

An exploration of the Substances Implicated in Drug Related Deaths across the North West of England

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A drug-related death review and surveillance system developed by the Public Health Institute at Liverpool John Moores University now covers ten separate coroner jurisdictions across the North West of England, and one area within the West Midlands. This surveillance coverage allows for the investigation of changes in the substances implicated in drug-related deaths and differences in reporting between geographic areas.

Background:

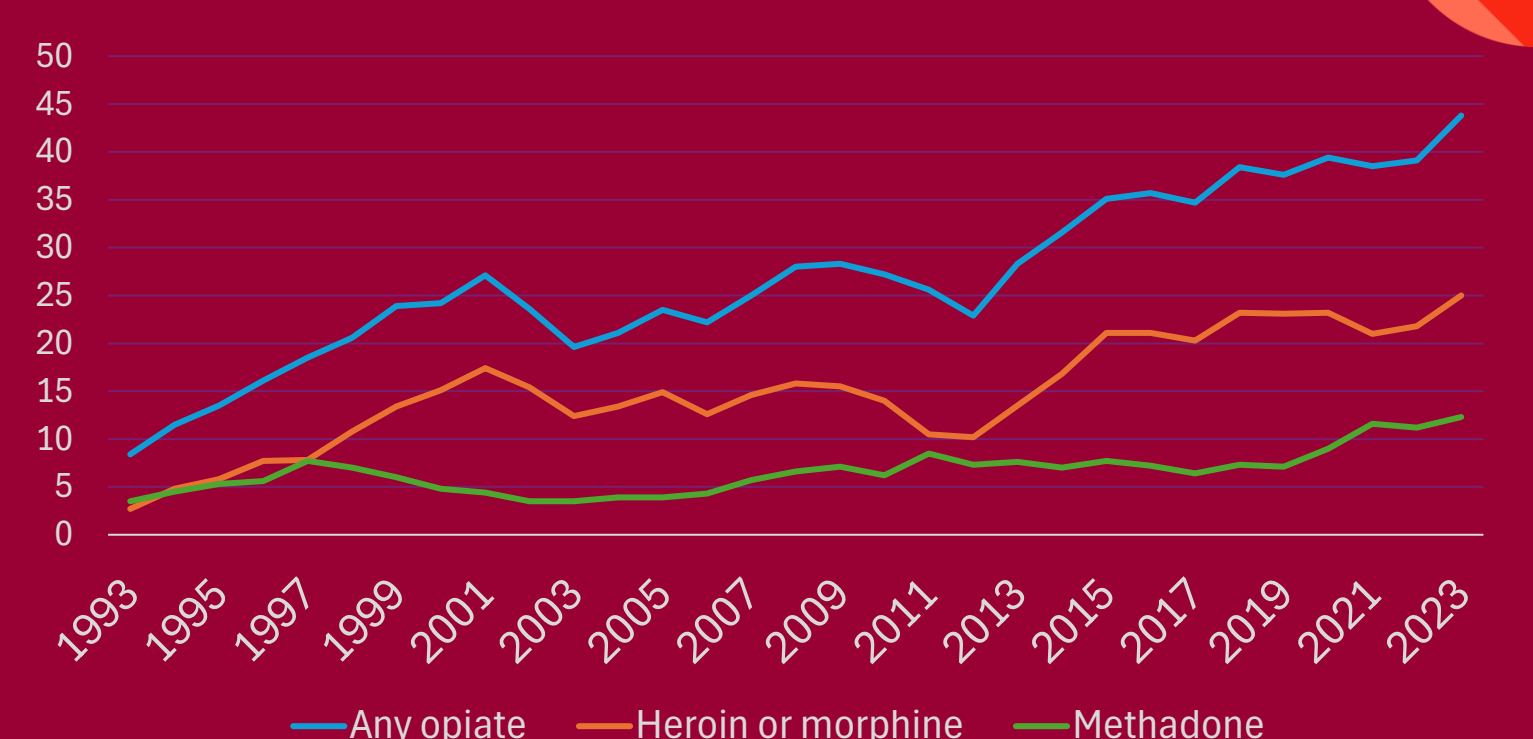
In England and Wales, the mortality rate for drug-related deaths has risen each year since 2012 (ONS data 2023). Just under half of the drug poisoning deaths registered in 2023 involved an opiate, and while heroin and morphine were the most frequently mentioned, methadone was implicated in almost a third of opiate deaths.

