

Through their lens:

Using photovoice and cellphilms to understand the experiences of clients of safer supply programs in Toronto

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Land Acknowledgement

This research took place on the traditional and unceded territories of the Huron-Wendat, Anishinaabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and most recently, The Mississaugas of the Credit River First Nation.

Current state of SSP and context

- Conducted extensive qualitative research with people receiving services from SSPs, capturing powerful personal stories and experiences
- **Identified communication gap** recognized that these impactful stories weren't reaching the public effectively
- Wanted to explore arts-based storytelling methods as alternative approaches to share these narratives with broader audiences
- Implemented photovoice and cellphilm techniques to amplify voices and create more accessible, engaging forms of storytelling
- These projects were conducted at a time when SSPs and harm reduction started facing organized pushback

Study 1:

Women's Experiences of Safer Supply Programs Photo Study

Study team & funding

- Katherine Rudzinski (PI)
- Adrian Guta (Co-I)
- Emily van der Meulen (Co-I)
- Vicky Bungay (Co-I)
- Carol Strike (Co-I)

- Charlotte Smith (RA)
- Kate Atkinson (KU)
- Kyrsten Howat (KU)
- SNAP Advisory Group

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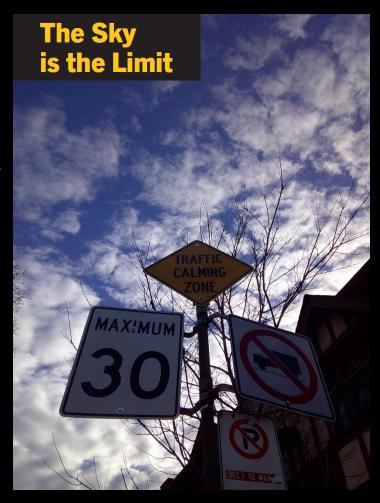
What is photovoice?



- Visual research methodology
- A participatory action research and critical thinking method
- Puts cameras into the hands of people who often are not 'heard'
- Three main goals:
 - 1. to enable people to record & reflect on their community's strengths and concerns;
 - 2. to promote critical dialogue & knowledge about important issues through discussion of photographs;
 - 3. to reach decision makers and make change.

Photo study project summary

- Partnership between researchers, community-based providers and people with lived/living experience (SNAP advisory group)
- Goals of project:
 - Support participants to document their experiences and show what impact safer supply programs have had on their lives through photos
 - Create action and advocacy to impact the sustainability and reach of these programs
- Engaged women and gender diverse clients of two Toronto-based SSPs
 - PHASE 1 (Oct 2023 Jun 2024) n=10
 - PHASE 2 (Oct 2024 Apr 2025) n=5



Structure of study

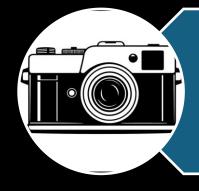
- 1. Group photo training sessions (no photo experience necessary!)
- 2. Taking the photos (received digital cameras; took 5 photos a day for 5 days)
- 3. Interviews (selected/discussed photos; co-created captions)
- 4. Focus groups (shared photos, discussed connections, planned photo exhibit)

Community event/photo exhibition

Photo Prompts



Please show what safer supply means to you



Please show how safer supply has impacted your life

Stability & Security

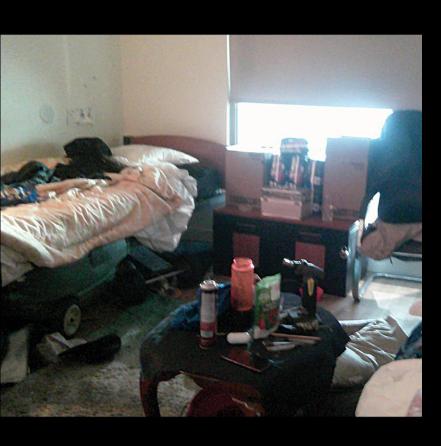


From Chaos to Healing

That's my walker, and the mess behind it, kind of represented my life before safe supply. Just the chaos of everything. Trying to find stuff, trying to get to work, trying to feed the cats, trying to feed myself. Prior to safe supply, it was more of a struggle, trying to make those decisions about 'Do I feed the cats or do I feed myself?' Whereas I actually have money now. I have fifty bucks in my wallet still right now and a couple bucks in the bank, for laundry and food. My fridge and freezer are full right now, which is really nice.

