Exploring alcohol and other drug use among men who have sex with men (MSM) in Nairobi, Kenya: implications for HIV and health promotion interventions

Anthony Tukai1, Hellen Babu1, Amos Mugambi1, Chrispo Nyamweya1, Mary Kung’u1, Polly Nguruki1, Rhoda Kabuti1, Jennifer Liku1, Wilf Nutland2, Peter Weatherburn2, Elizabeth Fearon3, Adrian D. Smith1, Joshua Kimani1, Adam Bourne1

1. Partners for Health and Development, Nairobi, Kenya; 2. London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, Department of Public Health, Environments and Society, London, UK; 3. University of Oxford, Nuffield Department of Population Health, Oxford, UK; 4. Department of Medical Microbiology and Infectious Diseases, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada; 5. La Trobe University, Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society, Melbourne, Australia

Background

- HIV prevalence among men who have sex with men (MSM) in Nairobi remains considerably higher than among other men (3). Prevalence of STIs is also high.
- Research in other contexts has documented an association between alcohol and other substance use and sexual risk behavior among MSM (2).
- There is extremely limited data relating to alcohol and other drug use among MSM anywhere in Africa, thus our understanding of both the prevalence of alcohol related problems and the use of illicit drugs is limited.
- An enhanced understanding of alcohol use and drug use practice and their role in social and sexual interactions would help to inform the development of local harm reduction interventions for MSM.

Study aim

This project aimed to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the social and sexual contexts of alcohol and drug use among (MSM) from Nairobi, Kenya.

Method

- This study involved two components: A qualitative phase and a respondent driven sampling (RDS) survey.
- Qualitative phase. Between April and July 2017, in-depth interviews were carried out with 30 MSM (aged 19-56) recruited via purposive sampling.
- Semi-structured interviews examined the contexts and motivations for alcohol and other drug use generally, as well as the role and impact of substance use during sex. Data were subject to thematic analysis.
- Respondent-driven sampling (RDS) was employed to recruit 618 MSM. Inclusion criteria: aged 18+; current male identity or assigned male gender at birth; Nairobi residence; and experience of consensual sex with a male partner in the previous 12 months.
- Participants conducted a computer-assisted survey, which included measures of alcohol use dependence (via the AUDIT scale) and established use of illicit substances within the previous 12 months. Percentages are RDS weighted.

Results - Survey

- One in 15 (6.4%) men surveyed displayed signs of alcohol dependence according to the AUDIT scale.
- A further 3.4% of men reported drinking at levels that could be harmful or hazardous to their health.
- Nearly 1 in 20 men (4.2%) had used gamma-hydroxybutyrate (GHB) within the previous 12 months.
- Smaller proportions of men had used stimulant drugs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alcohol use and dependence (AUDIT)</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low risk drinking</td>
<td>430/581</td>
<td>76.0</td>
<td>72-80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excess of low risk</td>
<td>89/581</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>11-18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harmful or hazardous</td>
<td>22/581</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>2-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol dependence</td>
<td>40/581</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>4-9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Illicit drug use Last 12 months

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drug</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ecstasy</td>
<td>19/605</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>1-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speed</td>
<td>15/606</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crystal meth</td>
<td>21/604</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>2-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GHB</td>
<td>26/603</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>3-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cocaine</td>
<td>19/603</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>2-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crack</td>
<td>19/603</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>2-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heroin</td>
<td>21/607</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>2-5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results - Interviews

- Five men were living with diagnosed HIV and 13 had not tested within the previous 6 months.
- All but two participants reported use of alcohol or other drugs during sex with other men.

Enabling effects of alcohol and drug use

- There was a common narrative of alcohol facilitating sexual confidence and adventurism, with men describing how they were more likely to try different sex roles or group sex.
- Many men also expressed fear that when drunk they may be less attentive to their surroundings and risked exposing themselves as MSM to other community members.

Conclusions

- While many men celebrated how drinking alcohol could help them to forget worries or concerns, they also reported how drinking too much could place them in potentially difficult or dangerous scenarios.
- A majority of participants felt that they would struggle to successfully negotiate condom use if they were under the influence of alcohol.
- "If you are intoxicated you are not in the right thinking so the risks are there. I have done sex in the toilets [at a club] I was desperate but was stupid. Anyone could have seen us."
- Enhancing a sense of sexual freedom after drinking alcohol was valued by some, but a few felt it made sex a foregone conclusion when, in fact, friendship might be preferred.

Conclusion

- One in 10 men in the RDS survey reported harmful or hazardous levels of alcohol use, of which two thirds showed signs of alcohol dependence.
- While low in absolute terms, the proportion of men reporting use of some drugs is higher than observed in some high income countries (3).
- Consuming alcohol or other substances is often considered a barrier to communicating effectively and mitigating the risks of unprotected sex.
- Substance use harm reduction interventions operating in tandem with HIV prevention and care activities are required to mitigate such risks.