Additionally, the number of deaths involving cocaine has increased in each of the last 12 years.

Drug poisonings involving cocaine 1993 to 2023



Heroin, morphine, or methadone 1993 to 2023

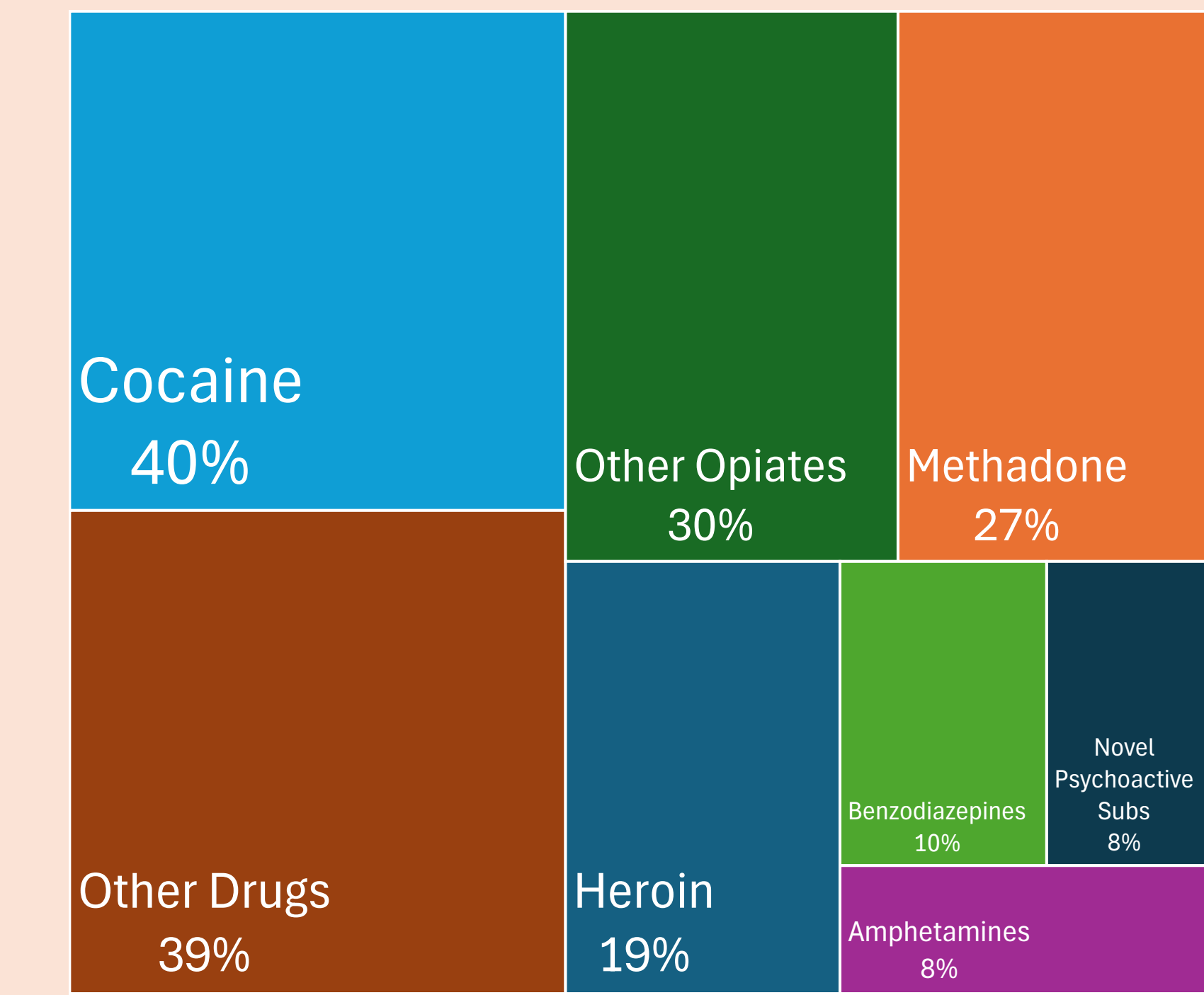


Study data:

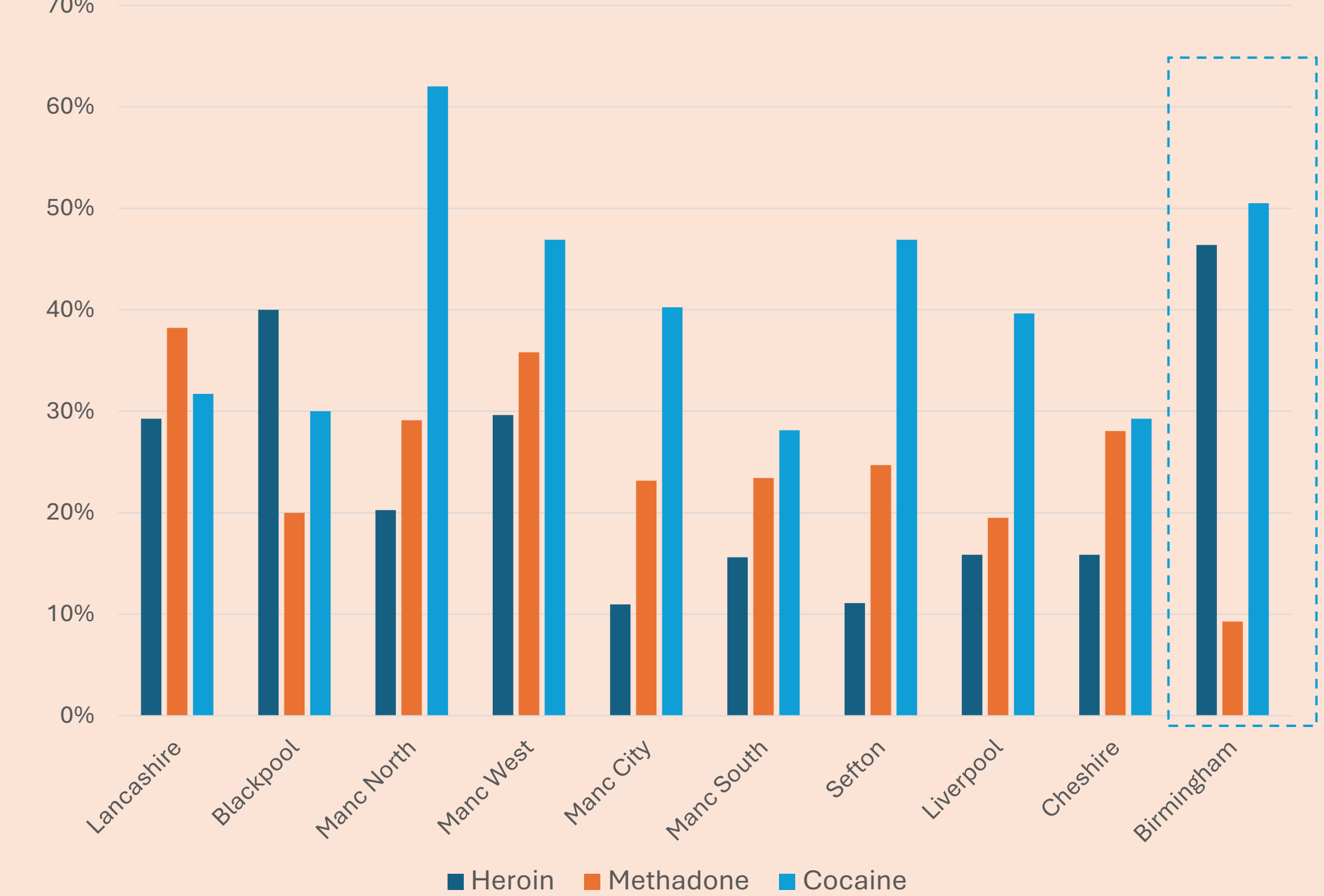
There are differences in the reporting of implicated substances for the purpose of determining the cause of death. This study aims to add context to the increased mention of substances such as methadone and cocaine within drug-related death data for England and Wales.

