

Background

- HIV prevalence among men who have sex with men (MSM) in Nairobi remains considerably higher than among other men (1). 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.



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

Illicit drug use Last 12 months	N	%	95% CI
Ecstasy	19/605	2.1	1-4
Speed	15/606	1.6	1-3
Crystal meth	21/604	3.1	2-5
GHB	26/603	4.2	3-7
Cocaine	19/603	3.2	2-5
Crack	19/603	3.2	2-5
Heroin	21/607	2.7	2-5

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 adventurousness, with men describing how they were more likely to try different sex roles or group sex.
- This enabling effect of alcohol is all the more significant in the Kenyan context given significant societal pressures and internalized homophobia that they often had to overcome to engage with other MSM.
- Around a third of men engaged in sex work and reported that alcohol helped them mitigate fears of meeting clients: *"When you are scared it [alcohol] boosts your morale, it gives you a bit of courage to approach the person you are supposed to meet."*



"David" is 24 years old and a student at University. He regularly has sex with older men who give him money and buy him alcohol. He claims that by taking alcohol or any sort of drug helps him face his fears around sex with men. David is HIV positive.

"John" is 32 years old. He is a casual worker in Nairobi city center. "sometimes the worst decisions are made because you feel pressure from friends to take alcohol, drugs and be sexual active. You get worked up, get drunk, and find yourself sexual with someone you normally wouldn't" John has recently been treated for an STI and is HIV positive.



Judgement and vulnerability

- 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. *"It can make you vulnerable not to use condoms when you are drunk, it can maybe make you blackout and maybe you will be bottomed."*
- 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.
- 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. *"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."*

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 necessary to have sufficient courage to meet other men for sex, particularly in the context of sex work.
- Excessive alcohol use can inhibit sexual negotiation, put men at risk for HIV/STIs and expose them to abuse or assault.
- Substance use harm reduction interventions operating in tandem with HIV prevention and care activities are required to mitigate such risks.

References: (1) Smith et al (2018) The continuum of HIV care and population viral load (PVL) among a representative sample of gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men (MSM) in Nairobi, Kenya. *International AIDS Society Conference*, Amsterdam. Poster THPE209. (2) Daniels et al (2016) "Booze is the main factor that got me where I am today": alcohol use and HIV risk for MSM in rural South Africa. *AIDS Care*, published online 18th May. (3) Bourne A, Weatherburn P (2017) Substance use among men who have sex with men: patterns, motivations, impacts and intervention development need. *Sexually Transmitted Infections*, 93(5):342-346.