Title:

"Experiences of looked after children accessing mental health services and the quality of life after leaving care."

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Keywords:

Children, Mental Health, Looked after children, out-of-the-home care, quality of life, mental health needs

1. Introduction & Background

Looked after children, and young people compromise the most vulnerable population of any society. They are the children or the young people, who are often below the age of 18 years and cared for by the local authorities and social services. According to some current research, evidence looked after children often have poor physical and mental health outcomes, in comparison to the general population (Rock et al., 2015). Children who come under care often face some significant life adversaries, due to which they are placed under care to be protected and cared for (Morrison & Shepherd, 2015). Therefore, considering the reasons for which children come under care becomes highly important in order to understand the experience of these children and the support that they need to overcome. Bilson and Martin, (2017) have informed in their research that, abuse and neglect (61%) are two main causes of children's and young people's entry into social care. These children may also have experienced acute family stress (8%), dysfunctional family environment (15%) as well as having parents who are either incapable of caring for children or have anti-social behaviour problems or absent parenting (7%) (Department of Education, 2017; Kerr, 2016).

According to the Department of Education (2016), meeting the mental health needs of looked after children and young people is significant in order to improve their health outcomes, and life opportunities as well as enhance their happiness and well-being (Alderson et al., 2020). Most of these children have experienced multiple adverse events, which increases their risk of mental health problems, early substance abuse as well as poor educational and health outcomes. This is the reason that a large number of looked-after children receive mental healthcare and access mental health services, while they are under the care of local authorities. Alderson et al. (2020) further informed that children who enter care are screened for physical and mental health needs. However, there are various unforeseen complexities that influence the progress and outcomes of these children. Lobatto (2021) identified the range of activities and interventions adopted by the local authorities to address the mental health needs of the looked-after children. However, evidence has shown that these children still experience the poor transition to adulthood, experience anxiety and depression and also have substance abuse problems when they leave care (Teyhan, Wijedasa & Macleod, 2018). Therefore, assessing the experience of children who leave care is important to understand their experience of assessing mental health services while being under care.

2. Aims & Objectives

Aim:

1. The primary aim of this research is to understand the impact of receiving mental health care in care on the quality of life of children after leaving care.

Objectives:

1. To explore the impact of out-of-home care on looked after children.
2. To critically evaluate the mental health service experience of children in out-of-home care and its impact on their mental well-being.
3. To evaluate the impact on children's quality of life, when they leave care homes.

Research Question:

"What is the impact on quality of life of looked after children receiving mental healthcare, when they are out of care?"

3. Ethics

For conducting this research, ethical approval was taken from the Ethics Board of the University. Ethics could also be considered as the moral principles that guide the particular research and support maintaining the confidentiality and privacy of data and cause no moral harm in terms of evidence and data included in the research (Moriña, 2021). However, further ethical principles have also guided this research work. Some of the main ethical issues associated with the qualitative review include the conflict of interest and representation of the data (Roth & Von Unger, 2018). Thus, while including evidence from the studies in this research, it was ensured that data is included from the articles that display no conflict of interest and are available with free access. Confidentiality is considered the main ethical principle in conducting research Suri (2020).

However, as this is not primary research, confidentiality does not affect the data, yet the researcher has placed due focus on not including any names or personal information of any participant while collecting evidence from primary research (Suri, 2020). To ensure the appropriate representation of the evidence, the names of the scholars are properly cited in the in-text citation and bibliography. Another ethical problem that could affect qualitative research is the interpretation of the findings, as over-interpretation or misinterpretation of

data could impact the validity of the results (Gough, Oliver & Thomas, 2017). Therefore, reasonable care was taken while interpreting the evidence, while preventing any personal biases in information representation.

4. Methods

4.1 Methodology

This chapter will present the comprehensive search strategy that is adopted for conducting this review. This paper is about conducting a systematic review that is also found to be a popular methodology for conducting healthcare research. According to Ahmed and Ishtiaq (2021), systematic literature reviews have a very significant place in health research, because they allow the systematic collecting of evidence, as well as their systematic analysis and synthesis. For this research work, it is important to understand the perspective of the looked-after children, when they receive mental healthcare, and the impact of such mental healthcare on their quality of life, when they leave care. Thus, for this purpose appropriate search terms were identified.