And my pain is managed, which is a big thing. Once I got on safe supply, I went from using my walker to my cane. Now that my pain was being managed, I could actually get around with the cane. So, for me, it was showing my level of healing, graduating from the walker to the cane, and now I can walk sometimes without it.

PHOTOGRAPHER 1



From a Tent to My Own Place

I'd be down in the tent thinking 'How am I gonna get my shit together and get a place?' In Toronto, it's fucking impossible. This is the apartment I have now, it's kind of messy but it's beautiful. I couldn't have asked for a better place. I'm downtown and there's no bugs. It's all brand new. I feel like a queen.

This is what really makes me happy. My own place – I can lock the door, come back and nothing's stolen. It makes a huge difference in my life. And it's furnished; there was a TV and a brand-new fridge. And it was all renovated. I finally got a safe spot. It's small, but it's okay. It's bigger than a tent, right? That's how I look at it. I've got my own bathroom. It's a nice place. I'm really lucky.



Now, I Have Crazy Stability

Before safe supply, I didn't even notice when holidays came and went. I just didn't care. As long as my dealer was available. It was just another day. Safe supply made me care more about everything, every aspect of my life and self care.

I don't feel the need to participate in anything criminal anymore. I choose when and where I want to be. Before, I was constantly worried about where I was gonna get my next dose. It was always a battle. My health was declining because I wasn't seeing the proper doctor, I wasn't sticking to the care plan, because, when you're not stable, you don't have the choice sometimes, it just slips to the wayside. So, it's not for lack of trying, it's just for the lack of stability.

Now, I have crazy stability. I work. I have a life with my family again. I'm spending the holidays with them. I have stable housing and I have a job and I do a lot with my community. I have a beautiful rescue pup, who has saved me more than I've saved her. Yeah, life's a lot better, because of the SOS program.

Relationships & Community Connection



I'm Not an Alien in the Community Anymore

Safe supply gave me a way that I am able to communicate better with people. This guy is a dog walker in the community. I used to always see him, but I used to always be fucked up in the mind, you know? And he used to be almost scared of me or something. You know, because a lot of people that get high, we're antisocial. Because you isolate. I didn't know how to socialize with the community. So, I had to learn how to have conversations again. When I got on the safe supply program, I was social. And this is what the program's been giving me.

It's nice to be able to talk to people in the community. I just thought it was nice, because now I socialize with these people. I'm not an alien in the community anymore.



A Connection You Can't Put Your Finger On

Before I started Safe Supply, I was pregnant and looking for options to ensure the safety of my baby. I had heard about the SOS program and it seemed like a good option. But it took a while for me to actually access it. I was homeless for a while, and then I got into family housing. Through family housing I was finally able to enroll in the program and I'm absolutely so grateful. It definitely saved my life.

In this picture I wanted it to show our hands. It's my hand and my son's hands, being able to connect.

A lot of times, when you're doing drugs, you don't get to go to family events. You don't get to be part of that, and just being able to participate is really special. Even though I don't even know if he really sees me as 'mommy', we still have a connection that you can't put your finger on.

PHOTOGRAPHER ES

Old Souls/New Lives



I like this photo because it represents order in the fact that we've got food in the oven, rather than scrounging for scraps in the garbage. Someone is cooking something. So now there's just more time to sort of be able to do that than there was before safer supply. It's a clean kitchen. Well, the dishes aren't done, but I mean, it's still a clean house.

My boyfriend, who is also on safer supply, his work boots are by the door. He does contracting and stuff. This shows a clean floor, as opposed to the boots being kicked off, all over the house. He is just standing back, you know, relaxing. It's about security, comfort - just the way he's leaning back, like the way he's got his legs crossed, just completely nonchalant. There is no urgency or anything. It's more of, like you can wait for the food to be ready and then enjoy it together.

Self-worth & Personal Growth



Feeling Good About Myself

In this photo I am happy. I mean, I have my down days, where I feel depressed; I feel like I don't have a whole lot of energy. So, this was one of my good days. I've always had low self-esteem, even before I got into drugs. And once I got into drugs, my self-esteem just dropped way down. But being on the SOS program, I feel better about myself.

