

The Opioid Crisis in the News, 2019-2026: Attention, Geography and Tone of Global Coverage, and How It Compares with Research and Invention

Fliar BI · Prism Research Layer · Working paper, October 2026 · Dataset and code: github.com/fliarbi/prism-news-api · Licence CC BY-NC 4.0

Abstract

We measure how the opioid crisis was covered in a global news index from January 2019 to July 2026, using 169,188 de-duplicated articles about opioids, fentanyl, heroin and drug overdose, and set that coverage beside 58,820 research papers and 2,908 patent families. All results are coverage measures, not counts of harm. Six results stand out:

1. **Falling attention.** The topic took 18.63 of every 10,000 news articles in 2019 and 10.03 in 2025, a 46.2% fall in share. The low point was 2020, 49.4% below 2019.
2. **Peak.** The highest monthly share was August 2019, at 22.93 articles per 10,000, the month of a state court ruling in an opioid lawsuit.
3. **Geography.** The United States holds 71.0% of located coverage, 1.47 times its share of all news. Canada (1.59), Mexico (3.3), Pakistan (2.04) and Myanmar (7.86) are also over-represented, while India (0.74) and the United Kingdom (0.58) are not. Within India, Mizoram (32.98), Punjab (11.02) and Assam (5.81) lead; within the United States, Kentucky (2.93), Oregon (2.59) and West Virginia (2.46).
4. **Tone and urgency.** 72.9% of articles are negative in tone (all news: 33.6%), and 91.5% carry a machine-assigned critical priority (all news: 42.6%).
5. **Vocabulary.** Fentanyl appears in the opening of 40,934 articles, more than heroin (33,226). Harm reduction is far more specific to the topic than enforcement (lift 375.51 against 66.59).
6. **Research and invention.** Opioid papers doubled as a share of the literature from 2015 to 2019 (4.96 to 10.23 per 10,000) and then fell 16.9% by 2025. Patent families per year fell 25.4% from 2016 to 2024.

Findings stated for citation

- **F1.** The topic's share of news fell 46.2% between 2019 and 2025 (18.63 to 10.03 per 10,000 articles).
- **F2.** Its share fell 49.4% in 2020, the lowest annual share between 2019 and 2025.
- **F3.** August 2019 was the peak month, at 22.93 articles per 10,000.
- **F4.** The United States' share of located coverage (71.0%) was 1.47 times its share of all news; Canada's was 1.59 times, India's 0.74 and the United Kingdom's 0.58.
- **F5.** Myanmar (7.86), Mexico (3.3) and Pakistan (2.04) were the most over-represented countries.
- **F6.** 72.9% of articles were negative in tone, 2.17 times the all-news share.
- **F7.** Naloxone administration training appeared in 8.93% of themed articles, 457.07 times its rate in all news.

- **F8.** Harm reduction (17.95%) and enforcement (17.82%) were equally common, but harm reduction was far more specific to the topic.
- **F9.** Opioid papers rose 2.06-fold as a share of all papers from 2015 to 2019, then fell 16.9% by 2025.
- **F10.** Opioid-related patent families per year fell 25.4% from 2016 to 2024; the US office held 22.6%.
- **F11.** Fentanyl was named in 40,934 article openings, more than heroin (33,226).
- **F12.** Within India, Mizoram (32.98), Punjab (11.02) and Assam (5.81) had the most over-represented coverage.
- **F13.** Within the United States, Kentucky (2.93), Oregon (2.59) and West Virginia (2.46) led.
- **F14.** China was the only one of the eight largest countries where the topic's share of national news did not fall from 2023 to 2025.

If you or someone you know is struggling, contact local emergency services or a crisis line.

1. Introduction

The opioid crisis is a sustained rise in deaths and harm from opioid use, first from prescription painkillers, then heroin, and since the mid-2010s illicitly made fentanyl and related drugs. It is centred on North America but reaches other regions through trafficking routes and prescription practice. Public-health agencies count deaths. Researchers count studies. Few sources count attention, meaning how much of the news the crisis takes and when, where and in what tone.

This paper and its dataset do that. They combine three records for one topic: a global news index, research papers and patents. Each comparison uses a denominator, so that growth in the index or in publishing is not mistaken for growth in interest. The companion dataset publishes an article-level sample (42,311 rows) and full coverage tables, so every figure here can be re-derived. The [Prism News API](#) serves the full history. The paper follows safe-reporting practice: it reports coverage in aggregate, names no individuals and describes no cases.

2. Data and methods

News. The Prism news index holds articles from outlets worldwide; non-English articles are indexed in English translation. Each article carries its opening text (the first few sentences), a primary location, a graded tone label, an editorial priority rating (1–9), themes, keywords and named organisations. We count unique article identifiers; repeated rows for the same article are removed. When this release was built, 92.88% of the index was readable, so all counts are lower bounds.

Matching. An article belongs to the topic when its opening text contains one of 21 terms as whole words: *opiod(s)*, *opiate(s)*, *fentanyl*, *carfentanil*, *nitazene(s)*, *xylazine*, *heroin*, *OxyContin*, *oxycodone*, *naloxone*, *Narcan*, *buprenorphine*, *methadone*, *overdose(s)*, *overdosed*, *opiod epidemic* or *opiod crisis*. Tag-only matches are not used, because tags attach drug words to unrelated stories. Four families of matches are excluded:

- receptor and endogenous-opioid neuroscience ("mu-opioid receptor binding");
- figurative overdoses ("an overdose of nostalgia");

- overdoses of named non-opioid substances (paracetamol, insulin, alcohol, sleeping pills);
- online pharmacy spam ("buy oxycodone online").

