

Title: Legacy in substance use: using the arts to empower communities to break cycles of silence

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Background: Northern Ireland (NI) faces a growing substance use (SU) crisis, reporting some of the UK's highest alcohol-specific and drug-related death rates, particularly among young adults. The legacy of 'the Troubles', economic deprivation, and intergenerational trauma contribute significantly to SU risk in NI. Silence, as a transmission mechanism for intergenerational trauma, continues to create persistent vulnerabilities in communities, particularly affecting mental health and SU. Arts based interventions offer a promising approach for addressing this complex intersection of trauma and SU, providing non-threatening means to explore emotions, build resilience, and shift attitudes. This study co-designed and evaluated a community-led arts-based intervention addressing SU and trauma.

Methods: The project took place in Belfast's Market community. A series of 9 arts-based workshops were held, with two intergenerational groups (14–21 and 21+ years). Workshops saw use of photovoice, a participatory- research method empowering participants to explore, document and reflect on historical context, current experiences, and future aspirations regarding SU and trauma in the community. The workshops culminated in development of a related photographic exhibition. Qualitative data gathered from photo elicitation interviews and participant focus groups were analysed using conventional content analysis.

Findings: Six key themes which emerged from participant interviews: pride, challenges, home, loss, resilience, and community. Focus group data highlighted the intervention tackled stigma, empowered participants, and strengthened community resilience.

Discussion: This research highlights the transformational power of an arts-based intervention to break cycles of silence and trauma, providing an innovative response to SU by addressing community hauntology and fostering long-term change.