Since starting the safe supply program and spending more time at the downtown health centre, I have people telling me, 'You're a good person. You have a good heart. You have potential. You gotta start believing in that.' And I never believed in that, until lately. So, the program has something to do with it.

A lot of the staff that work here, I feel like I could talk to them. So that makes me feel good.



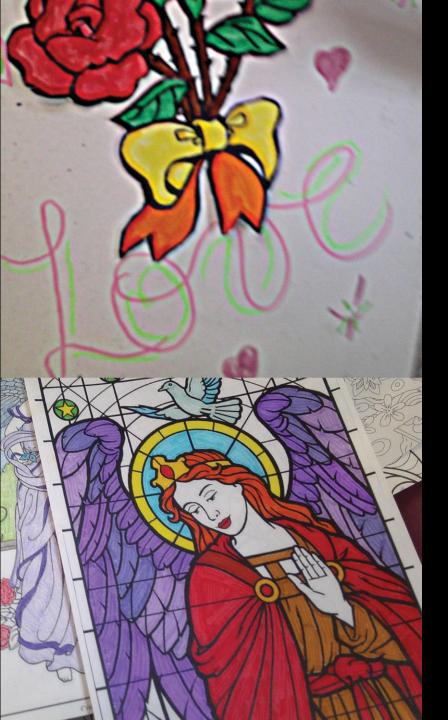
I'm Exploring, Getting to See What I'm Really Like

I'm just exploring with different hobbies now and getting to see what I'm really like.

These were crafts that were made in my building. We have different ceremonies. These were dream catchers. We do drumming and we sing. It's a great release. We smudge. It's wonderful just doing stuff, period. Before safe supply, that wasn't an option. I might start it but I wouldn't finish it. I'd be off to go score or god knows what. I collect art now too. And I can participate in different activities. On Friday night, we had the full moon ceremony.

I'd like to be an activist, a community activist, to share what I know.

PHOTOGRAPHER DM



Colours of my Daily Emotions

I love drawing. I'm very good with my hands. Very artistic. I'm trying to put more time into it, now that I'm back to how I used to be. This picture is of some things that I coloured. This shows my emotions of needing safe supply. And my daily routine 'cause that's what I do every day. I go and have a tea or coffee. I sit down, and I just get my book and I start colouring.

It's my motivation to myself. I like to see a difference in myself. When I do something, I credit myself. I like to give myself stickers or little sayings or colourful things. I like to do something good for myself when I achieve a goal. And if I do something for myself, it's like, 'I deserve that.'

PHOTOGRAPHER DOE DOE

Hope & Future Orientation



Growing Beautifully in Rough Situations

This is bark, but it looks like calluses. Living a street life gives you calluses but they can still look beautiful, and the moss is kind of like, new life growing on top of it. For a while, when I was using drugs, I did a lot of artwork around drugs and harm reduction. Now, I'm making more artwork around rock climbing, mushrooms, plants, stuff like that. On the safer supply program, you have time to slow down and enjoy nature around you. You're not hustling trying to find money, find a dealer, find a spot to use.

This is a picture of new life, with the greenery taking over the wall, which is just beautiful. This is a plant growing in a precarious situation. So, it has strong roots and is being resourceful. You can grow beautifully in rough situations. Safer supply gives you the resources and time to be able to do that grow and flourish in rough situations or environments. It's about resilience.

PHOTOGRAPHER 4



Coming Back to Being Me

Before I started on safer supply, my life was pretty disorganized and I didn't really know where I was going. I always worried about the future. I knew I wanted to get somewhere more structured, but I was lost. When I found Sub Hub everything started changing. I started to feel more motivated. I had more of a purpose. I was actually doing something to better my life, as opposed to before, when I was just going through the motions, and I'd miss my medicine all the time.

Being on SOS gave me some hope back. Because when you're out there, you feel kind of alone. You don't have the supports and people to rely on. This photo is a representation of feeling motivated about getting back to who I am. Being open to change, open to what's coming. Seeing life in Toronto in a brighter, more positive perspective. I'm coming back to being me. I can't go back to being who I was. I can go on to becoming more of me.