Together these removed 2,773 of 171,961 raw matches (1.61%). One reviewer read 40 randomly drawn matched openings, and a second reviewer re-judged 15 of them. 35 were about opioid use, misuse, overdose, trafficking, treatment, regulation or litigation (precision 87.5%), and in 25 (62.5%) opioids or overdose were the main subject. The five false positives were a homicide first reported as an overdose call, an overdose of a non-opioid drug, two news round-ups that mentioned heroin or fentanyl in passing, and a business press release that used the opioid epidemic as a slogan.

Measures. Coverage over time is expressed per 10,000 articles in the index that month or year, because the index grew from 11,807,177 articles in 2019 to 26,990,006 in 2025. Geography, tone, priority and themes use January 2023 – July 2026. Geography is expressed as lift: a country's share of topic articles divided by its share of all located articles. Place tags derived from ordinary words (714 words such as "Congress", "Earth", "Winter" or "Hurricane") were treated as unlocated in every location field, which removed 15.3% of city-tagged articles. The index files research abstracts that carry only a publication year on 1 January, so January is inflated in the monthly series. We therefore do not report seasonality.

Research and patents. Research papers are de-duplicated articles and reviews (2000–2025) with opioid, opiate, fentanyl, heroin, naloxone, buprenorphine, methadone, oxycodone, *drug overdose* or *overdose death* in the title. Repository deposits and receptor and endogenous-opioid neuroscience are excluded. Patent families (2005–2024) use opioid, opiate, fentanyl, naloxone, buprenorphine, methadone, oxycodone, overdose and abuse-deterrent terms in the title and are counted once per filing office.

3. Results

3.1 How much and when

The index holds 169,188 opioid-crisis articles from January 2019 to July 2026. Raw counts were 21,996 in 2019 and 27,061 in 2025, but the share of all news fell from 18.63 to 10.03 per 10,000, a 46.2% decline (Table 1). The low point was 2020, at 9.43 per 10,000, 49.4% below 2019, in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Share recovered to 13.03 in 2023 and then fell again. The highest monthly share was August 2019, at 22.93 per 10,000 (Figure 1). That was the month in which an Oklahoma court ruled on the state's opioid lawsuit against Johnson & Johnson.

Year	Articles	All articles in index	Per 10,000
2019	21,996	11,807,177	18.63
2020	15,301	16,230,014	9.43
2021	19,280	17,281,220	11.16
2022	23,626	19,115,515	12.36
2023	26,689	20,484,506	13.03
2024	23,805	23,311,896	10.21
2025	27,061	26,990,006	10.03

Table 1. Opioid-crisis articles per year and as a share of the index. 2026 (January–July) is partial and omitted.

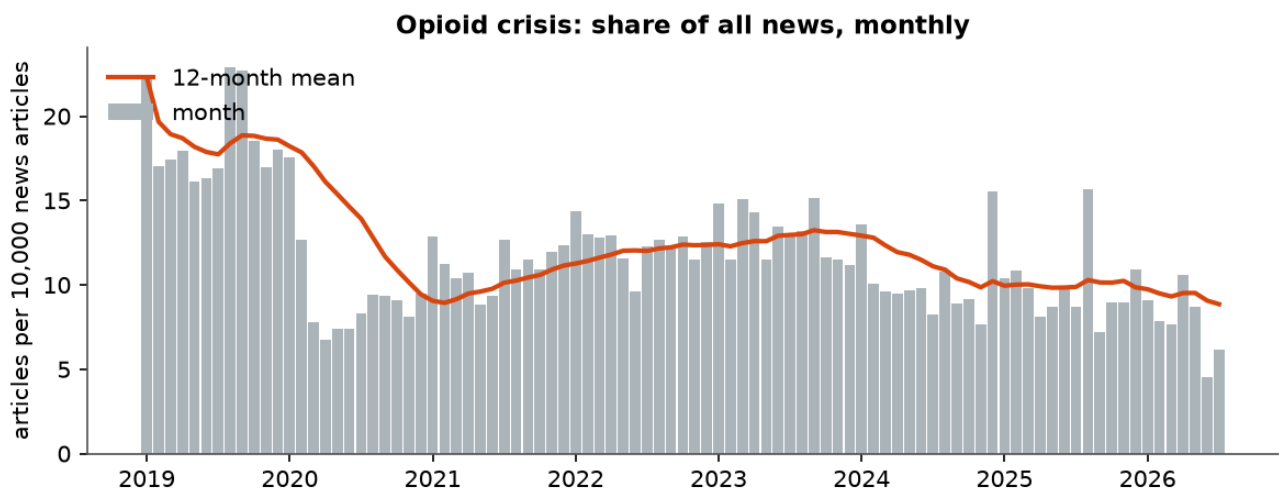


Figure 1. Opioid-crisis coverage as articles per 10,000 news articles, monthly, January 2019 – July 2026. Bars are months; the line is the 12-month mean. January bars are raised by research abstracts dated only by year.

Month shares averaged over 2019–2025 are nearly flat apart from January (11.48%), which reflects the dating of research abstracts rather than news (Figure 2). Opioid coverage has no natural season.

