

Dark rooms in Brazilian nightclubs: a matter of concern for STD/HIV policymakers

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Nightclubs have been described as leisure venues where alcohol and illicit drug abuse are present, and are places where certain behaviours increase the risk of contagion of sexually transmitted diseases (STD).¹ Given the absence of information for defining public policies aimed at the safety of nightclub patrons in Brazil, we performed the first representative survey (2013) of drinking behaviour, episodes of violence, sexual behaviour and illicit drug use in nightclubs in São Paulo, the largest city in the southern hemisphere. We defined nightclubs as dance clubs with one or more dance floors, that sell alcoholic beverages, control the entry and exit of individual patrons and are registered as *baladas* (the Brazilian term for nightclubs designated as dance clubs). A probabilistic sample of 31 nightclubs in São Paulo was drawn from a total of 150 nightclubs, with probability of inclusion proportional to their maximum capacity. A systematic sampling method was used to interview 2422 patrons in a three-step portal survey: entrance and exit interviews and an online interview 24 h after leaving a nightclub. Ethnographic observations were performed inside the nightclubs, simultaneously with the patron survey in the entry and exit lines, yielding data from 307 h of observation. Each nightclub was observed once, for an average of 8.5 h. A field coordinator, two ethnographers and seven interviewers composed the field research team at each night. Details about sampling and data collection are presented in Carlini *et al.*² and Santos *et al.*³ This letter describes part of the data from the 'sexual behaviour' axis extracted from the field diaries and the ethnographic observation form. It was observed that there were an existence of areas reserved for sexual intercourse in three out of six sampled nightclubs targeting men who have sex with men (MSM). These areas with little or no lighting are commonly known as 'dark rooms.' Anal and oral sex acts simultaneously occur among several people in the same space and with the exchange of partners. Participants usually do not know each other. Considering that dark rooms are located in regular dance clubs and allow patrons to have several sexual partners simultaneously, they seem to be different from glory holes.⁴ Dark rooms are legal in Brazil, but unregulated. Establishments

in which 'dark rooms' were found were dance clubs and not sex venues (e.g. brothels, bathhouses and swing houses). No prostitution or exchange of sex for money occurred in these establishments. However, high alcohol intoxication was found among patrons.²

The culture of not using condoms in dark rooms has emerged as a public health issue. The Municipal Health Secretariat provides free condoms to all São Paulo nightclubs; however, the use of condoms, even considering the free offer, is not a fact. Situations observed by ethnographers and reported by security staff at the venues were as follows:

'[At venue 07]: *We have a partnership with the Municipal Health Secretariat, which gives us free condoms, but we very rarely find condoms in the garbage of the 'dark room,' and our stock is always full. We don't need to refill it, and the use of condoms is not a habit.*'

'[At venue 17]: *After 3am, more than 100 patrons go upstairs to the 'dark room' [...] the nightclub didn't offer condoms, and patrons are not concerned about that [...] they will not use it.*'

In contrast, nightclubs observed in this survey, targeting straight patrons, had no areas reserved for sexual intercourse and attempted public sexual activity was forbidden and controlled by the security staff.

What motivated us to write this Letter to the Editor is the fact that in Brazil, according to governmental data, the recrudescence of the HIV epidemic is concentrated among MSM aged 20–25 years,⁵ coincidentally, the age category investigated in this survey. Considering that condoms are not being used for sexual intercourse in dark rooms, even when the nightclubs freely offers them, tailored campaigns to raise awareness of contagion risks for several STDs should be made more obvious in these establishments, considering scientific data about the recrudescence of HIV contagion among young MSM.

Conflicts of interest

None declared.

References

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