

A Systematic Review of Personality Traits and Social Support among Care Leavers in Child Protection System

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ABSTRACT

This systematically reviewed literature on personality traits and social support among young people aged 18-21 who receive aftercare services after leaving care. The analysis included 10 studies from various countries using different research methods. Most studies focused on social support, with fewer examining personality traits. The studies found that support networks are important in care leavers' transitions. Care leavers who maintained connections with family, friends, and formal support services appeared to have better housing stability, economic status, and general well-being outcomes. Residential support and aftercare services were reported as particularly helpful during the transition period. Studies examining personality traits were limited but indicated that optimism and persistence may contribute to better outcomes. Several studies found that self-efficacy, particularly with independent living skills, appeared to influence how effectively care leavers utilized available social support. Common challenges identified across studies included employment, financial management, housing, and social integration difficulties. Twelve out of 290 reviewed studies suggested that preparation for independent living and ongoing support were essential to successful transitions. Formal support services appeared most effective when care leavers felt ready for independent living. This review identified gaps in current research, particularly regarding the relationship between personality traits and social support. More detailed, long-term studies would help better understand how personal characteristics and support systems work together to influence outcomes for care leavers. The findings highlight the potential value of comprehensive preparation programs and extended aftercare services that address support needs and personal development.

Keywords: Child Protection, Aftercare, Care Leavers, Personality Traits and Social Support

1. INTRODUCTION

The transition of youths into adulthood varies significantly in different social contexts, reflecting variances in livelihood pathways and outcomes (Harrison, 2019; Mamelani, 2020). Global research indicates that this phase in a young adult's life represents a crucial transition, characterized by complexity and stress comparable to that of separation. It can place immense pressure on young people who are already vulnerable and at high risk (Dickens, 2018; Moodley, Raninga & Sewpaul, 2020; Breda, 2018). Although youths face different hurdles in their transition to adulthood, those in child and youth care centres experience significant challenges resulting from their past experiences of harm, neglect, abuse and separation from parents (Dickens, 2018; Moodley et al., 2020; Breda, 2018), or the precipitating reasons for their referrals to child and youth care centres. After leaving care, they are at increased risk of low educational attainment, unemployment, early pregnancy, substance abuse, crime, imprisonment and homelessness (Fredericks, 2018; Hlungwani & Breda, 2020; Mamelani, 2020; Obeng, 2020; Sekibo, 2020; Breda, 2018).

Consequently, the proper preparation of youth and the enhancement of their social networks are essential prior to their return to family members or reintegration into the community for independent living. Social support networks in the context of this study refer to formal or informal arrangements and processes by a group of individuals with common interests or activities that share and exchange information and provide and receive support (Rosenberg, 2019). Social support networks are often incorporated into after-care support programmes to ensure improved youth outcomes in post-residential care (Thorne & Breda, 2018). A planned and adequately managed preparation process for leaving care is necessary, thus incorporating a social support network for youths ageing out of care. (Thorne and Breda, 2018) However, in the South African context, there are no uniform guidelines for implementing this transition (Dickens, 2018; Hlungwani & Breda, 2020; Moodley et al., 2020).

Underprivileged youths, which include but are not limited to youths living in poverty, refugees, orphans, the marginalized and youths in CYCCs, face additional adversities during their transition to adulthood (Bond, 2020; Fredericks, 2018; Harder, Mann-Feder, Oterholm & Refaeli, 2020; Moodley et al., 2020; Sekibo, 2020). Studies on marginalised youths show that they experience poverty, trauma and discrimination, which can often lead to risky behaviours and adverse transition outcomes (Gwenzi, 2020; Obeng, 2020; Takele & Kotecho, 2020). Transitioning from child and youth care centres to community life is often difficult for these young people. They are forced to become 'instant adults' and often struggle to cope with life's challenges outside the child and youth care centres (Dickens, 2018; Breda, 2018). They renounce the majority of the economic, social, and emotional assistance formerly offered by the child and youth care centers. They must deal with significant life changes at a far younger age than most, having to find employment and often new homes independently (Campos, Goig & Ceunca, 2020; Mendes & McCurdy, 2019; Trif, 2018).