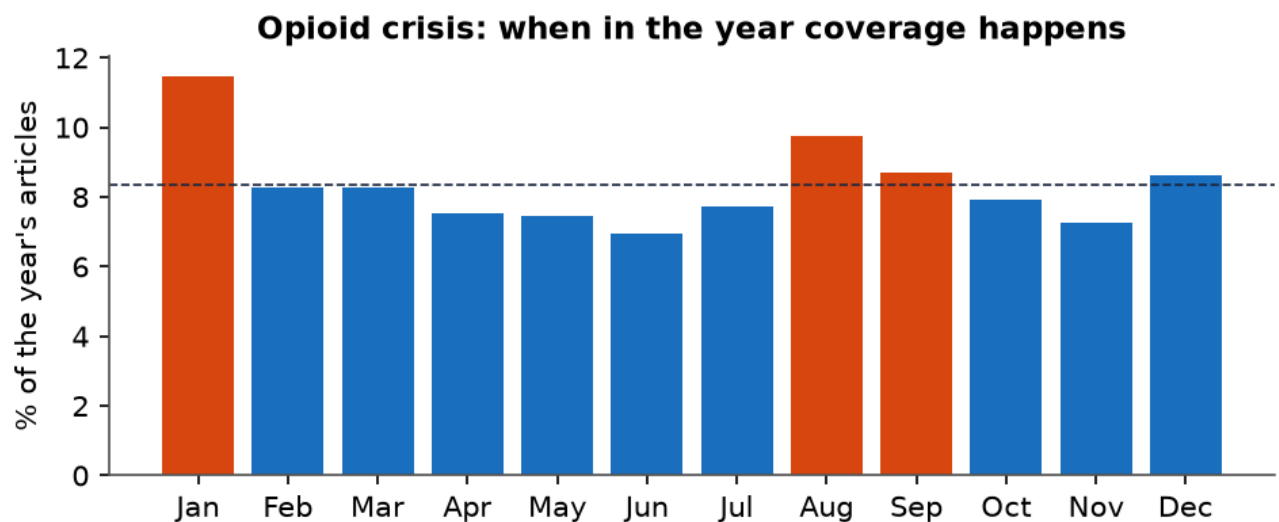


Figure 2. Share of each year's opioid-crisis articles published in each month, averaged over 2019–2025. Dashed line = an even spread (8.3% per month).

3.2 Where

Between January 2023 and July 2026, 42,415 opioid-crisis articles carried a primary location. The United States holds 71.0% of them, with a lift of 1.47. Canada, third by count, is also over-represented (1.59). Mexico (3.3), Pakistan (2.04) and Myanmar (7.86) are over-represented too; in the article sample, most of their coverage concerns trafficking and seizures, and part of the Pakistan and Myanmar counts are Indian border-seizure reports (from Punjab and Mizoram) that name the neighbouring country as the source. India, the second-largest source by count (9.78%), has a lift of 0.74, and the United Kingdom 0.58 (Table 2, Figure 3).

Country	Located articles	Share %	Lift vs all news
United States	30,115	71.0	1.47
India	4,149	9.78	0.74
Canada	1,450	3.42	1.59
United Kingdom	1,427	3.36	0.58
Australia	680	1.6	0.75
China	517	1.22	0.46
Mexico	433	1.02	3.3
Pakistan	393	0.93	2.04
Ireland	259	0.61	0.85
Nigeria	213	0.5	0.37
Singapore	146	0.34	0.39
France	143	0.34	0.17
Japan	112	0.26	0.25
Myanmar	108	0.25	7.86
Germany	105	0.25	0.21
New Zealand	104	0.25	0.38

Table 2. All countries with at least 100 articles in located opioid-crisis news, January 2023 – July 2026, with lift against all located news.

