Reviewer's report

Title: Spatial Distribution and Characteristics of Locations of Injecting Drug Users (IDU) in Five Northeastern States of India

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Reviewer: Amy Bohnert

Reviewer's report:

The authors are to be commended for the hard work. Their descriptive data on injection drug use and related problems in Northeastern India has important implications for prevention planning and policy.

- Major Compulsory Revisions

1. The process by which KIs were recruited and what were exclusion/inclusion criteria for KIs needs clarification (page 6). It wasn’t clear how many of each type of informant (police, health worker, IDU, ect.) was included in the study. It was also not clear how recently an IDU had to have been an active injection drug user to meet inclusion criteria for the study. This last part seems important to know, since someone who hasn’t injected in a long time may be less well-informed as to where current IDUs gather.

2. More information is needed on how many KIs were interviewed in each region, and how well the total area of these five states were covered. The authors infer the number of injection sites to be a measure of the extent of the drug use problem (for example, in the discussion on page 11, “In the mapping exercise, It was observed that the magnitude and the extent of [the] injecting drug use problem correspond[s] …”). Without more information about the number and distribution of KI interviewees, it cannot be determined if a greater number of sites were identified in these regions because they have a worse injection drug use problem or because there were more KI interviews over a larger portion of each state in those regions.

3. More information is also needed on the questions and measures used in the semi-structured interviews in order to fully understand and appreciate the results. Please expand the description in the brief paragraph on page 7 (immediately prior to the “Ethical consideration and consent process” section), particularly network measures. It is also unclear if all questions were asked of informants, or if some were just asked of IDUs who were KIs. I thought this was important because the answers to questions of whether drug networks were dynamic or stable, injection equipment sharing, and sources of needles would be well known to IDUs who are participating in the drug use, but not well known to police, for example. It is also not clear if IDUs who were interviewed were asked about their own behaviors (such as needle sharing) or asked to generalize for all IDUs at each site. A related question: How was the number of IDUs per site defined? The
number at the site at any one time on average, the number who visit on any one day on average, or the number of “regular attenders”?

- Minor Essential Revisions

1. There are grammatical and syntax errors and awkward word choices throughout the manuscript. I recommend a thorough edit.

2. On page 6 it is stated that the data collection involved “listing out the current locations where two or more IDUs gathered for injecting or other purposes (purchasing drug and injection equipments)….”. This definition is necessary to understanding the meaning of the data, and should come earlier in the text- it is difficult to understand what is meant by “IDU sites” in the abstract without this explanation. The use of the phrase “locations of injection drug users” in the title and abstract is confusing- it sounds like the physical location of individual people who are IDUs, rather than the location of places where IDUs are known to gather.

- Discretionary Revisions

1. Is the VCTC on page 4 meant to be VCCT, which is defined in the list of abbreviations?

2. It may aid the readability of the results section to break it into sub-sections, e.g., [results of structured questions, results of qualitative interviews] or [sample description, location of injecting sites, IDU network characteristics, risk behaviors, etc].

3. For the next steps of this line of research, the authors may wish to consider mapping the injections sites that were identified in this study using GIS or other software in order to quantitatively describe clustering of injection sites and regional characteristics associated with greater density of injection sites.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Not suitable for publication unless extensively edited

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.