

RESEARCH BRIEF

March 2013



DRUG USE AND HIV RISK AMONG MIDDLE-CLASS YOUNG PEOPLE IN GUATEMALA CITY

Background

This qualitative study explores the relationship between drug use and HIV-related risk behaviors among middle-class young people in Guatemala City. To date, HIV prevention programs in Guatemala have targeted two key populations known to have a heightened risk of HIV: female sex workers and men who have sex with men. However, an important unanswered question remains as to whether users of drugs—even non-injection drugs—constitute a third type of key population and a potentially important focus of future HIV prevention activities.

Study Methods & Design

This study employed the PEER methodology, whereby the peer-interviewers are themselves part of the target population (in this case, drug users), and each recruits three friends as informants. Each respondent was asked to participate in three interviews. The 21 peer-interviewers recruited a total of 62 respondents for a total of 184 interviews.

Acknowledgements

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Complete report: Fortin I and Bertrand JT. *Drug Use And HIV Risk among Middle-Class Young People in Guatemala City: An Exploratory Study*. October 2012. Baltimore: USAID | Project Search: Research to Prevention.

KEY FINDINGS

PATTERNS OF DRUG USE

Respondents viewed drug use favorably. Drugs were described as social lubricants that facilitate interactions with friends and provide new, pleasurable experiences, free from the conventions of a conservative society. Among this group of primarily young, middle-class respondents, drug use was limited almost exclusively to non-injection drugs, specifically cocaine, marijuana, ecstasy, LSD, and mushrooms. Respondents considered drugs affordable and easy to obtain in Guatemala City.

HIV RISK

Though respondents associated drug use to some sexual risk behaviors, HIV risk perception among respondents was low. Common fears included pregnancy, detection of drug use, overdose, and addiction. HIV, however, was not expressed by respondents as a major concern, and few knew anyone in their social circle who was HIV positive. Respondents were aware of how HIV is transmitted and the protection offered by condoms; but, they readily admitted that they were more worried about pregnancy, and that couples with certain level of mutual trust tend to forgo condoms and use only oral contraceptives. Under the influence of drugs, respondents reported being more concerned about pleasure than condom use. Respondents also reported multiple sex partners and occasional commercial sex in their drug user circles.

FINDINGS INFORMING

THE QUANTITATIVE STUDY

One aim of this study was to inform the development of a subsequent quantitative study on HIV prevalence and risk behaviors among injecting and non-injecting drug users in Guatemala City. From the qualitative study, information such as type of drugs used and willingness to be tested at the chosen HIV clinic was incorporated into the design of the quantitative study. Additionally, a glossary of slang terms used by respondents was created as a reference for future research in this population, and can be found in the full report.

CONCLUSIONS

Collectively, these qualitative data suggest that young, middle-class drug users are engaging in behaviors that may put them at heightened risk for HIV transmission, especially if the virus should become more prevalent in their tight-knit social networks. Future quantitative research is needed to estimate the prevalence of HIV among drug users to determine if they should be considered a key population for HIV prevention programs. Though the sampling method resulted in respondents with similar demographic characteristics, the findings provide a point of comparison for future research necessary to understand patterns of drug use in members of low and upper classes in Guatemala City.



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