Data from the drug-related death surveillance system is also used to add further context to these deaths.

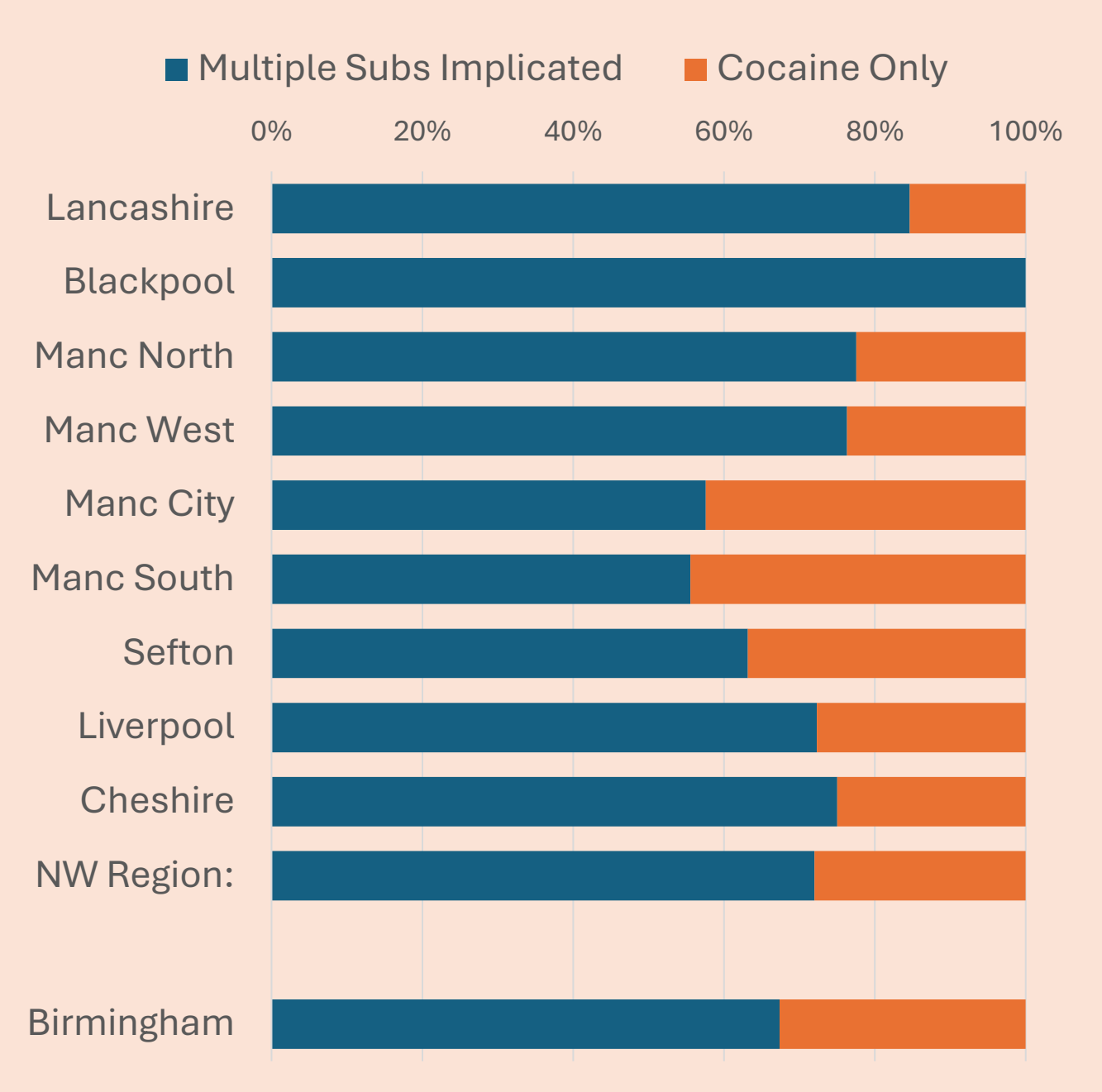
Implicated substances – North West England deaths registered in 2024



