency work.

Although still pursuing a predominantly enforcement approach, they began to realize that by themselves, their effectiveness would be limited or temporary, unless they committed a continuous stream of resources to the issue. By the mid-1980s, the police began to combine with local authorities and residents groups, as it was becoming increasingly evident that effective policing is dependent on good information and that the best source of useful information is local residents (Kinsey et al. 1986). The establishment of police and residents action groups proved effective in some areas, since it allowed the police to make better use of limited resources and to target issues more effectively (Matthews 1993).

Throughout the 1990s, the involvement of the police in multi-agency groups grew steadily and increasingly worked with prostitute support groups, as well as a growing array of other interested agencies, including those concerned with drugs and housing, forming part of an expanding group of agencies who increasingly took some degree of responsibility for the management of street prostitution in different areas. As these multi-agency groupings have become more extensive and more influential, the police have been able to limit their responsibility for policing prostitution, on one hand, while being able to more readily refer ‘sex workers’ and their clients to specialist agencies, on the other. This development has helped to reduce pressure on the police, whose enforcement strategies had increasingly become the object of criticism both outside and inside police circles. The claims that that enforcement did not work or simply displaced prostitution or, alternatively, only served to ‘force’ women back to the streets in order to pay their fines, although only half-truths, became widely accepted by most of the relevant agencies, including the police, during the 1990s.

**Crime, Disorder and Anti-Social Behaviour**

Prostitution itself is not a crime in England and Wales, although most of the ways in which a prostitute and a client can engage in the exchange of sexual services for money or other rewards is subject to some form of legal control. This fundamental ambiguity has placed constraints on police enforcement historically. However, the process and practice of police enforcement were, however, greatly eased by the passing of the Sex
Offences Act (1956) following the recommendations of the Wolfenden Committee (Matthews 1986). Despite these changes, however, enforcement remains fraught with difficulties, and much of the legislation relating to prostitution is widely regarded as antiquated and cumbersome.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the focus shifted increasingly towards the client and the kerb-crawler. The Sexual Offences Act (1985) gave the police greater powers to deal with kerb-crawlers, although there are serious limitations regarding its implementation, particularly in relation to the notion of ‘persistence’. In many areas, the police have adopted a range of imaginative and, in some cases, rather dubious methods to deter kerb-crawlers, such as sending letters to the suspect’s home, the organization of agent provocateurs, as well as the use of a range of motoring-related offences. In many parts of the United Kingdom, the male kerb-crawler has come to be seen as the main culprit, while the female prostitute is widely seen as less of an offender and more as a victim.

The shift in attitudes towards street prostitutes and kerb-crawlers is reflected in the number of women arrested for soliciting and related offences in the force areas surveyed. Between 1994 and 2004, the number of women arrested fell from 250 to 90 in Bradford, 270 to 40 in Norwich, 150 to 30 in Cardiff, and 310 to 50 in Stoke-on-Trent. There were a few locations where the numbers arrested increased over this period, such as Derby and Leeds, but nine out of the 11 respondents who completed this part of the questionnaire reported a significant decrease. This level of decrease is also reflected in the official statistics, with the number of cautions and convictions for soliciting offences decreasing dramatically in England and Wales over the last decade, as Figure 2 indicates. At the same time, the number of convictions for kerb-crawling offences has increased over the past five years, from 766 in 1998 to just under 1,000 in 2002.

In many respects, street prostitution is better viewed as a problem of disorder than one of quasi-criminality because it is not so much the actions of specific individuals that are particularly problematic, but the impact that street prostitution, in general, can have on the quality of life of local residents. It is mainly the problems of noise, nuisance and harassment, as well as the influx of strangers into the area, which are the main causes of public concern. Regarding street prostitution as a problem of disorder invites the mobilization of a variety of responses, which invariably move beyond a purely legal regulatory framework. Importantly, the focus on disorder makes it more of a social and community issue and promotes considerations of ‘public’ and ‘private’ space, while encouraging the development of more diverse and potentially more effective interventions (Matthews and Pitts 2001).

Increasingly, however, street prostitution has also come to be seen as a form of anti-social behaviour. Although the definition of what constitutes anti-social behaviour is notoriously vague, it was evident from the responses provided by vice squad officers that alongside existing legal controls and interventions related to disorder, anti-social behaviour legislation is also increasingly being used to address this issue (Home Office 2004a).

