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To cite this article: Anne-Kirstine Mølholt, Eva D. Sigurðardóttir, Mattias Bengtsson, Veronika Paulsen, Veera Niemi & Freydís J. Freysteinsdóttir (04 Mar 2026): The intersection of leaving out-of-home care and the risk of homelessness: a scoping review, Journal of Social Distress and Homelessness, DOI: [10.1080/10530789.2026.2639320](https://doi.org/10.1080/10530789.2026.2639320)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10530789.2026.2639320>



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Published online: 04 Mar 2026.



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The intersection of leaving out-of-home care and the risk of homelessness: a scoping review

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ABSTRACT

Young people who have been placed with foster parents or in residential care during upbringing are disproportionately represented among young people experiencing homelessness. This international trend has prompted growing attention within social policy and research on the intersection of leaving care and homelessness. This scoping review analyses research published between 2000 and 2024, examining the scope of existing studies, methodologies, definitions, and geographical contexts. Guided by Arksey and O'Malley's five-stage framework, five databases were searched, retrieving 3,983 peer-reviewed articles and publications. After removing duplicates, 2,155 records remained, of which 117 met the inclusion criteria. The findings indicate an increasing focus on the intersection between leaving care and homelessness, with much of the research originating from North America. Quantitative methods dominate the field, and homelessness is most often narrowly defined as rough sleeping, excluding broader definitions such as couch-surfing with friends or family. While awareness of this issue is growing, the review highlights significant variations in definitions and research approaches across geographical contexts. These differences can significantly influence how the challenges of leaving care and the risk of homelessness are understood and addressed in social policy and practice.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 14 March 2025
Revised 23 February 2026
Accepted 26 February 2026

KEYWORDS

Leaving care; homelessness; out-of-home care; scoping review; young people

1. Introduction

Young people leaving out-of-home care are at heightened risk of social and economic marginalization, including overrepresentation among those not in education, employment, or training (NEET), mental health difficulties, limited social networks, and family relationships often characterized by complex social problems (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Gypen et al., 2023; Klodnick et al., 2014; Perez & Romo, 2011). These disadvantages, combined with systemic barriers such as the changeover from child welfare to adult social services, make the transition to independent adulthood particularly precarious for care leavers (Barker et al., 2020; Goyette & Blanchet, 2022; Jones, 2011; Kushel et al., 2007; Nadon, 2020). In this article, the term care leavers refers to young people who, during their upbringing, were placed in out-of-home care by child welfare services, either with foster parents or in residential institutions. The precariousness for care leavers is further compounded by the fact that their transitions to adulthood are often described as “compressed and accelerated” (Stein, 2008), unlike the more gradual and exploratory phase of emerging adulthood experienced by many of their peers (Arnett, 2007).

An essential intersecting inequality characterizing the lives of care leavers is that they are over-represented among young people experiencing homelessness (Mendes et al., 2023; Narendorf et al., 2020; Youngbloom et al., 2022). Research consistently shows that care leavers are at heightened risk of homelessness due to intersecting systemic, structural, and individual factors, including limited post-care support, unstable and expensive housing arrangements, mental health difficulties, and fragile or absent family safety

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nets (Curry & Abrams, 2015; Glynn & Mayock, 2023; Huang et al., 2022; Johnson et al., 2015; Prince et al., 2019; Rome & Raskin, 2019; Tyler & Schmitz, 2013; White et al., 2011). This is an international tendency, although, as this scoping review highlights, research on the intersection of leaving care and homelessness has particularly been concentrated in North America (US and Canada) and has predominantly adopted a quantitative perspective.

The objectives of this scoping review are to examine existing research on the intersection between young people leaving out-of-home care and their risk of homelessness. By mapping the extent, range, and nature of research in this area, the review aims to identify key themes and trends across geographical contexts (Grant & Booth, 2009). Additionally, it seeks to inform future research by highlighting key research areas and gaps in knowledge (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005).

2. Materials and methods

This scoping review is conducted as part of a research project “Exploring homelessness among young care leavers (HACL): Addressing challenges and finding potentials in a Nordic welfare context.” The project brings together six researchers from five Nordic countries: one from Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland, respectively, and two researchers from Iceland. Additionally, a PhD student from Denmark participates in the consortium. Through a life course perspective, the project examines the risk of homelessness among young people leaving out-of-home care. This perspective provides a framework for exploring life courses, transitions, relatedness, and critical moments as interrelated dimensions (Elder, 1994), stressing leaving care and the risk of homelessness as intersecting processes rather than unitary events.

To gain a comprehensive overview of existing knowledge, the review draws on Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) five-stage framework for conducting scoping reviews, designed to ensure a rigorous, transparent, and systematic process for both conducting and presenting findings. The framework comprises:

- (1) Identifying the research question
- (2) Identifying relevant studies
- (3) Study selection
- (4) Charting the data
- (5) Collating, summarizing, and reporting the results.