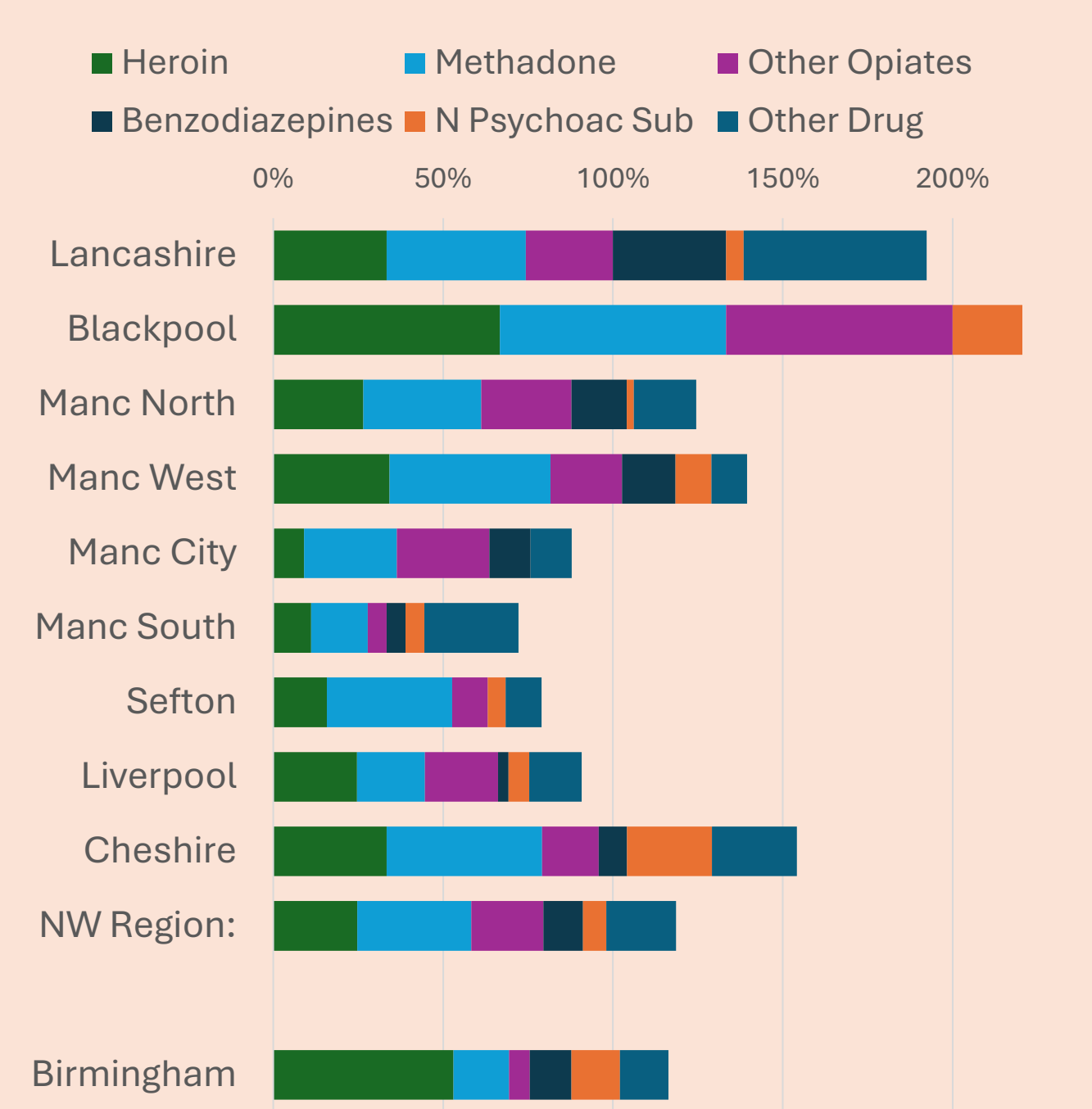
Heroin, Cocaine, Methadone – percentage of cases by coroner area - deaths registered in 2024



