

Care-experienced children and the criminal justice system. A systematic review of their perceptions and the professionals who work with them. (Children and Youth Services Review)

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ABSTRACT

The ongoing overrepresentation of care-experienced children within the criminal justice system remains a concern; understanding their pathways into and through the system is essential to developing more effective and informed responses. This systematic review aimed to *meta-synthesise* the literature on care-experienced children's journeys into and through the criminal justice system, drawing on the perspectives of the children and professionals who work with them. This review was pre-registered on Open Science Framework. Four electronic databases were searched on 14th August 2024. Inclusion criteria required studies to have a qualitative component exploring the perceptions of care-experienced individuals and/or professionals on the journeys of care-experienced children within the criminal justice system. Selected grey literature was included. Quantitative studies and studies focused only on children who entered care after criminal justice involvement were excluded. Twenty-six studies (21 datasets; $n = 819$ participants; 24 qualitative, two mixed methods) met the inclusion criteria. All studies were quality assessed using the CASP (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme). The quality of studies varied, with 24 not reporting on the researcher-participant relationship. Thematic synthesis identified five themes: 1) the search for belonging, 2) unresolved trauma, 3) systemic challenges fuel the criminalisation of care-experienced children, 4) fitting in a box: a limited view of care-experienced children, and 5) the complexity of intersectionality. A limitation of this study was the substantial absence of participant characteristic data across included studies. Limitations of the CASP tool for mixed-methods and grey literature were discussed. Recommendations included promoting trauma-informed approaches, belonging, and reducing unnecessary police involvement.

1. Introduction

Terminology describing children who are not living with their birth parents varies internationally, with terms such as children in out-of-home care and children in state custody. In this paper, care-experienced children are defined as children who have been placed in the care of local authorities (the local government responsible for local services) (Department for Education, 2023). Care-experienced children may live in the care of foster carers, kinship carers with relatives, or residential care settings.

In March 2023, 83,840 children were under the care of local authorities in England, a figure that continues to rise annually (Department

for Education, 2023). The primary reasons for a child entering care are abuse and neglect (65%) and family dysfunction (13%), while up to 1% of children enter care due to socially unacceptable behaviour (Department for Education, 2023). These statistics highlight the vulnerability of these children, whose entry into care more often reflects adverse life circumstances than behavioural issues. Unfortunately, the support provided to these children often inadequately addresses these pre-care vulnerabilities (Roberts, 2007; Simkiss, 2019).

Care-experienced children face significant life challenges (Bakketeig et al., 2020), including a higher likelihood of unemployment (Harrison et al., 2022), poorer educational outcomes (Sebba & Luke, 2019), and increased rates of mental health problems (Dubois-Comtois et al., 2021)

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compared to their non-care-experienced peers. Although most care-experienced children are not involved in the criminal justice system, they are overrepresented in it, a pattern seen in the UK (Bateman et al., 2018) and internationally, including Australia (Gerard et al., 2018), Sweden (Vinnerljung & Sallnäs, 2008) and the United States (Yang et al., 2021). In England, 33% of care-experienced children aged 10–17 have had contact with youth justice services, compared to 4% of those without care experience (Hunter et al., 2023). Additionally, the Office for National Statistics (2022) reports that 52% of care-experienced children (born in 1994) registered to a school in England had a criminal conviction by age 24, compared to 13% of those not care-experienced.

Research has explored the factors that may contribute to the overrepresentation of care-experienced children in the criminal justice system. One explanation focuses on the shared risk factors between care-experienced children and justice-involved children, including truancy, drug use, mental health difficulties, abuse, neglect and poor educational outcomes (Darker et al., 2008; McFarlane, 2018). These shared characteristics may predispose care-experienced children to a higher risk of offending, suggesting that their overrepresentation in the criminal justice system is connected to factors independent of their care environment. Another explanation focuses on the external factors tied to being care-experienced, such as instability from multiple placement moves, poor placement matching, increased risk of criminal and sexual exploitation, and being out of full-time education, all of which can precipitate or perpetuate offending behaviour (Baidawi et al., 2020; Hayden, 2010). Moreover, some systemic factors can help or hinder care-experienced children. Relationships with staff and peers and variations in staff training, practices, and policies can positively or negatively shape behaviours (Shaw, 2014).

The concept of “care-criminalisation” (MacFarlane, 2018) captures how the care environment can foster conditions that lead to involvement with the criminal justice system. Specifically, the lack of de-escalation training for care staff can result in an over-reliance on the police to manage children’s behaviours. This can result in care-experienced children interacting with the criminal justice system for behaviours that would not be criminalised in non-care settings (e.g. going missing) (Colvin et al., 2018; Staines, 2017), shaping negative police perceptions of the children (Baidawi & Ball, 2022).

Navigating the criminal justice system is particularly difficult for care-experienced children, who receive inadequate support in attending court, engaging with lawyers and fulfilling community orders (Baidawi & Ball, 2022). Once in the criminal justice system, care-experienced children encounter experiences which differ from those of their non-care peers. They are less likely to be granted bail by the police and more likely to be remanded into custody (McFarlane, 2018). McFarlane’s (2018) research highlighted that some professionals advocate for care-experienced children remaining in custody to provide ‘protection’ to the children, a concerning perspective, given that custody is not designed to provide protective care.

The existing literature emphasises the need to address the intersecting individual, family, community, and systemic factors to understand the over-representation of care-experienced children in the criminal justice system (Schofield et al., 2014). Therefore, it is beneficial to explore multiple explanations and refrain from oversimplifying what is likely a complex interplay of various factors.

1.1. The research study

The journeys of care-experienced children entering the criminal justice system are unique and multifaceted. Researchers have increasingly turned to qualitative research to explore and make sense of these experiences. While quantitative data provides valuable statistics on the overrepresentation of care-experienced children in the criminal justice system, it is through qualitative research that the complexities of their journeys can be understood. Research has started to examine the

interactions and experiences of those directly involved. However, the viewpoints of care-experienced children and professionals are often studied in isolation, leading to missed opportunities for an integrated understanding of these perspectives.

Therefore, this systematic review aims to conduct a meta-synthesis of the qualitative literature on the journeys of care-experienced children in and through the criminal justice system, drawing on both the perspectives of the children and the professionals who work with them. A thematic synthesis will allow for an in-depth exploration of these experiences, a novel and important contribution.

2. Method

This review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA; Page et al., 2021) reporting guidelines (Appendix A). The protocol for this systematic review was pre-registered on the Open Science Framework (OSF) on 29 November 2023 and assigned a digital object identifier (DOI) (removed for anonymity). Amendments were made to the registration due to changes to the search strategy and data extraction details.

2.1. Search strategy

Based on their relevance to the research objectives, four electronic databases (PsycINFO, Applied Social Sciences Index, Social Policy and Practice and CINAHL plus) were searched on 14th August 2024. Grey literature was captured by retaining all unpublished and non-peer-reviewed material indexed within the databases searched, which included reports, dissertations, and policy documents. No separate searches for grey literature were conducted. Due to the vast synonym variability for the criminal justice system and care-experienced children, MeSH (Medical Subject Headings) terms could not cover all possible terms. Therefore, the first author created a free text search, with support from the university librarian team and guided by the SPIDER (Sample, Phenomenon of Interest, Design, Evaluation, Research type) tool (Cooke et al., 2012). This increased search sensitivity by capturing studies that used newer or non-standard terminology, including those not yet indexed with MeSH. Structuring the search with Boolean operators maintained specificity, limiting irrelevant results whilst maintaining coverage. The search strategy is presented in Appendix B. No limits were applied to the search strategy. Citation chaining (backwards and forwards) of key papers was a supplementary search strategy to capture additional papers.

2.2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The eligibility criteria (see Table 1) were developed using the SPIDER tool (Cooke et al., 2012) as guidance. Studies were included if they a) consisted of a sample of participants with care-experience or/and professionals who work with them, b) included a focus on the interactions between care-experienced children and the criminal justice system, c) explored the participants’ perceptions and experiences, and d) were qualitative in nature or mixed-methods.

Studies were excluded if they lacked a qualitative component or were published in a language other than English. Studies that focused exclusively on the experiences of children who entered care after or due to justice involvement were excluded (e.g., remand care). Remand care is when a young person is placed in the care of local authorities while awaiting trial or sentencing. This review focused on possible pathways from care to custody; therefore, remand care did not meet the inclusion criteria. Articles were excluded if they contained perspectives from individuals outside the inclusion or exclusion criteria, or if the reviewer could not distinguish data or interpretations from such participants.

Books, editorials, commentaries, and letters were excluded from this review to maintain a focus on empirical research that directly reflected individuals’ perceptions and experiences. These sources often provide

Table 1
Inclusion and exclusion criteria.

	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Sample	Care-experienced individuals (including care leavers) who have interacted with the criminal justice system. Professionals who engage in a profession which interacts with the potential care to custody pathway.	Participants who became care-experienced after their involvement in the criminal justice system.
Phenomenon of Interest	The pathways of care-experienced children involved with the criminal justice system.	
Design Evaluation	(N/A -see Research Type) The perceptions and experiences of participants.	
Research Type	Qualitative, mixed methods, grey literature	No qualitative component Published in a non-English language Books (including chapters), editorials, commentaries and letters. Duplicate dissertations

secondary analysis or opinion rather than firsthand data, which may not

accurately capture the perceptions and experiences of those involved. Dissertations were removed in the full-text (final) screening if the published article was included. See Fig. 1 for the review selection and screening process.

Identified articles from the search were imported into Rayyan (Ouzzani et al., 2016), and duplicates were initially removed. The primary researcher screened all literature (including grey literature) in two parts, firstly by title and abstract and secondly by full text. To ensure the screening process of this review was reliable, a second reviewer (JC) independently screened 10% of the titles and abstracts (483) and 10% of full-text articles (9). Agreement between raters was moderate (99%, kappa = 0.75), and disagreements were resolved through discussion.