New Leaf on Life

Right before I started safer supply, my life was terrible because I was pretty much dying. I kept going to the hospital over and over. So, the minute I got out of the hospital, I went straight to Parkdale and got on SOS. From that moment forward, my life has never been better.

Safe supply means getting to relax, to enjoy simple things. Cause before when I was on street drugs, before I even use my stuff, I'm actually already thinking about how I'm getting my next stuff. So, you never get a chance to just relax. Now on SOS, you already have your stuff. Your stuff's paid for. You don't have to run and steal. You're not having to boost. So now you can truly just start enjoying the things that other people enjoy.

When you have access to a safer supply of drugs, you know it's safe. You know you're not gonna die from it. And now, what can you do? You can get housing. You can get a job. And you can function. So, it gives you all the tools that you need to be able to survive in life, and I think it's a great program.

PHOTOGRAPHER 3

Photo Exhibit Example 1 – June 2024



Permanent Photo Exhibit











Study 2:

Cellphilms Against Substance Use Stigma

Study team & funding

- Gab Laurence (NPI)
- Kate Atkinson (Co-PI)
- Jordan Howe (Co-PI)
- Adrian Guta (Co-PI)
- Katherine Rudzinski (Co-PI)
- Carol Strike (Co-PI)

- Charlotte Smith (RA)
- Camille Arkell (Co-I)
- Sarah Flicker (Co-I)
- Danielle German (Co-I)
- Gillian Kolla (Co-I)
- Katie MacEntee (Facilitator)

Research supported by:









What is a Cellphilm?

- Cellphilms are short 1 to 4-minute videos
- Participants make these videos with a cellphone, tablet or another device
- Videos are made in response to a research prompt

Goals of project:

- Support a small group of people who use drugs in creating cellphilms to document their experiences with safer supply programs and the impact on their lives
- Conduct interviews with cellphone film workshop participants to explore their videos and their filmmaking experiences

Cellphilm Project Summary

- We established an advisory group with people with lived experience
- Hired cellphilm facilitator to help with design of the sessions and training staff
- Total of N=13 participants took part in this pilot study
- Held four workshop days (September 2024) and one additional drop-in day (October 2024)
- Total of 6 cellphilms completed by 7 participants
- Six semi-structured interviews conducted with workshop participants between October 2024 and January 2025

Cellphilm Prompt

Because of Safe Supply I...

Community partner reflections

Working with researchers on these unique projects that centre the voices of people who use drugs has been fulfilling and eye-opening. Having led the SOS Program Evaluation, I was quite familiar with some of the benefits and needs most commonly identified by program members. However, bringing in expressive media that allowed clients to share their experiences more fully highlighted aspects of the program benefits that hadn't come through before, especially deeply personal benefits: spending time outdoors, having a new perspective and noticing more details about life and the landscape, finding comfort at home - even having space for artistic expression!

I would recommend these kinds of partnerships to other agencies, because they blend well an approach that prioritizes program members' views, voices, and expression with the critical research skills and knowledge translation capacity of academics. Parkdale Queen West CHC is deeply appreciative of these collaborations and the flexible, supportive approach always taken by our research leads. Thank you!!! - Kate

What We Learned

- Arts-based methods can be used to effectively capture the value(s) of SSPs, which extend far beyond overdose prevention to encompass wide-ranging impacts on participants' lives
- Participant-centered approach: Account for participants' complex life circumstances and recognize that people managing multiple responsibilities may have limited capacity for sustained engagement
- Flexible and responsive approach: Organize research activities around participants'
 life circumstances with gentle encouragement rather than rigid expectations—
 recognizing there's no single "right way" to participate and empowering participants to
 tell the stories they want to tell in ways that work for them
- Technology accessibility: Consider varying levels of tech-savviness across diverse age groups, particularly for middle-aged and older participants who may need additional support beyond youth-focused approaches
- Budget and resource planning: Ensure adequate funding and resources to support participant needs and project demands

Acknowledgments

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We would also like to acknowledge the SNAP and the cellphilm community advisory groups for their guidance and work on these projects.

Finally, thanks to the program staff for sharing their space and dedicating their time to ensure the success of these research projects.

Questions please email: katherine.rudzinski@uwindsor.ca