

# Suicidal Ideation in Commercial Sexual Activity

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**Abstract:** This study explores suicidal ideation in three groups of sex workers. The groups were determined by the age at which workers became involved in commercial sexual activity under 16 years, 16 and 17 years old, and 18 years and over. Respondents who began prostitution before the legal age of 18 years were often drawn into a complex social situation which frequently involved drugs and violence. This may result in feelings of powerlessness and depression which could lead to suicidal ideation. More respondents in this study reported thoughts of suicide since starting commercial sexual activity than in another New Zealand study. This was not related to their support systems.

## Introduction

In New Zealand the estimated rate of young people who report suicidal thoughts is 29% for females and 17% for males (Youth 2000, 2003). There are no studies of suicidal thought among those involved in commercial sexual activity in New Zealand. Overseas research has found a history of attempted suicide as high as 76% among street youth, most of whom admitted involvement in sex for money (Kidd & Kral, 2002).

Suicidality in adults has been found to be related to child abuse even after controlling the samples for childhood disadvantage and family dysfunction (Fergusson, Horwood & Lynsky, 1996; Mullens, Martin, Anderson, Romans, & Herbison, 1993). Childhood physical abuse has also been related to both suicidal ideation and suicide attempts (Read, Agar, Barker-Collo, Davies & Moskowitz, 2003). Given the higher rate of childhood sexual abuse reported among those involved in commercial sexual activity, a correspondingly higher rate of suicidal ideation might be expected (Giobbe, 1992; Pederson & Hegna, 2002; Adalf & Zdanowicz, 1999). Seng (1989) found that young people engaged in commercial sexual activity were more “potentially suicidal” than those who had been sexually abused but who had not been engaged in sex for money. However Adalf and Zdanowicz (1999) did not find a significant difference between street youth who were involved in prostitution and those who were not.

In a Queensland study, Stewart (1994) found that 65% of young people involved in commercial sexual activity had self harmed. Drugs have been inextricably linked with prostitution and have been seen as an emotional and physical anaesthetic while working (Noonan, 1997). Another Australian study stressed the issues of lack of self esteem, risk taking and drug use (Martyn, 1998). As one young person says in this study, “if you have been told you are worth nothing all your life you will value yourself at nothing and work in the sex industry, putting yourself at risk and charging a low price.” (ibid, 1998 p41).

A study in the South Island of New Zealand found that sex workers were more likely to have been exposed to high levels of personal abuse stress as young girls than the control group of women (Potter, Martin & Romans, 1999). In New Zealand, young people who become involved in commercial sexual activity under the age of 18 years are engaged in an illegal and secretive activity (Prostitution Reform Act 2003 Sections 20 -23). It is an activity that involves considerable risk of violence, “emotional and psychological damage, introduction to drugs, self harm and suicide, pregnancy, making connections with criminals and social isolation” as well as risks to physical health (Fitzgerald, 1997). Some young people have identified low self worth and a loss of control as the aspects of prostitution that have led to suicide attempts (Kidd & Kral, 2002).

A study of 303 female sex workers, mostly from Christchurch, found that a third began commercial sexual activity before the age of 18 years (Plumridge (2000). The author points out “the consumption of alcohol and drugs, expenditures on clothes, clubbing, shouting and smoking reported, as embarked upon in the spirit of the hedonism of the moment, later became depicted as a meaningless treadmill” (p 39). Such meaninglessness could lead to depression and suicidal ideation. The sample group in this study, which was part of an investigation into underage involvement in commercial sexual activity in Northland, Auckland and the Waikato regions, responded to questions about thoughts of suicide.

## **Method**

A questionnaire was developed in consultation with medical and psychological researchers including Maori, the Auckland Ethics Committee and Maori Community Workers in South Auckland. Members of the New Zealand Prostitutes Collective and staff from sexual health clinics in Auckland and Waikato also viewed the questionnaire with opportunity for comment. The questionnaire was distributed through a network of people involved in the sex trade. Questionnaires were returned from brothels, private workers, former workers from a snowballed sample and from street workers. Some street and parlour workers were interviewed using the same set of questions.

## **Results**

This study is based on 53 questionnaires or interviews in which the suicide question was completed. The two respondents who failed to answer the suicide question began commercial sexual activity at a very young age. The participants included 25 respondents who began commercial sexual activity under 16 years old, 20 who began as 16 and 17 year olds and 8 who began when they were 18 years and over. At the time of the retrospective survey, the average age of the underage beginners was 24 years with a range of 15 to 47 years. The average age of the over 18 year old beginners was 28 years with a range of 19 to 40 years. There were 42 females, 3 males and 8 transgenders. A number of transgenders may have been counted in the female and male groups as those early in the transition seemed to call themselves male and those who were more developed called themselves female (see Table I).