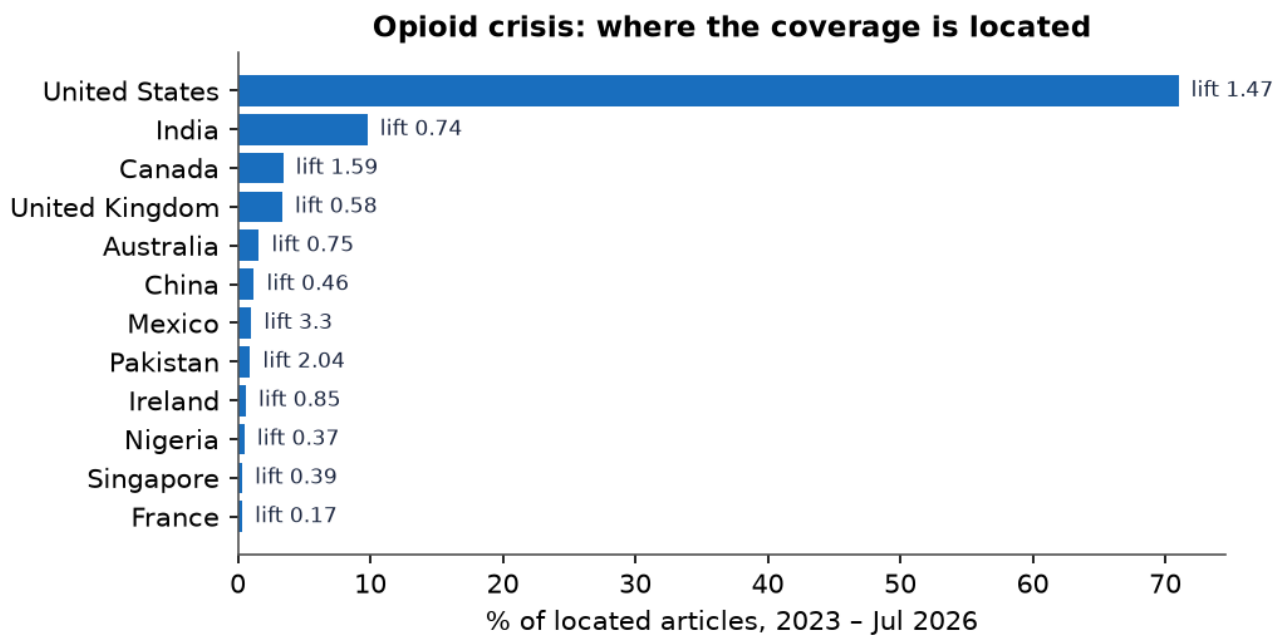


Figure 3. Leading countries by share of located opioid-crisis articles, 2023 – Jul 2026, labelled with lift against all located news.

3.3 Geo intelligence: continents, states and shifting attention

The world map (Figure 4) shows how concentrated the topic is. Only North America and a few other countries are over-represented. By continent, North America has a lift of 1.53 and holds 74.82% of located articles. Every other continent is under-represented: Oceania (0.69), Asia (0.6), Europe (0.38), Africa (0.32) and South America (0.25) (Figure 7, left).

Opioid crisis: which countries over- and under-cover the topic

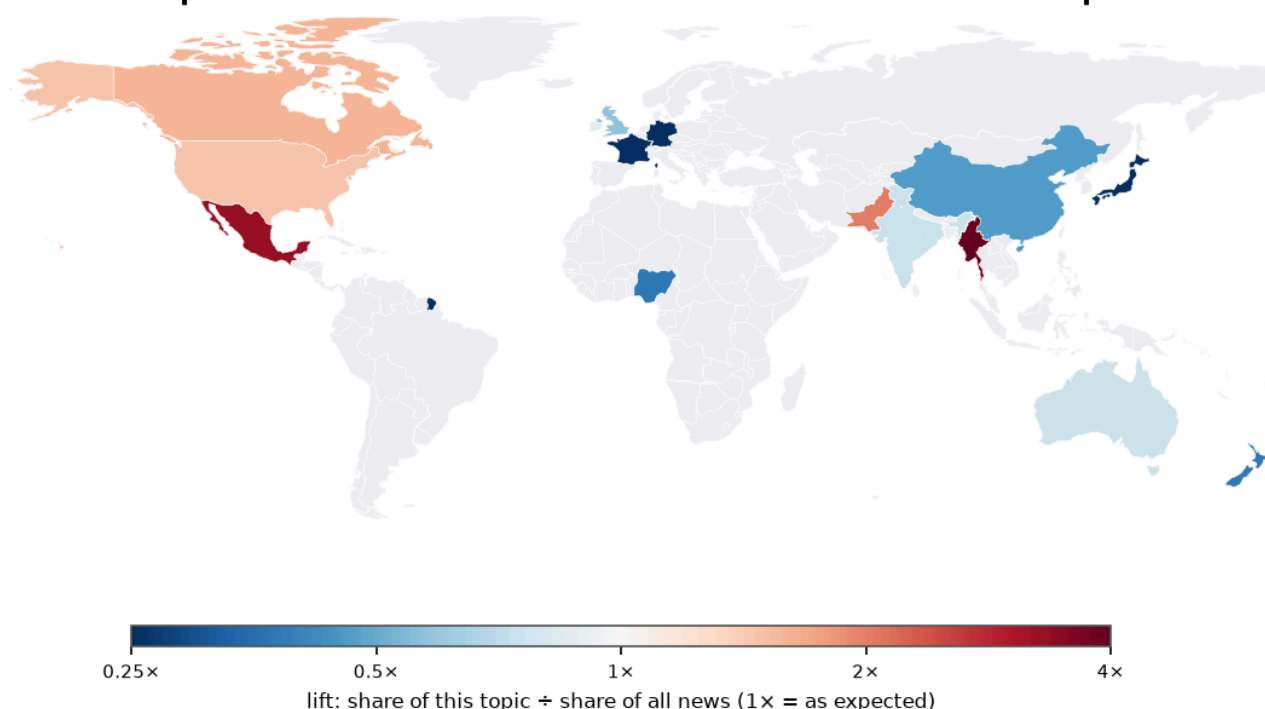


Figure 4. Lift of each country's share of located opioid-crisis articles, January 2023 – July 2026 (red = over-represented, blue = under-represented, grey = fewer than 100 articles). India is drawn with its official outline.

Within countries, the picture is sharper (Table 3). In India, coverage concentrates in the north-west and the north-east. Measured against each state's share of Indian news, Mizoram (32.98), Punjab (11.02), Assam (5.81), Manipur (3.23) and Jammu and Kashmir (2.55) are the most over-represented. Punjab alone holds 28.04% of the 3,959 located Indian articles. Maharashtra (0.35), Bihar (0.46), Uttar Pradesh (0.53), Gujarat (0.57) and Delhi (0.58) are under-represented (Figure 5). In the article sample, *heroin* is the matched term in most Indian articles, and most of this coverage reports drug seizures, so the Indian pattern reflects enforcement news as much as health news.