A growing number of forces in England and Wales are beginning to use Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs), despite the growing controversy which has arisen in relation to their use (Burney 2002; Scott and Parkey 1998). The main reasons for their adoption, it was reported, was either because the behaviour of the person concerned
was particularly unacceptable or persistent, or in cases where conventional sanctions to control persistent soliciting in residential areas have proved to be ineffective.

The time and effort involved in obtaining ASBOs have meant that amongst the police forces who have pursued this option, only a handful of orders have been enacted, while most forces have moved towards the use of CRASBOs instead, which involve the granting of an ASBO at the point of conviction. In Wolverhampton, for example, 10 CRASBOs have been issued over the last 12 months and it is claimed that half of the women who have been served with CRASBOs have subsequently stopped working as prostitutes. In some locations, such as Southampton, the threat of using ASBOs against kerb-crawlers is seen to have been effective in deterring kerb-crawlers, while in Bradford, CRASBOs are served on kerb-crawlers when convicted in certain cases.

In Ladywood, Edgbaston, 21 ASBOs have been used over the last two years and a local resident ‘street watch’ group have provided the information necessary to secure them. Again, it is felt by the police officers concerned that this option is preferable to fines and it is claimed that their use has contributed significantly to reduction street prostitution in the area. In Coventry, six CRASBOs have been used in the past year against women who work ‘persistently’ on the streets over a period of time. Initially, they are referred to the local support agencies but if they continue to work on the street, a CRASBO will eventually be issued.
Similarly, in Nottingham, five CRASBOs have been issued the last year to prostitutes and one to a pimp. The use of this sanction is seen as an alternative to the imposition of fines, which are seen to be either ineffective or counter-productive. In Nottingham, there is a strong commitment to an ‘exiting’ strategy and the use of CRASBOs is seen as a useful tool in achieving this objective. As one officer put it: ‘At the end of the day we got them to exit. A CRASBO disrupts their activities and makes and think about life choices.’

Two out of the five CRASBOs that have been issued in Nottingham, however, have been breached but this has not deterred the police from pursuing this option. There are apparently another 12 cases currently being processed. Indeed, the use of ASBOs, CRASBOs as well as Anti-Social Behavior Contracts (ABCs) is becoming widely seen by the police as an effective device to placate residents, keep street prostitutes out of certain residential areas, reduce the level of complaints from the public, deal with persistent and non-cooperative offenders and, in some cases, encourage women to leave prostitution. In most areas, the number of ASBOs, CRASBOs or ABCs which have been issued to date is minimal but there are clear indications that more forces are considering this option or planning to increase their use in the future.

In sum, the conception of street prostitution as form of anti-social behaviour continues the drift away from strict legal control towards the deployment of civil sanctions. Together with the emphasis on disorder, it represents a move away from a simple enforcement model towards a more multi-faceted approach, involving a more complex mix of sanctions. Importantly, however, a key component of the sanctions associated with anti-social behaviour is the capacity to ban individuals from designated areas. Spatial controls, in different forms, have come to play an increasingly central role in the policing of prostitution.

The Spatial Control of Prostitution

Prostitution has, for centuries, been subject to some form of spatial control. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Magdalene Homes for ‘fallen’ women, Lock Hospitals and brothels of various kinds were used to segregate prostitutes in off-street locations. At the same time, street prostitutes were often confined to certain streets or areas. As Alain Corbin (1990) has argued, various forms of spatial confinement and segregation have been used to render prostitution invisible but accessible. The creation of an enclosed milieu in different urban centres has served, through the ages, to provide a segregated space, designed to limit ‘contamination’, while allowing prostitution to remain continuously under the supervision of the authorities (Hubbard 1998). The registration of ‘common prostitutes’ and their segregation from the rest of society in the nineteenth century made a significant contribution, it has been argued, to the creation of street prostitutes as an outcast group (Walkowitz 1977).