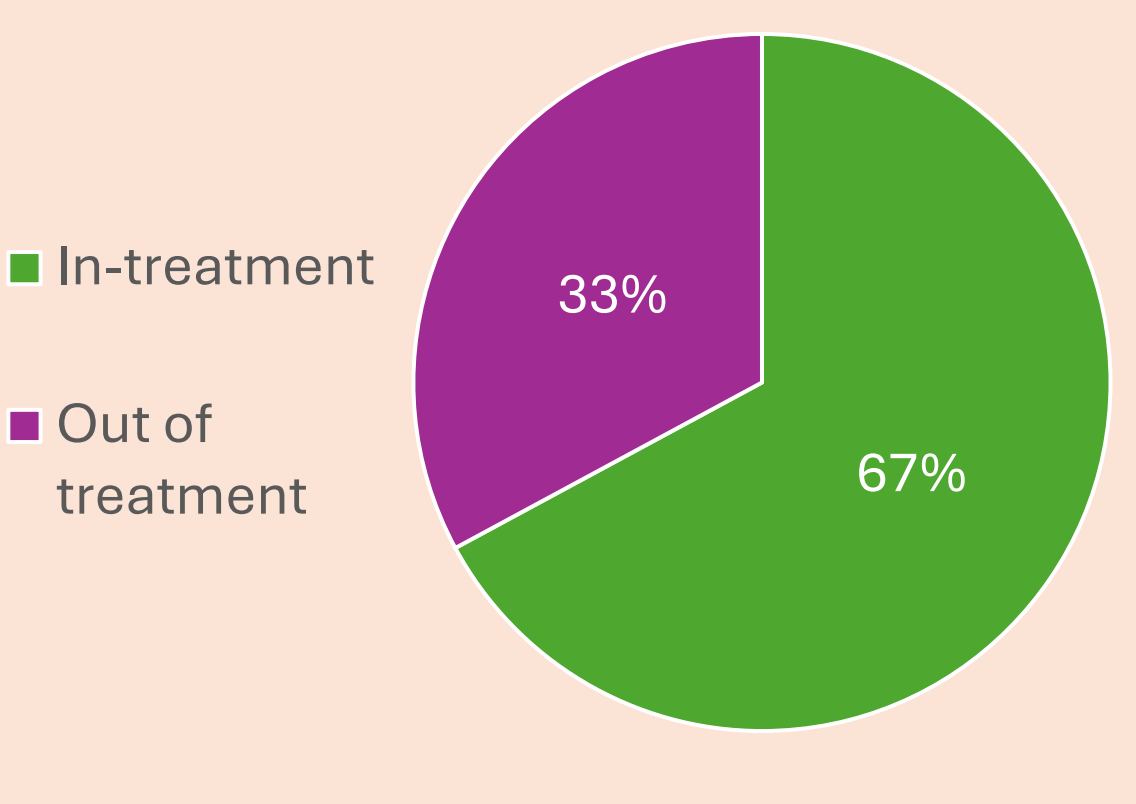
Cocaine implicated alone or multi-substances