This scoping review follows these five stages while also incorporating later refinements proposed by Levac et al. (2010), particularly the inclusion of descriptive numerical summary analysis and qualitative thematic analysis.

2.1. Research question

The aims of the review are to identify and synthesize existing research on the intersection between young people leaving out-of-home care and homelessness, and to examine the definitions, methodologies and geographical contexts of the research. These aims are guided by the broader research question; “what characterises existing research on the intersection between young people leaving out-of-home care and homelessness?”

2.2. Identifying relevant studies

During the winter of 2023 and spring of 2024, the research consortium – representing both the field of leaving care as well as the field of homelessness – developed a research protocol with key concepts and search terms; see Table 1. The two main concepts were “care leaver” and “homelessness.”

Regarding “care leaver,” the focus was on young people aged 18–24, reflecting both the typical age at which young people reach legal age and often must leave out-of-home care, and the UN and WHO definition of youth as up to age 24 inclusive (see for example World Health Organization, 1993). Studies were excluded if the population was entirely under 18 – for instance, if the main theme concerned

Table 1. Search terms.

Concept	Keywords
Care leavers	"foster alumni" OR "care leaver*" OR "leav* care" OR "residential care" OR "out-of-home care" OR "out of home care" OR "care experience*" OR "foster care" OR "foster famil*" OR "institutional care" OR "residential institution*" OR "foster child*" OR "substitute care" OR "foster youth" OR "kinship care" OR "state care" OR "public care" OR "societal care" OR "community care" OR "foster home" OR "child welfare" OR "care-experience"
Homelessness	"homeless*" OR "couch surf*" OR "sofa surf*" OR "sofa-surf*" OR "run-away" OR "hous* instab*" OR "couch surf*" OR "couch-surf*" OR "hous* exclusion" OR "roofless*" OR "street experienc*" OR "sleep* rough" OR "rough sleep*" OR "unstable housing"

The search string included the keywords of the two main concepts connected by Boolean "AND." Searches were conducted by the first author in the following databases: ProQuest, Scopus, Web of Science, Ebscohost, and PubMed.

absconding from out-of-home care, resulting in homelessness – or if the primary focus was not specifically on young people but on people experiencing homelessness more generally.

In terms of placement type, young people may have been placed with foster parents or in residential care, with no specific criteria regarding placement duration or setting. Research shows that care leavers frequently experience multiple placements, particularly those characterized by poorer outcomes such as a heightened risk of homelessness (Crane et al., 2013; Dworsky et al., 2013; Farmer et al., 2021; Rome & Raskin, 2019; Tyler & Ray, 2021; Yoshioka-Maxwell & Rice, 2020).

Eligible studies had to be peer-reviewed and published as a journal article, book chapter, book or report, and conducted between 2000 and 2024. Studies were excluded if they did not report original research but merely reviewed or summarized existing work. Further exclusions were made during the eligibility screening process, as outlined in Figure 1, which presents a flow chart of the screening procedure.