2.3. Quality evaluation

Although both qualitative and mixed-methods studies were included, the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) (CASP, 2024) was used to assess study quality. This decision was made because the primary focus was on qualitative data, and therefore, there was a need for in-depth analysis of those qualitative aspects. The lead researcher independently rated the included studies. Due to the absence of a summary scoring system in the CASP (Long et al., 2020), a numerical scale was utilised (No = 0, Partially Met = 0.5, Yes = 1). An item was defined as ‘Yes’ if the item met the criteria, ‘Partially Met’ if the criteria

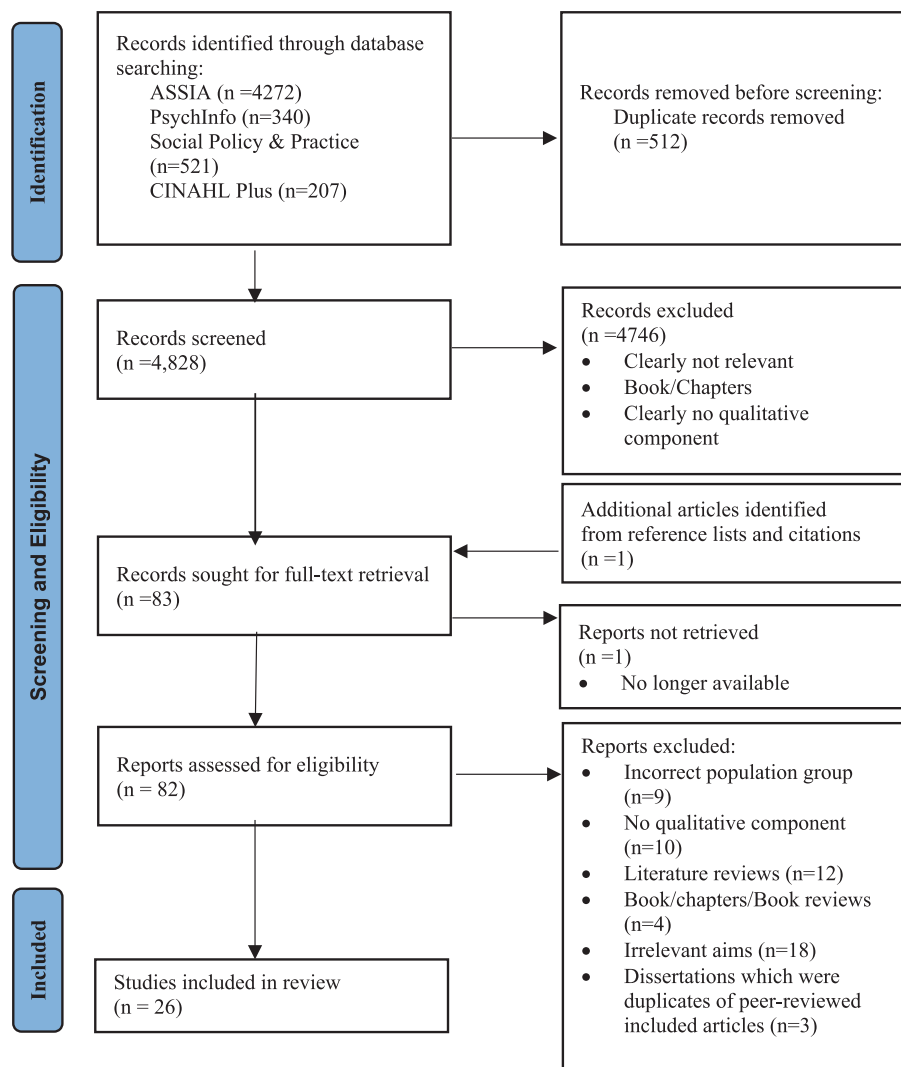


Fig. 1. Flow diagram of the selection and screening process.

were addressed but lacked sufficient detail (e.g. unclear recruitment processes or partially missing information) and 'No' if the criteria was not met. Overall, the quality of each study was then categorised based on the total of all CASP item scores. A CASP score of >8-10 was classed as high quality, 6-8 was moderate, and <6 was classified as low. To assess the reliability of quality assessment ratings, 20% of the papers (n = 5) were rated by a second reviewer (JC). There was moderate agreement (84%, kappa = 0.61) between raters. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved through discussion.

2.4. Data extraction

The first author conducted the data extraction in its entirety. The following data were extracted: author, year, country, publication type, study title, sample characteristics, recruitment method, data collection method, analysis, and key findings. Direct quotations and the author's interpretation, presenting the views or experiences of the research population, were also extracted. For peer-reviewed articles, data were extracted from the findings sections, but not from the discussion sections.

2.5. Data synthesis

The data were synthesised using the three stages of thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008), using NVivo (Lumivero, 2024). Thematic synthesis was selected for its effectiveness in integrating findings from multiple qualitative studies, enhancing overall understanding (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Repeated themes across articles within the same dataset were categorised as a single analytic unit during synthesis to prevent findings from being incorrectly amplified. The process began with repeated reading of the raw data to build familiarity, followed by developing initial codes (line-by-line coding). In the second stage, inductive coding was refined to generate new codes grouped into descriptive themes. The final stage identified conceptual links between codes and themes, resulting in analytical themes. Appendix C presents the thematic synthesis process.

Greater weight was assigned to higher quality studies, ensuring that more robust studies strongly influenced the synthesis outcome. Specifically, when comparable codes were identified across studies of differing methodological quality, findings from higher quality studies were prioritised in defining codes and informing interpretation. During theme refinement, themes supported mainly by higher quality studies were given greater analytical prominence and explored in more depth, while themes emerging primarily from lower quality studies were retained to capture conceptual breadth but interpreted cautiously and given less analytical emphasis.

2.6. Reflexivity

All researchers had professional experience with care-experienced children and the criminal justice system. These experiences could have influenced the review process, especially during the synthesis phase.

Clear inclusion and exclusion criteria were established during the screening phase to limit the influence of professional perspectives on study selection, and an independent second reviewer enhanced the reliability of this process. During synthesis, the team remained aware that professional experience could predispose them to emphasise themes relating to their own experiences and beliefs. To address this, the frequency of references to each theme across studies was taken into consideration to ensure that themes reflected patterns present in the literature rather than potential researcher bias.

Petticrew and Roberts (2005) suggest that such experiences may lead to confirmation bias, where reviewers emphasise evidence supporting their preconceptions while discounting conflicting findings, particularly in sensitive areas like criminal justice and care-experienced populations. This could result in conclusions that reflect the researcher's experiences

more than the literature. To moderate these biases, the team maintained reflective logs, engaged in regular supervision meetings, and revisited the data, ensuring that counter-narratives and neutral interpretations were considered. For example, positive interactions within support systems were less prominent in the synthesis, prompting reflection on whether this reflected the literature, the voices prioritised in included studies, or potential influence from the team's previous and current professional experiences.

3. Results

3.1. Study characteristics

A total of 26 studies from 21 datasets were included, with some studies sharing the same dataset. For ease of reading, the study characteristics are presented in three separate tables based on participant groups: professionals (Table 2), care-experienced individuals (Table 3), and both cohorts (Table 4). Sample sizes ranged from four to 117 participants, with a total combined sample size of 819. Four sets of articles reported data from the same data set (Shaw, 2011; Shaw, 2014; Shaw, 2017), (Day, 2017; Day et al., 2023), (Fitzpatrick et al., 2022; Fitzpatrick et al., 2024) and (Ball & Baidawi, 2021; Baidawi & Ball, 2022) (see Table 5).

Studies were conducted in the United Kingdom (n = 17), Australia (n = 5), and the United States of America (n = 4). Six of the 26 studies were presented as grey literature; the remaining 20 were peer-reviewed, published articles. Eleven studies focused on specific characteristics of care-experienced children, women and girls (n = 6), race and ethnicity (n = 4), and intellectual disability (n = 1).

Nine of the 26 included studies did not report any demographic (gender, age or ethnicity) information (Baidawi & Ball, 2022; Fitzpatrick, 2022; Gerard et al., 2019; Howard League for Penal Reform, 2018; Hunter, 2022; Mendes, et al., 2014; Prison Reform Trust, 2016; Shaw, 2017; Shaw & Greenhow, 2021). Of the studies recruiting professional participants (n = 17), six reported on gender (range: female, 6-27; male, 2-28), three reported on age (range: 26-69) and four reported on ethnicity. Of the studies recruiting care-experienced individuals (n = 15), 13 reported on gender (range: female, 3-54; male, 4-62), 12 reported on age (range: 13-58) and 10 reported on ethnicity.

Twenty-four studies were qualitative, and two were mixed methods (Day et al., 2020; Hunter, 2022). Twenty-five studies included interviews and/or focus groups, and one study did not specify the data collection method (Howard League for Penal Reform, 2018). Analytical approaches included thematic analysis (n = 10), analytic induction techniques (n = 1), inductive content analysis (n = 1), grounded theory (n = 2), inductive reasoning approach (n = 1), framework analysis (n = 2), identification of recurring themes (n = 1) with eight not specifying a named analysis (Agenda Alliance for Women and Girls at Risk, 2022; Fitzpatrick et al., 2022; Flores et al., 2018; Gooch et al., 2022; Howard League for Penal Reform, 2018; Hunter, 2022; Prison Reform Trust, 2016; Simmons-Horton et al., 2023).

Ten of the studies focused on professional perceptions, nine on care-experienced individuals' perceptions and seven included the perceptions of both cohorts. No criteria were set regarding publication date, but studies ranged from 2011 to 2024.

3.2. Methodological appraisal

Using the CASP, all 26 studies were quality appraised, as detailed in Table 3. With total scores provided, three studies were rated as high quality (Ball & Baidawi, 2021; Shaw, 2011; Simmons-Horton et al., 2023), 14 were rated as moderate, and the remaining nine were rated as low quality.

As a collective, 88% of studies excelled in having a clear statement of the study aims (n = 24), 100% of studies were appropriate for qualitative methodology (n = 26), and 77% described the value of the research

Table 2
Study characteristics: participants in professional roles.

