

Too Many Lives Lost: Learning from Global Leaders in Harm Reduction and Treatment

Evan D. Gumas; Jesse C. Baumgartner, MPH; Munira Z. Gunja, MPH

Background & Objectives

- Drug overdose deaths increased in many high-income countries during the COVID-19 pandemic, with much higher mortality rates in the United States, Scotland, and Canada.
- *Aim:* Quantify the overdose mortality burden and treatment coverage rate between countries. Lessons can be learned from peer nations on how to increase access to treatment for drug use disorders and reduce the number of preventable deaths.

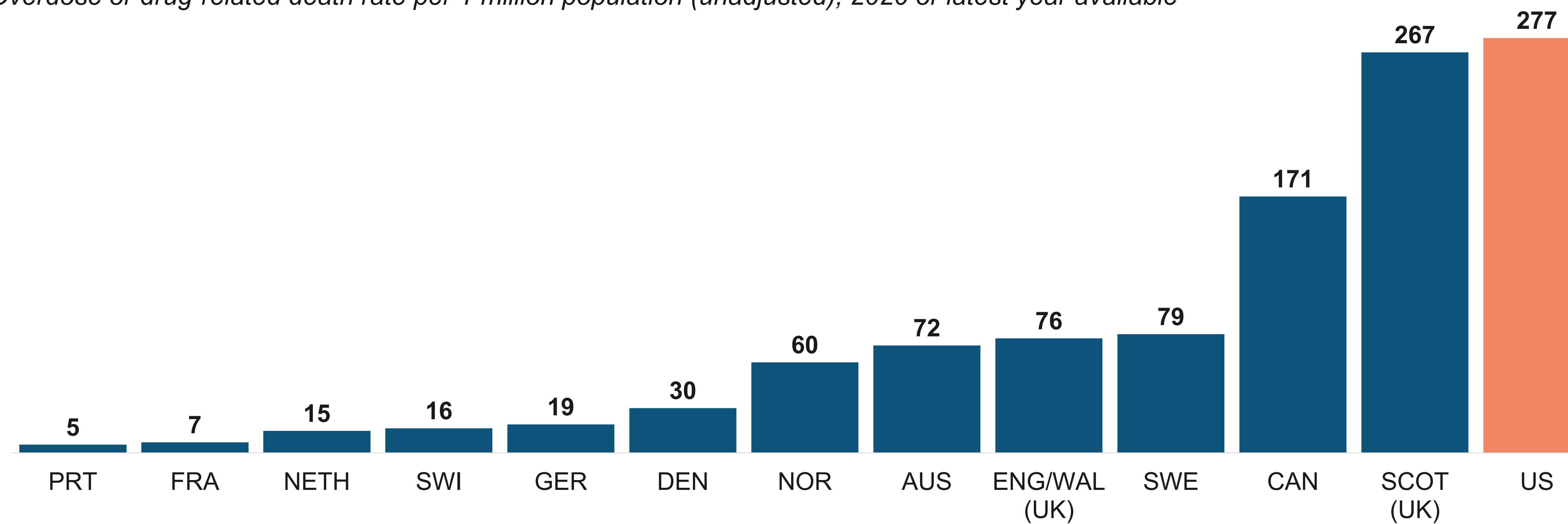
Methods

- Using the latest available data from the CDC, EMCDDA, and contacts and databases at international health and drug monitoring agencies, we created cross-national comparisons on drug overdose mortality rates and the percentage of higher-risk opioid use populations receiving medication-assisted treatment.
- Countries included were Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland, U.K. (England, Scotland, Wales), and the U.S.

Results

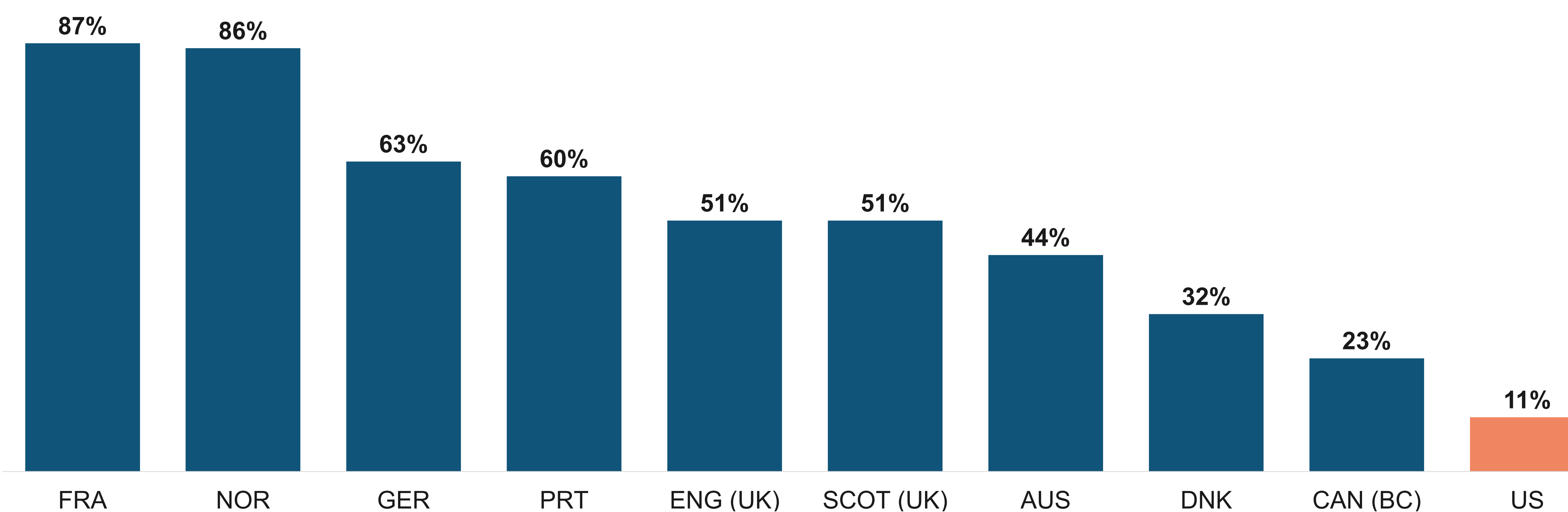
Overdose/drug-related deaths are highest in the United States, followed closely by Scotland; deaths were lowest in Portugal and France.

Overdose or drug-related death rate per 1 million population (unadjusted), 2020 or latest year available



People with high-risk opioid use are much more likely to access effective addiction treatments like methadone internationally than in the U.S.

Percentage of people with high-risk opioid use or opioid use disorder (OUD) who received opioid-substitution treatment



Conclusions

- Overdose rates have reached crisis levels in countries like the U.S., Scotland, and Canada.
- Lower mortality rates in peer countries indicate opportunities to learn from different experiences and strategies across the board.
- Access to effective opioid addiction medications varies widely across countries, with particularly low access in the U.S. and Canada.

Implications

- Broad access to medication-assisted treatment is vital to managing opioid use disorder and reducing the risk of opioid overdose.
- Making it easier for primary care providers to provide MAT prescriptions can make treatment more accessible.
- More comprehensive coverage can be provided by using harm-reduction and drug-treatment programs as a foundation for connecting patients with mental and general health providers.
- Expanding social spending on factors like housing, disability, and education, could improve outcomes by addressing socioeconomic burdens associated with substance use disorder and mortality.