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Racialization of Heroin Use and the Emergence of a Public Health Issue

Ellen Pogson
University of Southern Maine

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Abstract

The heroin epidemic has received ample news coverage since its onset in 2014. Heroin users and their communities, law enforcement, treatment providers, and local/national governments have spoken out about what is occurring, and what ought to be done about the crisis. As the volume of news coverage highlighting white heroin users increases, a paradigmatic shift has occurred, in which heroin use is viewed as a public health issue, versus one of strict legality. To identify what has contributed to this shift, articles published in the Portland Press Herald between 2014 and 2016 were analyzed thematically, taking special consideration into the racial identity of those featured. Identifying the degree to which race place a role in shaping public opinion is critical in order to illuminate biases that are often undetected by the white majority. The findings are discussed in terms of their implications for health care and public policy on a national level, and seek to contribute to the national discourse that is emerging on this topic.

Introduction/Background

The United States is experiencing the highest rates of heroin use, overdoses, deaths, and treatment admissions in its history. In Maine alone, 378 fatal overdoses occurred in 2016. It is estimated that within the small municipality, of Portland, Maine one fatal overdose occurs per day (Lawler, 2015). The heroin epidemic receives daily news coverage, and thus, heroin use has become humanized. The race of the people featured, reporting style, and evocative writing used, have helped to align this epidemiological period of heroin use with the medical community as opposed to the legal system, which has been the case in historic surges of drug use (Benavie, 2009). To understand the degree to which the racial identity of the user plays a role in the shaping of public opinion and the alignment of heroin use with the medical community, media reports from 2014 to 2016 are analyzed for emerging themes, specifically, the identity and portrayal of the white heroin user.

Question

- How is race used as a tool in newspaper publications to shape public opinion of the heroin epidemic in Portland, Maine, between the years 2014-2016?
- How does the portrayal of the heroin user inform public policy and health care interventions?

Methodology

Ethnographic Content Analysis:

A technique where documents are analyzed for their significance and meaning in context of the culture in which they are written (Schreier, 2008).

Social Constructionism:

How groups of people assign meaning to phenomena, in this case, how North American culture determines the significance of heroin users, and the nature of the intervention required to address the current societal needs (Creswell, 2007).

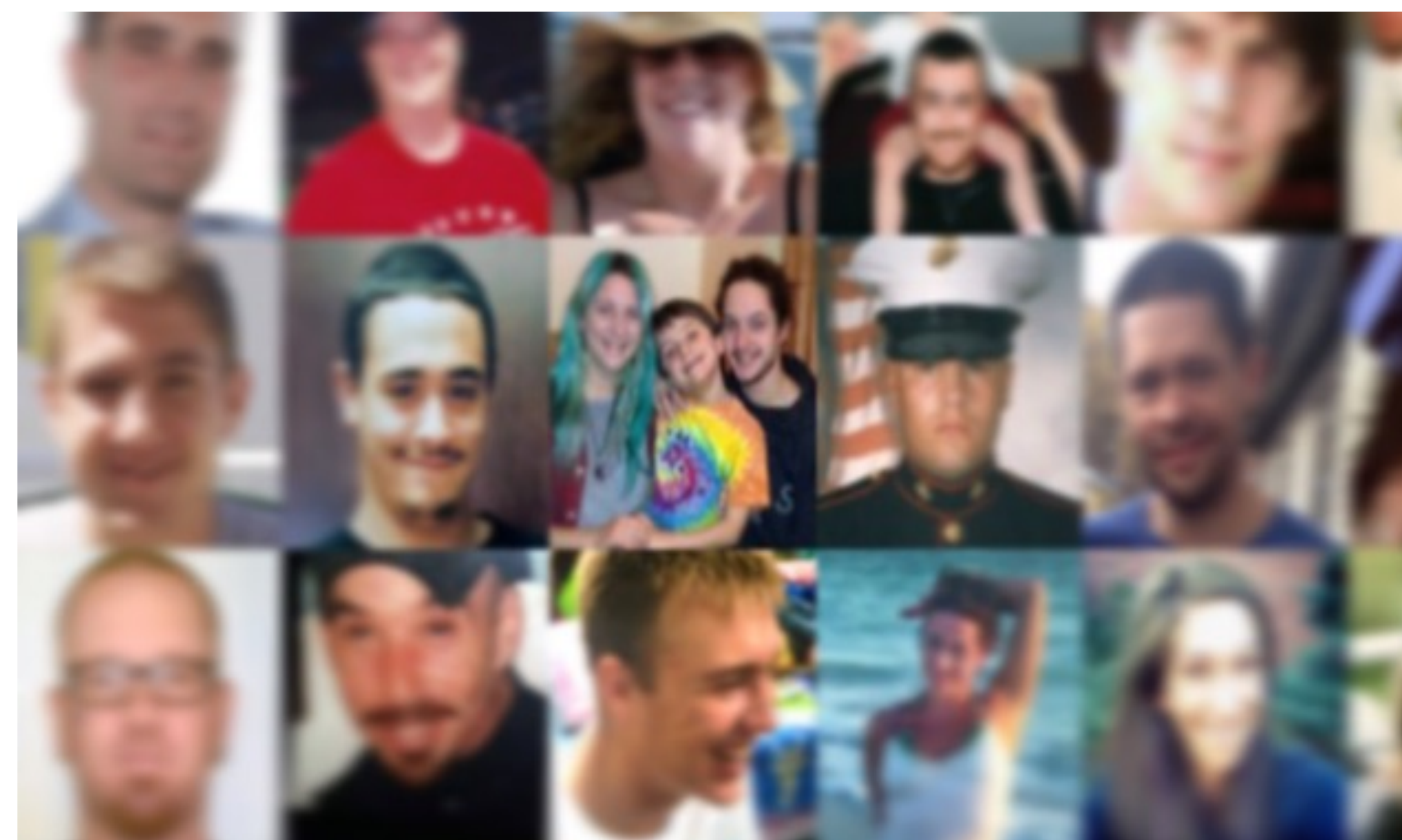
Article Selection Criteria:

- Archived Portland Press Herald articles available on MARVEL! - Maine News Index
- Key search terms: Heroin & Epidemic
- 2014-2016
- Narrative genre (excludes: police dispatches, reports on drug trafficking)
- Of the 1,464 available articles, 50 articles met all 4 criteria

Themes & Subcategories

Fig. 1: Portrayal of the User		
2014	2015	2016
Desperation of the user	Addiction is relentless	User as a victim of suffering
New, young profile of users (even famous & successful)	New, young profile of users - atypical "anyone can be an addict"	User as a person in long term recovery
"...although each case is different, certain similarities have emerged. Most of the people coming in are med in the 20s or early 30s. And most don't match the stereotypical description of a heroin junkie" (2015)		

Fig. 2: Commentary of Others		
2014	2015	2016
Atypical overdose victims	Universality - anyone can be an addict	Universality - everyone is impacted
More treatment is needed	More treatment is needed and provide access to Narcan	More treatment is needed and provide access to assorted medication assisted treatment
"It is scary to think that this (an overdose) could happen to anyone" (2016)		



Lost: Heroin's Killer Grip on Maine's People, Portland Press Herald, 2017
 Fatal overdose victims.

Fig. 3: Description of the Problem		
2014	2015	2016
Prescription opiate medications are to blame for the heroin epidemic	Prescription opiate medications are to blame for the heroin epidemic	The heroin epidemic was caused by the medical community
"Some of this problem has to be owned by the medical community. It is true that a movement to treat pain as "the fifth vital sign" several years ago led practitioners across the country to begin prescribing opioid pain medications more often" (2016)		

Fig. 4: Action Needed/What Happens Next?		
2014	2015	2016
Heroin users are criminals AND need treatment	Reduce criminality → address as public health issue	Reduce criminality → address as public health issue
"Maine needs to address its drug problems from every angle. That means viewing the heroin epidemic in the context with other opiates, and recognizing that law enforcement and treatment are both essential to the state's response" (2014)		

Fig. 5: Policy Needed/Response to Governor Lepage		
2014	2015	2016
MaineCare & Treatment cuts are unacceptable	MaineCare cuts are a barrier to treatment. More treatment is needed in Maine!	MaineCare cuts are a barrier to treatment. More treatment is needed in Maine!
"King said his staff is working on a Medicaid waiver that would allow uninsured people to obtain Medicaid-based recovery service. Lepage, however, has refused to expand Medicaid in Maine and has tightened Medicaid eligibility requirements, kicking more childless adults out of the system. Addiction experts say it's these young, uninsured, childless adults who are most vulnerable to heroin addiction" (2015)		

Preliminary Results

Five themes emerged from the data: the portrayal of the heroin user, the commentary of others, a description of the problem, what action is needed, and public policy needed/response to Governor Lepage. Significant sub categories relating to these themes emerged. Between 2014 and 2016, shifts in public thinking are evident (paraphrased and directly quoted from the literature). (See figures 1-5).

- **Portrayal of the heroin user:** In 2014, articles contained an element of shock that even famous, successful white people could become addicted to heroin. By 2016, heroin users described in a colorblind way, with the resounding narrative that, "anyone can be an addict." (fig. 1).
- **The commentary of others:** Between 2014 and 2016, the commentary of community members shifted from a hypothetical stance that "anyone could potentially fall victim to heroin use" to the firm stance that everyone in the community is impacted (fig. 2).
- **Description of the problem:** In 2014, causation of the heroin epidemic was linked to pharmaceutical medications. By 2016, the onus had gradually shifted to the medical community at large (fig. 3).
- **What action is needed:** In 2014, writers advocated for legal ramifications AND treatment for heroin users. By 2016, writers advocated for criminal sentence reduction, the expansion of treatment, indicating a progressive shift. (fig. 4).
- **Public policy and the response to Governor Lepage:** In 2014, Portland residents expressed concern over cuts to MaineCare. By 2016, MaineCare cuts were viewed as a social injustice, preventing heroin users from accessing treatment - the most desirable intervention. (fig.5).

Discussion

This study aims to contribute to the growing body of literature about the racialization of the heroin epidemic. Netherland and Hansen (2016), completed a content analysis of national publications that explored the portrayal of young, white heroin users in the media and color blind reporting tactics. Colorblind journalism reinforces the idea that "anyone can become an addict," and is a subtle reiteration of institutional racism that pervades every aspect of American life, but is often unacknowledged by white people (Netherland & Hansen, 2016). No such study has been conducted in Portland, Maine, despite the volume of publications related to this topic, and evident colorblind publishing.

Because public policy and health care accessibility on a national level are currently under the revision of the Trump administration, these findings are significant, as the mass portrayal of white heroin users has become a lynch point in the discussion of who is and is not deserving of health care, and who does and does not deserve legal ramifications for drug use. On a minute scale, the findings in Portland, Maine highlight a silent racial bias in media's coverage of the heroin epidemic that has evoked major public response.

Although the population of Portland Maine is comprised of 88% white people (Census Bureau, 2017), Portland Press Herald articles published between 2014 and 2016, report on the heroin epidemic through a colorblind approach. Doing so subtly perpetuates the notion that if a crisis of this magnitude occurs in white communities, law enforcement is not the first line approach - treatment is. Race has been used as a tool to shift punitive response methods toward advocacy. From a social justice standpoint, illuminating racial biases in colorblind reporting is a step toward increasing critical thinking about racial justice in this community.

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