Over the past century, most urban centres in the United Kingdom have established ‘red light districts’ or informal zones for the management and containment of street prostitution. These ‘red light districts’ have normally been established in areas typified by deprivation, a transient population, low political participation and limited political or social influence (Hubbard 1997). The parameters of these zones are normally enforced by the police in an attempt keep street prostitution away from the wealthier neighbourhoods. As long as ‘red light districts’ are accessible to clients, particularly
those in cars, an informal deal is struck between the prostitutes and the police by which women working in the designated area will receive less police attention than those who stray into surrounding ‘respectable’ areas. Thus, there is nothing natural, accidental or inevitable about the creation of these informal zones. Their existence has a social and political logic and their location is a product of identifiable forces.

This informal system of regulation has operated in many urban areas in the post-war period through to the mid-1980s. At that time, changing urban developments involving a mix of regeneration projects, gentrification, new patterns of immigration and changing class relations changed the dynamics of inner-city life and redefined the relation between public and private space. In the wake of these social and economic realignments, a number of residents groups have sprung up in different urban centres across the United Kingdom in the form of local action groups or, in some cases, vigilante groups, demanding that the authorities address the problems seen to be associated with street prostitution.

Under the influence of an increasingly influential body of crime prevention literature which advocated Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED), interested parties sought to ‘design out’ street prostitution through the introduction of traffic management and road closure schemes which aimed to undermine the spatial logic of street prostitution by rendering established sex markets inaccessible. Where these schemes involved the active participation of local residents, they proved very effective (Matthews 1986; 1992). However, the distribution of street prostitution in some urban areas did not lend itself readily to a CPTED strategy, while, in other areas, either the residents or the police lacked the commitment or competence, or both, to develop such an approach. There was also a growing resistance from many of the prostitute support groups who did not want to see street prostitution ‘designed out’, and claimed—with or without empirical evidence—that such strategies invariably lead to displacement (see Matthews 1993).

There has been a noticeable shift in the politics of policing away from using spatial controls to design out street prostitution back towards a strategy of designing it in by relocating it as far as possible in industrial or commercial areas. There are indications that a number of police forces, including Leicester, Preston, Bradford, Hull and Northampton, have been steadily moving towards the re-establishment and relocation of informal zones in non-residential areas, often working in conjunction with the local agencies which have been set up to support street prostitutes. The argument is that if street prostitution can be limited to these areas, they cause fewer problems for residents, and as long as the women behave in ways that do not generate complaints, they can be an effective and an efficient way of managing street prostitution while allowing the agencies to access their clients. By keeping arrangements informal and adopting a strategy of what has been referred to as negative zoning, this approach avoids some of the problems associated with the creation of officially designated ‘toleration zones’ (Lowman 1992; Matthews 1992).

In many respects, recent developments in Plymouth are symptomatic of the shift from a strict enforcement model to more multi-agency approach, employing negative zoning. Over the last 12 months, there have been no arrests in Plymouth, either for soliciting or kerb-crawling, while complaints from the public have decreased by half. The officer who has responsibility for prostitution-related matters now works closely with the main local agency, which has been set up to support and assist prostitutes in
the area, as well as with other relevant agencies. He claims that the problems that arise are normally resolved through discussion with these agencies. Street prostitution is allowed to operate informally in the designated areas, where it is seen to cause minimal annoyance and disruption to the life of the community. The role of the police appears to be to deal with sporadic complaints from the public and to make sure that the women work inside the designated area, or, alternatively, to refer those involved in street prostitution to the relevant agencies, where necessary. Although there are still complaints from the general public, the officer concerned says that he just does not have the time to make arrests unless it is absolutely necessary.

A slightly different approach has been adopted in Preston, where street prostitution is largely dealt with by two community beat officers who adopt what they see as a realistic and pragmatic response, based on a ‘problem orientated policing’ approach (Goldstein 1990). Working in a multi-agency partnership and operating what is referred to as a ‘management zone’, the two officers have adopted a more tolerant approach towards what they consider to be ‘non problematic sex work’. Their aim is to move street prostitution out of residential areas and to allow it to operate—as long as it is within a certain time-frame and as long as the women adopt acceptable codes of behaviour. It is claimed that there has been a significant reduction in street prostitution as a result of adopting this multi-faceted strategy, involving a reduction in demand by sending letters to kerb-crawlers, relocating the ‘management zone’ in a commercial area which is accessible to arterial routes, and addressing anti-social behaviour by issuing ABCs, where considered necessary. The two officers claim that this approach has not only reduced the level of street prostitution in Preston, but also reduced the number of complaints from around 400 per year down to 20. One of the officers involved summarized their approach in the following terms:

We are involved in the management of the situation, rather than look at the enforcement model. We rather say to the women; If your behavior is inappropriate or in such and such a place and is likely to create complaints we will be obliged to pursue a course of enforcement. However, if they can be persuaded to work more responsibly in terms of location, practices and demeanor then that will reduce our calls to service.

