

## Overview

[The Global Health Education and Learning Incubator at Harvard University](#) (GHELI) supports interdisciplinary education about world health through the production, curation, and dissemination of educational public goods. This exemplar work was a final project for “World Health: Challenges and Opportunities,” a General Education course at Harvard College taught by GHELI Faculty Director Sue J. Goldie. For this creative assessment designed with support from GHELI, students systematically analyze a societal health challenge they care about and create a “real world” product intended to influence policy or motivate change.

## Abstract

A painting aiming to foster empathy for those struggling with opioid addiction in San Francisco, California.

## Artist

Olivia Cooper (2024)

## Caption

The opioid epidemic has hit urban centers hard, particularly my native San Francisco. Drug use disorders have risen to the third leading cause of DALYs in 2019, and the 15th cause of death in 2019 in California. On average, there are 76.3 overdose-related 911 calls per week, with a total of 2305 in the last 30 weeks—this is also likely an underestimation, as many overdoses are responded to by community members who may not call 911 for help. From March 2023 to March 2024, there were 805 unintentional drug overdoses in the city of San Francisco, with an average of 67 per month—this is a rise from 635 confirmed unintentional fatal drug overdoses in 2022. This painting aims to address the opioid crisis in San Francisco with empathy and inspire policymakers to offer more support and resources to those struggling with opioid addiction.

## Artist Lens

As a native San Franciscan, I’ve seen up close and personal the impact of the opioid crisis on my community. From an early age, I interacted with drug users daily on the bus, on my walk to the post office, and through early education programs through my school. The opioid crisis has hit San Francisco extremely hard, particularly among the unhoused populations. But the opioid crisis can impact anyone, regardless of education, socioeconomic status, race, or creed. Thus, my painting shows a city street in San Francisco that looks, at a first glance, quite normal. But, the eye is quickly drawn to the massive pills that are abducting people from the streets. The largest pill is labeled with OxyContin, the drug most responsible for the beginning of the opioid crisis. Within the pill-spaceships, the viewer can see hands pressed to the glass, some even in prayer, as those trapped within beg for help to escape. I chose to present drug use in this way because oftentimes addiction can impact people almost randomly—after having a back surgery, a man is prescribed OxyContin and becomes dependent on it for pain management or a woman takes Fentanyl intending to consume a different drug at a party with friends. As a child, my perspective on addiction really changed when I realized that addiction can affect anyone and everyone. Within the painting, many of the colors on the street are drab, and not far outside

of the range of normal life, but the colors of the pills are big, bold, exciting pinks and greens and oranges. This symbolizes the allure of the drugs, and the excitement that users first have when they try them.

The painting is designed to be shown to policymakers, parents, or anyone in charge of introducing the idea of addiction to young people for the first time, to show how addiction can sneak up on someone. Empathy is so important when it comes to solving a problem like addiction, and so many policy makers in San Francisco have left those struggling with addiction with little support or resources. I hope that policymakers, armed with greater empathy to those struggling with addiction, could offer better support for those struggling with addiction, more funding to allow the Department of Public Health to be more useful, with halfway houses in safe neighborhoods, more numerous treatment centers, better education for young people about addiction, and thorough distribution of Narcan. I chose to paint for my medium because I enjoy it, but also because I thought I could get the most vibrant colors for the pills that way. The paint dried very quickly, and it was difficult to always get the perfect color match, but the meticulous work gave me lots of time to think about my motivations for this project and how I can help my community when I move back to San Francisco post-graduation.

## Media

### Painting

