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Feature

Photography: Lisa Ryszkowska

A dangerous game

How do the police ensure women in prostitution are safe? Syreeta Lund writes a special report from Suffolk Constabulary in the aftermath of the murders of five women.

Women are still compelled to walk the streets of Ipswich and sell sex for a living – despite the grim discovery of the naked bodies of five murdered women working as prostitutes.

In fact, even after news of the murders emerged, women were still travelling from all over the country to ‘work’ in Ipswich. An officer who patrols the area told me: “One woman had come down from Scotland as she thought business would be good following the murders, less competition.” This may sound shocking but the majority of the sex workers are driven by the need for money, often for drugs.

The Women’s Resource Centre, a charity which support women’s organisations, estimates that there are 80,000 people involved in prostitution in the UK, with as many as 95 percent having an alcohol or drug addiction.

Sex workers are often at the most vulnerable end of society. Research from crime reduction projects, published in 2004, featuring interviews with 333 women involved in prostitution, found that many reported difficult childhood histories, including time spent in care, domestic violence, child abuse and rape.

Yet, until more recently, the women involved in prostitution were often those criminalised – not the kerb crawlers who pay for sex and, in some cases, beat and rape those involved. The government’s figures for 2002, published in July 2004 in the Home Office’s *Paying the Price: a consultation paper on prostitution* revealed that there were 2,678 convictions for soliciting, compared to only 993 convictions for kerb crawling offences.

Murders

A few months after Steven Wright, 48, from Ipswich town, was arrested and charged with the murders of Gemma Adams, 25, Anneli Alderton, 24, Tania Nicol, 19, Paula Clennell, 24 and 29-year-old Annette



Ch Supt Fletcher: approach to prostitution has changed ‘dramatically’

Nicholls – the news vans vacated the lawn of the town’s headquarters and the women are back on the streets. But Suffolk Constabulary is one of the forces that has, and is, changing the way they deal with sex workers and the men who use them.

Ch Supt John Fletcher, who up until recently was commander for the Ipswich area, explains that the town has a history of prostitution, dating back to at least the 1980s, and that there is quite a lot of through traffic from lorry drivers and businessmen.

At that time, police activities were much more focused on enforcement, using overt and covert methods, often targeting the women as the problem. However, Ch Supt Fletcher says: “Obviously links between prostitution and drugs have become more evident over more recent years and our approach has changed dramatically.”

The area the women work in mainly centres around Portman Road and the surrounding streets, very near to Ipswich football ground.

Ch Supt Fletcher says: “The area where the women worked used to be fairly run-down and had not been developed. It was quite industrial and there were not as many houses as there are now.”

He adds that women would travel from as far away as London, Nottingham and Manchester to work in the town.

“Clearly there is a market there in Ipswich and there is anonymity for the women if they travel from elsewhere. If someone works in the same area they live in and they are known, their activities are much more likely to be detected.”

Floral tribute for victims



Tackling violence and drugs

But one of the many dangers for the women working in the area is that they are often vulnerable, aside from the most recent tragedies that have struck a small rural town, sex workers can often find themselves subject to abuse from punters.

PC Janet Humphrey, works directly with some of the women working on the streets of Ipswich.

“Some prostitutes would not talk to police officers during the murders, but they were very keen to give information to the people they knew where they could. They were all very scared. We had several meetings, one in a church in the vice area, but none of them turned up because they were too nervous about going there. I had to go and speak to them directly and give reassurance and advice.”

In relation to the kinds of women she is in the contact with, she says they can come from all over the country, but the one thing that generally connects them is that around 95 to 99 percent of them are drug users. They range from around 17 years old from a broken background to those in their 40s who have been in children’s homes as youngsters.

“Within Ipswich we have kept on top of violence toward the women – they are well aware and know some of us to speak to. Targeting the kerb crawlers and helping the girls out of it is very much the way forward,” she tells me.

“Prostitutes go out on the streets as sex workers often to buy drugs. They may be forced to go out and threatened with violence, in some cases by their partners who could be pimps or boyfriends hooked on drugs.”

The force now endeavours to take into account their vulnerability and have used their Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership, which includes representatives from Ipswich Borough Council, Suffolk Constabulary, the local health authority, community drugs team and other relevant partners to try to provide support for the women.

The partners reflect the whole social and welfare needs of working women and vice has featured as a priority of the partnership and a prostitution steering group has been set up.