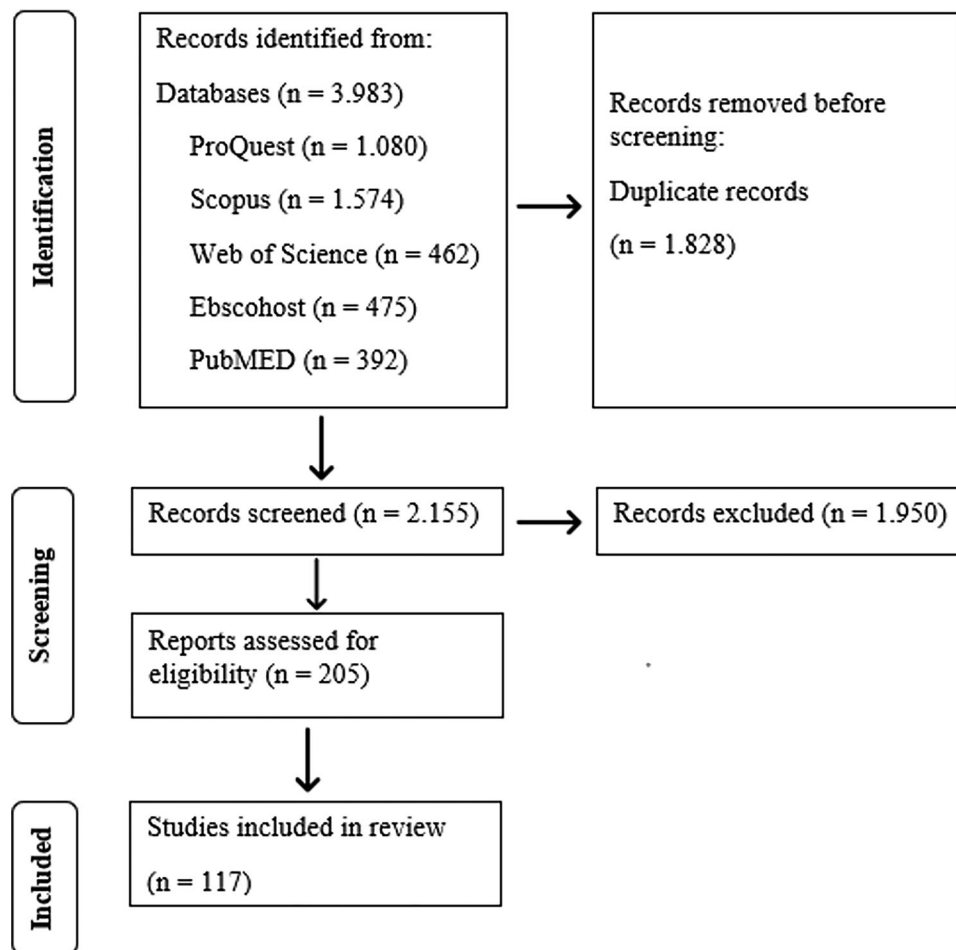


Figure 1. Flow chart of the screening process.

All records retrieved from the databases were imported into Rayyan and checked for duplicates. The remaining 2,155 records were blind-screened, with two researchers (first and second author) independently reviewing all studies before comparing assessments of eligibility. Reasons for exclusion were for example: the study did not address the intersection of leaving care and the risk of homelessness; participants were outside the target age range; the study was a literature review; the publication was inaccessible; or the output was a policy debate paper or a poster summary. Where eligibility was uncertain based on the abstract, the full article was reviewed to reach a decision. Following this initial screening, two further researchers (third and fourth author) joined in a detailed reading of each included study.

2.3. Charting the data

The 205 studies remaining after screening were organized into descriptive categories, including country of origin, methodology, year of study, age group and definition of homelessness. These categories enabled comparison across studies in terms of methodology (e.g. quantitative or qualitative), primary focus (homelessness, care leaving or both) and geographical context (e.g. North America or Europe). Following further eligibility assessment, 117 studies were assessed as relevant. The reference list includes all studies. If literature is in the reference list, but not one of the included studies, the reference is marked with an asterisk (*).

2.4. Collating, summarizing and reporting the results

The charted data addresses the aim of the article: to identify and synthesize existing research on the intersection between young people leaving out-of-home care and homelessness, and to examine the definitions, methodologies, and geographical contexts of the research. The results are presented using descriptive numerical summary analysis and qualitative thematic analysis, as recommended by Levac et al. (2010).

3. Results

The findings of the scoping review are presented in two main sections. The first section, Section 3.1, addresses geographical contexts and methodologies by outlining the descriptive features of the included studies. The second section, Section 3.2, examines the definitions of homelessness, highlighting the considerable variation across studies. Summarizing these characteristics provides insight into research patterns and the priorities and values they reflect, which are discussed in Section 4.

3.1. Descriptive features of the studies

This analytical section examines the geographical contexts and methodologies of the 117 studies found relevant through the screening. An initial analysis of the year(s) in which data were collected shows a clear upward trend. This may reflect increased attention to the vulnerabilities of young people leaving out-of-home care and their risk of homelessness, as well as developments such as the launch of the US database “National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD)” in 2011 as a result of the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (Kelly, 2020). For example, 18% of studies were conducted between 2005 and 2009, rising to 31% in 2010–2014 and 37% in 2015–2019. In the following two sections the geographical context of each study is firstly examined, followed by an analysis of the methodologies employed, also in relation to the geographical context.

3.1.1. Geographical context of the studies

Research on the intersection of leaving care and homelessness is geographically diverse, with studies originating from Ethiopia (Takele & Kotecho, 2020), India (Modi et al., 2020), Australia (see for example Jau et al., 2022; Johnson et al., 2010; Mendes et al., 2023), the UK (see for example Glynn & Mayock, 2023; Loosemore et al., 2021; Simon, 2008), Belgium (Gypen et al., 2022; Gypen et al., 2023; Verstraete et al., 2018), and occasionally cross-nationally (Howard et al., 2023; Milburn et al., 2006). However, as shown in the bar chart in Figure 2, North American studies dominate the field, outnumbering those from other regions in exploring the intersection of leaving care and homelessness.