No.	Author(s), year, location, publication type, title.	Participants: Professionals		Recruitment method	Data collection/ analysis	Key findings
		Cohort	Gender/Age/ Ethnicity			
1.	Shaw (2011). United Kingdom. Journal article. ¹ 'Professionals' perceptions of offending in children's residential care'	Field Social Workers, Youth Offending Service (YOS) Officers, Action for Children (AFC) Leaving Care Workers, Police Officers, Residential Care Managers, Magistrates, Legal Advisors, Solicitors. Numbers unspecified. (Total n = 31)	Gender: female (n = 13), male (n = 18) Age: NS Ethnicity: NS	Purposive sampling via court records and professional networks.	Interviews and focus groups. Grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990)	1) Individual disposition and family background 2) The residential setting and associated interactions 3) Policy, practice and system arrangements
2.	Marshall (2014). United States. Journal article. 'Understanding racial disproportionality affecting African American Youth who cross over from the child welfare to the juvenile justice system: Communication, power, race and social class'	Child welfare (n = 12) Law Enforcement (n = 13). (Total n = 33)	Gender: female (n = 19), male (n = 14) Age: 45.18 (mean) Ethnicity: Black (n = 13), White (n = 20) NS	Purposive and snowball sampling	Ethnographic fieldwork with semi-structured interviews Analytic induction techniques. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)	1) Cultural variation in patterns of communication 2) Power and race relations 3) Resistance by youth, families and professionals 4) Work conditions
3.	Mendes, Baidawi & Snow (2014). Australia. Journal article. 'Young people transitioning from out-of-home care in Victoria: Strengthening support services for dual clients of child protection and youth justice'	Out-of-home care. Youth justice. Alcohol and drug services. Legal services. Numbers unspecified. (Total n = 77)	NS	Non-probability sampling using self-selection, purposive, and snowball methods.	Semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Unspecified thematic analysis.	1) Overrepresentation 2) Criminalisation 3) Interagency relationships 4) Resources/funding 5) Behaviour management 6) Residential care environment
4.	Gerard, McGrath, Colvin and McFarlane (2019). Australia. Journal article. 'I'm not getting out of bed!' The criminalisation of young people in residential care'	Non-government providers of residential care (n = 14), NSW Police Force representatives (n = 11), Juvenile justice officers (n = 7), Department of Family and Community Services employees (n = 5) and legal professionals (n = 9) (Total n = 46).	NS	NS	Semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)	1) Lack of interagency cooperation 2) The perceptions of criminal justice professionals on the relationship between indigeneity, residential care and involvement in the criminal justice system 3) Lack of professionalisation amongst staff in residential care
5.	Greig, McGrath and McFarlane (2019). Australia. Journal article. 'Taking the wheels off': young people with cognitive impairment in out-of-home care'	Senior strategy officers and service providers with experience working with care-experienced children with intellectual disabilities. (Total n = 11)	Gender: female (n = 8) male (n = 3) Age: NS Ethnicity: NS	NS	Semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)	1) Increased vulnerability 2) Lack of belonging and security 3) Challenges with identification 4) Steering to the criminal justice system 5) Lack of support
6.	Ball and Baidawi (2021). Australia. Journal article. ³ 'Aboriginal crossover children's characteristics, service needs and service responses: The views of Australian key stakeholders'	Key stakeholders (judicial officers, police prosecutors and officers, lawyers, child protection and youth justice professionals, education professionals, child and family mental health clinicians, and representatives from non-government agencies). (Total n = 82)	Gender: male (n = 28) female (NS) Age: NS Ethnicity: Aboriginal (n = 3) No other ethnicity data collected.	Purposive sampling using flyers, direct emailing, and information sessions in court locations.	Semi-structured interviews (6 individual, 6 small groups) and 13 focus groups. Thematic analysis (Grinnell & Anrau, 2018)	Characteristics of Aboriginal crossover children 'We don't want him anymore' - Children growing up experiencing high levels of abuse and neglect, and household adversity Intergenerational trauma continues to be passed down 'What's a Koori?' - children experience cultural identity confusion and disconnection Service needs 1) 'Kids raised by kids' - A need for positive role modelling 2) Confusion, disagreement and bureaucracy 3) All the same? Service Responses 1) Specialist Koori Court is effective 2) Under-resourced and underfunded services 3) Child Protection are not adequately protecting children-but in what way?

(continued on next page)

Table 2 (continued)

No.	Author(s), year, location, publication type, title.	Participants: Professionals		Recruitment method	Data collection/ analysis	Key findings
		Cohort	Gender/Age/ Ethnicity			
7.	Shaw and Greenhow (2021). United Kingdom. Journal Article. 'Professional perceptions of the care-crime connection: Risk, marketisation and a failing system'	Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) professionals, voluntary fostering agency professionals and Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs). (Total n = 36)	NS	NS	Six focus groups and semi-structured interviews. Unspecified thematic analysis.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) The continuing problem of residential care 2) The resident group 3) Private children's homes 4) Residential home staff: Capabilities, confidence and commitment 5) Foster care: Positive perceptions, mixed messages and risk averse practice 6) The role of the police
8.	Baidawi and Ball (2022). Australia. Journal article. ³ 'Multi-system factors impacting youth justice involvement of children in residential out-of-home care'	Key stakeholders (judicial officers, police prosecutors and officers, lawyers, child protection and youth justice professionals, education professionals, child and family mental health clinicians, and representatives from non-government agencies). (Total n = 82)	NS	Opt-in recruitment via court information sessions and agency outreach	Semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Inductive content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Police frustration towards children in residential care 2) Criminalising responses to children's behavioural difficulties 3) Limitations of the residential care environment 4) Limited court support 5) Greater exposure to remand 6) Challenges with service collaboration for children in residential care
9.	Fitzpatrick (2022). United Kingdom. Journal Article. 'Challenging perceptions of care-experienced girls and women'	Practitioners (working in children's homes, a youth offending team, secure units, a prison and charities for care-leavers and women leaving prison). Care-experienced (n = 3) Serving prison sentences (n = 2). (Total n = 15)	NS	NS	Semi-structured interviews. Unspecified thematic analysis.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) The complexity of societal expectations 2) Damaging staff cultures 3) Raising aspirations and the problem of labels
10.	Hunter (2022). United Kingdom. Journal Article. 'Out of place': the criminalisation of Black and Minority Ethnic looked after children in England and Wales.'	Youth justice and children's services experts. (Total n = 27).	NS	NS	Mixed Methods: Quantitative analysis of data sets and semi-structured interviews. Not specified.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Intensifying overrepresentation and the 'double whammy' effect 2) 'Sticking out like a sore thumb': placing BME children in care 3) The intersections between criminalisation and racialisation

[^{1,2,3,4} indicates studies from the same dataset, NS = not specified].

(n = 21). However, only 8% of studies (n = 2) adequately addressed the relationship between researcher and participants, and only 19% of studies (n = 13) provided a rigorous data analysis. These low scores in researcher influence and data analysis quality raise concerns of possible bias as a significant limitation.

4. Thematic synthesis

This systematic review synthesised the literature on care-experienced children's interactions with the criminal justice system from their perspective and the professionals who work with them. The thematic synthesis resulted in five main themes, 1) The search for belonging, 2) Unresolved trauma, 3) Systemic challenges fuel the criminalisation of care-experienced children, 4) Fitting in a box: a limited view of care-experienced children, and 5) The complexity of intersectionality, three of which included sub-themes, as shown in Fig. 2. The quality of studies was considered during the thematic synthesis; Appendix D presents a matrix of theme representation studies within the 26 included studies.

Theme 1: The Search for Belonging

Studies identified that care-experienced children faced limited opportunities for belonging, often linked to their experiences of inconsistent relationships with caregivers and professionals. In this context, peer relationships emerged as a primary means of meeting their relational

needs of belonging and connection. While some peer relationships were positive, others increased vulnerability to exploitation and offending, functioning as either protective or harmful depending on the social context in which it occurs.

4.1. Peer relationships

The search for belonging influences the peer relationships that care-experienced children form. In their desire to fit in, some children adopt behaviours they would not otherwise engage in. Simmons-Horton (2021, p. 590) commented on how one care-experienced participant, "met a boy in one of her placements who got her involved in "crazy stuff", and they ended up getting arrested". This is noted in studies as a more prominent concern for children residing in residential settings, especially when placement matches may not be appropriate (Gerard et al, 2019).

Shaw (2014, p. 1833) commented on the importance of peer relationships for care-experienced children: "the desire to fit in with his peers was more important than pleasing staff and conformity to what was considered to be acceptable behaviour". One professional noted how peer pressure can lead vulnerable children into offending situations, even if they have no prior history of such behaviour:

I think that peer pressure contributes. They may come here with no offending background and meet somebody who does offend and then

Table 3
Study characteristics: care-experienced participants.

No.	Author(s), year, location, publication type, title.	Participants: Care-experienced		Recruitment method	Data collection/ analysis	Key findings
		Cohort	Gender/Age/Ethnicity			
11.	Prison Reform Trust (2011) . United Kingdom. Grey Literature. ⁵ 'Care - a stepping stone to custody? The views of children in care on the links between care, offending and custody'	Care-experienced children: no offending history (n = 5) cautioned and/or convicted (n = 5) been in custody (n = 13) (Total n = 23)	Gender: Female (n = 8), Male (n = 15) Age: 13–17 years old Ethnicity: Bangladeshi (n = 3) Black African (n = 3) Black British (n = 1) Black other (n = 1) White British (n = 12) White European (n = 1) White Irish (n = 1) White Other (n = 1)	Unspecified. Recruitment via gatekeepers.	Semi-Structured Interviews. Unspecified framework analysis	1) Instability in care 2) Relationships as risk and protection 3) Stigma and labelling 4) Peer influence 5) Structural inequities
12.	Shaw (2014) . United Kingdom. Journal Article. ^{1,5} 'Why do young people offend in children's homes? Research, theory and practice'	Current and former care-experienced children who have been convicted of an offence. (Total n = 12)	Gender: Female (n = 3), Male (n = 9) Age: 15–22 years old Ethnicity: NS	Purposive sampling via court records and professional networks.	Semi-structured Interviews. Unspecified Thematic analysis.	1) Disempowerment 2) Peer influence 3) Residential culture and staff relationships 4) Routines 5) Placement instability
13.	Day (2017) . United Kingdom. Journal Articles. ² 'Hearing the voice of looked after children: challenging current assumptions and knowledge about pathways into offending'	Children who have been in the care and criminal justice system. (Total n = 19).	Gender: Female (n = 4), Male (n = 15) Age: 13–17 years old Ethnicity: Black British (n = 2) Black British and White British (n = 4) Asian and White British (n = 1) White British (n = 12)	NS	Semi-structured interviews. Constructivist approach to grounded theory (Charmaz & Bryant, 2007).	1) The labelling of children in care 2) Negative feelings towards residential care and case manager 3) The importance of the peer group
14.	Howard League for Penal Reform (2018). United Kingdom. Grey Literature. ⁵ 'Ending the criminalisation of children in residential care "This is our story": Children and young people on criminalisation in residential care.'	Care-experienced children in a residential home who have also experienced the criminal justice system. (Total n = 4).	NS	NS	Unspecified qualitative methods Unspecified: direct quotes alongside summaries of the data	1) Emotional harm 2) Criminalisation 3) Systemic disadvantage
15.	Flores, Hawes, Westbrook and Henderson (2018) . USA. Journal Article. 'Crossover youth and gender: What are the challenges of girls involved in both the foster care and juvenile justice systems?'	Girls who had been in the foster care system and juvenile justice system. (Total n = 15)	Gender: Female (n = 15) Age: 14–19 years old Ethnicity: Latina (n = 10) White (n = 3) Asian (n = 1) Black (n = 1)	NS	Ethnographic research, semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Coding (not otherwise stated).	1) More time in detention 2) Different treatment 3) Probation and punishment for minor offences
16.	Simmons-Horton (2020) . USA. Journal Article. "'A bad combination": lived experiences of youth involved in the foster care and juvenile justice systems.'	Dual-status (foster care and juvenile justice systems) adults. (Total n = 10)	Gender: Female (n = 6), Male (n = 4) Age: 18–24 years old Ethnicity: African American (n = 7) Latino/Latina (n = 3)	Purposive sampling via emailing relevant organisations and snowball sampling.	Semi-structured interviews. Unspecified thematic analysis.	1) Experiences of or leading dual involvement 2) Environmental and systemic traumatic experiences 3) Absence of normalcy
17.	Gooch, Masson and Waddington (2022) . United Kingdom. Journal Article. 'After care, after thought?: The invisibility of careexperienced men and women in prison'	Care-experienced individuals in prison. Women's prison (n = 32) CAT C/ YOI 1 (n = 34) CAT C/ YOI 2 (n = 28) (Total n = 94)	Gender: Males (n = 62), Female (n = 31) Identified as male (in a women's prison) (n = 1) Age: 18–21 years	NS	Semi-structured interviews. NS	1) Why care about care experience? 2) Barriers to recording 3) Barriers to reporting: shame, stigma and distrust