In the United States, coverage is most over-represented in Kentucky, Oregon and West Virginia, followed by small north-eastern states: Kentucky (2.93), Oregon (2.59), West Virginia (2.46), Rhode Island (2.43), Connecticut (2.35) and Delaware (2.35). New Jersey (0.23) and Texas (0.75) are far below their weight in American news (Figure 6). California (14.62%) and New York (11.53%) hold the most of the 25,601 located US articles, with lifts of 1.47 and 0.99.

India: state	Articles	Lift	United States: state	Articles	Lift
Mizoram	205	32.98	Kentucky	260	2.93
Punjab	1,110	11.02	Oregon	661	2.59
Assam	377	5.81	West Virginia	261	2.46
Manipur	72	3.23	Rhode Island	96	2.43
Jammu and Kashmir	237	2.55	Connecticut	422	2.35
Himachal Pradesh	132	2.47	Delaware	256	2.35
Rajasthan	189	1.38	New Hampshire	154	2.1
Haryana	139	1.37	Vermont	53	1.96
Maharashtra (lowest)	218	0.35	New Jersey (lowest)	1,113	0.23

Table 3. States with the most over-represented opioid-crisis coverage, January 2023 – July 2026, and the large state with the lowest lift. Lift = the state's share of the country's located articles ÷ its share of all located news from that country. States with fewer than 50 articles are omitted.

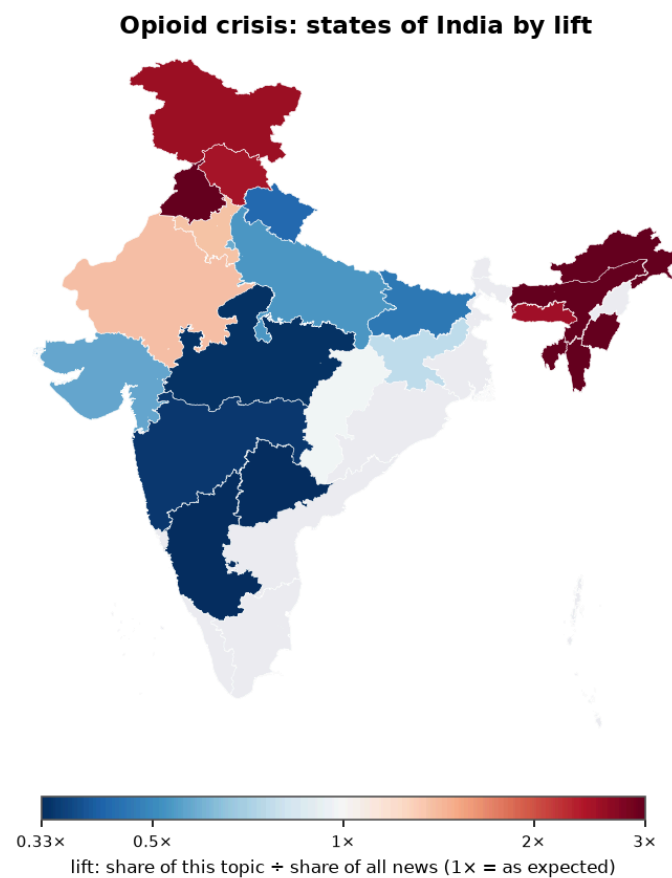


Figure 5. Lift of each Indian state's share of located opioid-crisis articles against its share of all located Indian news, January 2023 – July 2026. Official outline; Ladakh is drawn within Jammu and Kashmir in the boundary file used.