Thus, the police in Preston and elsewhere have attempted to promote a ‘responsibilization’ strategy in which street prostitution is managed less and less by the police themselves and responsibility is increasingly devolved on to the outreach workers, other agencies and, most importantly, to the women themselves. A similar, but somewhat more formalized, approach has recently been developed in Northampton, where prostitutes are encouraged to work in an industrial rather than residential area and, as long as they work between 7 pm and 7 am, they are not arrested or prosecuted. It is claimed that as a consequence of this policy, there has been a reduction in crime in the residential area. This ‘diffusion of benefits’ has been observed in other areas where street prostitution has been removed (Matthews 1993; Clarke and Weisburd 1994). By moving the street trade to the business park, the number of complaints from residents has fallen, it is claimed, by half.

Although there appears to be a general trend in England and Wales towards greater toleration of street prostitution by the police, as long as it takes place outside of residential areas, there are some exceptions and criticisms of this strategy. In Middlesborough, for example, which has adopted what was described as a ‘zero tolerance’ approach to
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kerb-crawlers, there is antipathy towards the establishment of either informal or formal zones. Street prostitution, which was once limited to an industrial estate near the docks, has recently moved into a residential area in the city and, as a result, there has been a growing number of complaints from local residents. In response to the suggestion that the creation of a formal ‘toleration zone’ might provide an effective response to this problem, one of the vice squad officers stated forcibly that:

We are completely opposed to a toleration zone. One, because they wouldn’t work in it anyway. They would just work where they want. If you move them to a toleration zone not all of them would work in it. The second reason is even in industrial areas we get complaints from the business community about condoms etc. The third reason is that would just exacerbate the problem. It would increase both demand and supply with more girls getting involved.

We have recently seen in Edinburgh the closure of what was known as a ‘non-harassment zone’ situated in Leith, as result of the changing social and economic composition of the area and the influx of more articulate and more powerful groups who were no longer prepared to tolerate the presence of street prostitution on their doorsteps. Subsequent moves by the City Council to create a formally designated zone in another location have proved unsuccessful and, consequently, they have withdrawn support for the establishment of a ‘toleration zone’ in Edinburgh in the foreseeable future (Edinburgh City Council 2000).

There can be little doubt, however, that zoning involving a degree of formalization and toleration, as long as it operates outside of residential areas, is gaining ground in a number of urban centres in Britain. The current push towards zoning, however, involves a double error. On one side, many of the advocates of zoning mistakenly present it as a new departure and as an alternative to those forms of regulation which have operated historically. On the other hand, the establishment of zones is seen as a form of ‘normalization’ and as an expression of tolerance, whereas the function of such zones—particularly the more formalized versions—is to maintain a milieu of difference and exclusion in which these ‘outcasts’ and ‘deviants’ can be continuously surveyed and controlled while being spatially isolated from ‘normal’ women and the rest of society. It is, of course, no accident that there has been no movement historically towards the spatial control of male prostitution.

The resurgence of debates about spatial control of prostitution has been a function of changing urban relations, the emergence of new social movements, changes in the labour market and the reorganization of urban space, in general. But the changing concerns about spatial control are also a function of the changing nature of street prostitution itself, both quantitatively and qualitatively. These changes are, in part, a product of previous policing strategies, which, in turn, have come to modify these strategies.

Quantitative Changes in Street Prostitution

When we began the research, we aimed to find out how many women worked in each area. We knew from the outset that the answer to this question would not be straightforward because of the tendency for some women to move between different locations, often as a response to police action. It was also expected that most forces would not keep detailed or accessible records. It is also the case that some women work only on a temporary or sporadic basis, while some use a number of different aliases. Apart from
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these problems, it became evident in the course of the research that different forces and
different groups count the number of street prostitutes in at least three different ways.