Even with the extension of support, youths transitioning out of residential care experience difficulties in completing and attaining higher education and training, finding and maintaining employment, securing stable housing, and building and maintaining healthy relationships (Bond, 2020; Campos et al., 2020; Dickens & Marx, 2020; Sekibo, 2020). Studies (Mhongera & Lombard, 2018; Takele & Kotecho, 2020; Breda & Pinkerton, 2020) have shown that many young people, unable to meet their basic needs once they age out of care, end up living in poverty, committing a crime, taking substances and experiencing early parenthood. Moreover, the low-income status among youths ageing out of care was found to exacerbate challenges in the areas of housing and employment, resulting in a higher risk for poor mental health (specifically relating to substance abuse) and physical health (Dutta, 2018; Dickens, 2018; Frimpong-Manso, 2020). Therefore, they often become entangled with the criminal justice system (Sekibo, 2020).

Globally, services, programmes and policies were created to support the transition from child and youth care centres into independent living. According to most studies, these interventions do not fully equip and prepare young people for independent living (Bond, 2020; Dickens, 2018; Harder et al., 2020; Mogale, 2019; Breda, 2018). Section 191(3)(e) of the South African Children's Act 38 of 2005 (RSA, 2005) requires child and youth care centers to offer transitional support to youths exiting care. Although it refers to preparation and support for transition from care, the Children's Act does not indicate which specific services would provide the kind of support required by youths exiting child and youth care centers (Moodley et al., 2020; Pinkerton & Breda, 2019; Van Breda, 2018). Preparing youths to exit child and youth care centres and providing after-care services is relatively new and under-researched in South Africa; as a result, services are primarily underdeveloped (Breda, 2018).

According to Hlungwani and Breda (2020), child and youth care workers in South Africa are not trained to facilitate programmes that meet the specific needs of youths transitioning out of residential care. There is a dearth of formal research on how best to support young people as they transition to life outside residential care (Mamelani Projects, 2020; Breda, 2018). Some studies focus on youth experiences and their challenges once they exit residential care (Dickens, 2018; Hlungwani & Breda, 2020; Moodley et al., 2020; Breda, 2018). Nevertheless, there is a paucity of knowledge regarding the evolution and utilisation of social networks when adolescents transitioning from residential state care assume adult responsibilities in housing, job, and school. As a result, many child and youth care centers have found it difficult to prepare young people for independent living and offer fully continued support to cope with typical adult challenges (Hlungwani & Breda, 2020; Moodley et al., 2020). Moreover, in the child and youth care center's environment, there is little focus on building strong social support networks for the youth (Fredericks, 2018). Many youths leave child and youth care centers without the necessary skills, resources and social networks to thrive outside residential care.

Research on care leavers' outcomes highlights the importance of social support and psychological factors in their transition to adulthood. Felt security, continuity, and social support from peers, staff, and family significantly predict better outcomes (Cashmore & Paxman, 2006; Sulimani-Aidan et al., 2013, 2021). Readiness to leave care mediates the relationship between social support and life satisfaction (Dinisman, 2016). Optimism and perceived readiness for independent living correlate positively with military service adjustment (Sulimani-Aidan et al., 2013). Participation in skills acquisition activities and post-secondary education predicts lower psychological distress (Sulimani-Aidan et al., 2021). However, care leavers face challenges in housing, finances, and mental health (Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006; Phillips et al., 2023). Informal networks promote well-being and better outcomes (Teer, 2021). Many care leavers overcome adversity despite vulnerabilities without displaying negative indicators (Montserrat & Llosada-Gistau, 2024).

2. AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

A systematic review was selected to assess the scope, diversity, and characteristics of research concerning social networks for juveniles transitioning out of residential state care and to pinpoint knowledge deficiencies in this area. Research on this facet of youth protection services is scarce, and knowledge on the subject remains minimal. *This systematic review aimed to examine the available evidence on the personality traits and social support for care leavers ageing out of residential care and identify any strategies adopted.*

2.1 Research Questions

Using the research question, "What is the relationship between personality traits and social support outcomes for care leavers transitioning to independent living?"

The subsequent questions of research were established for the analysis:

- In what way do care leavers evaluate their readiness for autonomous living?
- Which personality qualities do they exhibit?
- What specific assistance requirements do they possess?
- What kind of skills do they have of coping in the shift phase to adulthood?

3. METHODOLOGY

The systematic review was guided by the methodological framework developed by Arksey and Malley (2005). The evaluation seeks to collect, analyse, and integrate existing empirical material concerning former care leavers' subjective perceptions and experiences of independent living during their transition to adulthood.

3.1 Method Design

A systematic review was conducted based on the procedure devised by the Centre for Reviews and Dissemination (2009) and the PRISMA statement (Moher et al., 2009) to identify, assess, and synthesise quantitative research.

3.2 Databases, Search Terms and Inclusion Criteria

A comprehensive literature search was performed utilizing six databases alongside various search terms (Table 1). The investigation encompassed the timeframe extending from 2020 to 2025. The process of study identification and selection is illustrated in a PRISMA flow chart (Moher et al., 2009) (Fig. 1). The search commenced without any constraints imposed. Scopus yielded a substantial volume of results, employing search constraints including title, keywords, abstract, and original articles (restricted to the English language) from ScienceDirect, alongside open-access articles selected for the review. The criteria for inclusion of the original articles are delineated in Table 1.

3.3 Search Outcome and Exclusion Criteria.

From the corpus of research articles, a total of 1073 search outcomes spanning the years 2020 to 2025 were obtained, with 290 open-access articles selected for consideration in this study. Non-empirical studies, including reports on advanced projects or contemporary issues like descriptions of welfare policies for children and service systems, as well as statements for new journals, were omitted from consideration. Research Studies were likewise omitted because the care leavers remained in foster care; the individuals involved were older adults in residential care or were staff or relatives of children or young individuals in care. Articles that pertain to the transition from services beyond foster care, such as those addressing alcohol addiction, incarcerated individuals, mental health patients, or young people with disabilities or cognitive challenges, were similarly omitted. A total of 269 articles have been excluded.

The systematic review of the literature resulted in the identification of 21 pertinent studies, among which were two articles addressing the issue of drug abuse. A total of seven systematic reviews were subsequently excluded, resulting in the selection of a final cohort of 12 studies for the review. This review encompasses studies employing quantitative methodologies published between 2020 and 2025, a period selected to ensure the inclusion of the most current data available. During this concluding selection phase (Fig. 1), the articles focused on intervention strategies, care systems, evaluation studies, substance abuse, parenting dynamics, perceptions held by parents or teachers, preparation for transitioning out of care, homelessness, mental health diagnoses, and distinctive residential care approaches.

4. IDENTIFY THE RESEARCH QUESTION

The key inquiry that directed this examination was: "What is the relationship between personality traits and social support outcomes for care leavers transitioning to independent living?" The following supporting questions were developed during the review process to address specific areas of the primary research question (Peters, Godfrey, McInerney, Munn, Tricco & Khalil, 2020). The PRISMA-ScR framework was employed through a systematic approach: (1) identifying titles that aligned with the specified criteria, (2) screening abstracts following the established inclusion and exclusion parameters, and (3) selecting studies that fulfilled the predetermined study requirements. Figure 1 presented below, delineates the methodology employed in the selection of studies for the review. The discussion encompasses social support networks, personality traits, the process of ageing out of care, residential care, and the factors contributing to positive transition outcomes.