Substances implicated together with cocaine

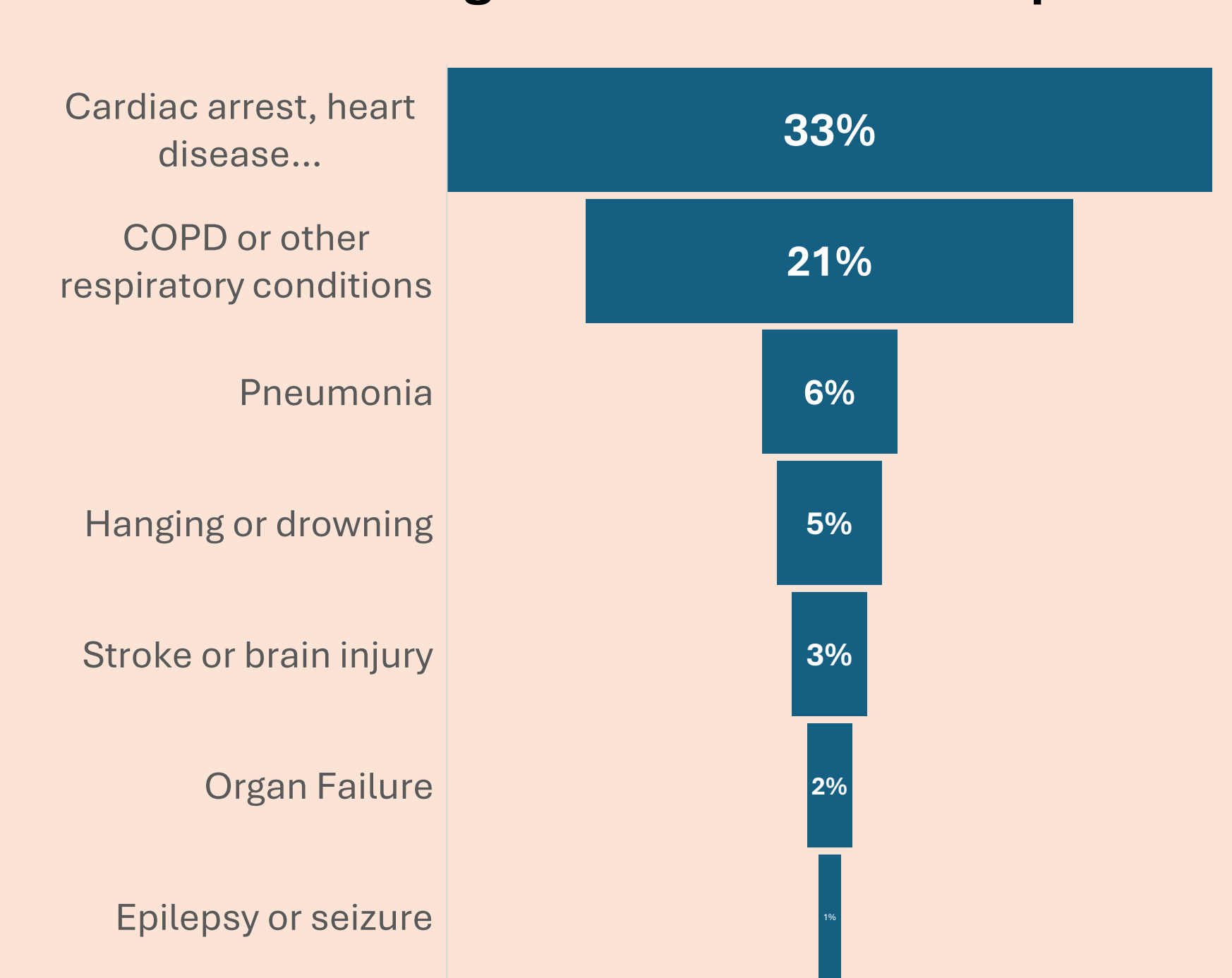


In-treatment status, for deaths where Methadone is implicated



Where Cocaine was implicated in the cause of death in more than half of cases (57%) the cause of death also mentions other health issues. For a third of deaths this related to heart issues, although in some cases it is unclear whether this is a direct result of cocaine use, or a pre-existing condition.