The first figure which is sometimes given is the total number of women whom the
police have come into contact with or who have been identified as working in their area
over the past 12 months. Some of these women will be local; others will be visitors,
while most of the vice squad officers interviewed referred to a ‘hard core’ of regulars
working in their area. Identifying and disaggregating the composition of this group in
terms of levels and periods of involvement as well as mobility would, of course, be
useful to any analysis of street prostitution in different localities. The second figure that
is frequently presented refers to the number of women who are ‘currently active’. By
‘currently active’, the police tend to mean those women who had been seen or
cautioned over the previous three or four weeks. The third answer to the question that
was given by some respondents was the average number of women working on the
streets on any one day/night.

The discrepancies in these figures are substantial. Each set of figures carries different
connotations and implications, not only for the level of street prostitution but also for
the development of responses. There are also implications for the identification of
increases or decreases, particularly since the number currently active may be increasing
while the average number out on the street at night might be decreasing, and vice
versa. Therefore, we have to be careful when making claims about increases or
decreases in the numbers involved in street prostitution, both locally and nationally.

Although the figures presented in Figure 3 are largely guesstimates and approxima-
tions, what is interesting is the difference between each set of figures, with the total
number of women known often being three or four times those identified as currently
active. What is also significant is the relatively low number of women working on the
street on any one night in many urban centres in England and Wales. This may go
some way to explain the difficulty that various observers have noted in finding signific-
ant numbers of women on the street at night in different locations. It would appear
that, on the basis of this sample of responses, over half of those surveyed reported 10 or
fewer women working on the streets in different urban centres on an average night.

The different sets of figures have a different relevance for the different groups
involved. The total figure is likely to be of most interest to the various agencies that
provide services for prostitutes throughout the year, while the police tend to take the
number of those ‘currently active’ as their main point of reference. Residents’ associa-
tions, however, are probably more interested in the number of women actually working
on an average night and would probably take this figure as a guide to the effectiveness
of policing strategies. Thus, each type of headcount carries different implications, not
only into the nature of ‘the problem’ but also has important implications for policy
intervention and development.

There was an indication in the 1994 survey that the number of women currently
working on the street had either stabilized or decreased in many areas. From the avail-
able data, it would seem that this tendency has continued and in the most recent
survey, there is further indication of a general decrease in numbers of women both
‘currently involved’ in street prostitution or visible on the streets on an average night.
In some cases, the decrease has been dramatic. Very few respondents in the most
recent survey report an increase in the number of women ‘currently active’ in their
area.
The reported reduction of the number of women involved in street prostitution appears to be the result of at least four interrelated developments. First, the various strategies pursued by the police and other agencies, including enforcement strategies, have deterred a number of women from engaging in prostitution or decreased their period or level of involvement. Secondly, the growing community pressure from local action groups has served to reduce the number of prostitutes on streets in certain neighbourhoods. Thirdly, the growing recognition of the violent and precarious nature of the street trade has deterred a number of women from engaging in this activity. Fourthly, there are widespread reports that a more comprehensive set of interventions have been put in place to remove under-aged girls from the streets as quickly as possible and to put them in touch with social services and other agencies. This has undoubtedly had the effect of reducing the flow of young women into street prostitution. Alongside these quantitative changes, important qualitative changes have also taken place, which have had an impact on the social composition of street prostitutes.

**Qualitative Changes in the Nature of Street Prostitution**

If it is the case that the quantitative data of street prostitution are vague and often undifferentiated, so the data on the social composition of the women involved in prostitution in different locations over time are equally amorphous. There are a plethora of local surveys, often involving detailed case studies, but researchers have to date failed to provide much in the way of ‘joined up’ accounts which would allow us to engage in
any detailed analysis of the changing social composition of the women involved nationally, or changes in collective attitudes or motivations over time.

There is, however, a strong indication that the quantitative changes which have been identified are closely linked to the qualitative developments, and that where the numbers involved on a day-to-day basis have declined, this has had an impact on the composition of those who remain involved in street prostitution. In a number of interviews with police officers, it was suggested that there may have been a ‘hollowing out’ in recent years, with a significant decrease in the numbers who had previously had a temporary or sporadic involvement in prostitution, who have either been deterred or have moved on, i.e. many of those women who may previously have become involved in street prostitution in order to deal with pressing financial crises have come to resist this option. To the extent that this has occurred, it would mean the street trade has lost a proportion of its more amateur and floating population and what remains is a committed ‘hard core’ of career women who have a long-term commitment to prostitution, on one hand, combined with a growing body of increasingly desperate, damaged and vulnerable women, on the other hand, who eek out a precarious living through prostitution. These developments have implications not only for policing the regulation of street prostitution, but also for the implementation of ‘exiting’ strategies. The more desperate and disorganized group are characterized as having very chaotic lifestyles; in many cases, their involvement is seen to be associated with drug addiction.