Victim Care Centres, set up by the police, also offer experts in the field of working with prostitutes, they have to be referred there but they will be given different options to try to help them out of the lifestyle.



Photography: Andrew Carruth

Patrol: PC Simon Cousins and CSO Claire Barber

Curbing kerb crawlers

Ch Supt Fletcher says: “The police cannot solve the problem simply by enforcement and the needs of the women need to be addressed – they are many and varied. Operation Sumac, set up following the murders, found that there has been 70 or 80 women involved in street prostitution. The steering group was striving to get the balance between developing routes out of prostitution, such as practical assistance in housing needs and welfare, as well as sexual health and taking a robust approach to kerb crawlers.

“One of our priorities is to deal with kerb crawlers,” says Ch Supt Fletcher. “When it comes to restricting the market we take a robust approach.”

This includes sending letters to potential kerb crawlers who have been seen in the vicinity, either by officers on patrol or have been captured on CCTV. “This can have a disruptive effect if it arrives as the family sit round a breakfast table first thing in the morning.”

“The fact we know prostitutes are still working on the streets is very difficult. We have to offer realistic routes out of that lifestyle. We need to put money into enforcement and send out a message to kerb crawlers that they will be prosecuted, they may have their vehicle taken away from them and be subject to an ASBO.”

They also have a joint strategy with the media to name and shame those who have ended up going to court. They often find that the backgrounds of the kerb crawlers can vary from married family men and businessmen to lorry drivers passing through.

The extreme tragedy of five murders has identified the underlying reasons why women resort to

prostitution, particularly the link with drugs and as a consequence the media have portrayed the victims as human beings. One example in the local paper, *The Evening Star*, was the ‘Somebody’s Daughter’ campaign.

PC Simon Cousins and CSO Claire Barber, patrol the town centre area which includes the Portman Road area. The high profile patrols seem to be working at putting the kerb crawlers off.

PC Cousins says: “Lots of members of the public just want reassurance but I did have one guy ask me, ‘Why are you still here if someone was arrested?’, but I think he possibly frequented the area for the sex workers and wanted us out.”

He says it is important for the force to get the balance right between making sure they address the concerns about prostitution in the community while ensuring they have a good enough relationship with those working the streets as they have provided good intelligence.

Change in approach

The force has been taking a more holistic approach over the last couple of years which follows ACPO strategy and the *Paying the Price* consultation.

Ch Supt Fletcher says the murders have sharpened the forces focus further, part of Operation Sumac, has been to set up a joint strategy to help sex workers off the streets with partner organisations, such as Suffolk County Council and the Drug and Alcohol Action Team.

“We are in the process of developing the strategy which will reflect our current approach but which will require further resources for enforcement, treatment and the technical side, such as ANPR (automatic number plate recognition) sites attached to CCTV facilities with preventative signs warning that police are monitoring the area. These would be movable to prevent displacement.”

This approach includes a case conference process where the sex workers would be provided with help and support from partner agencies, but if they fail to accept the help they could then be subject to antisocial behaviour contracts or antisocial behaviour orders with the condition that they do seek help.

Insp Bruce Robinson, is the acting district commander for the area and had been an inspector for the central centre which covers the areas where the prostitutes worked, and is also a founder member of the vice steering group.

He said that over the past few years the group had begun to work more closely with the community drugs team and local councils. Outreach workers carried out surveys among the prostitutes which

culminated in using the information to plan a strategy of how different organisations could work together to help the sex workers.

The vice steering group meets bi-monthly where they talk about issues affecting the workers, enforcement and looking at the demand issue.

“In terms of resources [to deal with prostitution] we only have a finite number and we need to look at ways for multi-agency working. The fact we know prostitutes are still working on the streets is very difficult. We have to offer realistic routes out of that lifestyle. We need to put money into enforcement and send out a message to kerb crawlers that they will be prosecuted, they may have their vehicle taken away from them and be subject to an ASBO. It’s no good putting 40 bobbies on the streets for three weeks and then pulling them out.”



Photography: Andrew Carruth

Insp Bruce Robinson

The roles carried out by officers:

The Basic Command Unit perspective

Insp Bruce Robinson, headed the town centre team in Ipswich before becoming acting commander for the area.

Tania Nicol, 19, was the first girl reported as missing by her mother on November 1, 2006. Insp Robinson said that as Tania was a sex worker and she was classed as ‘vulnerable’, a major incident room was set up within a matter a few days following the call.

