



POLY-DRUG USE IN POST-INDUSTRIAL SCOTLAND

An Ethnographic Perspective

Dr Laura Roe, Dr Richard Irvine,
Professor Alexander Baldacchino

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

- **Twelve months of ethnographic research** with recovery services and individual people who use drugs
- Return visits to fieldsites - 2017 to present
- Additional research project on landscape, energy transition, and experiences of drug use funded by the ESRC, the Landscape Research Group (LRG) and the St Andrews Interdisciplinary Research Support (STAIRS).
- ‘The Pit and the Kit: Addiction, Heroin and the End of Coalmining in Scotland’ exhibition (ESRC funded)
- **Methodology**
 - Participant observation
 - Multiple semi-structured and unstructured interviews with 15 individuals
 - Ethical approval granted by University of St Andrews Ethics Committee (UTREC); no conflict of interest declared



BRIEF CONTEXT IN SCOTLAND

- Drug death crisis, with 1339 deaths in 2020, the highest number ever recorded and highest in Europe
- Patterns of intensive poly-drug use and poly-drug implicated deaths
- Many underlying reasons including high deprivation, delayed effects of historical deprivation, welfare reform, high prevalence of trauma, etc.

KEY RESEARCH THEMES

- Relations to land, place, and history
- Time, temporality, memory
- Affective experiences of boredom, pleasure, grief, trauma, and joy intersected with poly-drug use and specific experiences of intoxication

INDUSTRIAL DECLINE

- 20th century community life heavily organised around coalmining, with substantial emphasis placed on family, community, solidarity, and patriarchal notions of masculinity.
- Former coalmining neighbourhoods in Scotland, England and Wales found to be “significantly more deprived than the GB average”; to have higher instances of ill health; and “exceptionally high” percentage of residents on welfare benefits (Foden et al. 2014).
- Tied to senses of boredom, and time as ‘empty’ and ‘endless’

“There was fuck all else to do. You need something.”

“Heroin fills the time, kills it.”

“It’s the best feeling, everything falls away and you’re just warm. I don’t know. It’s hard to describe, the feeling. I’m sorry I’ve done it sometimes, but I need it.”

“You’re feeling doon, so you get out your nut, and it takes everything away. You enjoy it, you forget. Life’s easy, nothing matters, life becomes a’ about that, all consuming, like. It’s almost like a cult, but the leader isnae a person, it’s a drug. There isnae anything else, nothing else matters. Nothing else.”



“The needle marks and abscesses that map an addict’s body – open wounds in the literal sense – powerfully attest to how addiction is...a historical formation and an immanent experience. These are wounds in which the future, the present, and the past commingle through the force of recurring need” (Garcia 2009: 93).