**Drug Use and Street Prostitution**

One of the most consistent findings of the 2004 survey was the very high proportion of street prostitutes identified as being addicted to drugs. Virtually all areas reported extremely high levels of drug addiction amongst street prostitutes and it was reported that between 50 and 95 per cent of the women working on the street in different areas were addicted to class A drugs—normally heroin and crack cocaine—and, in a number of cases, to both.

It is the case, of course, that street prostitution has historically been associated with high levels of drug use, including alcohol, and it may be that the growing concerns about drug use amongst this group reflects changes in the nature or intensity of addiction. It may also be the case that the growing proportion of drug addicts amongst those currently involved in street prostitution is a function of the ‘hollowing out’ process involving the relative decline in the numbers of women motivated by direct economic need. The gradual decrease in the numbers of those who engage in prostitution sporadically in order to pay bills or to support themselves and their children means that a greater proportion of those who are currently involved in street prostitution are seen to be motivated by problematic drug use (Home Office 2004b).

The available evidence lends support to both explanations and they are, of course, not mutually exclusive. As suggested above, there are good reasons to believe that there has been a significant decrease in the number of amateurs engaging in prostitution on a temporary or sporadic basis, with the consequence that the greater proportion of those who remain working on the streets are identified as problematic drug users. At the same time, there seems to be a shift in the drug of choice, with heroin and crack cocaine featuring more prominently.
While the evidence of the changing composition of street prostitutes is persuasive, we must be careful not to succumb to the increasingly popular myth which claims that the vast majority of women are driven into prostitution primarily in order to support a drug habit. Not only do such accounts fail to explain why many of the increasing number of drug addicts do not turn to prostitution to finance their habit, but nor does it explain the relatively low level of illicit drug use amongst women who work in off-street locations. Moreover, the tendency to see the problem of prostitution as predominantly a problem of drugs fails to appreciate how heavy drug use is frequently part of a chaotic, desperate and problematic lifestyle (Pitcher and Aris 2003). By seeing problematic drug use as the main reason for involvement in prostitution, there is danger that the other, equally important factors involved are played down or ignored and the regulation of prostitution becomes increasingly seen as part of the ‘war against drugs’.

Recent research has shown that just over half of those surveyed were not drug addicts when they entered prostitution and that they became more intensive users after becoming involved in prostitution (Cusick et al. 2003). It is also important to note that a high proportion of street prostitutes have been found to be poly drug users, regularly using cannabis and a whole range of other substances which fit in with their lifestyle (Home Office 2004c). This pattern of drug use suggests that the relationship between drug use and involvement in prostitution is more complex than is often suggested. Much of the recent research on prostitution, however, has failed to unpack the dynamics of the relation between drug use and prostitution, and there has been little examination of the pathways, meaning and diversity of drug use among prostitutes, both in relation to their work and to recreational activities (Parker et al. 1998). As the recent Home Office review has suggested, problematic drug use is only one element in a complex pattern of disadvantage, vulnerability and abuse and that a ‘holistic’ welfare-orientated strategy is needed if a comprehensive interventionist strategy is to be developed (Hestor and Westmoreland 2004).

Off-Street Prostitution

So far, we have mainly concentrated on the changing nature of the street trade. This has been because street prostitution has been the central focus of public concern and debate in recent years, despite the probability that it is stabilizing or decreasing in a number of areas. In terms of change, it is the off-street trade that is the site of expansion, with an enormous growth nationally in the number of massage parlours, saunas, escort agencies, gentlemen’s clubs, hostess bars, lap-dancing venues, as well as women working from private flats. Indeed, in many urban centres in England and Wales, we have a form of quasi-legalization in which a growing number of brothels are allowed to operate virtually undisturbed. This drift towards the quasi-legalization of off-street prostitution involving the spatial segregation of women in ‘private’ establishments mirrors the move towards the formalization of spatial segregation of women on the streets.