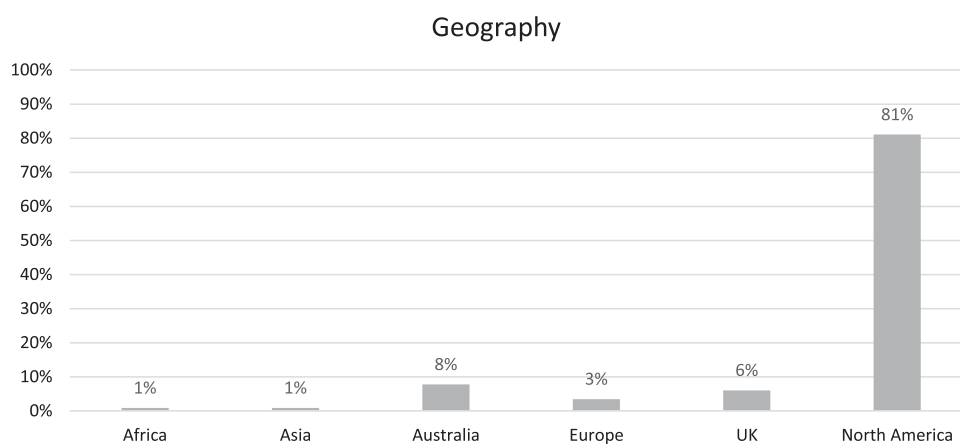


Figure 2. Geographical context of the included studies.

As shown in the bar chart in [Figure 2](#), the geographical distribution of studies reveals two key dynamics shaping the research field. First, welfare contexts strongly shape the relevance and scope of research on the intersection of leaving care and homelessness. Second, the volume of research is influenced by data accessibility. While certain issues resonate across borders, others reflect country-specific objectives and challenges. It is therefore important to acknowledge that much of the existing research arises from particular welfare and situational contexts, which affects its wider applicability. For instance, [Milburn et al. \(2006\)](#) demonstrate that the profiles of young people experiencing homelessness in Australia and the US differ, with implications for the effectiveness of service systems in each country.

These contextual variations are also visible in the types of solutions emphasized regionally ([Bender et al., 2015](#); [Milburn et al., 2006](#)). In North America, independent living programs dominate as the primary policy and practice response when young people leave care (see for example [Curry & Abrams, 2015](#); [Davis & Thibodeau, 2024](#); [Fernandes-Alcantara, 2016](#); [Jones, 2011](#); [Munson et al., 2017](#); [Schelbe et al., 2024](#); [Senteio et al., 2009](#); [Youngbloom et al., 2022](#)). Research on these transitional housing assistance programs often highlights a need for interventions specifically tailored to young people with a care background, rather than generic, one-size-fits-all approaches to all young people facing homelessness ([Bender et al., 2015](#); [Brown & Wilderson, 2010](#); [Curry & Abrams, 2015](#); [Fowler et al., 2019](#)).

The large body of research originating from North America covers a wide range of topics. Some studies focus on specific subgroups of care leavers at risk of homelessness, for example by sexual orientation (see for example [Forge et al., 2018](#); [Robinson, 2018](#); [Santa Maria et al., 2020](#); [Youngbloom et al., 2022](#)) or racial and ethnic background (see for example [Baskin, 2007](#); [Gibbs et al., 2023](#); [Kidd et al., 2019](#); [Perez & Romo, 2011](#); [Watt & Kim, 2019](#)). Others examine topics such as the interplay between leaving care, homelessness and incarceration (see for example [Gibbs et al., 2023](#); [Lee et al., 2023](#); [Lovett & Xue, 2020](#); [Prince et al., 2019](#); [Shpiegel et al., 2022](#); [Simmons-Horton, 2021](#)), the risk of sexually transmitted diseases (see for example [Lim et al., 2017](#); [Santa Maria et al., 2020](#); [Yoshioka-Maxwell & Rice, 2019](#)), mental health and wellbeing ([Ferguson, 2009b](#); [Klodnick et al., 2014](#); [Narendorf et al., 2022](#); [Thompson & Hasin, 2012](#); [Tyler et al., 2018](#); [White et al., 2011](#)), and substance misuse (see for example [DeHart et al., 2021](#); [Thompson & Hasin, 2011](#); [Tyler & Schmitz, 2020](#); [Yoshioka-Maxwell et al., 2014](#); [Yoshioka-Maxwell & Rice, 2017](#)). Cross-sectoral overlaps and collaborative approaches also feature prominently (see for example [Barker et al., 2014](#); [Bowen et al., 2021](#); [Gharabaghi & Stuart, 2010](#); [Kushel et al., 2007](#); [Simmons-Horton, 2021](#); [Yoshioka-Maxwell, 2022](#)).