Opioid crisis: states of United States by lift

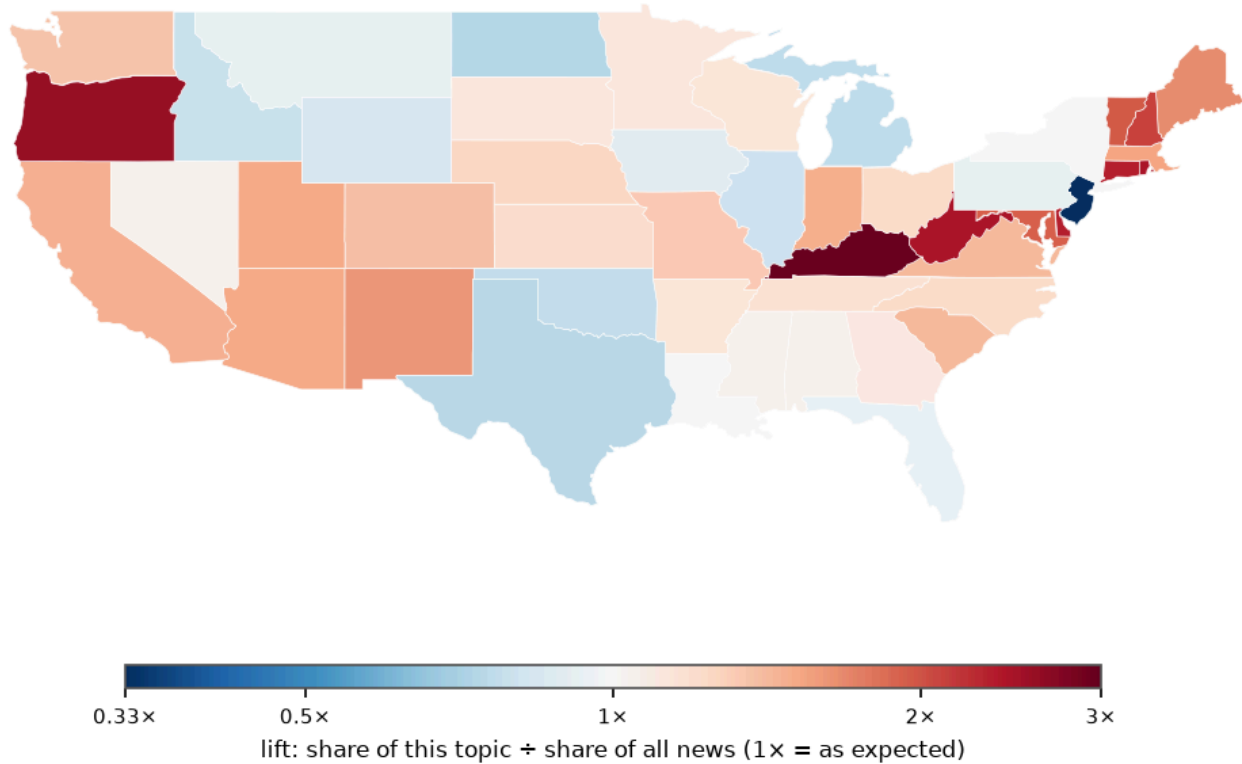


Figure 6. Lift of each US state's share of located opioid-crisis articles against its share of all located US news, January 2023 – July 2026.

Attention also moves between countries from year to year (Figure 7, right). Measured as articles per 10,000 of each country's located news, the topic fell between 2023 and 2025 in seven of the eight countries with the most coverage: India to 0.6 times its 2023 level (12.01 to 7.26), Australia 0.61, Pakistan 0.75, the United Kingdom 0.76, the United States 0.79 (19.53 to 15.38), Canada 0.85 and Mexico 0.93. Only China did not fall, moving from 6.3 to 6.5 (1.03 times); in the article sample its coverage centres on fentanyl and trade. In the United States the share in 2025 (15.38) was about half its 2019 level (30.61). Ireland's share fell from 18.75 in 2023 to 3.13 in 2025, but its baseline is small.

Coverage is more negative than each country's own news everywhere. The gap is widest in Ireland (91.1% negative against 34.0%), Mexico (94.5% against 37.4%) and China (83.2% against 27.2%), and narrowest in Pakistan (96.9% against 59.5%), where news overall is already mostly negative. In the United States, 81.2% of articles are negative against 33.1% of American news.

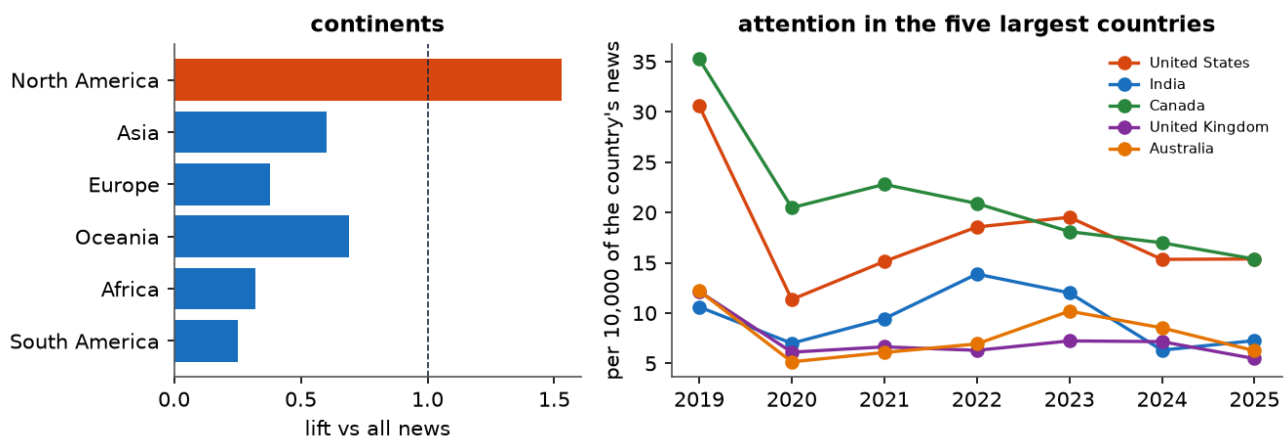


Figure 7. Left: lift by continent, January 2023 – July 2026. Right: opioid-crisis articles per 10,000 of each country's located news, 2019–2025, for the five countries with the most articles.

3.4 Tone, urgency and themes

Opioid coverage is far more negative and more urgent than news in general (Figure 8). Among articles with a tone label, 72.9% are negative, against 33.6% across the index (2.17 times). A machine-assigned editorial priority puts 91.5% of articles at critical level (7 or higher), against 42.6% of all news (2.15 times).