It was evident in the 1994 survey that the police, as well as many local authorities, effectively turn a blind eye to the off-street trade, although brothels remain illegal, unless there is a complaint from the public, disturbance or some evidence of underaged girls being involved. The situation a decade later has not changed very much except that there is a growing interest in some parts of the United Kingdom in trafficking
and the involvement of illegal immigrants. In London, for example, the street trade has dramatically decreased over the past decade or so, and areas such as Soho, Streatham, Finsbury Park, Paddington and Kings Cross, which were once major ‘red light’ districts, currently have relatively few women working on the street. At the same time, nearly every High Street in London now has a brothel, while telephone boxes and local papers are full of advertisements advertising sexual services in one form or another. Indicatively, the off-street trade has not only grown in size and scope, but has also steadily spread out across London into the suburbs and the home counties (Matthews 1998).

In London, the Clubs and Vice Unit are one of the few forces which are actively involved in regulating the off-street street trade and spend considerable time gathering intelligence on the location of brothels, the numbers of women involved, their ages and their nationality. The evidence gathered during recent operations suggests that a growing proportion of women working in brothels are non-nationals. It is estimated that approximately 5 per cent of these women have been ‘trafficked’ in the sense that they have been abducted or coerced into prostitution. The majority, however, are involved in a form of debt bondage, in which they pay for their travel and accommodation by working in a club or a brothel for an agreed period of time. However, in many cases, the women were not fully aware of the type of work that they are expected to engage in, while, in other cases, the period of time is extended by the traffickers or the brothel owners. In the course of conducting operation ‘Kon -Tiki’ in 2003, 293 foreign women who were working in brothels across London were arrested. The majority of the women were from Eastern Europe—Russia (22), Lithuania (41), Kosovo (25), Moldova (16), Poland (16), Romania (16) and Thailand (41). The police also took charge of 10 foreign juveniles under the age of 18.

One important development regarding the regulation of the off-street trade in England and Wales has been the ability of the police authorities to freeze the assets of brothel owners under the Proceeds of Crime Act (2003). In the past, when brothels were closed down for infringements, they often reopened under a new name shortly afterwards. Freezing assets, as one officer put it, ‘really hits them where it hurts’. The enormous profits which can be made from running these establishments has encouraged a growing number of profit-seeking entrepreneurs to invest in the off-street sex industry. Even a small ‘massage parlour’ or ‘sauna’, employing three or four women, can make in excess of £1million per year (Devi 2003).

An investigation into commercial sexual activity in London, which was conducted by the Eaves Housing for Women (2004), found 730 flats, massage parlours and saunas selling sex in London. It was estimated at only 19 per cent of the women found working in these establishments were from the United Kingdom and it was estimated that between 3,000 and 6,000 women were involved in this part of the off-street trade. One in four women were found to be from Eastern Europe, 13 per cent from South-East Asia and 12 per cent from Western Europe. A total of 164 escort agencies were identified, involving approximately 2,000 women. This mapping exercise suggests that the size of the off-street trade in London is becoming more extensive and diverse. Importantly, the research found evidence of the growing involvement of organized networks.

In Yorkshire, the police have been involved in a major investigation into trafficking, which has lasted 18 months and involved the 300 staff. Operation ‘Rampart’, as it is
known, is investigating the role of organized crime, the involvement of foreign women and illegal immigrants, as well as juveniles. The operation has centred on two brothels: one in Sheffield, involving 30 women, and one in Leeds, involving 50 women. Many of the women involved are believed to be nonnationals. The case is still ongoing but, to date, approximately £1.5million has been seized in assets, while some of the women have been deported and others have applied for asylum. This operation has involved long periods of surveillance and the gathering of information and intelligence. As in the case of the foreign women working in London, it has been found that while one or two have been abducted, the majority are involved in some form of debt bondage.