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Table 3 (continued)

No.	Author(s), year, location, publication type, title.	Participants: Care-experienced		Recruitment method	Data collection/analysis	Key findings
		Cohort	Gender/Age/Ethnicity			
18.	Day, Clark and Hazel (2023). United Kingdom. Journal Article. ² 'Hearing from justice-involved, care-experienced children: what are their experiences of residential care environments and regimes?'	Care-experienced people who have also experienced the criminal justice system. (Total n = 19).	old (n = 63), 21-30 years old (n = 19), 30+ years old (n = 12) Ethnicity: NS Gender: Female (n = 4), Male (n = 15) Age: 13–17 years old Ethnicity: Black British (n = 2) Mixed black British and White British (n = 4) Mixed Asian and White British (n = 1) White British (n = 12)	Recruitment via gatekeeper (YOT Officer)	Semi-structured interviews. Unspecified inductive reasoning approach.	1) Institutional features of residential care 2) The tension between care and control 3) Labelling and stigmatisation
19.	Simmons-Horton, Kolivoski and Garza (2023). USA. Journal Article. 'Black girl magic: Empowerment stories of black dual status girls'	Black young women with previous experience in the foster care system and juvenile justice systems. (Total n = 6)	Gender: Female (n = 6) Age: 18–36 years old. Ethnicity: Black or Bi-racial Black (n = 6)	Purposive sample recruited via social media, organisations, working with the dual status population, and word of mouth	Semi-structured interviews. Unspecified coding and descriptive matrices (Averill, 2002).	1) Unveiling structural and gendered racism: Experiences of Black dual-status girls 2) Trauma and triumph: Responses and navigating adversity through resistance, critical interrogation of oppressive systems, and engaging in collective responsibility 3) Black girl magic: Centering voices, collective consciousness, and collective responsibility.

[^{1,2,3,4} indicates studies from the same dataset, ⁵ the author inferred key findings as themes were not explicitly stated, NS = not specified]

come under pressure to become involved. So, you may have service users who are quite vulnerable and who get involved in things that aren't their fault. (Shaw, 2011, p. 362)

However, for some care-experienced children, peer relationships functioned as a protective factor, offering emotional support and social identity. Peer relationships were described to be like a “substitute family” (author, cited in Day et al., 2020, p.42), which provided care-experienced children with “emotional support and a sense of self-worth and status” (author, cited in Shaw, 2014, p. 1833). Several studies highlighted how care-experienced children’s relational needs and desire for connection can increase their vulnerability to exploitation, which may in turn lead to involvement in criminal behaviour. This concern may be further intensified for care-experienced children with cognitive disabilities; Greig et al. (2019) suggest that these children may experience additional challenges in recognising risk and anticipating potential consequences, creating an additional layer of vulnerability to exploitation. Rather than being supported as victims, care-experienced children are often charged with minor offences:

Young people in care are at an increased risk of child sexual exploitation, through going missing, taking drugs, associating with adult offenders, all of which can result in the police charging young people for minor offences, such as drunk and disorderly, rather than treat these young people as needing care/help. (professional, cited in Prison Reform Trust, 2016, p. 92)

4.2. Advocacy

The criminal justice system is a complex and confusing process, especially for children and young adults. Unlike children who grow up with a family to advocate for them, care-experienced children lack that support and advocacy when navigating the system. Without a strong

sense of belonging, these children often have no trusted adults to guide them through the process:

Several interviewees were adamant that a lack of advocacy can result in looked after children receiving harsher sanctions, in particular custodial sentences. They believed that professionals perceive the lives of such children as ‘chaotic’ (Youth Justice Consultant 3) and so attempt to mediate that by imposing structure. Indeed, many looked after children are left to attend court alone or without someone who knows them well. (author, cited in Hunter, 2022, p. 17)

Some studies suggest that finding an appropriate adult to advocate for care-experienced children in legal proceedings is often difficult. Carers may be ill-suited, especially if the child’s case involves an offence against them. Additionally, carers often fail to help children attend court or engage with legal professionals, leaving them with minimal guidance in navigating the system, “I went to juvenile, and I sat in juvenile for two weeks, with like no attorney, no caseworker, no one called me.” (care-experienced person, cited in Simmons-Horton et al., 2023, p. 7). This insufficient support leaves care-experienced children isolated and disadvantaged in legal proceedings, moving them further away from a sense of belonging. Lawyers (Baidawi and Ball, 2022, p. 58) highlighted the “excessive independence” expected of these children, including contacting lawyers, gathering information, and obtaining support letters.

Theme 2: Unresolved Trauma

Care-experienced children receive little support around their traumatic experiences, leaving them unresolved. Emotional regulation and behavioural difficulties were described as “trauma-related outcomes which obstruct the development of positive attachments, leading to isolation from mainstream services” (Mendes et al., 2014, p. 14). The absence of positive relationships with professionals, along with limited training in trauma and mental health for staff, exacerbates these

Table 4
Study characteristics: professionals and care-experienced participants.

No.	Author(s), year, location, publication type, title.	Participants: Care-experienced and Professionals <i>Cohort</i>	<i>Gender/Age/Ethnicity</i>	Recruitment method	Data collection/analysis	Key findings
20.	Prison Reform Trust (2016) . United Kingdom. Grey Literature. ⁵ 'In care, out of trouble: How the life chances of children in care can be transformed by protecting them from unnecessary involvement in the criminal justice system'	Social workers, police, magistrates, academics and other experts. Numbers unspecified. Care-experienced people who have also experienced the criminal justice system. Numbers unspecified.	NS NS	NS	Qualitative written submissions (n = 222), consultation meetings, focus groups and other oral evidence. Unspecified. Direct quotes are provided alongside summaries of the data	1) Instability 2) Feeling unheard and misunderstood 3) Criminalisation 4) Peer mentorship 5) Limited support for leaving care
21.	Shaw (2017) . United Kingdom. Journal Article. ¹ 'Residential care and criminalisation: the impact of system abuse'	Field Social Workers, Youth Offending Service (YOS) Officers, Action for Children (NSAFC) Leaving Care Workers, Police Officers, Residential Care Managers, Magistrates, Legal Advisors, Solicitors. Numbers unspecified. (Total n = 32) Current and former care-experienced people who have been convicted of an offence. (Total n = 12)	NS NS	Purposive sampling via court records and professional networks.	Semi-structured interviews. Unspecified thematic analysis	1. The limitation and homogeneity of placements 2. The damaging effects of placement movement 3. The dilemma of placement size 4. The use of "out of area" units
22.	Day, Bateman and Pitts (2020) . United Kingdom. Grey Literature 'Surviving incarceration: the pathways of looked after and non-looked after children into, through and out of custody'	Youth justice case workers (n = 6), youth justice operational managers (n = 3), criminal justice strategic managers (n = 3), child care social workers (n=3), social care operational managers (n = 2) and care home managers (n = 2) (Total n = 19). Care-experienced children with experience of custody. Residential children's homes (n = 10), supported tenancy (n = 8), extended family (n = 2), own tenancy (n = 1) and secure children's home (n = 1) (Total n = 22)	NS NS Gender: Male (n = 22) Age: NS Ethnicity: BAME (n = 6)	NS	Mixed methods. Analysis of quantitative data. Semi-structured interviews. Analysis of case files. Identification of recurring themes (not otherwise stated).	6) The need to survive and the survivor identities 7) Surviving life before custody 8) Surviving custody 9) Surviving resettlement
23.	Agenda alliance for women and girls at risk (2022) . United Kingdom. Grey literature. 'We've not given up' Young women surviving the criminal justice system'	Professionals from the youth, women and girls' and criminal justice sectors. (Total n = 91) Young women with lived experience of the criminal justice system (n = 16). Care-experienced (n = 10). (Total n = 26)	NS NS Gender: Female (n = 16) Age:17-28 years old Ethnicity: Black, Asian and minoritised groups (n = 11)	NS	Interviews, focus groups, a co-production workshop and two expert seminars. Unspecified.	The creation of additional vulnerabilities by systems meant to protect and support
24.	Fitzpatrick, Hunter, Shaw and Staines (2022) . United Kingdom. Grey Literature. ⁴ 'Disrupting the routes between care and custody for girls and women'	Professionals, including front-line practitioners and senior policy leads from children's services, police, youth justice, probation, prisons, and the judiciary (Total n = 40) Care-experienced girls and women. Imprisoned care-experienced women (n = 37)	NS NS Gender: Female (n = 27), Male (n = 13) Age: 26-69 years old Ethnicity: White (n = 37), Black or Mixed (n = 3) Gender: Female (n = 54) Age: 16-58 years old Ethnicity: Black,	Unspecified. Recruitment via Youth Offending Teams (YOTs), social workers, social media, and professional contacts.	Interviews and documentary analysis of protocols. NS	1) Judging girls and women: The impact of gender, ethnicity and 'official' care histories 2) The preventing unnecessary criminalisation agenda 3) Victimisation, exploitation and harm

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Table 4 (continued)

