

**AECL-9812**

## Using photovoice as a community engagement tool

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### What is photovoice?

Photovoice is a participatory research method that enables individuals to share their lived experiences and perspectives through photography (Amos et al., 2012). This method is both empowering and illuminating — it amplifies participants' voices while offering researchers rich, contextualized insights into the topic under study. Photovoice is particularly well-suited for exploring community issues and conducting needs assessments.

Participants are guided by prompts that help focus their photography on the issue of interest. Prompts can be tailored to a variety of objectives: for example, a general community assessment might use prompts aligned with a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis, while an inquiry into food insecurity could include questions such as, “What does getting groceries look like in your community?” or “What does it mean to be hungry?”

The act of photographing encourages participants to engage critically with their surroundings, reconsider familiar environments and uncover hidden narratives. The resulting images often surface community strengths, highlight areas of concern and inspire dialogue around possible solutions (Amos et al., 2012). After photographs are collected, participants engage in group discussions to interpret and reflect on their images — adding narrative and meaning through captions and conversation (Evans-Agnew & Rosenberg, 2016).

### Photovoice process overview

A typical photovoice project unfolds across three key stages: recruitment and orientation, photo collection and group discussion, and community dissemination. These stages foster individual reflection, collective meaning-making, and public engagement, forming a coherent structure that supports both research and community empowerment.

### Participant selection

The first step is identifying and recruiting participants. Photovoice has been used effectively with diverse populations — including youth, individuals with disabilities, people experiencing homelessness, and women from underrepresented groups (Brent & McMorrow, 2021). However, the method is adaptable to virtually any group.

One of the most significant outcomes of photovoice is the development of critical consciousness. Participants frequently report greater awareness of their roles in society, the systemic factors influencing their communities, and the potential for collective action (Breny & McMorrow, 2021). A participant group of 10 to 15 individuals is often sufficient to foster robust discussion while remaining manageable for facilitators.

### Three-meeting structure

#### Meeting 1: Welcome & orientation

The initial meeting sets the foundation. Facilitators introduce participants to the goals of the photovoice project, the timeline, and practical considerations such as basic photography skills, ethical guidelines, and the intended use of the photographs. For projects involving minors, this is also the time to collect parental or guardian consent (Amos et al., 2012).

Trust-building is critical at this stage. Facilitators should incorporate icebreakers and participatory activities that help foster rapport. This meeting also emphasizes that participants' lived experiences are valid and valuable forms of data. By the end of the session, participants should have a clear understanding of the process and receive their photo prompts, along with instructions for submitting or presenting their images at the next session.

## **Meeting 2: Photo sharing & focus group discussion**

Once participants have completed their photography assignments, they reconvene for a facilitated discussion. This session provides the core qualitative data of the project. Participants can submit photos in advance for display via slideshow or bring printed images to share physically.

To guide the conversation, facilitators may group photos by theme or prompt. A useful tool for photo discussion is the P.H.O.T.O. framework (Amos et al., 2012), which encourages reflection with the following prompts:

- P: Describe your photo
- H: What is happening in your photo?
- O: Why did you take it?
- T: What does this photo reveal about your life or community?
- O: How could this photo inform positive change?

Facilitators should avoid interpreting images independently. The most meaningful insights emerge from participants' interpretations and group dialogue (Latz, 2017). These discussions can be audio recorded for transcription and analysis or documented through detailed notes.

## **Meeting 3: Community exhibit**

The final stage involves presenting participants' work to the broader community. Exhibits can take many forms: a formal reception, a gallery-style display in a public space (e.g., a library or courthouse) or a printed artifact like a photo book or calendar. Participants should be involved in determining the format and location of the exhibit.

Each image is typically displayed with a caption or quote selected by the participant, reinforcing the idea that they are the authors of their own stories (Solis, 2022). Public exhibits not only validate participants' contributions but also offer the community a deeper understanding of the issues explored. This visibility can foster community dialogue, highlight shared concerns and encourage action.

## **Practical considerations**

### **Photo submission options**

Depending on participant demographics, facilitators can offer several methods for submitting photos and accompanying materials. For digitally literate groups, tools like Google Forms and Google Drive are useful for collecting and storing submissions securely and efficiently. These platforms simplify the process of creating presentation materials for discussion and exhibition.

Alternatively, participants can print their photographs and write captions by hand. While this may be more accessible for some — particularly older adults or those less familiar with digital tools — it does incur printing costs. Facilitators should be prepared to offer support with either submission method as needed.

### **Equipment & cost management**

Photovoice does not require expensive or specialized equipment. Most participants can use the camera on their smartphone, which is sufficient for both digital display and modest print formats.

Facilitators should assess technology access during recruitment. If needed, low-cost digital cameras or even disposable film cameras can be provided. In some cases, participants may retain these devices as an incentive upon project completion.

Submission and editing tools like Google Drive are free and widely accessible. Optional editing apps such as Afterlight (iOS/Android) and Darkroom (iOS) are also free and user-friendly.

### **Participant incentives**

Incentives should be context-appropriate and meaningful to the participant group. Adolescents may respond well to creative competitions or the opportunity to keep photography equipment. Adults may value gift cards, meals or gas vouchers. However, facilitators should not be discouraged if funding is limited — many participants are motivated by the opportunity to share their experiences and contribute to their community.

## References and additional resources

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