The amount of time and resources required to conduct an operation of this kind, particularly when it involves gathering information on organized crime networks and traffickers, acts as a deterrent to most forces. Many police officers who were interviewed stated that they did not have the time or resources to engage proactively against off-street establishments. Instead, they stated that they were only prepared to respond if there was a problem or complaint. Not surprisingly, therefore, recent research indicates that a majority of police forces in Britain have a limited knowledge of trafficking and the off-street trade in general, while the official statistics show that the number of convictions for brothel-keeping offences at magistrate’s courts has plummeted from 100 in 1992 to eight in 2002. Over the same period, the number of those found guilty of procuring has also decreased significantly from 135 to 31. However, the approach developed by the Clubs and Vice Unit in London, it has been suggested, may provide a useful model for intervention by prioritizing the exploitation of children, the trafficking of women and children for sexual exploitation, dealing with violence towards prostitutes and investigating organized crime (Kelly and Regan 2000).

Conclusion

Over the past 10 years, we have seen a number of significant changes in the ways in which prostitution—particularly street prostitution—has been regulated in the United Kingdom. In general, we have seen a shift away from a strict enforcement model linked to the operation of specialist vice squads which were set up in the 1970s and 1980s to focus specifically on this issue. However, during the 1990s, a number of the specialist units have been disbanded or downsized, while some of those that remain in operation have experienced a change of focus and now deal with issues such as pornography, internet crime and paedophilia. In some cases, the disappearance or the reduction in size of these specialist units has been a function of the decrease in the numbers of women involved in the street trade. In other areas, changes have been a consequence of changing police priorities.

For the most part, the police have moved, with a few notable exceptions, to a more multi-faceted, multi-agency approach involving a range of different agencies and organizations. In this process, the police have increasingly devolved responsibility to other agencies, particularly those specialist organizations involved in providing services to women involved in prostitution. It is clear from our survey of different police forces in England and Wales that there are significant variations in the strategies adopted and the time and resources dedicated to addressing this issue. However, there is a discernible
trend in the policing of street prostitution which involves the following components to a greater or lesser degree:

(a) a shift of focus away from the female prostitutes and towards the male kerb-crawler;
(b) a tendency to see the female prostitute as more of a victim rather than an offender;
(c) the reconfiguration of space designated for the operation of the street trade in sexual services away from certain residential areas towards industrial and commercial sites in response to community pressure and urban developments;
(d) the development of a more extensive multi-agency approach, involving a shift from police to policing;
(e) an increasing focus on the use of anti-social behaviour legislation and the deployment of ASBOs, CRASBOs and ABCs;
(f) a greater propensity for the police to act as a referral agency, particularly in relation to the perceived increase in problematic drug use; and
(g) a growing interest in the development and promotion of ‘exiting’ strategies.

There have also been important changes in the object of policing, i.e. in the number, composition, motivation and activities of those involved in street prostitution. The combined impact of recent policing interventions, community pressure and the hazards of working on the streets appears to have deterred a number of those whose commitment to prostitution was short-term or contingent. The result has been that the street trade is increasingly divided into two groups—the ‘hard core’ of experienced career women on one hand and the growing proportion of desperate and disorganized women on the other. The women concerned often suffer from a range of problems—financial, housing, educational—and often have histories of sexual and physical abuse and neglect. Drug abuse is only one aspect of these generally chaotic lifestyles. Responding to these women’s needs, therefore—particularly if the aim is to help them to exit from prostitution—will involve the provision of an intensive welfare programme (Bindel 2004).

The changes that have taken place in relation to the off-street trade have been more limited, despite the fact that the off-street trade is expanding apace (Jeffries 1997). At present, the majority of forces do not feel that they have the time and resources to engage in lengthy proactive investigations. Growing concerns with trafficking and the reports of growing numbers of foreign women and under-aged girls working in brothels throughout the United Kingdom has, however, prompted some police forces to take action. There are also some indications of a growing involvement of criminal networks in the sex industry and, clearly, these organizations are attracted by the potentially vast profits that can be made from the commercialized sex trade.

There is a case to be made, therefore, for the police to redirect their attention to the expanding off-street trade. For too long, the police and local authorities have turned a blind eye to the operation of these establishments on the dubious assumption that because there are few public complaints or disturbances, there are no real problems associated with the expanding commercialized sex industry. The limited interventions and research that have been carried out to date, however, have uncovered a range of issues, including trafficking, the use of under-aged girls, as well as forms of exploitation and the involvement of organized networks. More detailed investigation may well uncover other serious problems and abuses.
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