No.	Author(s), year, location, publication type, title.	Participants: Care-experienced and Professionals Cohort	Gender/Age/ Ethnicity	Recruitment method	Data collection/ analysis	Key findings
25.	Staines, Fitzpatrick, Shaw and Hunter (2024). United Kingdom. Journal Article. "We need to tackle their well being first": Understanding and supporting care-experienced girls in the youth justice system'	YOT staff with various roles (including, case managers, team managers and operational or thematic leads) (Total n = 8). Girls and women who had both care and youth justice involvement (Total n = 17).	Mixed or other (n = 17), White (n = 37) Gender: Female (n = 6), Male (n = 2) Age: 34 – 63 years old; mean = 46 Ethnicity: White British (n = 7), Black British (n = 1) Gender: Female (n = 17) Age: 16 – 26 years old; mean = 20 Ethnicity: White British (n = 10) Mixed ethnicity (n = 3) Black British (n = 2) 'Other' ethnic background (n = 2).	Purposive sampling via YOTs, social workers, third-sector organisations working with care-experienced individuals and social media	Unspecified interviews. Framework analysis.	1) Criminalisation 2) Interactions with the police 3) Understanding behaviour 4) Supporting care-experienced girls in youth justice 5) Trauma-informed frameworks 6) The importance of relationships 7) Activities and interventions
26.	Fitzpatrick, Hunter, Shaw and Staines (2024). United Kingdom. Journal Article. ⁴ 'Confronting intergenerational harm: Care experience, motherhood and criminal justice involvement'	Professionals, including those from children's services, police, youth justice, probation, prisons, and the judiciary. (Total n = 40). Care-experienced women in prison across three English prisons (n = 37) Girls and women who had both care and youth justice involvement (n = 17) (Total n = 54).	NS Gender: Female (n = 54) Age: 16–58 years old Ethnicity: NS	Unspecified. Recruitment via Youth Offending Teams (YOTs), social workers, social media, and professional contacts.	Semi-structured interviews. Unspecified thematic analysis.	1. Breaking the cycle of intergenerational stigma and social care and criminal justice involvement 2. Lack of support and fear of asking for help 3. A care-less approach to pregnancy and motherhood 4. Towards a shift of focus: from responsibilising girls and women to the state as problem parent

[^{1,2,3,4} indicates studies from the same dataset, NS = not specified].

children's vulnerability. As one author explained:

when past trauma is not adequately dealt with in care (for example, due to inadequate support for mental health and/or inappropriate placements) and when care perpetuates further trauma (such as through abuse and/or instability), girls and women are vulnerable to crossing over from care into the youth or adult criminal justice system (author, cited in Fitzpatrick et al., 2022, p. 18).

4.3. Healing or harm: relationships with professionals

As part of their unresolved trauma, many care-experienced children have faced disrupted attachments and neglectful relationships, leading to feelings of mistrust and relational difficulties. Care-experienced children who build trusting relationships with professionals report positive outcomes, while those who lack trust in professionals often face greater challenges. Key factors contributing to strong relationships include frequent visits, consistency in carers and professionals, and meaningful efforts to understand the child. In contrast, professionals "who change frequently" with "poor management of transitions", and "superficial" interactions were seen as barriers to building trust and providing effective support (care-experienced people, cited in Prison Reform Trust, 2016, p. 46). One Leaving Care Worker highlighted the contrast between residential care workers, despite their same role:

In all the units where I've worked, you've got good, effective staff that are able to deal with situations appropriately and you get a lot of other staff who aren't . . . I know when I worked in residential, you'd often check rotas to see who you were working with. Depending on who you were working with, you'd have a pretty good idea of how that shift was going to go. (Shaw, 2011, p. 363).

4.4. Reactive responses and the absence of trauma-informed care

Studies highlighted how some professionals and carers lack the necessary skills to implement a trauma-informed approach, struggling to respond appropriately to the behaviours of care-experienced children. Day (2017, p. 126) commented on how care-experienced children described situations in which trauma-based behaviours were "inappropriately managed" by staff. For some groups, particularly Black girls, staff responses to distress may be racialised, resulting in harsher responses (Simmons-Horton et al., 2023). This gap in knowledge and training can lead to unnecessary restraints and violence, as one professional described:

The staff in certain places are not trained and therefore not skilled and therefore unsafe. . . . Certain children's homes or secure units . . . they're not supported by staff, there isn't enough staff there and it

Table 5
CASP quality appraisal of studies.

	Authors and publication year.	Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?	Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?	Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?	Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?	Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?	Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	Is there a clear statement of findings?	How valuable is the research?	Total score (max score =10)
1	Prison Reform Trust (2011).	Yes	Yes	PM	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	PM	Yes	Yes	8
2	Shaw (2011).	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	PM	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	8.5
3	Marshall (2014)	Yes	Yes	PM	Yes	Yes	No	PM	Yes	PM	Yes	7.5
4	Mendes, Baidawi and Snow (2014)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	PM	Yes	PM	Yes	8
5	Shaw (2014)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	PM	PM	7
6	Prison Reform Trust (2016)	PM	Yes	PM	No	PM	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	4.5
7	Day (2017)	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	PM	No	No	No	PM	Yes	5
8	Shaw (2017)	Yes	Yes	PM	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	PM	PM	6.5
9	Flores et al (2018)	PM	Yes	Yes	No	PM	No	No	PM	Yes	Yes	5.5
10	Howard League for Penal Reform (2018)	No	Yes	PM	PM	PM	No	PM	PM	No	No	3.5
11	Gerard, McGrath and McFarlane (2019)	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	PM	Yes	Yes	6.5

	Authors and publication year.	Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?	Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?	Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?	Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?	Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?	Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	Is there a clear statement of findings?	How valuable is the research?	Total score (max score =10)
12	Greig, McGrath and McFarlane (2019)	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	8
13	Day, Bateman and Pitts (2020)	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	PM	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	7.5
14	Ball and Baidawi (2021)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	PM	9.5
15	Shaw and Greenhow (2021)	Yes	Yes	No	PM	PM	No	PM	No	Yes	PM	5
16	Simmons-Horton (2021)	Yes	Yes	Yes	PM	Yes	No	Yes	PM	Yes	Yes	8
17	Agenda and Alliance for Youth Justice (2022)	Yes	Yes	PM	No	PM	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	5
18	Baidawi and Ball (2022)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	PM	PM	Yes	Yes	8
19	Fitzpatrick (2022)	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	PM	No	Yes	Yes	4.5
20	Fitzpatrick et al. (2022)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	PM	PM	7
21	Gooch et al. (2022)	Yes	Yes	PM	PM	PM	No	PM	PM	Yes	Yes	6.5
22	Hunter (2022)	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	PM	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	5.5
23	Day, Clark and Hazel (2023)	Yes	Yes	No	PM	PM	No	PM	No	PM	Yes	5

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Table 5 (continued)

Authors and publication year.	Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?	Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?	Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?	Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?	Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?	Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	Is there a clear statement of findings?	How valuable is the research?	Total score (max score =10)
24 Simmons-Horton, Kolivoski and Garza (2023)	Yes	Yes	Yes	PM	PM	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	9
25 Fitzpatrick et al. (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	PM	PM	No	PM	No	PM	Yes	6
26 Staines et al. (2024)	Yes	Yes	No	PM	PM	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	6
% of included studies rated as Yes	88%	100%	54%	35%	35%	8%	46%	19%	73%	77%	

Total score key: High (>8-10), Moderate (6-8) and Low (<6). [PM indicates the study partially met the criteria].

<p>Theme 1: The search for belonging 22 studies (3 high quality)</p> <p>1.1. Peer relationships (20 studies; 3 high quality)</p> <p>1.2. Advocacy (10 studies; 1 high quality)</p>	<p>Theme 2: Unresolved trauma 22 studies (3 high quality)</p> <p>2.1. Healing or harm: relationships with professionals (19 studies; 2 high quality)</p> <p>2.2. Reactive responses and the absence of trauma-informed care (18 studies; 3 high quality)</p>
<p>Theme 3: Systemic challenges fuel the criminalisation of care-experienced children 17 studies (2 high quality)</p> <p>3.1. The police as a behaviour management tool (16 studies; 1 high quality)</p> <p>3.2. Increased police contact, familiarity and surveillance (11 studies; 2 high quality)</p>	<p>Theme 4: Fitting in a box: a limited view of care-experienced children 18 studies (1 high quality)</p> <p>Theme 5: The complexity of intersectionality 17 studies (3 high quality)</p>

Fig. 2. The five main themes and sub-themes.

leads to multiple restraints, incidents of violence, that are completely unnecessary half the time. (Fitzpatrick, 2022, p. 22)

Rather than de-escalating situations with understanding and care, staff and carers may resort to punitive measures, which can further distress children and lead to offending behaviours. A care-experienced individual stated how they would be “restrained for anything” (Simmons-Horton et al., 2023, p. 6). Professionals commented on how care-experienced children may “panic when restrained, leading them to lash out” (Staines et al., 2024, p. 191). One care-experienced young person recounted how a staff member restrained him to prevent him from self-harming, which resulted in the young person biting him. This led him to being “arrested, held overnight in a police cell and prosecuted for assault”, the young person described how he expected a more “calm” and “reassuring” approach (Howard League for Penal Reform, 2018, p. 3).

Theme 3: Systemic challenges fuel the criminalisation of care-experienced children.

This theme relates to the systemic difficulties and challenges which contribute to the criminalisation of care-experienced children. The

included studies evidenced how professionals sometimes rely on police as a behaviour management tool, resulting in frequent interactions that increase surveillance and the likelihood of being charged.

4.5. The police as a behaviour management tool

The studies evidence how a limited understanding of trauma-related distress and difficulties with building relationships can create situations in which carers struggle to respond effectively to behaviours. At times, both professionals and care-experienced individuals noted that the police were being used as a method to manage the behaviour of care-experienced children (e.g. locking themselves in the house, self-harm), when carers felt unable to do so effectively, and not always for criminal behaviours. Care-experienced children were also faced with police involvement for going missing; one young person shared how she was “charged for wasting police time” (Prison Reform Trust, 2016, p. 84) when she went missing. One care-experienced young person described unnecessary police involvement and the need for alternative responses to divert children away from the criminal justice system:

In foster homes, they quick to call the police on you when you acting out like that’s the first thing. Instead of intervening? Like acting like a foster parent? Like, sitting, having a conversation with you? Like what’s wrong with you today? Like, you know, you seem different. You know, learning the youth, that live in their home. It’s like, Ima call the laws, Ima call the police on you, Ima call your caseworker. It’s more of like a threat. (Simmons-Horton et al., 2023, p. 8).