**Table I Gender and Suicidal Ideation**

<i>Gender</i>	<i>Thoughts of Suicide</i>	<i>None</i>	<i>Total</i>
<b>Female</b>	14	28	42
<b>Male</b>	3		3
<b>Transgender</b>	2	6	8
<b>Total</b>	19	34	53

All three male respondents reported experiencing suicidal ideation compared to a third of the female respondents and a quarter of the transgenders (see Table I).

There were 23 Pakeha (43%), 20 Maori (38%), 6 Pacific People (11%), 2 European immigrants (4%) and two Asians (4%) (see Table II).

**Table II Ethnicity and Suicidal Ideation**

<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Thoughts of Suicide</i>	<i>None</i>	<i>Total</i>
<b>Pakeha</b>	8	15	23
<b>Maori</b>	7	13	20
<b>Asian</b>	1	1	2
<b>Pacific</b>	2	4	6
<b>New European</b>	1	1	2
<b>Grand Total</b>	19	34	53

There were no ethnic differences with regard to those who had thoughts of suicide. The age the respondents first had sex for money ranged from under 10 years old to over 17 years old. Almost half (48%) of those who began commercial sexual activity under 16 years had had thoughts of suicide compared to a quarter of those who began as 16 and 17 year olds and a quarter of those who began when they were over 18 years (see Table III). Two respondents who began under 16 years did not respond to the question on thoughts of suicide. They were not included in the tables.

**Table III Suicidal Ideation and Age of Entry into Commercial Sexual Activity**

<i>Age of entry</i>	<i>Suicide Thoughts</i>	<i>None</i>	<i>Total</i>
<b>Under 14 years old</b>	5	3	8
<b>14-15 years old</b>	7	10	17
<b>16-17 years</b>	5	15	20
<b>18 years and over</b>	2	6	8
<b>Total</b>	19	34	53
<b>Percentage</b>	36%	64%	100%

At the time they started having sex for money, 15% were living with at least one parent. Most were living away from family. In this study living with parents did not make a difference to suicidal thoughts.

The respondents were asked who suggested their involvement in commercial sexual activity. When older, more mature people influenced the respondents decision to get involved in sex for money more respondents reported suicidal thoughts (see Table IV).

**Table IV Influence of Others and Suicidal Thoughts**

<i>Influence of others</i>	<i>Suicidal Thoughts</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>No thoughts</i>	<i>Total</i>
<b>Peers</b>	3	16%	12	15
<b>Self</b>	5	28%	12	17
<b>Older people</b>	10	56%	9	19
<b>Total</b>	18	100%	33	51

Fifty six percent reported thoughts of suicide in cases where the influence was a male user or someone older than themselves. This compares to 28% when the respondents thought of having sex for money themselves and 16% when their peers suggested the idea.

The amount of control the respondents had over their lives may be gauged by looking at the person who set the price for their first sex for money transaction (see Table V). There was less suicidal ideation reported when the price was set by themselves (29%) or by an older woman, a relative or a brothel (35%) than when the price was set by a client or pimp (54%).

**Table V Setting the Price and Suicidal Ideation**

	<i>Suicidal Thoughts</i>	<i>None</i>	<i>Total</i>
<b>Client or Pimp</b>	7	6	13
<b>Friend</b>	1	2	3
<b>Brothel</b>	6	11	17
<b>Older Woman/or relative</b>		2	2
<b>Self</b>	5	12	17
<b>Total</b>	19	34	52

The disclosure of childhood sexual abuse (60%) was associated with more respondents reporting thoughts about suicide (see Table VI). When childhood sexual abuse was reported, the rate was 44%. This compares to 25% when no abuse was reported.

Those who had been sexually assaulted since becoming involved with commercial sexual activity (72%) also reported a high incidence of suicidal thoughts (32 %) (see Table VII). Secondary victimisation is noted in much therapeutic discourse on childhood sexual abuse (Briere, 1998). In this study only four of those disclosing childhood sexual abuse failed to report being sexually assaulted since beginning commercial sexual activity.

