Reviewer's report

Title: Factors associated with sexual venues among HIV-positive methamphetamine-using men who have sex with men: Analysis of baseline data from a behavioral intervention study

Version: 1 Date: 27 January 2010

Reviewer: David Kennedy

Reviewer's report:

Please number your comments and divide them into

- Major Compulsory Revisions

The author must respond to these before a decision on publication can be reached. For example, additional necessary experiments or controls, statistical mistakes, errors in interpretation.

1. The authors either need to better explain the venue throughout the paper or they need to present different data. The venue is frequently described as the location of risky sex. This happens throughout the paper, including the title, abstract, results, and discussion/conclusion. However, it is the venue for risky sex + methamphetamine use. The men may have had sex in different venues when they were not using methamphetamine. Maybe it is unlikely that these men were having sex without methamphetamine. However, there is no presentation of venue related data that is separate from the use of meth.

The research questions are well defined. The authors state:

Three research questions were addressed: (1) What sexual venues are most frequently used by HIV-positive methamphetamine-using MSM? (2) What levels and types of sexual- and drug-risk behavior are associated with different types of sexual venue in this target population? (3) Are demographic characteristics, substance-use variables, and psychosocial factors associated with specific patterns of attendance at sexual venues?

However, to some degree, the questions do not match the data and analyses. This is a problem mainly regarding the way that the venue was selected. The respondents were asked to name the venues that they had sex in when they were high on methamphetamine. However, throughout the manuscript, the authors leave off the qualifying statement about the co-occurrence of sex and meth use and treat these venues as venues where the respondents had sex. The respondents may have had sex in other venues that they did not use meth. For example, a respondent who had sex in two venues, a public place without using
meth and a private venue while using meth would, have been categorized as private venue only. Perhaps there were very few of these cases but, as described, the data do not allow the authors to know this for sure.

For the first research question above, the authors cannot answer this question. They can answer the following question: “What sexual venues are most frequently used by HIV-positive methamphetamine-using MSM when they had sex and used methamphetamine together?” They also can’t answer the second question. They can answer the following question: “What levels and types of sexual- and drug-risk behavior are associated with different types of combined sex and methamphetamine venue in this target population?” They also can’t answer the third question. They can answer this question: “Are demographic characteristics, substance-use variables, and psychosocial factors associated with specific patterns of attendance at sexual-methamphetamine venues?

The authors would either have to present different data in which sexual activity and methamphetamine were decoupled or they have to make it more clear in the text that their generation of types of venue is based on co-occurrence of sexual activity and methamphetamine use.

The data are sound for answering the revised question. It is impossible to know how sound they are for answering questions about venue and sexual behavior alone because it does not appear that respondents were asked about this.

If the authors modify their research questions to couple sexual activity and meth use when defining venue, they should discuss in the limitations section the possibility that respondents were engaging in sexual activity in different venues without being high on meth. It may be unlikely but it needs to be addressed that the data are limited.

The abstract is accurate except for the same problem in not accurately defining the choice of venue. The title and abstract make reference to choice of sexual venue which is misleading given the limited scope of the venue definition.

- Minor Essential Revisions

1. The authors should explain how sex in hotels/motels were treated in defining the venue. Were they private or commercial? There is no reference to hotels/motels in the Measures section paragraph that describes the choice of venue. Private is defined as “either their own homes or in a sex partner’s home.” Also, there are other “home” locations that may not have been either the respondent’s or partners homes, such as homes of friends/relatives. How were these treated? Perhaps a more extended description of the text that respondents were given/read would make this more clear. However, if it was not addressed in the introduction to the question, it is likely that there were different definitions used by respondents as they answered the question. This would have to be addressed in the limitations section.

2. The following sentences from the Discussion section should be re-written to make them more clear:
Our findings indicate that the highest levels of unprotected sex occurred among MSM who reported going to commercial but no public venues and among those who went to public venues. This should be interpreted with caution, because we did not ask participants whether their sexual and drug risk-behaviors actually occurred in these venues.

The last sentence is confusing because participants were asked if they had sex in the venues. However, they were not asked if they had unprotected sex in the venues. The last sentence probably is trying to say that participants were not asked if either their drug use or their risky sexual behavior occurred in these venues. The first time I read the sentence I thought it was stating that participants were not asked about sex nor drug use in the venues but I realized that the sentence was just poorly constructed. The “risk” is separated from the “sexual” which made me think the sentence was asking about all types of sexual behavior (which is how the interview question was worded).

- Discretionary Revisions
None.

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**
I declare that I have no competing interests.