European research places greater emphasis on the role of family and social capital (see for example [Mayock et al., 2011, 2021](#); [Mullan, 2022](#); [Parker & Mayock, 2019](#); [Simon, 2008](#)), as well as on explorative mapping of how best to support care leavers in education, employment and housing ([Gypen et al., 2022, 2023](#); [Loosemore et al., 2021](#)). While such topics are not absent in the North American studies, the focus there tends to be more quantitative and explanatory, whereas European studies often adopt a more explorative orientation ([Chassman et al., 2020](#); [Lenz-Rashid, 2006](#); [Yoshioka-Maxwell & Rice, 2020](#)).

A common global thread across the research is the evaluation of practices, policies and formal programs. These studies range from assessments of initiatives aimed at the personal development of care leavers to evaluations of the effectiveness of support provided by governmental or non-governmental agencies and policies (see for example Barker et al., 2020; Bergman et al., 2023; Clare et al., 2017; Collins & Curtis, 2011; Fernandes-Alcantara, 2016; Hussein & Cameron, 2014; Nadon, 2020; Senteio et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2022; Yen et al., 2009). Many of these highlight that successful transitions, often contrasted with housing instability or homelessness (see for example Natalier & Johnson, 2012), share a common theme: the experience of being cared for during and after placement. This is reflected in factors such as fewer placement moves, access to therapy while in care, regular visits – particularly in the final year before leaving care – and aftercare programs that both prepared young people for the transition and offered continued support once they had left (Glynn & Mayock, 2023; Gypen et al., 2023; Reilly & Schlinkert, 2024).

3.1.2. Methodological approach to studying the intersection

In terms of methodological approach, the majority of studies are quantitative (see for example Chassman et al., 2020; Curry, 2017; Fowler et al., 2017; Greeno et al., 2019; Tyler & Melander, 2010). In this review, quantitative studies are understood as those based on registers, surveys, or interview data analyzed using statistical methods to describe, summarize, and compare findings (see for example Cazares & Hernández, 2020; Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Ferguson, 2009b). Qualitative studies, by contrast, present findings in non-numeric form and typically rely on interviews, focus groups, or ethnographic methods interpreted through an often textual or narrative analysis (see for example Ferguson, 2009a; Gomez et al., 2015; Lalonde et al., 2021; MacDonald, 2014; Rome & Raskin, 2019). Some studies adopt mixed methods, combining both approaches (see for example Duval & Vincent, 2009; Modi et al., 2020; Narendorf, 2017; Samuels et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2022). Overall, 60% of the included studies are quantitative, 34% qualitative, with the remainder consisting of descriptive accounts of programs and projects. Figure 3 illustrates how the distribution of methodological approaches varies across geographical contexts.

As illustrated in Figure 3, the methodological approach varies markedly across geographical contexts. Studies from North America predominantly adopt a quantitative approach, while those from other regions, particularly the UK, are largely qualitative. These differences appear to be culturally influenced, as policy and research approaches in North America are generally more decentralized, impact-focused and outcome-driven. In contrast, the UK has a more centralized, government-integrated policy-research model, placing stronger emphasis on commissioned research, often incorporating qualitative assessments and multi-agency inspections. This contrast thus highlights not only different research traditions but also the types of knowledge produced. Quantitative studies offer broad insights into mechanisms and prevalence, answering “what” and “how many” questions, whereas qualitative approaches provide deep, contextual understandings of processes and experiences, and thus the possibility of answering “why” questions.

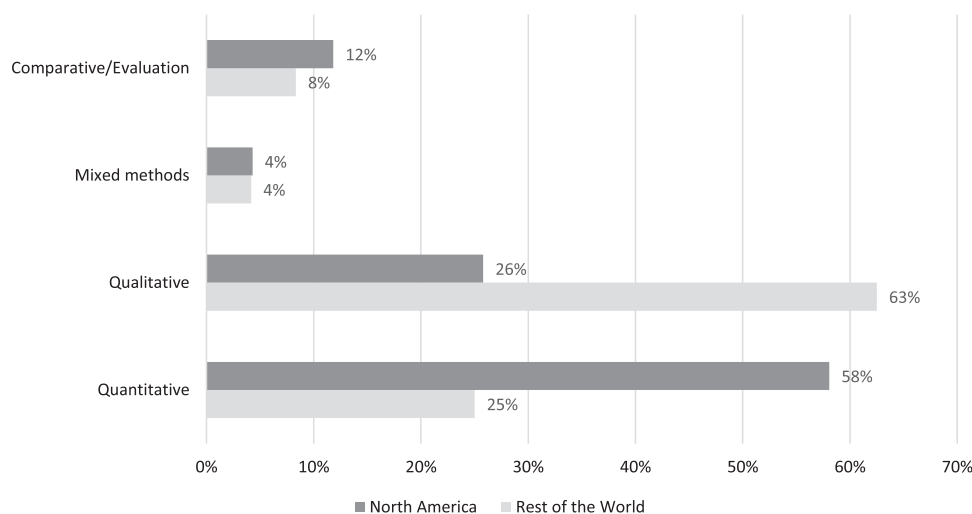


Figure 3. Geographical context and applied methodology.