Systematic reviews are specifically aimed at identifying, evaluating and summarising the evidence from the individual research conducted in the field, thus, allowing researchers to understand and evaluate the available knowledge (South & Lorenc, 2020). Secondly, it is also identified that systematic reviews allow for synthesising the primary evidence and help in developing evidence-based knowledge and learning (South & Lorenc, 2020). However, Owens (2021) has argued some significant limitations of the literature review, such as informational biases, personal biases of the researcher and risk of the conflict of interest and confidentiality of information. To overcome these limitations in this systematic review, the researcher has considered various ethical and regulatory principles to present optimal quality evidence by preventing any personal biases.

Systematic reviews typically start with a well-developed and well-guided research statement or research question (Muka et al., 2020). The first step in the research is to develop a comprehensive question based on PICO (population, intervention, comparison and outcome) framework. The PICO framework is identified to be highly significant in terms of providing a systematically developed research question (Doleman et al., 2021). Scholars have considered that the PICO framework is also effective in achieving the relevant search results by allowing

identifying the appropriate search terms (Brown, 2020). According to Eriksen and Frandsen (2018), the PICO framework is identified as the most significant systematic approach that helps in developing the research question and also supports in identifying the key themes for developing evidence-based knowledge.

Table 1. PICO Framework

P- Population	Looked After children
I-Intervention	Access to mental health services
C- Context	Children looked after children, children in care
O-Outcome	quality of life after leaving care, or after being out of care

4.2 Search Strategy

Using an appropriate and effective search strategy is highly significant for conducting a high-quality review of available evidence (Denscombe, 2017). For the purpose of selecting appropriate evidence for the research, the hierarchy of the evidence is considered the most suitable approach. The studies that are ranked at the top of the hierarchy of evidence are considered to have a higher level of validity and reliability and also considered to have a high level of generalizability (Kothari and Smith, 2022). Therefore, for the purpose of accessing appropriate and relevant research articles, some of the important databases were searched, which include CINAHL, Scopus, PubMed, Embase, PsychINFO and University library. Therefore, with the help of the appropriate search terms, a systematic review of the literature was conducted. CINAHL is considered the most significant electronic database that provides access to a large number of peer review studies and clinical trials (Hopia & Heikkilä, 2020). However, the major limitation is that it does not always provide free access to all articles and conducting the search on other databases becomes imperative.

5. Results

Figure 1. "Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis"
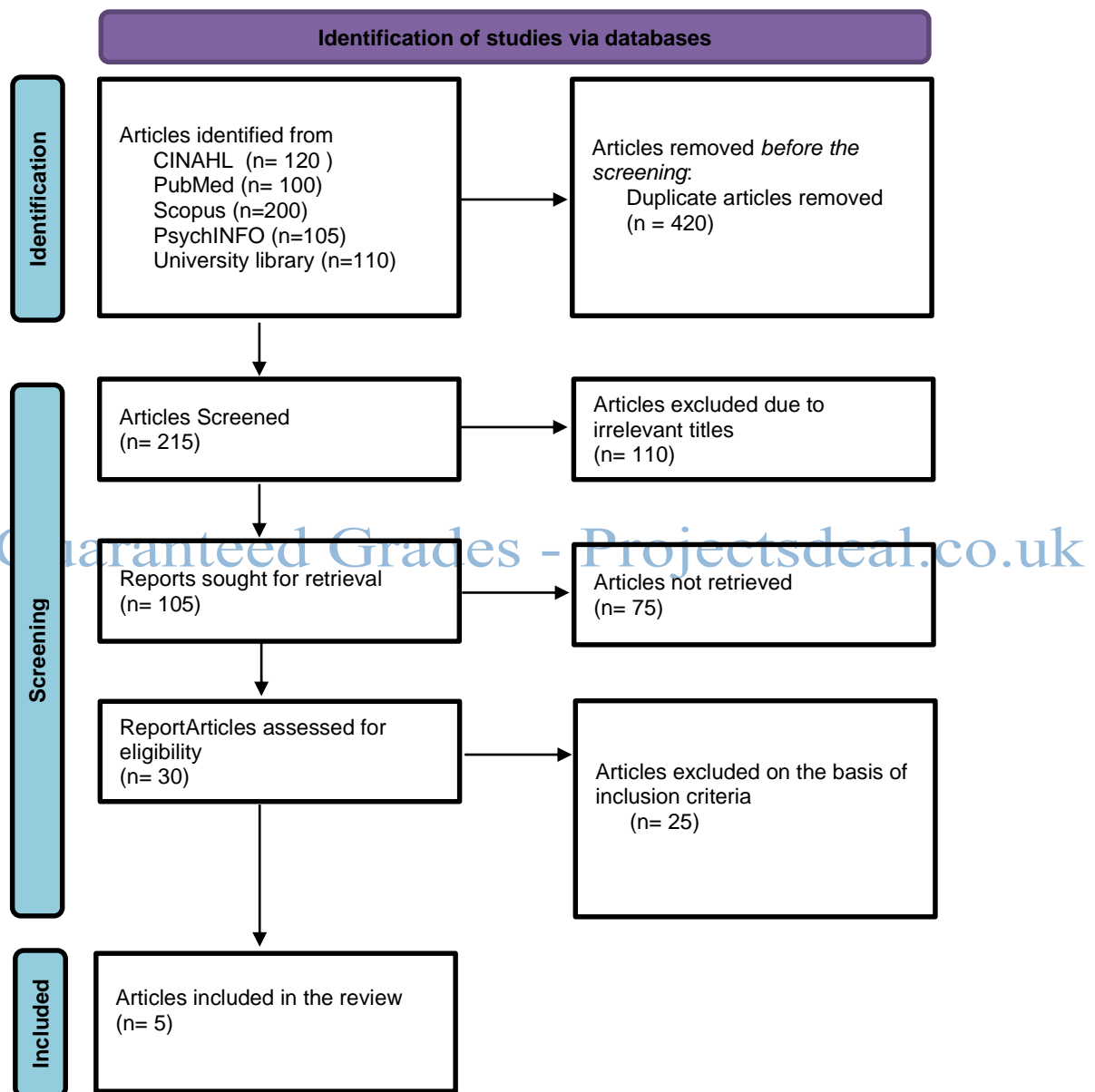
(PRISMA) flow diagram

