Reviewer's report

**Title:** Mental health outcomes in HIV and childhood maltreatment: a systematic review.

**Version:** 1  **Date:** 21 November 2011

**Reviewer:** Nathan Hansen

**Reviewer's report:**

I have had the opportunity to review the manuscript entitled “Mental health outcomes in HIV and childhood maltreatment: A systematic review.” In general, this is a well written manuscript that has pulled together the majority of the empirical literature on mental health and HIV outcomes related to child abuse, particularly childhood sexual abuse. This is an important topic, and the effect of childhood abuse on the HIV epidemic is tremendous. This review did a reasonable job of pulling the literature together; however, it did not go very far in synthesizing the literature.

I think the authors are correct that a meta-analysis of the literature would be limited—the current literature is diverse and contains epidemiology studies as well as treatment studies. However, the literature does contain rich information that is not adequately summarized in this review.

**Major Revisions Suggested:**

I think the paper could be organized into at least three sections: one describing rates of child maltreatment reported; one describing health outcomes, including the impact of child maltreatment on mental health and HIV risk; and one describing interventions and outcomes. To some degree some of these sections are present, but rates, or ranges of rates, of abuse or outcomes are not presented, and are not contrasted with non-abused and non HIV-affected populations to contextualize findings.

Numerous health outcomes are listed, but again, rates are not reported, nor are they contextualized. Etiology is not indicated, including the probable role of child maltreatment. To some degree, this will require comparison against a broader literature, but I think this is warranted if there is to be an argument that child maltreatment in the context of HIV is worthy of special attention. In fact, this argument has already been made in a number of the publications cited for this review, including increased odds of seroconversion and ongoing risk behavior and rates mental health and substance use problems higher than other populations.

There have been at least three intervention studies with this population, but these and the positive outcomes of these studies were basically lost among the other studies. I think it is worth discussing these separately.
Finally, while the study notes that statistical pooling was hampered by the differences between studies, it did not make much attempt to summarize the data from a thematic or content perspective—statistical pooling and comparison is only one way of synthesizing the literature, and, as the authors point out, this is not the most useful approach for this literature. I think this literature does need to be reviewed, and the authors have pulled together a great set of studies on the topic. But more work could be done to extract findings and meaning from each study and categorize and synthesize this for the field.

Minor Revisions Suggested:

I think it would be helpful to clarify implications of child maltreatment by gender and sexual identity.

Discretionary Revisions Suggested:

A final point: I would not use the term gender-based violence in the background. This paper is not about gender-based violence, and while much child abuse falls into this category, not all of it does—particularly the abuse of boys. I think sticking to child maltreatment or child abuse better fits the paper.

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

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