Notably, almost all UK studies employed qualitative methods, underscoring a strong focus on contextualized, in-depth perspectives. By contrast, studies that compare regions or evaluate programs are almost exclusively conducted in North America or Australia, further underlining the regional orientations in knowledge production.

3.2. The research approach to and definition of homelessness

This section examines how homelessness is defined and addressed in the included studies. For 67 studies (57%), the intersection between leaving care and homelessness is the central theme, focusing on experiences of housing instability, risks of homelessness, or housing pathways after leaving out-of-home care (see for example Barker et al., 2014; Chikwava et al., 2022; Verstraete et al., 2018; Yoshioka-Maxwell, 2023). In the remaining 50 studies (43%), homelessness appears as one among several findings, rather than the primary focus (see for example Gendron et al., 2012; Hernandez & Lee, 2020; Loosemore et al., 2021; MacKenzie et al., 2020; Santa Maria et al., 2015; Tyler, 2006).

A central issue concerns how homelessness itself is defined in the studies. As Kelly (2020) notes, estimates of homelessness among care leavers vary greatly depending on whether definitions focus only on rough sleeping and shelter use or also include unstable housing such as couch surfing. Broader definitions inevitably produce higher prevalence rates, as many young people prefer couch surfing to shelters, which are often regarded “as a last resort” (Kelly, 2020, p. 1). Similarly, Johnson et al. (2015, p. 14) stress that drawing a line “between the housed and the homeless is controversial and so the idea of homelessness remains a contested concept in many parts of the world.” As an alternative, they argue for culturally grounded definitions based on shared community standards. MacKenzie et al. (2020) advance this perspective by outlining three categories of homelessness: “Primary homelessness: rough sleeping, in tents or cars or public facilities; Secondary homelessness: temporary shelter, either couch-surfing or supported accommodation; Tertiary homelessness: boarding house accommodation” (MacKenzie et al., 2020, p. 14). Other scholars expand this further. Orsi-Hunt et al. (2024, p. 36) use the term houselessness and emphasize that “Increasingly, housing insecurity has been conceptualised as a spectrum, with “homelessness” at one end and “stable, safe, adequate, and affordable housing” at the other” and they continue “So, even if a young adult is not fully unhoused, they may still be experiencing a degree of housing insecurity or instability.” Crane et al. (2013, p. 42) emphasize “felt homelessness,” or the subjective experience of not having a home – something that care leavers may carry with them from their time in care.

To capture this variation, the included studies were charted according to whether they applied a narrow or broad definition of homelessness. Narrow definitions restrict homelessness to rough sleeping, shelters, or formal housing services (see for example Rosenberg & Kim, 2018; Shah et al., 2017), sometimes explicitly excluding couch surfing and classifying it instead as unstable housing (see for example Santa Maria et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2023; Yen et al., 2009). Curry and Abrams (2015, p. 147) state in this regard that “the estimates of homelessness among former foster youth typically do not account for those who are informally or temporarily housed by staying a short period with a succession of friends, better known as couch-surfing.” In contrast, broad definitions of homelessness include couch surfing and not having a fixed address (see for example Combs et al., 2018; Fowler et al., 2009; Glynn & Mayock, 2023; Greeson et al., 2020; Hudson & Nandy, 2012; Schmitz & Tyler, 2015). This broader definition of homelessness is sometimes in research presented as “hidden homelessness.” FEANTSA, the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless, underscores that the hidden and invisible form of homelessness is important to include in a definition of homelessness as

Hidden homelessness tends to be more prevalent among women, youth, LGTBI, victims of domestic abuse, and people living in rural and smaller communities. As a consequence, people experiencing long-term homelessness are over-represented in many measuring exercises and especially in point-in-time counts (Develtere, 2022, p. 9).

Overall, 42% of the included studies apply a narrow definition of homelessness, while 35% use a broad one. For the remaining 22% of the studies, the definition was unclear or implicit (see for example Villagrana et al., 2020). In a study by Heyman et al. (2020), it is stated that “Key questions were designed to explore how participants experienced the foster care system, particularly in areas such as education, employment,

housing, and homelessness, which can present significant challenges for young people transitioning out of care.” However, the text does not clarify how questions about homelessness were framed or which approach the definition of homelessness was based on.

