Reviewer’s report

Title: Sexual behaviors and their correlates among young people in Mauritius: a cross-sectional study

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Reviewer: Richard A Jenkins

Reviewer’s report:

General

The manuscript summarizes findings from a probability survey of HIV risk behavior and associated factors among young adults in Mauritius, which has relatively low HIV prevalence, but some evidence of recent increases in reported cases, although this reflects dated epidemiological data. The study makes use of a multi-stage sampling strategy to sample youth. It’s unclear why this population was chosen as no information is provided on the demographic or risk profile of existing cases. Data reported by UNAIDS suggests that cases in Mauritius are primarily IDU and this may account for the collateral presence of cases in the correctional system. The “Discussion” would benefit from more concise integration of the findings and more attention to the practical utility of different prevention methods and what is known about the local epidemic.

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

Introduction:

The information regarding recent cases is somewhat dated (p. 4) and there is no mention of the primary modes of transmission or the age range, gender, etc. of the cases. According to data available to UNAIDS, the epidemic recently has become largely characterized by IDU and cases have appeared in the prison system, related to this. Previously cases had been largely attributed to heterosexual transmission. The relevance of some of the background information needs elaboration. Factors such as migration are meaningful if the migration is occurring with populations at risk (e.g., sex workers, people associated with drug trafficking routes). In much of the world, HIV risk is often attributed to migratory populations in which there is little difference in HIV risk or prevalence relative to local populations.

The relevance of sexual experience data (p. 5) is somewhat unclear, especially in the absence of a clear rationale for assessing the study population used in the paper. It’s also unclear what was or was not addressed in prior research that this study was able to address.

Methods:

More detail would be desirable regarding the enumeration areas (p. 6) such as population size, and rural v. urban location. A brief description of piloting procedures would be desirable—was a technique such as cognitive interviewing used? Were there observations of interviews?

Was the project reviewed by Emory University’s IRB?

Results:

In table 1, a racial/ethnic breakdown would be desirable. The educational levels should be translated into a 12 year educational system or one with primary and secondary levels of instruction.

Discussion:

This section would be more useful if it focused on implications of the most significant findings (largest ORs, significant in multivariate analysis). Findings that are significant in univariate, but not multivariate analysis may be worth further exploration, but some consideration also should be given to what they represent in
relation to each other and to variables that were significant in multivariate analysis. There are a number of variables that were significant at the univariate analysis that may reflect a personality disposition along the lines of sensation seeking (e.g., ever been to a nightclub, ever watched pornography, substance use), but only some of them were significant in the multivariate analysis (nightclub visitation, marijuana use). The religious differences may represent cultural differences for which religion is a status marker, as opposed to something unique about a particular denomination or the value of using churches as venues for HIV prevention.

Similarly, the approach interpreting finding seems reflexive and need to address practical considerations. It tends to be difficult to mount prevention activities in nightclubs, beyond low impact approaches like dissemination of brochures. Studies targeting gay clubs have had more success, but these are venues where sex sometimes takes place (given the stigma attached to same-gender couples elsewhere) and venue owners often have an interest in serving the particular needs of the gay community. In contrast, people have had less success gaining entry into heterosexual venues. Targeting the kinds of youth you go to nightclubs and considering the motives for this activity might be more useful. There are many examples of media campaigns specifically targeting people who seek out risk and provided repeated exposure to prevention messages through radio melodramas, role model stories, etc.

The involvement of churches in HIV care has had little if any translation into prevention and there often has been an aspect of “love the sinner, hate the sin” attached to this. The Roman Catholic Church has supported hospice activities in many countries but this has not altered attitudes toward promoting HIV prevention. Protestant organizations often have taken a more evangelically approach that is similarly unable to engage the range of activities needed for HIV prevention. As mentioned previously, consideration of how religion acts as a status marker and for whom would be more useful, along with consideration of how social practices (e.g., control over virginity) is managed differently among different religious communities.

The data here need to be considered in light of HIV in Mauritius and the populations where cases have appeared. Intensive infectious disease control efforts with affected persons and their sexual or drug using networks, coupled with prevention counseling may be a better first line approach than mass campaigns, especially if youth are not the main population affected. Under those circumstances, HIV prevention makes more sense in the context of a broader health agenda.

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

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

Level of interest: An article of limited interest

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: Yes, and I have assessed the statistics in my report.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests