Author’s response to reviews

Title: Effectiveness of community outreach HIV prevention programs in Vietnam: A mixed methods evaluation

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Reviewer 1 Comments

1. The article is well written and I commend the authors for having undertaken to do the evaluation, more often, interventions are never evaluated to assess the impact and program staff continue rendering services that might not be changing the behaviour or improving the services that the intervention set to achieve. My only concern with the study is that data were collected 10 years ago, but this has been acknowledged as a limitation.

Author Response:
Thank you for your kind comments. We are glad you agree that it is worthwhile to undertake these types of evaluations and to publish the findings.

We have made revisions to the manuscript based on your queries. Please note that the page and line numbers have changed a bit in this latest revised version.

2. On page 8 line 162, they mention that "peer outreach workers employed by the agencies made initial introductions to their regular clients, who in turn shared study information with their peers". The statement is confusing, who are the peers referred to?

Author Response:

We apologize for the confusion. Throughout the manuscript, and in the literature on vulnerable (or high-risk) populations, “peers” typically refers to members of the vulnerable population. In that sentence, we meant that the clients of peer outreach workers (who were members of vulnerable populations) shared study information with their friends and acquaintances who were also members of their vulnerable population (PWID, FSW, and MSM). We modified the language to clarify (page 10, lines 194-196).

3. On page 8 line 176-177, they stated that "in the four survey provinces, we randomly identified participants in the comparison group for IDI participation" Did they want to say intervention group?

Author Response:

Thank you for the good catch. Yes, you are correct. We have made that change (now page 10, line 211).

Reviewer 2 Comments

1. Abstract: The 90-90-90 UNAIDS target and the evaluation done in 2007 and 2008. Its also not clear what was the objective being evaluated as well as the type of evaluation conducted. The investigator presented some results in the methods. The type of evaluation design was not stated but rather the data collection approach.

Author Response:

We are sorry the evaluation objective was not clear. We modified the last sentence of the Abstract’s Background to read: “The evaluation focused on assessing program effect on HIV knowledge, high-risk behaviors, and HIV testing among high-risk populations.” (See page 3, lines 46-48.) We hope this clarifies the objective.
With regard to design, we revised the first two sentences of the Methods section to clarify our design vs. data collection. The text now reads: “We used a mixed-methods cross-sectional study evaluation design. Data collection encompassed a quantitative survey of 2,199 individuals supplemented by 125 in-depth interviews.” (See page 3, lines 49-51.)

2. Introduction: From line 99 to 109, it’s unclear what the investigator wants to communicate. If this is an evaluation work, then what is the intervention being evaluated? What was the overall objective that was set and now being evaluated? The write-up is a mixture of methods and issues being raised. For this work to merit publication, the authors need to work on the introduction to explicitly show what is the issue and what sort of evaluation is being conducted.

Author Response:

We have endeavored to clarify these points by modifying the first three sentences on study design, program being evaluated, and evaluation focus. These now align well with our revised language in the abstract and read:

“In 2007-2008, we conducted a nationwide mixed-methods cross-sectional evaluation of the impact of PEPFAR-supported community-based outreach programs. The evaluation was designed to assess program effect on HIV knowledge, high-risk behaviors, and HIV testing service uptake among PWID, FSW, and MSM. It also examined use of peer educators versus health educators, and made specific recommendations for program improvements.” (See page 6, lines 99-104.) We hope this addresses the reviewer’s concerns about this paragraph.

With regard to the intervention being evaluated, a detailed description is provided on page 7, in the first paragraph (lines 119-135).

3. From line 152 to 154- it clearly stated that this is a 10-year data, its therefore not clear how will this pass for an evaluation of the current situation

Author Response:

We agree that the data are a bit old. We do not argue that we conducted an evaluation “of the current situation.” Rather, we believe our findings are those of a well-designed and rigorous evaluation with findings that provide insights into the impacts of a major HIV prevention program utilizing peer outreach.

4. What is the evaluation design?? This has not been stated. What has been stated is the data collection approach. why tell us what you cannot do and not tell what exactly was done.

Author Response:
To clarify the study design, we have revised the language in the paragraph under “Design overview” at the bottom of page 8 and top of page 9 (lines 162-174). This paragraph now describes clearly the overall study design (mixed-methods, cross sectional), supplemented by a brief description of the data collection approach. We modified the language on what we couldn’t do to make it less distracting (page 10, lines 164-165). Other key parts of the study design are contained in subsequent paragraphs, which provide detail on the study site and participants (pages 9-10, lines 177-189), recruitment approach (page 10, lines 191-204), categorization of high-risk participants (page 10, lines 204-206), qualitative component participants (pages 10-11, lines 208-213), study instruments (page 12, lines 238-249), sample size estimates (page 12, lines 252-259) and analyses (pages 12-14, lines 261-297).

5. The method section is confusing? If it is an evaluation then what was the objective of the intervention. It is the objective of the intervention that will be evaluated to see if the objectives were achieved or not.

Author Response:

In the background section of the manuscript, under “Overview of Vietnam’s long-term peer outreach programming, we describe program details at length. As stated there, the program was focused on HIV prevention, via improvements in knowledge and high-risk behaviors. We have revised the language to be extra clear. Please see page 7, lines 125-127, which states: “…employing outreach workers to expand community-based HIV prevention measures focused on increasing HIV knowledge and reducing high-risk behaviors among key populations, primarily PWID, FSW, and MSM.”

6. In an evaluation where a community outreach is carryout out, the question you should ask is did the outreach achieve the stated objective?. What is being documented here is entirely different. I cannot see the evaluation part of the write-up in the methods

Author Response:

As noted above, the description of the program is located in the Introduction (page 7, lines 119-135). We have explained in several places what the evaluation objective was. We believe that for a program which aimed to improve knowledge and reduce high-risk behaviors of vulnerable populations, it was relevant to assess the program’s effect in doing just those things.

Editor’s requests

Reviewer 2 does mention that your Response Letter provides more answers than the Manuscript itself therefore it would be great if some of the responses included in the Letter could be added into the Manuscript.
Author Response:

We reviewed our responses and nearly all include references to where changes were made in the manuscript. There were two responses where we felt we could make further edits. These are associated with the following questions from reviewers:

1. Are the targets of the interventions neglected by other interventions? What about the comparators?

We have added information from our responses in the Discussion section. See page 22, lines 489-495.

2. Question about age of data and relevance of the study.

We also added language in the discussion section. See pages 22-23, lines 497-507.