**Table VI Disclosure of Childhood Sexual Abuse and Suicidal Thoughts**

<i>Sexual Abuse &amp; Rape</i>	<i>Suicidal thoughts</i>	<i>None</i>	<i>No Response</i>	<i>Total</i>
<b>Sexual Abuse &amp; Rape</b>	12	13		25
<b>Rape only</b>	5	8	1	14
<b>Abuse only</b>	2	3		5
<b>No Abuse</b>		10	1	11
<b>Grand Total</b>	19	34	2	55

There was some support for the notion that childhood sexual abuse may lead to further victimisation as only four of those who had been abused were not subsequently raped. This compares to seven in the group where there was no disclosure of abuse.

There was less reporting of suicidal ideation among those who had their first consenting sexual experience at the age of fifteen (see Table VII)

**Table VII Age of first Consenting Sex and Suicidal Ideation**

<i>Age of First Consenting Sex</i>	<i>Suicidal Thoughts</i>	<i>None</i>	<i>Total</i>
<b>Under 12 years</b>		3	3
<b>12 Years</b>	6	7	13
<b>13 Years</b>	4	3	7
<b>14 Years</b>	2	3	5
<b>15Years</b>	1	10	11
<b>16Years</b>	2	1	3
<b>17</b>	3	3	6
<b>18 Years and over</b>	1	2	3
<b>Total</b>	19	34	53

In this study seeking help was not related to suicidal ideation. There was no difference in reported suicidal ideation between those who had stopped commercial sexual activity or who sought help after assaults than those who did not.

Respondents who had tried to stop commercial sexual activity but returned to the sex trade because they ran out of money, were less likely to have experienced thoughts of suicide.

Those who reported using drugs were more likely to have experienced thoughts of suicide (50%) than those not using drugs (22 %) but the numbers not using drugs were small.

Alcohol is a known depressant. Those who began drinking alcohol before they became involved in commercial sexual activity were more likely to have thoughts of suicide (44%) than those who did not (See Table IX).

Friendships with others who were in the sex trade did not appear to ameliorate suicidal ideation although more respondents who did not have such thoughts appeared to have friends away from the trade. The figures were low. Two out of the twelve who had friends outside the sex trade had thoughts of suicide compared to 14 out of 16 of those who had friends in the trade.

**Table VIII Early Use of Alcohol and Suicidal Thought**

<i>Alcohol Use</i>	<i>Suicide Thoughts</i>	<i>None</i>	<i>Total</i>
<b>Excess Alcohol</b>	8	8	16
<b>Occasional</b>	6	12	18
<b>Seldom</b>	2	4	6
<b>None</b>	3	10	13
<b>Total</b>	19	34	53

## **Discussion**

Current research suggests suicidal ideation occurs in about 29% of females and 17% of males in New Zealand. In this study 35% of sex workers reported suicidal ideation. There was a correlation between the age at which they began commercial sexual activity and the reporting of suicidal thoughts. The younger they began having sex for money, the higher the number of respondents who reported suicidal thoughts. Nearly half (48%) of those who began commercial sexual activity before the age of sixteen experienced suicidal ideation. This is clouded by the high numbers who had experienced childhood sexual assault which is a known contributing factor in suicidal ideation. In addition, early involvement in commercial sexual activity is exploitative and may have similar effects to childhood sexual abuse. The method of gathering information may have lowered the suicidal ideation figures. Data was gathered either by filling in an anonymous questionnaire or by having an interview in the street or in a brothel. It was not a particularly safe situation from which to examine the more negative aspects of the lifestyle. A more in depth qualitative survey may give added information (Worth, 2000, Kidd & Kral, 2002).

When they first had sex for payment, most of the respondents had the price arranged by some one else. This was generally the person who had suggested they engage in sex for payment. This suggests a certain powerlessness which is one of the factors associated with the feelings of helplessness that may lead to suicidal ideation (Kidd & Kral, 2002). The current study supports this view as those who said they thought of engaging in commercial sexual activity themselves, or had followed an advertisement, were less likely to report thoughts about suicide.

The findings of this study support the literature but are limited by the narrowness of the interviews. It is difficult to believe that all the respondents felt open enough to talk about suicidal thoughts when they were actively engaged in what was a risky evening's activity. The findings have limited generalisation until a more robust and in depth range of interviews with those engaged in the sex trade in the Auckland area is carried out. Further research involving interviews can increase feelings of worthiness as it indicates to sex workers that a researcher considers their lives sufficiently important to study. This may offset a sense of low self worth reported by other researchers and may enable in depth responses (Kidd & Kral, 2002).

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