Table2. Studies Selected

S. No.	Author & Year	Title	Methodology
1	Teyhan, Wijedasa & Macleod (2018)	"Adult psychosocial outcomes of men and women who were looked-after or adopted as children: prospective observational study"	Observational Study
2	Wood & Selwyn (2017)	"Looked after children and young people's views on what matters to their subjective well-being."	Online Questionnaire Survey Research
3	Alderson et al. (2020)	"A pilot feasibility randomised controlled trial of two behaviour change interventions compared to usual care to reduce substance misuse in looked after children and care leavers aged 12-20 years: The SOLID study"	Randomised Control Trial
4	York and Jones (2017)	"Addressing the mental health needs of looked after children in foster care: The experiences of foster carers"	Semi-structured interviews
5	Alderson et al. (2019)	"The key therapeutic factors needed to deliver	Qualitative Semi-structured Interviews

		behavioural change interventions to decrease risky substance use (drug and alcohol) for looked after children and care leavers: a qualitative exploration with young people, carers and front line workers"	

PRISM flow chart informs about the selection of the five important articles that are selected for conducting this systematic review. PRISM approach allowed for eliminating duplicate studies, articles that were not appropriate according to their titles and those that could not meet the inclusion criteria.

6. Discussion

This section will be discussing the findings and the main themes that are identified from the literature. This section will discuss different themes identified from the literature.

6.1 Poor Social & Psychological Outcomes

The first study included in their review is conducted by Teyhan, Wijedasa & Macleod (2018), which is a prospective observational study. Evidence informed that children who have been looked after experience various social and psychological issues when they leave care. This evidence could be associated with the poor quality of life experienced by children leaving care. However, another research included in this review conducted by Wood & Selwyn (2017) informs that despite providing mental healthcare support when they are looked after, such support is not enough in managing their future transition to adulthood due to various situations. For example, 'relationship' is one of the most significant factors that affect the quality of life of children and young people leaving care. Children, who enter care, mainly experience difficult relationships within their family or with their parents, which make it difficult for them to develop future relationships (Gray et al., 2020). This finding is also supported by another study included in this review, which is conducted by Alderson et al.

(2020), who informed that unforeseen complexities related to social and psychological outcomes of looked after children often remain unaddressed while they are in care, but such complexities result in affecting their quality of life in later age. Children and young people could be looked after for a short period or a long period, but despite accessing mental health services, their quality of life upon leaving care is still not clear. Children who grow up with foster parents are often identified to display a higher risk of mental health problems, emotional insecurity, and lack of sense of belonging, which further impact their well-being and quality of life in late adulthood (York & Jones, 2017). When young people are out of care, they experience a lack of financial and social support. Transition to adulthood is also identified to be difficult for them, which further influences their ability to get employment, and have financial stability as well as a stable family (Wood & Selwyn, 2017).