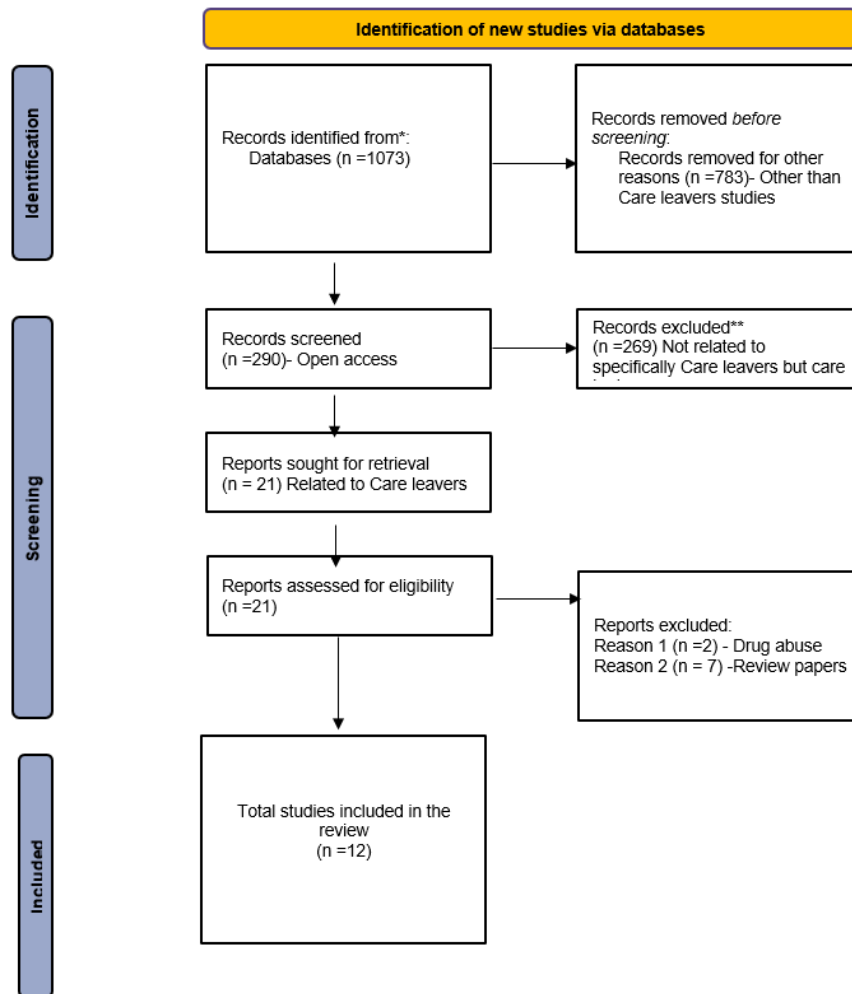


Figure 1: Flow Chart depicting the Process of Selecting Studies for Review

* Records from Science Direct with specific research papers on care leavers in Elsevier from 2020-2025 (out of 1073, 290 are open access and considered for systematic review). **No automation tools were used. Source: Page MJ, et al. BMJ 2021;372: n71. Doi: 10.1136/bmj.n71.

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Source: Adapted from Liu, Irwin & Morrow (2015) Citation identified from manual searches N=1

5. STUDY SELECTION

The investigators delineated the ensuing inclusion criteria: studies published in English, full-text, peer-reviewed, and open-access, conducted between 2020 and 2025, of social networks. The temporal parameters of 2020 and 2025 guaranteed the inclusion of only contemporary and, therefore, relevant studies. The criteria for exclusion encompassed peer-reviewed articles on the topic that were published in any language other than English, content that required payment, and publications released before the year 2020. By the findings of Peters et al. (2020), a data extraction sheet was employed (see Table 1).

6. FINDINGS

The following systematic review studies are described in tabular form. The effort is taken from the different geographical regions to have a broad picture of the research question.

Table 1: The Selected Research Articles for Systematic Review

Sl.No	Authors	Year	Summary
1	Sabrina Göbel, Andreas Hadjar, Ute Karl, Julia A Jäger	2020	The paper presents a study on the school-to-work transitions of young people leaving care in Luxembourg. It focuses on how they achieve agency in these transitions and the role of continuity and discontinuity in their care and educational trajectories.
2	Mattias Bengtsson, Yvonne Sjöblom, Peter Öberg	2020	This paper delineates a longitudinal qualitative investigation focused on comprehending the transition from out-of-home care to autonomous adulthood among a cohort of Swedish care leavers, emphasizing the manifestation of their agency throughout this transformative journey.
3	Natalie Glynn	2020	This paper presents a theoretical framework combining Recognition theory, precarity, and liminality theory to understand the transition out of state care for young people. It is supported by qualitative data from a longitudinal study of care leavers in Ireland.
4	Panelwolfgang Hagleitner, Stephan Sting, Thomas Maran	2022	The paper analyses the socio-economic status and living situation of care leavers aged 20-29 in Austria, finding they are disadvantaged compared to the general population regarding education, employment, financial status, health, and life satisfaction.
5	Minna Kaasinen, Anja Terkamo-Moisio, Pirkko Saloekkilä, Arja Häggman-Laitila	2023	This paper describes the experiences of social inclusion among Finnish care leavers transitioning to independent living, highlighting the importance of interpersonal relationships, daily activities, and well-being in promoting social inclusion.
6	Suyen Karki, Olli-Pekka Ryynänen, Pirkko Saloekkilä, Arja Häggman-Laitila	2023	This study employs a Bayesian analysis methodology to elucidate and interpret the disruptive behaviours exhibited by Finnish care leavers who have been engaged with aftercare services for approximately two years.
7	Ayoub Eslamian, Rojan Afrouz, Amir Moghanibashi-Mansourieh	2024	The paper explores the lived experiences of young care leavers in Iran, highlighting the challenges they face during the transition to independent living, including feelings of abandonment, sudden transition, stigma and discrimination, loneliness, and isolation.
8	Panelrachna Mishra, Satarupa Dutta	2024	The paper proposes a mentorship-based curriculum to support the social reintegration of youth transitioning from childcare institutions in India, addressing the challenges they face due to inadequate aftercare services and infrastructure.
9	Sasambal Reuben	2024	This paper explores how care-leavers in South Africa use networking and social connections to achieve their goals and promote resilience during the transition out of residential care.

10	Joshua Mcgrane, Julie Selwyn, Claire Baker	2024	This paper delineates the formulation and psychometric validation of an instrument designed to assess the subjective well-being of care leavers in England. The survey revealed that individuals who have exited care experience diminished subjective well-being in comparison to the broader population, with notable disparities observed among different local authorities and specific groups, including those with disabilities.
11	Minna Kaasinen, Arja Häggman-Laitila, Anja Terkamo-Moisio	2024	The paper aims to describe the social inclusion of care leavers and the related factors using a mixed-method retrospective document analysis of data from 698 care leavers in Finland.
12	Emma O'kane, Eavan Brady	2025	This study investigates the housing trajectories and experiences of adult care leavers aged 24-35 in Ireland.

Source: Secondary data

The research papers in **Table 1** cover various studies on the school-to-work transitions of care leavers across different countries. They explore agency, socio-economic challenges, social inclusion, and support systems during the transition from care to independent adulthood. These studies include longitudinal qualitative research from Luxembourg, Sweden, and Ireland; theoretical frameworks integrating Recognition theory, precarity, and liminality theory; and socio-economic analyses in Austria. They also discuss mentorship programs in India, social reintegration strategies in South Africa, and the experiences of care leavers in Iran and Finland, highlighting issues like stigma, isolation, and the importance of social networks. Furthermore, studies in England and Finland assess subjective well-being and social inclusion, while research on housing pathways in Ireland examines the post-care experiences of adult care leavers.

Table 2: shows that the methodologies used in these studies vary across research designs and approaches.

Authors	Methodology
Sabrina Göbel, Andreas Hadjar, Ute Karl, Julia A Jäger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A mixed-methods approach combining survey research and retrospective case studies - A questionnaire based on frameworks of relational agency and life course transitions but with insufficient survey data for statistical analysis - Retrospective, qualitative, and partially autobiographical interviews conducted with 16 young individuals who have transitioned from foster care and residential care environments. - Analysis of the interview data using a grounded theory approach, focusing on the concept of relational agency
Mattias Bengtsson, Yvonne Sjöblom, Peter Öberg	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Longitudinal qualitative design with three waves of semi-structured interviews over 21 months on average - Purposeful sampling of 14 care leavers in Sweden aged 16-20 years - Interviews were conducted at three-time points: when still in care (T1), 6-10 months after leaving care (T2), and 10-19 months after T2 (T3) - Data analysis used a directed content analysis approach guided by Hitlin and Elder's (2007) typology of agency, with an abductive approach moving between data and theory
Natalie Glynn	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Qualitative longitudinal research design with 3 data collection points over 1 year - Purposive sampling to recruit a diverse sample of 16 young care leavers aged 18-19 - Data analysis using qualitative techniques like synchronic/diachronic comparisons and case files
Panelwolfgang Hagleitner, Stephan Sting, Thomas	<p>The study used a questionnaire survey of 122 care leavers aged 20-29 in Austria. The questionnaire utilized standardized scales and items to collect data that</p>

Maran	could be compared to the Austrian sample from the EU-SILC survey. It was based on existing studies and international categorization systems.
Minna Kaasinen, Anja Terkamo-Moisio, Pirkko Salokekkilä, Arja Häggman-Laitila	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The study used a qualitative design with individual thematic interviews of 16 care leavers aged 18-20, most of whom had been in child welfare institutions or foster care. - Data were collected in 2016 through recorded interviews that were transcribed and analyzed using qualitative inductive content analysis. - Ethical approval was obtained, and participant privacy was protected.
Suyen Karki, Olli-Pekka Ryynänen, Pirkko Salokekkilä, Arja Häggman-Laitila	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Retrospective document analysis of electronic patient records of 600 care leavers who had participated in aftercare services - Data collected by a multidisciplinary team of researchers, covering 428 variables related to the care leavers' background, social situation, health, and services received - The outcome variable "disruptive behaviour" was a composite measure constructed from 10 different variables related to risky and problematic behaviors
Ayoub Eslamian, Rojan Afrouz, Amir Moghanibashi-Mansourieh	The study used a qualitative, semi-structured interview approach with 18 care leavers aged 19-32. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview data, with the first author keeping a reflective journal that was shared with the research team. MAXQDA-10 software was used for the data analysis.
Panelrachna Mishra, Satarupa Dutta	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Utilized Kern's approach to curriculum development to design a mentorship-based aftercare curriculum - Grounded the curriculum design in a socio-ecological framework of resilience - Focused on designing a mentorship-based intervention to support the social reintegration of youth transitioning from institutional care
Sasambal Reuben	The study used a qualitative, descriptive, and interpretive approach with a grounded theory methodology to explore the psychosocial processes that enable resilience in care-leavers in South Africa.
Joshua Mcgrane, Julie Selwyn, Claire Baker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Co-production of the survey with 31 care leavers through workshops over a year - Distribution of the survey by 21 local authorities to care leavers aged 18-25, with an average response rate of 39% - Psychometric validation of the survey using factor analysis, differential item functioning analysis, and evaluation of convergent and divergent validity with the ONS 4 wellbeing questions
Minna Kaasinen, Arja Häggman-Laitila, Anja Terkamo-Moisio	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A mixed method, retrospective document analysis design utilizing quantitative and qualitative data - Purposive, total sampling of all care leavers receiving aftercare services in a major Finnish city between 2020-2021 - Data collected from electronic records and registers, including administrative decisions, service provider descriptions, patient records, and aftercare plans
Emma O'kane, Eavan Brady	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Purposive sampling to recruit 5 participants aged 24-35 who were considered "care leavers" and had spent at least 12 months in care before turning 18 - Semi-structured interviews with participants, with the option to participate online or in-person - Transcription and anonymization of the interviews, with each participant assigned a pseudonym - Creation of narrative timelines to capture each participant's housing pathway from age 18 to the time of the interview - Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts to identify patterns and themes across the housing biographies

Source: Secondary data

7. SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS OF THE REVIEWED ARTICLES

The study by Göbel, Hadjar, Karl, and Jäger (2020) discusses how care arrangements can perpetuate educational inequalities, emphasising that factors like the type, duration, and consistency of placements significantly influence the educational outcomes and qualifications of care leavers. The authors highlight the importance of qualitative interviews, which offer valuable insights into how care leavers experience and exercise agency during their transitions—insights that may not always be evident to the individuals at the time. The article calls for further research and policy interventions to address the complex and varied situations faced by care leavers, aiming to reduce the reproduction of inequality in their educational trajectories. However, the research by Bengtsson, Sjöblom, and Öberg (2020) identifies three distinct patterns of transition for care leavers, each linked to different dimensions of agency. It finds that care leavers who demonstrated "life course agency," characterised by long-term goals, had more stable transitions to independent adulthood. Additionally, the study highlights the heterogeneous nature of the transition process, with some care leavers experiencing a prolonged "in-between" state rather than a clear, defined transition.

The investigation by Glynn (2020) explores the experiences of care leavers during their transition to adulthood. It highlights that while care leavers sought a liminal space to "figure things out," many felt the aftercare system unfairly categorised some as "deserving" of support and others as "less so." The study also points out the stress caused by the link between education and financial support in the aftercare system, which pressured care leavers to make quick decisions about their futures without sufficient time for reflection. Additionally, those dealing with challenges like drug use, mental health issues, or involvement with the criminal justice system faced differential treatment, feeling "denigrated" and perceived as "undeserving" of assistance. Further, the study by Hagleitner, Sting, and Maran (2022) reveals that care leavers aged 20-29 in Austria are significantly disadvantaged compared to their peers in education, employment, financial status, health, and life satisfaction. It highlights the challenge care leavers face in managing their troubled backgrounds and developmental tasks within a compressed timeframe, contributing to their disadvantages. However, the study is limited by the absence of representative public data on Austrian care leavers, making it difficult to assess the representativeness of the sample used in the research.

The study by Kaasinen, Moisio, Saloekkilä, and Laitila (2023) emphasises that care leavers' social inclusion is closely linked to their interpersonal relationships, including those formed in childhood, foster care, and later in life. Participation in daily activities such as studies, hobbies, and work, along with improvements in health and well-being, plays a significant role in promoting their social inclusion. The study also challenges the misconception that care leavers are inherently disadvantaged, highlighting that they possess the desire and resources to overcome social disadvantages and make positive changes in their lives despite facing prejudices from the service system. However, the study by Karki et al. (2023) found that substance abuse was the most commonly reported risky behaviour among care leavers, with other behaviours being rarely documented. It also revealed that substance abuse, psychiatric illness, and self-destructive behaviour were positively linked to higher levels of disruptive behaviour. In contrast, the attainment of secondary or vocational education, coupled with placement in a foster family, correlated with diminished instances of disruptive behaviour among individuals transitioning out of care.

The research conducted by Eslamian, Afrouz, and Mansourieh (2024) elucidates that young care leavers in Iran grappled with sentiments of abandonment, an abrupt shift to independent living, as well as experiences of stigma, discrimination, and isolation. The transition was marked by challenges that care leavers were unprepared for, and the accelerated pace of this transition, combined with a lack of preparation, made it difficult for them to access opportunities and achieve success. Similarly, the study by Mishra and Dutta (2024) reveals significant shortcomings in India's current aftercare system, including inadequate infrastructure, limited services, and a failure to adhere to international best practices. It highlights that there are too few aftercare homes, with more than a quarter of care leavers receiving no aftercare support, and many are unaware of available services and welfare schemes. Despite legal provisions for aftercare, inconsistent implementation results in ambiguity regarding responsibility and accountability for supporting care leavers. Further, the study by Reuben (2024) explores how care leavers actively seek and utilise social connections to achieve their goals and meet their needs. It highlights that care leavers develop and refine networking skills to build these relationships. The study also emphasises that care leavers derive strength from "weak ties," as these connections can evolve into meaningful, supportive relationships.