4.6. Increased police contact, familiarity and surveillance

There was evidence of unnecessary police call-outs for minor behaviours which resulted in care-experienced children frequently interacting with the police. In some studies, these unnecessary calls contributed to increased police frustration, with police feeling like “it was their responsibility to charge the young person when called to residential children’s homes” (author, Gerard et al, 2019, p. 83), feeding into the police’s decision on whether to charge a child or not:

The moment where a young person’s charged in those settings comes after a sequence of calls, and probably a frustration from police being called to that unit regularly to deal with a difficult kid that they do not feel equipped to deal with ... frustration often feeds into the decision to charge a young person. (professional, cited in Baidawi & Ball, 2022, p. 58).

Frequent police interactions often result in care-experienced children being placed on the, “police radar”, which is a “slippery slope to formal

youth justice sanctions” (professional, cited in [Hunter, 2022, p. 17](#)). Having this familiarity with the police can contribute to excessive police surveillance of care-experienced children:

Once you’ve been pushed into the eyes of the police now the police know you, so . . . now you’re in town with your friends, oh look there’s Isla, we always get called about her, let’s keep an eye on her, whereas Joe could be standing with me, who probably sells drugs, does all these things but because his parents don’t call the police on him all the time the police don’t know about him. (care-experienced person, cited in [Staines et al., 2024, p. 191](#))

Theme 4: Fitting in a box: a limited view of care-experienced children.

This theme suggests that professionals view care-experienced children through a narrow lens, focusing on a single aspect of their identity or behaviour, overlooking the complexity of these children’s identities. For example, assuming they cannot be vulnerable and involved in criminal activity. One professional explained that such oversimplified perceptions block the development of a deeper understanding of care-experienced children:

For some of the girls and young women, this approach contrasted with that taken by social workers or care staff who either treated them ‘like a traumatised child’ or ‘like you’re a criminal’ (Ellie) rather than trying to understand how trauma influenced their involvement in the youth justice system. ([Staines et al., 2024, p. 195](#))

This oversimplification leads to care that does not account for the child’s full complexity, ignoring factors such as their gender, race, age, or personal experiences. By fitting these children into predefined categories or labels, professionals fail to recognise the multi-dimensional nature of their lives. For example, care-experienced women and girls in the criminal justice system are not viewed as “real women” (professional, cited in [Fitzpatrick et al., 2022, p. 26](#)) with interventions in the criminal justice system “geared towards boys” (professional, cited in [Staines et al., 2024, p. 197](#)). This can result in providing care that addresses only part of their needs and overlooking the broader context of their identity and experiences. One participant commented, “there are disability needs and there are criminogenic needs and they fund disability needs but they don’t fund criminogenic needs” (professional, cited in [Greig et al., 2019, p. 927](#)).

Theme 5: The complexity of intersectionality

The intersectionality of gender, race, and intellectual disability was discussed in the studies. Although not as prominent and lacking depth, there were some discussions about the role of age and how older care-experienced children are “disadvantaged” (professional, cited in [Prison Reform Trust, 2016, p.29](#)) within the care system. Care-experienced children can have additional layers of identity and, therefore, additional layers of disadvantage. One black care-experienced girl described the stigma around being a black girl and how this leads to differential treatment:

They consider us more aggressive. You know, like if we [Black girls] are angry, you know, its less trying to calm us down and more so trying to restrain us. You know, be rough with us instead of, like, being gentle like they will with someone else.” ([Simmons-Horton et al., 2023, p. 8](#))

These multiple layers of identity result in unique needs which can be difficult for systems and professionals to understand and meet. [Ball and Baidawi \(2021\)](#) express how professionals struggle to “differentiate between the needs of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children”, with one professional stating:

... for the (diversion) program that we use... it’s one for everyone. We don’t discriminate between being Chinese,...Koori or a white person. ([Ball and Baidawi, 2021, p. 6](#))

One author explains how “straddling” class and race can contribute

to a young person’s involvement in both the care and the criminal justice system:

An African American law enforcement professional explained that blacks with low incomes may become involved in child welfare and juvenile justice systems because of the compounded difficulties of straddling black and white worlds, and low-income and middle-class worlds. (author, cited in [Marshall, 2014, p. 85](#))

As a result of these unique needs, studies reported that care-experienced children can be placed in inappropriate placements. One care-experienced individual explained their experience and how age might not be considered in a placement match, “you might have the younger offenders who are just out of their luck sort of thing, being in [residential care] with sixteen and fifteen-year olds who now have ten criminal briefs” ([Baidawi & Ball, 2022, p. 57](#)). One author commented on the inappropriate mixed-gender placements provided to young care-experienced women, “Young women with experience of care may also have experienced being placed in mixed-gender, unregulated accommodation. Widely recognised as an inappropriate environment for vulnerable children” ([Agenda Alliance for Women and Girls at Risk, 2022, p. 28](#)).

4.7. Discussion

Twenty-six studies were included in this systematic review of care-experienced children’s interactions with the criminal justice system from their perspective and the professionals who work with them. A thematic synthesis resulted in five key themes: 1) The search for belonging, 2) Unresolved trauma, 3) Systemic challenges fuel the criminalisation of care-experienced children, 4) Fitting in a box: a limited view of care-experienced children, and 5) The complexity of intersectionality. These themes collectively reveal how care-experienced children are often failed by the systems there to support them. Many are faced with unresolved trauma and a longing for connection, while encountering relationships which have the means to help or hinder. Their trauma-related behaviours are not addressed adequately, leading to offending behaviour and repeated involvement with the police and criminal justice system. Professionals may overlook the full complexity of their identities, often reducing them to labels that neglect the impacts of trauma, social exclusion, and intersecting vulnerabilities.

Consistent with [Staines et al. \(2024\)](#), our findings highlighted care-experienced children’s search for belonging. The desire to feel accepted often leads these children to place significant importance on peer relationships, where the need to ‘fit in’ can sometimes result in offending behaviours. While prior literature has acknowledged the problematic nature of some peer influences ([Shaw, 2014](#)), our findings focus on the underlying emotional need for belonging that drives such behaviours. By centring belonging, our synthesis reframes some behaviours typically interpreted as ‘challenging’ as attempts to gain identity, value, and safety in the absence of good attachments. This search for belonging can make care-experienced children vulnerable to exploitation, a concern noted in the literature ([Baidawi et al., 2020](#)). Care-experienced children in the criminal justice system face heightened vulnerabilities due to the lack of consistent advocacy, unlike their peers who often have parental support. This leaves them to navigate complex legal processes alone, as highlighted by [Badawi and Ball \(2022\)](#). The absence of adequate advocacy not only compromises their legal outcomes but also deepens their sense of isolation and disconnection. There is a pressing need to improve advocacy support to ensure these children receive the guidance and representation essential for fair treatment and a stronger sense of belonging. The findings offer insight into the unresolved trauma carried by care-experienced children and the importance of consistent and positive relationships, echoing previous research findings ([Shaw, 2014; Shaw, 2017](#)). Care-experienced children are faced with inconsistent professionals and inadequate relational approaches. In

line with Scofield et al. (2014), our findings suggest that social work staff (particularly those working in residential children's homes) respond inappropriately (e.g. restraining with no de-escalation attempts) to trauma-related behaviours, drawing care-experienced children unnecessarily into the criminal justice system by precipitating or perpetuating offending behaviour. The literature has recommended enhanced training for care staff to better equip them with the knowledge and confidence needed to support these children effectively (Shaw, 2016), a recommendation strongly reinforced by the findings of this review.

Our findings suggest that care-experienced children are facing criminalising systems and processes, aligning with Hayden (2010) and McFarlane (2018), who observed that care staff supporting these children involve the police in incidents that may not warrant police intervention. Furthermore, this review highlighted the high frequency of police reports made for care-experienced children. These frequent reports contribute to excessive surveillance by care staff and the police, an established issue in the literature (Hayden, 2010; Colvin et al, 2018). It is important to note that within this review, these issues were not confined to a single country or time period. This suggests that despite existing literature proposing recommendations (McFarlane, 2018; Shaw, 2016), international change is still needed.

Our findings reinforce previous literature (Shaw & Greenhow, 2020) that stresses the tendency for both care and criminal justice professionals to view care-experienced children through a singular lens, ignoring their complex identities. These children are frequently reduced to labels, such as "criminal", disregarding the complexity of their identities and lived experiences. Focusing on only one aspect of a child's experience contributes to care-experienced children receiving oversimplified, one-size-fits-all support. In line with the literature (Colvin et al., 2018), these findings present the challenges of care-experienced children being labelled and the impact on the care they receive.

This meta-synthesis highlighted the intersecting characteristics of care-experienced children (e.g. gender, race, disability). While intersectionality is increasingly evident in studies focused on specific characteristics (e.g. ethnicity; Hunter et al., 2023), it appears less frequently in broader research on care-experienced children interacting with the criminal justice system. Our findings suggest that the intersectionality of such factors creates a more complex reality for care-experienced children, where overlapping challenges shape their experiences. For example, the specific needs and vulnerabilities of care-experienced girls are sometimes overlooked, with some being placed in mixed-gender, unregulated accommodation, not suitable for their well-being. Similarly, it has been considered that Black care-experienced girls and women may experience higher rates of restraint, due to racialised perceptions that misinterpret expressions of distress as aggression. The review also highlighted other intersecting identities, such as socioeconomic status and age, and their influence on care-experienced children's trajectories through the criminal justice system. This area has been largely underexplored to date and warrants further research. Given the uniqueness this brings to each care-experienced child, our findings suggest that care-experienced children face inappropriate placements and support, as highlighted by Shaw (2014). For example, an African American young person from a low-income background may face compounded challenges navigating multiple social environments, such as predominantly white middle-class spaces alongside economically disadvantaged, racially marginalised communities. Standard care settings may fail to meet these complex needs. For instance, a placement that does not recognise cultural differences in communication styles might interpret a young person's assertiveness as defiance, leading to punitive responses (e.g. restraint) rather than supportive interventions. Given the complexities, it may be impossible to fully meet all the needs of care-experienced children in a standardised way, as their diverse experiences and traumas demand tailored approaches rather than one-size-fits-all solutions. However, this should not deter efforts to provide the best possible support. Disentangling the effects of these various

factors can be challenging, and professionals must consider each child's individuality and intersectional identities.