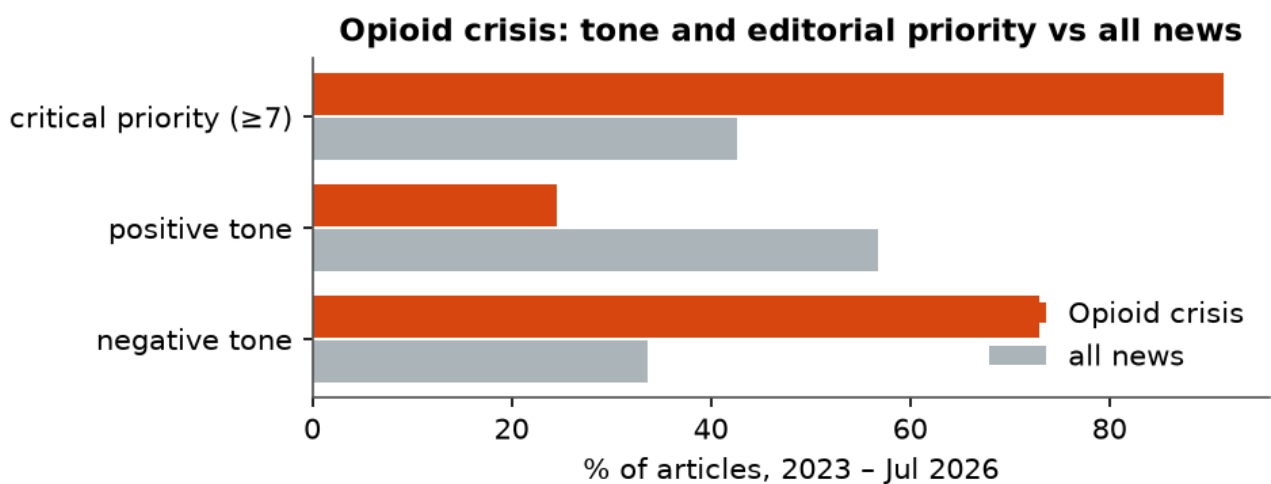


Figure 8. Tone and the share rated critical priority, opioid-crisis articles vs all news, 2023 – Jul 2026.

Themes show what the stories are about (Table 4). Addiction and treatment is the most common theme (22.89% of themed articles), followed by overdose prevention (21.22%). Harm reduction (17.95%) and drug trafficking enforcement (17.82%) are about equally common, but harm reduction is far more specific to the topic: its lift is 375.51, against 66.59 for enforcement, which is common across all crime news. Naloxone administration training appears in 8.93% of themed articles, 457.07 times its rate in all news.

Theme	Articles	Share %	Lift
opioid addiction and treatment	13,587	22.89	477.95
overdose prevention techniques	12,597	21.22	461.91
opioid addiction treatment medications	11,364	19.15	342.87
prescription drug misuse	11,011	18.55	483.72
harm reduction strategies	10,655	17.95	375.51
drug trafficking laws and enforcement	10,575	17.82	66.59
overdose treatment and antidotes	9,042	15.23	339.41
narcan administration training	5,298	8.93	457.07

Table 4. The most common themes in opioid-crisis coverage, with lift against all themed news, January 2023 – July 2026.

The vocabulary of the openings shows which drugs the news names. Across January 2019 – July 2026, *opioid* appears in 59,304 article openings, *fentanyl* in 40,934, *overdose* in 38,949 and *heroin* in 33,226. Newer adulterants are rarer: *xylazine* in 1,401 and *carfentanil* in 828. The organisation tagger is unreliable for this topic (it confuses a public-health agency's abbreviation with an unrelated group), so organisations are not analysed.

3.5 Research attention and invention

Research on opioids grew faster than the scientific literature until 2019 and then declined. Papers with an opioid term in the title rose from 4.96 per 10,000 papers in 2015 to 10.23 in 2019 (2.06 times), and fell 16.9% to 8.5 in 2025. Over 2015–2025, 58,820 such papers were published. The most-cited include national prescribing guidelines, surveillance reports on overdose deaths and studies of persistent use after surgery [1–5], as well as public-health and naloxone-distribution approaches [6, 7].

News attention and research attention both peaked in 2019 (Figure 9). Both fell in 2020. Research share stayed high afterwards, while news share recovered only partly.

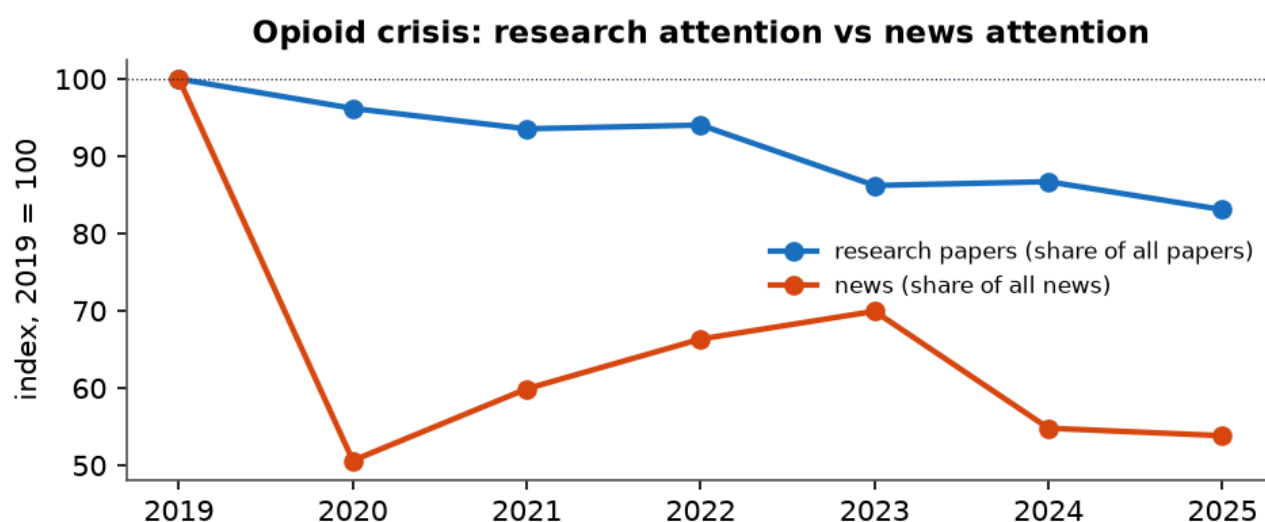


Figure 9. Research papers with opioid terms in the title (share of all papers) and opioid-crisis news (share of all news), each indexed to 2019 = 100.

Patenting is small and declining. 304 opioid-related patent families were published in 2015, 319 in 2016 and 238 in 2024, a 25.4% fall from 2016. Of office filings by the 2,908 families published between 2015 and 2024, the United States office holds 22.6%, followed by international applications (14.4%), the European office (13.4%), China (12.7%) and Canada

(10.3%) (Figure 10). The leading technology classes are medicinal preparations (A61K, 673 families) and heterocyclic compounds (C07D, 217).

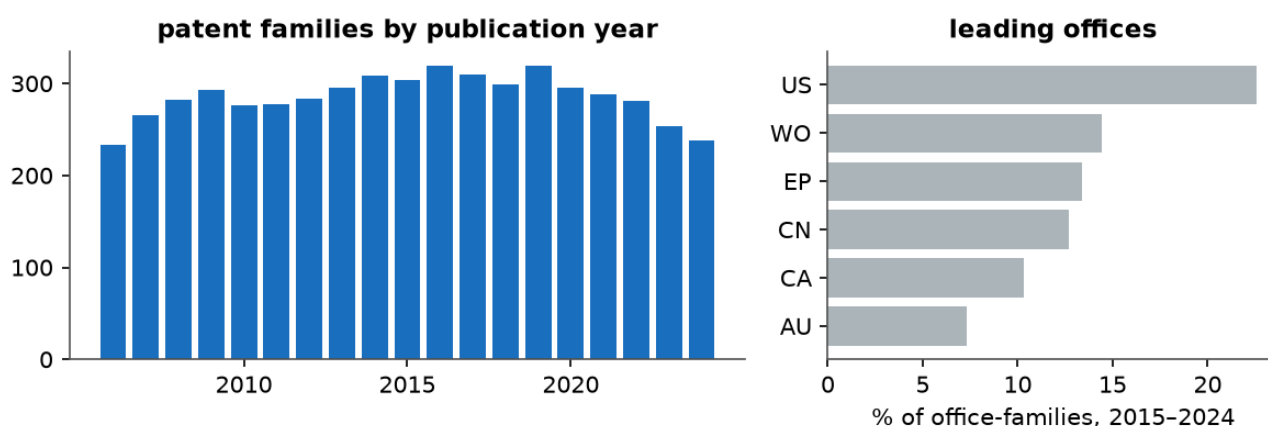


Figure 10. Opioid-related patent families by publication year (left) and the leading filing offices, 2015-2024 (right).

4. Discussion

Three points matter for anyone who uses news as a record of the opioid crisis. First, coverage measures attention. The topic's share of news fell by almost half between 2019 and 2025. The data do not show why it fell, and the fall is not a measure of harm. Second, the crisis is covered as an American story. The United States holds more than seven in ten located articles and is over-represented even against its large weight in the index. Outside North America, the topic is over-represented mainly where drugs are produced or trafficked (Myanmar, Mexico, Pakistan, and the Indian states of Mizoram and Punjab), and there the coverage is largely about seizures and enforcement. Third, harm reduction and naloxone are the most distinctive themes of the coverage, more specific to it than enforcement.

Research, invention and news run on different clocks. Research share doubled in four years and has eased since. Patenting is small and declining. News share peaked in the month of a major court ruling and was lowest in the first year of the pandemic. The dataset lets researchers link the three, for example to test whether state-level coverage tracks state-level policy.

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5. Limitations

- **Index availability.** 92.88% of the index was readable at build time, so counts are lower bounds. Shares and lifts are less affected, because the missing part is spread across topics.
- **Coverage after May 2026.** The index thins after May 2026, so 2026 (January-July) is partial and is excluded from year comparisons.
- **Matching.** Matching uses the article opening. Articles that mention opioids only later are missed, and five of the 40 hand-checked matches were not about the topic. *Overdose* also matches overdoses of other drugs when the substance is not named in the opening.
- **Dating.** Research abstracts dated only by year are filed on 1 January, which inflates January.

- **Place tags.** Place tags derived from ordinary words were treated as unlocated (15.3% of city-tagged articles). Real places that share a name with such a word, for example Providence, are lost with them, which lowers some state counts.
- **Machine labels.** Location, tone, priority, themes and organisations are machine-labelled. The city field is noisy and is not analysed.
- **Outlet mix.** The index over-represents English-language outlets, which favours North American coverage.
- **Research and patent counts.** These match titles only. Office shares reflect filing practice.

Data availability

The dataset (article sample, monthly and country tables, research and patent tables, all metrics) is released under CC BY-NC 4.0 with this paper. The sample holds 42,311 of 169,122 matched articles to 31 July 2026. Full article text, headlines, publishers, later articles and other topics are served by the Prism News API: <https://github.com/fliarbi/prism-news-api> (base URL <https://radar-api.fliarbi.com/news>). A worked query: `prism-news trends "fentanyl" --since 2019-01-01 --until 2026-07-31 --granularity monthly`.

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