3.2.1. Defining homelessness and methodology

It is valuable to examine how definitions of homelessness intersect with the methodological approaches employed in the studies. As illustrated in Figure 4, quantitative studies are more likely to adopt a narrow definition of homelessness, whereas qualitative studies more often apply a broader one.

The findings presented in Figure 4 are not unexpected. As stressed earlier, many quantitative studies originate from North America. They draw on administrative data or recruitment from shelters, drop-in centers, or housing programs designed for young people experiencing homelessness. A prominent example is the frequent use of the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) in US-based research (see for example Crawford et al., 2015; Gibbs et al., 2023; Kelly, 2020; Prince et al., 2019; Rosenberg & Kim, 2018; Schelbe et al., 2024; Shpiegel et al., 2020; Watt & Kim, 2019). The NYTD’s Outcomes File Codebook defines homelessness as a situation in which a young person ““had no regular or adequate place to live.” The definition “includes situations where the youth is living in a car or on the street, or staying in a homeless or other temporary shelter” (Kelly, 2020, pp. 3–4).

4. Discussion

The aim of this scoping review was to identify and synthesize existing research on the intersection between young people leaving out-of-home care and homelessness, while also exploring the definitions, methodologies, and geographical contexts of the studies. Care leavers exemplify the precariousness of the transition from care to independent living. As Johnson et al. (2010, p. 2) note, “Care leavers are among the most vulnerable populations in our society – they have limited economic and social resources to draw on and consequently accessing and maintaining accommodation is one of the most difficult tasks confronting care leavers.” Structural barriers in housing markets disproportionately affect young people (Johnson et al., 2010; Perez & Romo, 2011; Verstraete et al., 2018). Limited financial resources, high unemployment rates, and age-related discrimination create significant barriers to stable housing. For care leavers, these difficulties are compounded by the absence of familial safety nets and limited social capital. The private rental market, often the default entry point for young people beginning their housing journeys, is particularly inaccessible to care leavers due to landlords’ scepticism about their financial reliability and lack of rental history (Johnson et al., 2010).

The findings of the review emphasize four central findings. First, there is a growing focus on the intersection between leaving out-of-home care and the risk of homelessness. Second, the majority of studies originate from North America. Third, most studies employ quantitative methodologies. Fourth, most studies adopt a narrow definition of homelessness. These findings are interconnected, as large-scale administrative

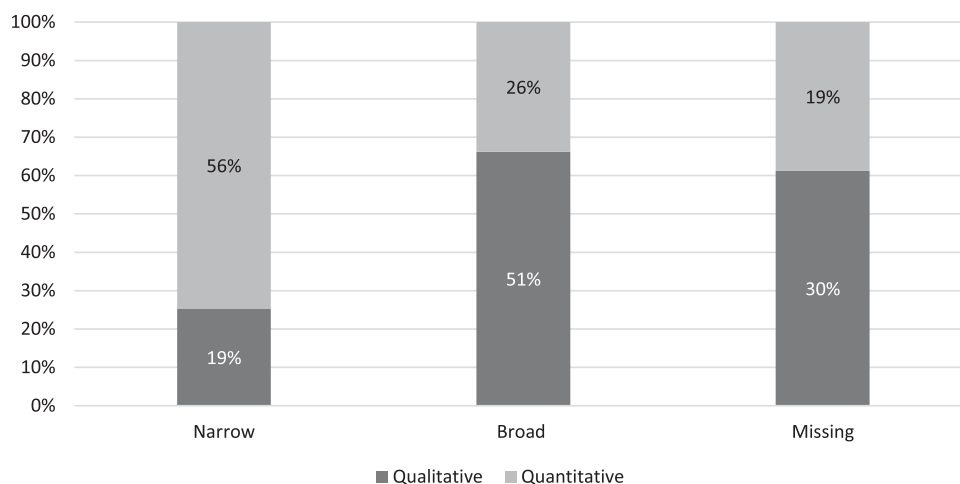


Figure 4. Methodological approach and the definition of homelessness.

data collections, such as the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD), both enable and shape the research focus. Such datasets provide opportunities for broad insights into subgroups and comparative analyses. However, definitional choices and data limitations also shape what can be known. For instance, concerns have been raised about the NYTD's restricted item lists and high dropout rates, which vary across states and may result in underreporting of homelessness (Kelly, 2020; Prince et al., 2019; Rosenberg & Kim, 2018; Shpiegel et al., 2020; Watt & Kim, 2019).

Closely connected to the large-scale data possibilities is the key finding that studies from North America not only dominate in number but also cover the widest range of topics within the field. Yet these studies, particularly quantitative ones, typically rely on narrow definitions of homelessness. Such definitional choices significantly influence the interpretation of findings and, ultimately, shape policy and practice. Awareness of these methodological and conceptual differences is therefore critical. As Fernandes-Alcantara (2016) observes, inconsistent definitions and methodologies contribute to disparities in how homelessness is understood and addressed across contexts. The operationalization of homelessness as a cultural standard in Australia illustrates how shared community benchmarks can inform effective policy responses (Johnson et al., 2015; MacKenzie et al., 2020). However, it also highlights the challenges of applying these benchmarks universally, given cultural and economic diversity across contexts.