5. Limitations

The quality across studies varied, with nine studies categorised as low quality, increasing the risk of introducing bias to the review findings. Only two of the 26 studies considered the relationship between participants and researchers. Power dynamics (especially for child participants), researcher influence within data collection and analysis (including data interpretation), and a lack of reflexivity may have contributed to researcher bias. To minimise this bias, the reviewer assigned weight to the studies in the synthesis process, ensuring the studies' quality was considered when identifying themes. Several studies did not report specific details, including participants' characteristics. This limited the ability to draw conclusions regarding the overall characteristics of participants and the influence this may have had on the review findings.

Our search strategy included various terms related to 'care-experienced children' and the 'criminal justice system'. However, given the variation in terminology across countries, it is possible that relevant studies from other regions were not captured. This may explain why the included studies were limited to the US, UK, and Australia, reflecting a potential bias in terminology rather than an absence of research from other countries.

A strength of this review is the inclusion of grey literature, which contributed to a broader range of studies, creating a more comprehensive review and minimising publication bias. However, including grey literature and mixed methods (in addition to qualitative studies) did add complexity when deciding on an appropriate quality appraisal tool. The CASP (2023) was selected due to its specific design aimed at critically appraising qualitative studies, which is the primary focus of this review. Using multiple tools would have introduced challenges in rating and comparing the quality scores across various studies. Nonetheless, the researchers acknowledge that the CASP (2023) is not intended to appraise grey literature or mixed-methods studies, presenting a limitation to the quality appraisal methodology employed in this review.

6. Practice recommendations

Firstly, it would be recommended that all systems supporting care-experienced children implement attachment-based, trauma-informed approaches, such as Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP) (Hughes, 2004). Encouraging consistent relationships is important, so a focus on limiting staff turnover and promoting continuity of care is required. The care and criminal justice systems would benefit from trauma and mental health training, as well as appropriate approaches when working with care-experienced children. Care-experienced children should be assessed for attachment difficulties, exploitation risk and loss of connections. Behaviours, including those associated with peer affiliation, should be considered stemming from unmet relational needs. To improve such approaches, procedures within the criminal justice and care system should be reviewed, considering the question, 'Would this be suitable for a vulnerable child who may not have anyone to advocate for them?'. If not, prioritisation of resources would be recommended to ensure sufficient advocacy is provided.

A trauma-informed approach would be sensitive to the need of care-experienced children to belong. This would involve seeing these children not just through the lens of risk or behaviour, but as young people seeking connection, safety, and identity. By fostering trust, stability, and inclusion, trauma-informed practice helps children feel seen and connected, establishing a foundation for belonging. Involving children in shaping their support plans and making future decisions shifts away from a one-size-fits-all approach. This should be supplemented with care-experienced children receiving mental health and trauma-focused therapeutic interventions, such as Trauma-Informed Cognitive

Behavioural Therapy TF-CBT (Cohen et al, 2012).

The theme of intersectionality revealed how overlapping identities, particularly race and gender, create further disadvantage. Care-experienced Black girls and women are especially vulnerable to being stereotyped as aggressive when expressing distress, leading to disproportionate use of restraint. In response, professionals must receive mandatory anti-racism and discrimination training, embedded within trauma-informed care frameworks. This training must go beyond awareness-raising to include structured reflective exercises and clinical supervision, enabling staff to confront and unlearn implicit biases (for example, those around stereotypes of Black femininity). Alongside this, services must implement restraint reduction protocols that include identity-informed risk assessments, explicitly prompting teams to question how race and gender may be shaping perceptions of risk and behaviour. Without these changes, systems risk perpetuating harm under the guise of protection.

Secondly, to prevent the unnecessary criminalisation of care-experienced children, clear protocols should be implemented, regularly reviewed, and audited to minimise unnecessary police callouts and establish the police as a last resort. This is likely to include a multi-agency approach. Finally, whenever possible, care-experienced children should be supported in their need for belonging by involving and promoting positive role models with lived experience. Prioritising peer support initiatives and encouraging positive health connections may reduce care-experienced children’s reliance on unhelpful connections. Improving advocacy systems and ensuring that a dedicated advocate, who has taken the time to know the child, is available is important for supporting care-experienced children in legal proceedings and decision-making processes.

7. Future research

This review identified a narrow professional perception of care-

experienced children and a lack of researcher reflexivity, highlighting the need for future studies to address bias and strengthen validity. A key finding was the children's deep need for belonging, suggesting further research should explore how they seek connection and the systems' role in supporting this. Additionally, a gap exists around police discretion in charging decisions, where examining influencing factors could reveal systemic biases and contribute to our understanding of the over-representation of care-experienced children in the criminal justice system.

8. Conclusion

Care-experienced children’s interactions with the criminal justice system can be shaped by their search for belonging, systemic challenges that fuel criminalisation, a lack of holistic understanding by professionals, unresolved trauma, and the complexities of navigating intersecting identities. Professionals often overlook the importance of understanding the complex needs and experiences of care-experienced children, failing to appreciate their vulnerabilities fully.

Despite limitations in the studies reviewed, particularly researcher bias and missing information, the review provided several recommendations. These included promoting trauma-informed approaches, increasing the opportunity for connection and belonging and preventing unnecessary police involvement. Future research should focus on exploring the intersectionality of care-experienced children’s identities, understanding the role of police discretion in decision-making, and examining the complex need for belonging among these children.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. PRISMA guidelines checklist

Section and Topic	Item #	Checklist item	Location where item is reported
TITLE			
Title	1	Identify the report as a systematic review.	p.9
ABSTRACT			
Abstract	2	See the PRISMA 2020 for Abstracts checklist.	p.10
INTRODUCTION			
Rationale	3	Describe the rationale for the review in the context of existing knowledge.	p.11-13
Objectives	4	Provide an explicit statement of the objective(s) or question(s) the review addresses.	p.12-13
METHODS			
Eligibility criteria	5	Specify the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the review and how studies were grouped for the syntheses.	p. 13
Information sources	6	Specify all databases, registers, websites, organisations, reference lists and other sources searched or consulted to identify studies. Specify the date when each source was last searched or consulted.	p.13
Search strategy	7	Present the full search strategies for all databases, registers and websites, including any filters and limits used.	p.136
Selection process	8	Specify the methods used to decide whether a study met the inclusion criteria of the review, including how many reviewers screened each record and each report retrieved, whether they worked independently, and if applicable, details of automation tools used in the process.	p.13 -14
Data collection process	9	Specify the methods used to collect data from reports, including how many reviewers collected data from each report, whether they worked independently, any processes for obtaining or confirming data from study investigators, and if applicable, details of automation tools used in the process.	p.16
Data items	10a	List and define all outcomes for which data were sought. Specify whether all results that were compatible with each outcome domain in each study were sought (e.g. for all measures, time points, analyses), and if not, the methods used to decide which results to collect.	p.16
	10b	List and define all other variables for which data were sought (e.g. participant and intervention characteristics, funding sources). Describe any assumptions made about any missing or unclear information.	p.16
Study risk of bias assessment	11	Specify the methods used to assess risk of bias in the included studies, including details of the tool(s) used, how many reviewers assessed each study and whether they worked independently, and if applicable, details of automation tools used in the process.	p.16
Effect measures	12	Specify for each outcome the effect measure(s) (e.g. risk ratio, mean difference) used in the synthesis or presentation of results.	NA

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Section and Topic	Item #	Checklist item	Location where item is reported
Synthesis methods	13a	Describe the processes used to decide which studies were eligible for each synthesis (e.g. tabulating the study intervention characteristics and comparing against the planned groups for each synthesis (item #5)).	p.16
	13b	Describe any methods required to prepare the data for presentation or synthesis, such as handling of missing summary statistics, or data conversions.	p.15
	13c	Describe any methods used to tabulate or visually display results of individual studies and syntheses.	p.16
	13d	Describe any methods used to synthesize results and provide a rationale for the choice(s). If meta-analysis was performed, describe the model(s), method(s) to identify the presence and extent of statistical heterogeneity, and software package(s) used.	p.16
	13e	Describe any methods used to explore possible causes of heterogeneity among study results (e.g. subgroup analysis, meta-regression).	NA
	13f	Describe any sensitivity analyses conducted to assess robustness of the synthesized results.	p.16
Reporting bias assessment	14	Describe any methods used to assess risk of bias due to missing results in a synthesis (arising from reporting biases).	p.16
Certainty assessment	15	Describe any methods used to assess certainty (or confidence) in the body of evidence for an outcome.	p.15-16
RESULTS			
Study selection	16a	Describe the results of the search and selection process, from the number of records identified in the search to the number of studies included in the review, ideally using a flow diagram.	p.15
	16b	Cite studies that might appear to meet the inclusion criteria, but which were excluded, and explain why they were excluded.	NA
Study characteristics	17	Cite each included study and present its characteristics.	p. 19-31
Risk of bias in studies	18	Present assessments of risk of bias for each included study.	p. 33-35
Results of individual studies	19	For all outcomes, present, for each study: (a) summary statistics for each group (where appropriate) and (b) an effect estimate and its precision (e.g. confidence/credible interval), ideally using structured tables or plots.	NA
Results of syntheses	20a	For each synthesis, briefly summarise the characteristics and risk of bias among contributing studies.	p. 36
	20b	Present results of all statistical syntheses conducted. If meta-analysis was done, present for each the summary estimate and its precision (e.g. confidence/credible interval) and measures of statistical heterogeneity. If comparing groups, describe the direction of the effect.	NA
	20c	Present results of all investigations of possible causes of heterogeneity among study results.	NA
	20d	Present results of all sensitivity analyses conducted to assess the robustness of the synthesized results.	NA
Reporting biases	21	Present assessments of risk of bias due to missing results (arising from reporting biases) for each synthesis assessed.	p.33-35
Certainty of evidence	22	Present assessments of certainty (or confidence) in the body of evidence for each outcome assessed.	p. 36
DISCUSSION			
Discussion	23a	Provide a general interpretation of the results in the context of other evidence.	p.43-45
	23b	Discuss any limitations of the evidence included in the review.	p.45-46
	23c	Discuss any limitations of the review processes used.	p.45-46
	23d	Discuss implications of the results for practice, policy, and future research.	p.46-47
OTHER INFORMATION			
Registration and protocol	24a	Provide registration information for the review, including register name and registration number, or state that the review was not registered.	p. 13
	24b	Indicate where the review protocol can be accessed, or state that a protocol was not prepared.	p.13
	24c	Describe and explain any amendments to information provided at registration or in the protocol.	p.13
Support	25	Describe sources of financial or non-financial support for the review, and the role of the funders or sponsors in the review.	p.13
Declaration of competing interests	26	Declare any competing interests of review authors.	NA
Availability of data, code and other materials	27	Report which of the following are publicly available and where they can be found: template data collection forms; data extracted from included studies; data used for all analyses; analytic code; any other materials used in the review.	NA