The study by McGrane, Selwyn, and Baker (2024) found that most care leavers reported moderate to high well-being, though a more significant proportion reported low well-being than their peers. It also identified a steep decline in well-being following their transition out of care. Additionally, the study noted significant variation in the well-being of care leavers across different local authorities. Again, a study by Kaasinen, Laitila, and Moisio (2024) found that while over half of care leavers had no significant physical health issues, a third had multiple psychiatric diagnoses, and more than a third struggled with problematic substance use. Despite these challenges, most had completed at least one level of education, and over half were continuing their education, demonstrating resilience and resources. Nonetheless, the research uncovered that more than fifty per cent of care leavers encountered challenges with their daily routines, and almost half struggled with essential life skills, highlighting critical areas for enhancement within aftercare services. However, the study by Kane and Brady (2025) highlights the diverse housing pathways of care leavers, noting variations in the type, quality, and conditions of housing they accessed post-care. It also found that experiencing placement breakdowns and housing instability shortly before leaving care

increased the risk of long-term homelessness. Informal supports were crucial in shaping care leavers' housing experiences, while formal supports were often perceived as insufficient or inconsistent after they left care.

8. STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

The systematic review was conducted by limiting searches to the ScienceDirect database, focusing on relevant and authoritative research papers. From a total of 571,460 outcomes concerning care leavers, the researcher examined the results for 2020 to 2025, yielding 147,947 results. Considering the condition of research papers, 97,869 results are displayed. Furthermore, the publication title criteria for Children and Youth reviews in the field of Psychology yielded 1,073 results. The researcher meticulously analyzed 290 open-access research publications by downloading the full texts and thoroughly assessing the material, thereby improving the reliability of the search procedure and applying particular criteria for evaluation. Care leavers' psychological characteristics and social support are examined, excluding any other relevant factors.

The results were heterogeneous, which constrained the synthesis of the findings. However, the study successfully achieved repeatability, suggesting that the construction of fundamental conceptual categories was successful (Centre for Reviews and Dissemination 2009). The reviewed documents have been catalogued, enabling readers to verify the specified classifications should they wish to do so. The studies included in the review were evaluated for methodological rigor according to the criteria established by the Centre for Evidence-Based Management in 2014 for cross-sectional studies, and the findings indicated a robust level of strength. This further substantiates the veracity of the review. Nonetheless, the investigations were descriptive, resulting in minimal evidence.

9. CONCLUSION

Numerous studies utilized qualitative methodologies, such as longitudinal and semi-structured interviews, frequently combined with thematic analysis or grounded theory to investigate the experiences and issues faced by care leavers. Other research employed mixed methods approaches, integrating surveys with retrospective case studies or document analysis to investigate issues such as well-being, housing, and aftercare programs. Certain research concentrated on purposive sampling, selecting individuals based on certain age demographics or experiences, whilst others employed standardized scales to collect data for comparison with larger population surveys. Several research studies also included the collaborative development of surveys and tools with care leavers. Moreover, curriculum design and psychometric validation methodologies were employed in specific research initiatives to establish new frameworks and support systems for care leavers. The research emphasized a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis to enhance the comprehension of care leavers' transitions and the efficacy of aftercare programs.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest - The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest

Ethical Standards - This page does not include any experiments involving human volunteers conducted by any of the writers. Unrestricted Access This article is disseminated under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), allowing unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, contingent upon proper attribution to the original author(s) and source, provision of a link to the Creative Commons license, and indication of any modifications made.

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