Reviewer’s report

Title: Surviving crack: strategies developed by Brazilian users to deal with the risks associated with the drug, a qualitative study.

Version: 1 Date: 10 June 2010

Reviewer: Samuel R Friedman

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Review of Surviving Crack

This is a good paper on an important issue. I think that it should be published after some clarification and perhaps a modest amount of re-analysis.

1. Is the question posed by the authors well defined? yes

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described? They are reasonably well described. In the Abstract, however, the authors should say what the criteria for enrollment are.

I think that the study would have been stronger if they had also conducted a degree of life history interviewing of each subject and asked how this shaped their survival strategies for crack. We found this useful in our “Staying Safe” study. See Friedman, Samuel R; Mateu-Gelabert, Pedro; Sandoval, Milagros; Hagan, Holly; Des Jarlais, Don C. (2008). Positive deviance control-case life history: a method to develop grounded hypotheses about successful long-term avoidance of infection. BMC Public Health 2008, 8:94 (20 Mar 2008)

Also, see the Major Compulsory Revision note on eligibility criteria.

3. Are the data sound? They seem quite good.

4. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition? Yes

5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data? Mainly yes. See below in Minor Essential Revisions.

6. Are limitations of the work clearly stated? yes

7. Do the authors clearly acknowledge any work upon which they are building, both published and unpublished? yes

8. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found? By and large, yes. I think it would be clearer if the authors referred to “Tactics and strategies” rather than simply to “strategies,” since some of what they find
seems more tactical.

9. Is the writing acceptable?

Acceptable, yes, but some work is needed. For example, the word “finalities” on p. 24 is not good usage. There are many instances of less than perfect wording that might be found by reading the text again with this in mind—but their meaning was pretty clear in those cases.

Discretionary Revisions (which are recommendations for improvement but which the author can choose to ignore)

1 In our Staying Safe study (see above and other papers that have been published from it or are in press), we have found that there are a number of longer-term strategies that seem related to remaining uninfected with HIV and HCV. These strategies center around “symbiotic goals” (Friedman et al, in press, Substance Use & Misuse) such as maintaining good social relations with relatives and friends, retaining housing, and also assuring both long term income and short-term credit (not necessarily from dealers.) These goals are “symbiotic” in that they are sought for their own benefits, not necessarily in order to avoid infection (in our study) or to avoid overdose or violence (in “Surviving Crack.”) If it is possible to consider symbiotic goals or other long-term strategies with the data collected in this study, it might be worth adding to the paper.

2 On p. 12, the authors say “the minority of the sample reported that they had experienced an overdose.” The paper will be stronger if the exact number who reported this is provided.

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

3 On page 14, the third paragraph does not seem to be well-supported in the data as reported. At the least, clarification is required. For example, there is some support that at some times there may have been problems recognizing risks, but I do not think the data show this for users as individuals.

4 Also on p. 14, the middle paragraph has some language that seems incorrect but readily easily fixed. I do not understand why the authors refer to overdose risk as “unnatural” but HIV death as “natural.” Also, I do not think that “level of contamination” is correct in the next sentence.

5 We need more information about the Sample. At the least, I think it would be useful to see a listing (perhaps by gender) of the exact numbers of years that subjects have been using crack. This ties into the Major Compulsory Revision below, but seems valuable in itself as well. More information on subject’s current and past employment and economic levels might also be useful.

6 Also on page 9, the authors discuss crack users’ perceptions of risks. They set forth three categories of these perceptions. The wording makes it unclear whether these are emic or etic categories. This needs to be clarified.
Major Compulsory Revisions (which the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

7 This paper is about “surviving crack,” and frames its methodology as an attempt to study those crack users who have survived crack long enough so that their survival strategies might be viewed as having helped them to do this. I question whether interviewing people who have survived for 4 years is the correct cut off. In our Staying Safe study, referred to above, we settled on an 8 – 15 years of injecting in New York City and remaining uninfected with either HIV or hepatitis C as evidence for having relatively “safe” tactics and strategies. In collaborations with researchers who are adapting this methodology to their own cities and issues, we have developed additional understanding of the importance of, and difficulties involved, in setting such an eligibility criterion. Here, the essential point is that in an earlier study by these authors, 18% of crack users died over a 5 year follow-up period. That is a high mortality rate, but still 82% survived 5 years or more. I think that the authors of this paper should consider their data more carefully, and the mortality curves (including the point, alluded to in this paper, that after a certain number of years of crack use the mortality rate declines considerably) to better define and justify their cut-off point. At that point, they might consider what they would have found if they had excluded those now “ineligible” under the new cut off. I do not think that this will require a great deal of work; and I do think that it may lead to some valuable new insights.

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