He says: “It did shock the community and many people were wandering around feeling dazed by the whole thing. We had a pod in the area which was staffed day and night so members of the public could

speak to someone.

“I did feel a personal responsibility for what went on because it was in our patch. The focus was on the community from our perspective, reassuring them and trying to find that missing person.”

He says the force worked with the local media and a poster campaign was launched during the initial reports of missing persons, although there was not much coverage in the national newspapers until a body was discovered.

“It was important we dealt with the community issues and business community issues. Basically, we would be having command team meetings three times a day. We were dealing with issues arising not only around the enquiry but how we maintained a service to the public. There was a flurry of activity in relation to scene containment as there needed to be a force wide approach as a crime in action.”

PC Simon Cousins and Claire Barber, a community support officer

PC Cousins was involved in high profile patrols during the murders and dealt with many questions from the public who were shocked and concerned over what had happened.

He said: “I have mainly been involved in patrols but at the time I had to stand in a field with the scene preservation team; it was incredibly cold but we were all doing our bit to help.”

Claire Barber, who was still in her initial training as a community support officer at the time of the murders, was called upon to help restrict media access to the police canteen as police officers were discussing sensitive matters connected to the murders. She said: “There were 16 of us and we just felt we were doing that little bit to help.”

PC Janet Humphrey

PC Humphrey has worked with many of the girls and they trusted her and spoke to her about their fears. She says that the force gave out the Curbside Leaflet, providing tips on how to keep safe, giving out rape alarms, providing a police pod in the red light area as well as providing a text number sex workers could contact at any time if they did not feel safe.

Ch Supt John Fletcher

Ch Supt Fletcher said that Suffolk did not have the capacity to deal with the situation as it developed, but added that in terms of skills, they had the same of any other force but needed the numbers from mutual aid. “We needed enough people for containment, searching

“I was so proud of what the officers and staff did here within Suffolk, their commitment as a team and personal commitments.”

and major incident staff as well as high profile patrols. We called upon mutual aid very quickly.”

Merseyside Police, for example, sent around 12 ANPR vehicles on 24/7 and they were deployed where vice activity took place. There was literally a ring of ANPR around Ipswich. This was used proactively and for reassurance. About 33 forces across the country contributed to help in the wake of the murders.

“We had officers from other forces carrying out high visibility patrols, primarily to prevent any women going missing.”

Many officers and staff worked long hours to support the operation and Ch Supt Fletcher said: “I was so proud of what the officers and staff did here within Suffolk, their commitment as a team and personal commitments.”

Jim Keeble, chairman of Suffolk Police Federation and Angela Mercer, general secretary

Mr Keeble landed back from a holiday in Lapland over Christmas at 3am in the morning.

“In the first week I worked about 80 hours, everyone was working really hard. I was the link officer for all the experts. Most days were 8am to around 10pm. We had five incident rooms and five senior investigating officers.

“I had to make sure we crossed all the information across the five rooms. I was a kind of Mr Fix-it, organising meetings and getting things done.”

Angela Mercer, the federation’s secretary, had only been in post three weeks when the murder inquiry began. She was part of the Gold Group with responsibility for the welfare of officers.

She would be on site at the cordon area handing our hand warmers and ensuring officers had basics like food.

Mr Keeble said: “You have all these massive issues going on but you can’t forget about the people.”

The facts

Sex workers

- There are an estimated 80,000 people involved in prostitution in the UK, up to 5,000 children may be involved at any one time
- Around 75 percent of women involved in prostitution began when they were under the age of 18
- Many prostitutes report that they spent time in care and had difficult childhoods such as child abuse, rape and domestic violence
- As many as 95 percent of women involved in prostitution have a drug or alcohol addiction

The user

- The profile is of a man around 30 years of age, married in full time employment
- A national survey of sexual attitudes and lifestyles found that 8.9 percent of men in London aged 16-44 reported having paid for sex in the past five years

The pimp

- Less research is available but those who have been interviewed admitted to pimping children and young women
- They make between £500 to £7,000 a week and tend to be involved in other criminal activity including drug dealing and acquisitive crime

Problems caused by the sex trade

- The impact on communities through noise, harassment and litter
- Links with drug abuse and the drug market
- The abuse of children through prostitution
- People trafficking for sexual exploitation
- Abuse of vulnerable women

Sources: Home Office: *Paying the Price: a consultation on prostitution*, July 2004 and Women’s Resource Centre