Appendix B. Search strategy

Sample: care-experienced professionals and care-experienced individuals*	Phenomenon of Interest: Care-experienced children*	Evaluation: experiences with the criminal justice system*	Research Type: Attitudes*
"professionals" OR "police" OR "social worker" OR "social workers" OR "foster carer" OR "foster carers" OR "criminal justice professionals" OR "criminal justice professional" OR "youth offending professional" OR "youth offending professionals" OR "youth offending team" OR "youth offending teams" OR "residential staff" OR "support worker" OR "support workers" OR "children's home staff" OR "police personnel" OR "jurors" OR "law enforcement" OR "community support officers" OR "community support officer" OR "child welfare workers" OR "child welfare worker" OR "care leaver" OR "care leavers" OR "care experienced" OR "care-experienced" OR "looked after child" OR	"children in care" OR "child in care" OR "looked after children" OR "looked after child" OR "care-experienced" OR "care experienced" OR "children looked after" OR "out-of-home" OR "children's homes" OR "childrens homes" OR "childrens home" OR "children's home" OR "child institutionalised" OR "child institutionalized" OR "institutionalised children" OR "institutionalized children" OR "children's placement" OR "foster care" OR "foster home" OR "child care institution" OR "residential childcare" OR "childcare institution" OR "child care institution" OR "child welfare" OR "children's social care" OR "state care children" OR "local authority care"	"Justice system" OR "prison" OR "juvenile offenders" OR "juvenile offender" OR "court" OR "forensic" OR "criminalisation" OR "youth offenders" OR "youth offender" OR "penal" OR "youth justice" OR "police custody" OR "incarcerated" OR "imprisoned" OR "arrested" OR "young offenders" OR "young offender" OR "justice-involved" OR "offending" OR "convicted"	Attitud* OR perceptio* OR view OR views OR viewpoint OR experienc* OR belief OR beliefs OR opinio*

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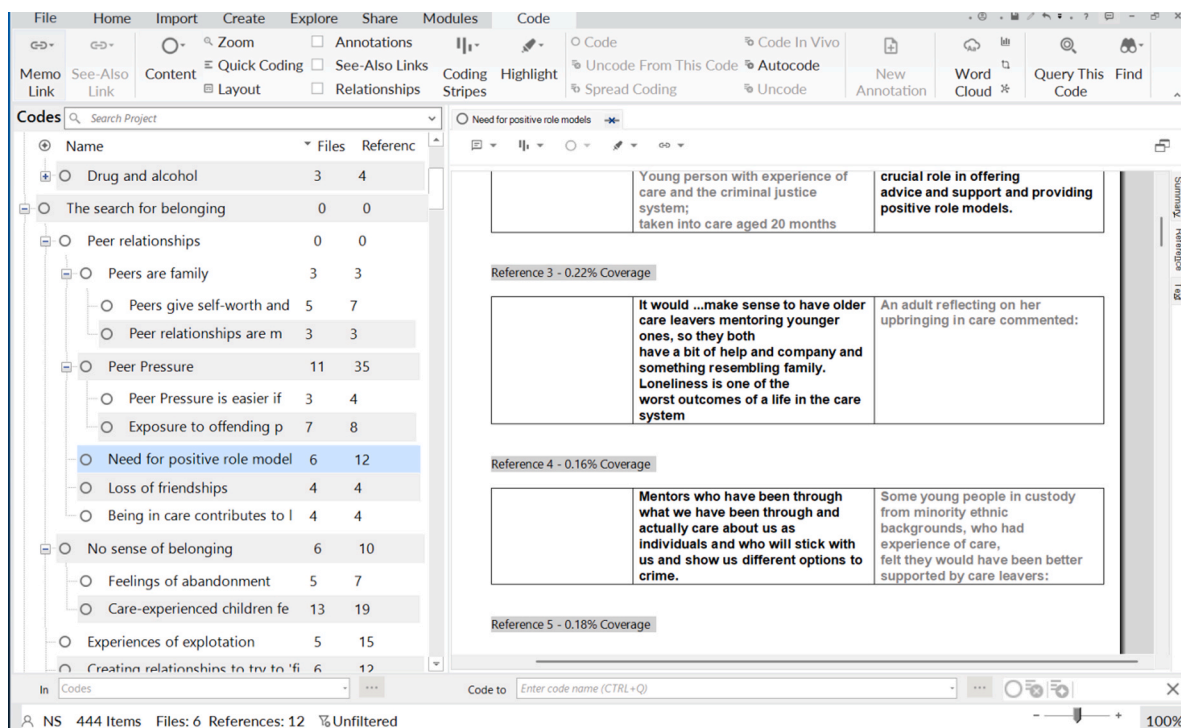
Sample: care-experienced professionals and care-experienced individuals*	Phenomenon of Interest: Care-experienced children*	Evaluation: experiences with the criminal justice system*	Research Type: Attitudes*
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“looked after children” OR “foster child” OR “foster children” OR “children in care” OR “crossover children” OR “crossover youth” OR “dual-status youth” OR “dual-status children” OR “dually-involved children” OR “dually-involved youth” OR “multisystem youth” OR “multi-system youth” OR “multisystem children” OR “multi system children”

*Boolean operators (AND) were used to combine search strings

Appendix C. Examples of the coding process

F.1 Example of line-by-line coding and creation of descriptive themes



F.2 An example of analytical themes derived from the descriptive themes

Name	Files	References	Created on	Created by	Modified on	Modified by
Systemic factors fuel the criminalisation of care-experie	0	0	04/04/2025 12:35	NS	04/04/2025 12:35	NS
Frequent interactions with the police	0	0	04/04/2025 12:30	NS	04/04/2025 12:30	NS
Consequences of increased frequency of reporte	6	7	10/01/2025 16:03	NS	04/04/2025 13:06	NS
Being know by the police leads to further poli	4	5	07/01/2025 12:09	NS	04/04/2025 12:54	NS
Excessive surveillance due to frequency of rep	6	9	17/03/2025 14:56	NS	04/04/2025 12:53	NS
The number of incidents or reports	0	0	04/04/2025 13:05	NS	04/04/2025 13:17	NS
Frequent offences with increasing severity	4	12	07/01/2025 10:20	NS	17/03/2025 15:00	NS
Police receive high number of reports	4	4	10/01/2025 12:23	NS	04/04/2025 12:54	NS
Residential homes to quick to resort to police	4	6	10/01/2025 12:24	NS	04/04/2025 12:40	NS
The police as a behaviour management tool	0	0	04/04/2025 12:30	NS	04/04/2025 12:30	NS
Arrested to prevent further harm to self	0	0	09/01/2025 16:36	NS	04/04/2025 13:22	NS
Arrested to prevent self-harm	1	1	04/04/2025 12:55	NS	04/04/2025 12:55	NS
Police involvement used as punishment	0	0	04/04/2025 13:01	NS	04/04/2025 13:21	NS
Police as a method to manage challenging be	16	53	09/01/2025 16:57	NS	04/04/2025 12:58	NS
Reporting to the police to reduce likelihood of fut	0	0	04/04/2025 13:00	NS	04/04/2025 13:19	NS
CJS involvement will prevent future offending	2	2	10/01/2025 11:31	NS	04/04/2025 12:59	NS
Staff involving the police as a coping strategy for t	0	0	04/04/2025 13:00	NS	04/04/2025 13:19	NS
Carers own frustrations guiding police involvle	4	7	10/01/2025 12:21	NS	18/03/2025 10:17	NS

Analytical main theme: Systemic factors fuel the criminalisation of care-experienced children

Analytical sub-theme 1: Frequent interactions with the police

Descriptive themes making up this sub-theme:

- Consequences of frequency of reported incidents
- The number of police incidents or reports

Analytical sub-theme 2: The police as a behaviour management tool.

Descriptive themes making up this sub-theme:

- Arrested to prevent further harm to self
- Police involvement used to reduce future offending
- Police involvement used as a punishment
- Staf emotions from behaviours

Appendix D. Matrix of studies (with quality ratings) and represented themes

Authors and publication year	CASP total score (max = 10)	1. The search for belonging		2. Unresolved trauma		3. Systemic challenges fuel the criminalisation of care-experienced children		4. Fitting in a box: A limited view of care-experienced children.	5. The complexity of intersectionality
		Peer Relationships	Advocacy	Healing or Harm? The Power of Professional Relationships	Reactive responses and the absence of trauma-informed care	The police as a behaviour management tool	Increased police contact, familiarity and surveillance		
Ball and Baidawi (2021)	9.5	x	x	x	x				x
Simmons-Horton, Kolvoski and Garza (2023)	9	x		x	x		x		x
Shaw (2011). Prison Reform Trust (2011).	8.5	x			x	x	x	x	x
Mendes, Baidawi and Snow (2014)	8	x		x				x	
Greig, McGrath and McFarlane (2019)	8	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Simmons-Horton (2021)	8	x	x	x					x

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(continued)

Authors and publication year	CASP total score (max = 10)	1. The search for belonging		2. Unresolved trauma		3. Systemic challenges fuel the criminalisation of care-experienced children		4. Fitting in a box: A limited view of care-experienced children.	5. The complexity of intersectionality
		Peer Relationships	Advocacy	Healing or Harm? The Power of Professional Relationships	Reactive responses and the absence of trauma-informed care	The police as a behaviour management tool	Increased police contact, familiarity and surveillance		
Baidawi and Ball (2022)	8	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Marshall (2014)	7.5			x	x			x	x
Day, Bateman and Pitts (2020)	7.5	x	x		x	x	x	x	x
Shaw (2014)	7	x		x	x			x	
Fitzpatrick et al. (2022)	7	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Shaw (2017)	6.5	x		x	x	x		x	
Gerard, McGrath and McFarlane (2019)	6.5		x	x	x	x	x		x
Gooch et al. (2022)	6.5			x	x			x	
Fitzpatrick et al. (2024)	6	x	x	x	x			x	x
Staines et al. (2024)	6			x	x	x	x	x	x
Flores et al (2018)	5.5					x		x	x
Hunter (2022)	5.5		x			x	x		x
Day (2017)	5	x		x				x	
Shaw and Greenhow (2021)	5	x				x	x		
Agenda and Alliance for Youth Justice (2022)	5	x				x		x	x
Day, Clark and Hazel (2023)	5	x			x	x		x	
Prison Reform Trust (2016)	4.5	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Fitzpatrick (2022)	4.5	x		x				x	x
Howard League for Penal Reform (2018)	3.5	x		x	x	x			

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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