Using Photovoice to Capture Diverse Experiences of Cleveland’s Opioid Crisis

PI: Lee Hoffer, PhD, MPE, Associate Professor  
Co-PI: Allison Schlosser, MSW, PhD Candidate

Case Western Reserve University  
Department of Anthropology

Abstract

The U.S. is in the midst of a crisis in opioid overdose. Since 2000, the opioid overdose death rate has increased by 200 percent, creating moral panic and a public health crisis. Attention to opioid addiction, treatment, and overdose has intensified with the emergence of groups of relatively socially privileged drug users and the highly publicized overdose deaths of celebrities such as Philip Seymour Hoffmann and Prince. Images of white suburban and rural opioid users now saturate media in stark contrast to well-worn representations of criminalized black and brown urban “addicts.” These images challenge deeply engrained beliefs about addiction. Media representations, however, often obscure lived experience. Combining media analysis and Photovoice participatory action research, this project aims to understand diverse local experiences of opioid addiction and overdose. This project collaborates with opioid users from varied backgrounds in Cleveland to understand how people depicted by media experience opioid addiction, overdose, and related media coverage. While opioid overdose is now recognized as a significant public health problem, it is under-theorized in the humanities and social sciences. There is a lack of understanding of how individuals experience overdose and respond to media representations of this phenomenon. This project advances theory of opioid addiction and overdose and gives voice to communities affected by one of the most significant health and social issues of our time.