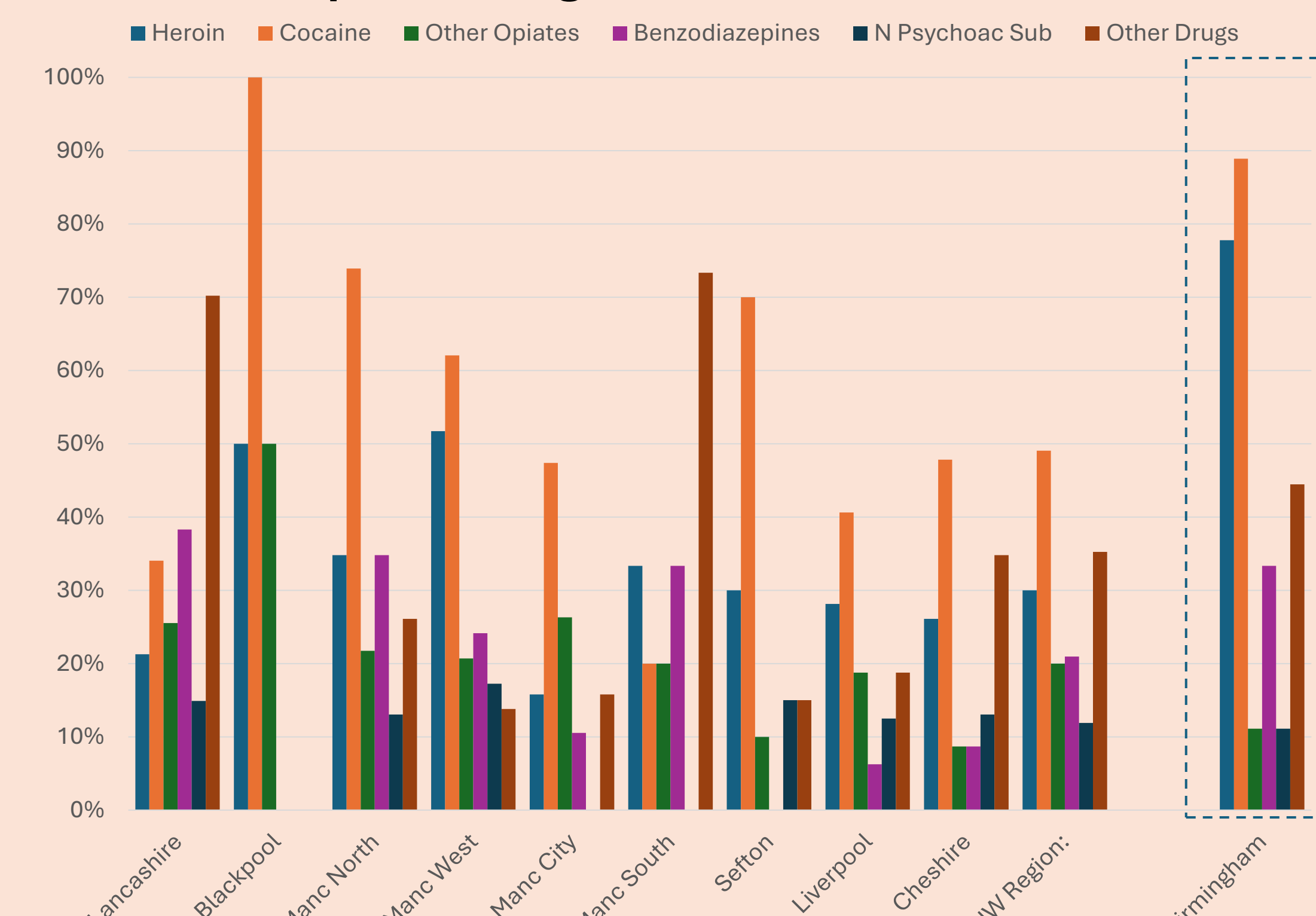
Causes of death together with Cocaine implicated



Source: LJMU, IMS 2024

In most cases where Methadone was implicated it was mentioned together with other substances. For the North West as a region in only 10% of cases was methadone mentioned as the only substance. For Birmingham all cases with methadone also had other substances implicated.

Substances implicated together with Methadone



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