To adequately support young people transitioning out of care, it is essential to consider their lived experiences and apply a life course perspective. Narrow definitions of homelessness and datasets limited to cross-sectional or short-term measures risk treating homelessness as a discrete and isolated event, detached from the trajectories, contexts and transitions that precede and follow it. A life course perspective instead situates homelessness within the broader pathways of young people's lives, recognizing how earlier experiences, linked lives, and future aspirations interact with housing outcomes. Understanding homelessness among care leavers requires attention to its multifaceted and dynamic nature. Homelessness extends beyond the absence of shelter to encompass a continuum of housing instability, including precarious arrangements such as couch surfing, transitional housing, and short-term rentals. A broader, more inclusive definition of homelessness is necessary if policies and services are to reflect lived realities. Moreover, housing instability is deeply interwoven with other developmental challenges. As Curry and Abrams (2015) note, housing insecurity disrupts young people's ability to pursue education and employment, creating a cycle in which these barriers reinforce one another. Care leavers are often forced to prioritize immediate housing needs over long-term goals, such as higher education or stable career paths. This reciprocal relationship between housing instability and psychosocial outcomes, as emphasized by Fowler et al. (2009), underscores the complexity of addressing homelessness. It also reinforces the value of a life course perspective, which highlights interdependencies across domains and over time. Supported housing programs could help bridge this gap, yet provision remains limited and frequently constrained by eligibility requirements, signaling the need for flexible, tailored, and developmentally attuned interventions.

5. Limitations

It has not been within the scope of this article to examine the risk and protective factors associated with young people leaving out-of-home care and their risk of homelessness. Additionally, while this article has focused on definitions of homelessness and how these definitions relate to geographical contexts, it has not explored how studies conceptualize "out-of-home care." In this respect, it remains unclear whether certain care settings may heighten the risk of homelessness for young people transitioning out of care. A cross-country comparison could provide valuable insight into how risk and protective factors, as well as the role of specific care settings, are shaped by broader welfare policy contexts, the availability of support, and the infrastructures in place for care leavers.

6. Future directions

The evolving body of research on young people experiencing homelessness, particularly those with a care background, points to the importance of longitudinal and context-sensitive approaches (Collins & Curtis, 2011). While these studies have advanced our understanding of housing trajectories and the impact of policy interventions, they also reveal critical gaps. For instance, there is a need for theoretical contributions as

well as a deeper exploration of housing instability as a normative experience for young people entering the housing market, often characterized by frequent moves and volatility. Understanding the reasons behind such mobility and its developmental implications remains a crucial area for future research. Additionally, an examination of risk and protective factors associated with young people leaving care and their risk of homelessness is an important topic for further research, particularly when approached from a life course perspective, which highlights how risks and protections are not fixed but evolve over time in relation to earlier experiences and future opportunities. Reviews of research on aftercare services and transitional housing programs are also essential for advancing knowledge of the most effective ways to support young people leaving care and to reduce their risk of homelessness.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, homelessness among young people, particularly those transitioning from care, is a complex and multifaceted issue shaped by structural, cultural, and individual factors. Addressing this issue requires the adoption of a broad definition of homelessness that acknowledges the continuum of housing instability and its interconnections with other life domains, viewed through a life course perspective. Such an approach allows homelessness to be understood not as a single, static event, but as part of a trajectory shaped by past experiences and influencing future opportunities.

Fernandes-Alcantara (2016) highlights that many young people avoid traditional shelters, instead relying on informal and transient arrangements that escape conventional measures of homelessness. This complicates efforts to count and support young people experiencing homelessness effectively, as traditional data collection methods often overlook these less visible populations. The cultural definition of homelessness applied in Australian research (Johnson et al., 2015) provides a nuanced framework by distinguishing between primary, secondary, and tertiary forms of homelessness. These categorisations can guide targeted interventions by recognizing that the needs of young people in transitional housing differ from those who are sleeping rough or couch surfing.

Expanding the definition of homelessness in this way can help ensure that policies and services address the full spectrum of housing challenges faced by care leavers and other young people, both at a particular point in time and across their life course. Such an approach highlights the importance of shifting needs and circumstances, and of developing interventions that are sensitive to the dynamic, evolving nature of young people's housing trajectories.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by NordForsk through the funding to Exploring homelessness among young care leavers: Addressing challenges and finding potentials in a Nordic welfare context, project number 151687

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