6.2 Substance Abuse Problem Among Care Leavers

Another significant theme identified in the literature is associated with the identification of the higher level of substance abuse problems among children and young people leaving care. For example, Teyhan, Wijedasa & Macleod (2018) identified that 10% of the looked-after children included in the study reported using the substance after leaving care, while a large number of these children smoke tobacco and females had early pregnancies. Some of the earlier research has reported that children and young people leaving care often reported a lack of social and emotional support, which created more instability in life and increased the problem of substance abuse among them (Häggman-Laitila, Salokekkilä and Karki, 2018). Alderson et al. (2020) further informed that the higher prevalence of substance abuse problem among care leavers, increase mental health morbidity and poor quality of life outcomes. Such evidence informs that this problem occurs because of a lack of therapeutic and preventive mental health interventions delivered when children and young people are under care. York and Jones (2017), traumatic past experiences have a significant impact on the future life of individuals. Traumatic separation from parents or families or being subjected to neglect and abuse results in causing mental health difficulties among looked-after children, which further impacts their quality of life when they leave care (Vizard et al., 2018). Earlier research conducted by have argued that the aforementioned factors work in tandem to affect the growth, development, mental health and psychological outcomes of children and young people leaving care, resulting in an increased risk of substance abuse (Simkiss, 2019). Existing literature displays a gap in understanding the association between the experience of

looked after children who access mental health services and their quality of life outcomes after leaving care.

6.3 Lack of Social and Emotional Support For Care Leavers

Another important theme identified in the literature is the poor quality of life of the looked-after children after leaving care who receive mental healthcare during care mainly because they lack social and emotional support. Teyhan, Wijedasa & Macleod (2018) argued that past experience of neglect and abuse impact children's experience during their placement and emotional trauma increase the incidence of mental health problems among them On the contrary, semi-structured interviews conducted by Alderson et al. (2019) identified that neglect, abuse and family breakdown experienced by children before entering under the care of local authorities, have little or no impact on aspects of living arrangements of children entering the care, rather lack of social and emotional support when they leave care is the major reason of their poor quality of life. However, Hiller et al., (2020) refuted this perspective by arguing that children and young people's traumatic experiences may not have an impact on their living arrangements in care, but it significantly influences their mental state and disrupting their normal growth and development, resulting in creating a risk for their future transition to adulthood and their future ability to build relationships. York and Jones (2017) considered in their research that despite getting mental health scanning and mental healthcare support, there remains some gap in understanding the experience of looked after children and young people that disrupt their mental health, and creates distrust and lack of engagement with professional healthcare and social services. Alderson et al. (2020) consider that long-term social, emotional and financial support is required to be provided to care leavers in order to improve their quality of life.

6.4 Gaps in Existing Research

This research identified some important gaps in the existing primary literature. The first gap identified in the existing literature is the lack of studies conducted to understand the personal experience of children who had been in care. Currently, there are very limited studies that provide the personal experience of such children and young people in relation to their quality of life. The second gap identified in the current literature is that studies have been more focused on collecting data from carers, healthcare workers, or foster parents, while the personal experience of the care leavers is more important in order to understand their perspective about their quality of life who have accessed mental healthcare when they were

under care. These are significant to be addressed in order to develop more informed policies and strategies to address the needs of care leavers.

7. Conclusion/Recommendations

This study conducted a systematic review of the literature to understand the experience of looked after children accessing mental health services and the quality of life after leaving care. This study concludes that children and young people who leave care shall be considered as a "difficult to be reached" group of the population, who have various unmet social, emotional and financial needs that further impact their quality of life. This research conducted a systematic review of the literature and identified some important themes, according to which despite children and young people under care receiving mental healthcare support, yet quality of life outcomes after leaving care is very poor. This research concludes that these groups of children and young people have poor social and psychological outcomes, which could be because of the non-targeting mental health interventions as well as the lack of individualised and therapeutic interventions in mental healthcare. Secondly, their quality of life after leaving care remains poor because of unaddressed mental and psychological needs and a lack of guidance and support. Therefore, this study provides the following recommendations:

- Further research should be conducted to collect data directly from the care leavers in order to understand their personal barriers and limitations impacting their quality of life.
- There is a need of conducting more comprehensive research in order to understand the experience of care leavers in relation to the support and services they receive after leaving care and how it might impact their social, emotional and psychological well-being
- Substance abuse is identified as one of the main themes in literature. Therefore, further research can consider the participation of care leavers in the study to understand their problems and their motivation factors to bring change in their quality of life.

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