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Foster Placement Breakdown: A Scoping Review of Care-Experienced Narratives

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ABSTRACT

While there is an extensive body of international literature on foster care placement breakdown, little attention has been given to children's lived experience of this common phenomenon. Using a scoping review method, the study collates and synthesizes what is known about care-experienced people's lived realities of breakdown. The study followed Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) five-stage approach to conducting scoping reviews and adopted a child-centred lens in defining breakdown. The review identified 20 peer-reviewed studies published between January 2015 and December 2024 containing narratives of both children and adults reflecting on breakdown experiences. Reflexive thematic analysis identified two recurrent themes (i) belonging and identity and (ii) communication, voice and agency. Grounded in recognition theory, the review identified breakdown as a time when children's rights are vulnerable to being violated. For some, breakdown had long-lasting negative impacts including identity harm, while others recalled it as a positively formative experience permeated with their resistance and agency. The study offers a distinct contribution to scholarly work on the topic of breakdown and calls for more research with care-experienced people to strengthen knowledge in the field.

1 | Introduction

Contemporary foster care systems operate in an era that emphasizes children's rights (Van Bijleveld et al. 2015). Most notable is the influence of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), ratified in 1989, principally Article 12(1), which stipulates that children have the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them. Accordingly, there is strong recognition of the importance of children's participation in decisions affecting their care (McTavish et al. 2022) and having their care-experiences heard through research participation (Garcia-Quiroga and Agoglia 2020). Placement breakdown (hereafter referred to as 'breakdown') is common in foster care, with a recent meta-analysis proposing an average worldwide rate of 26% (Eltink et al. 2025). Breakdown is also associated with negative outcomes including behavioural issues, anxiety, depression and poorer social connections and academic

achievement (Aarons et al. 2010; Rock et al. 2015; Vanderfaeillie et al. 2018). Given the potential significance of breakdown in the lives of children in foster care, this scoping review aims to synthesize contemporary peer-reviewed literature of care-experienced perspectives on this phenomenon.

1.1 | Definition(s) and Key Research Messages

Historically, the topic of breakdown has been beset with inconsistent definitions across literature and practice (James 2004; Harkin and Houston 2016), with scholars noting that very narrow or broad definitions can be operationalized (Vanderfaeillie et al. 2008). However, a common thread across definitions is that breakdown refers to an unexpected end of placement, often against the child's care plan (Berridge and Cleaver 1987; López et al. 2011). Inconsistencies arise regarding the issue of

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perspective (Bombach, Gabriel, and Stohler 2018) namely from whose standpoint is unexpected defined: foster carer, social worker or the child?

Inconsistency also derives from the entangled nature of breakdown with different, but related, concepts such as instability, permanence and moves (James 2004; Unrau 2007). Permanency and stability are both multidimensional, comprising psychological, physical, relational and legal considerations (Osmond and Tilbury 2012). Scholars have warned against breakdown being considered the antithesis of stability (Backe-Hansen 2010) recognizing that although it occurs for negative reasons (Vanderfaeillie et al. 2018), it does not inevitably produce a negative outcome for the child (Vanderfaeillie et al. 2008). However, permanence and stability are key goals of care systems internationally (Stenason and Romano 2023) with the reduction of breakdown identified as a 'crucial issue for policies designed to increase permanence' (Sinclair et al. 2005: 239).

Consequently, there is a significant body of research determining risk factors associated with breakdown, with this evidence-base consistently identifying that older children (Konijn et al. 2019; Montserrat et al. 2020) and adolescents (Eltink et al. 2025; Vinnerljung et al. 2017) are at greater risk. Similarly, children experiencing behavioural or mental-health difficulties (Harkin and Houston 2016; Montserrat et al. 2020), principally those with externalizing, rather than internalizing issues (Rock et al. 2015; Vreeland et al. 2020), are more likely to experience breakdown. Regarding foster family composition, the presence of foster carers' birth children has been found to have a strong association with breakdown (Höjer et al. 2013; Montserrat et al. 2020), with some studies noting this combination can give rise to jealousy and rivalry (Oosterman et al. 2007; Rock et al. 2015). At a broader level, conflictual relationships between foster and birth parents have also been identified as predictive of breakdown (Vanderfaeillie et al. 2018). Existing literature contains mixed findings regarding the impact of separation from siblings on placement trajectories; however, Rock et al. (2015) systematic review determined that such separation was a strong risk factor, with some children feeling less secure in placements without siblings. Systemic issues such as lack of carer preparation for placement and poor support for carers have also been found to be predictive of breakdown (Konijn et al. 2019; Octoman et al. 2014; Rock et al. 2015).

While there is a wealth of research exploring risk factors associated with breakdown, few studies have gone beyond these 'sterile indicators' (Barber et al. 2004). Recent exceptions offer perspectives of foster carer (Kertesz 2024; Tonheim and Iversen 2018) or social workers (Norgate et al. 2012; Taylor and McQuillan 2014). The aim of this scoping review is to synthesize contemporary peer-reviewed literature capturing care-experienced perspectives (both children in care and/or adults retrospective accounts) of breakdown. Deepening understanding of these experiences is essential from a children's rights perspective and honours the principles of the UNCRC. The review will also identify any gaps in such knowledge to inform future research.

Attuned to a rights-based ethos, findings will be anchored in Axel Honneth's recognition theory, which contends that for individuals to flourish they need recognition across three domains

(Honneth 1995). The process of recognition occurs first by the individual experiencing love/care through close relationships; second, by having their rights respected; and finally, through social esteem specifically being afforded opportunities to contribute to, and be part of, a community. Misrecognition occurs when individuals or groups are ignored, devalued, stereotyped or denied rights, negatively shaping their identity (Honneth 1995).

This study is concerned with contemporaneous accounts of care-experienced perspectives of breakdown capturing publications from 2015, with seminal literature pre-2015 acting as an initial lens to analyse the data. Noteworthy, here is Butler and Charles (1999) UK study, which found that foster carers demonstrated a 'hierarchy of value' by favouring their birth children over foster children (Butler and Charles 1999: 13). Further, in Barber et al.'s (2004) Australian study, some participants reported experiencing maltreatment in placement, with concerns raised not listened to, resulting in them deliberately engaging in behaviour to force the placement to an end. Other scholarly work identified that care-experienced people were unaware of issues in their placement prior to termination and were moved without notice, leaving them feeling powerless (Gilbertson and Barber 2003; Rostill-Brookes et al. 2011). Earlier research also identified breakdown as a time of multiple losses, which could have long-lasting impacts (Barber et al. 2004; Rostill-Brookes et al. 2011).

By mapping contemporaneous studies, this review will build upon earlier work to advance understanding of care-experienced perspectives and constructively guide future research, policy and practice on the topic of breakdown.

2 | Method

Scoping review was the chosen method, as the study's overall aim was to form a knowledge synthesis by systematically mapping evidence of lived experiences of breakdown (Tricco et al. 2018). In keeping with Arksey and O' Malley (2005)'s rationale for undertaking a scoping review, the study objectives were to:

- examine the extent, range and nature of research
- summarize the research findings and establish core themes on the topic
- identify research gaps to inform future research

The study was guided by Arksey and O' Malley (2005)'s five-stage framework and observed the PRISMA checklist extension for scoping reviews (Tricco et al. 2018).

2.1 | Search Strategy

The research team was assembled to include methodological and content expertise (Sharma and Goyal 2023). Initial exploratory searches were completed to broadly inform the search strategy, and a protocol was developed. Consultation on US specific terminology was conducted, and a search string was constructed (Supporting Information 2). This search was adapted

and applied to three electronic databases in June 2024: Web of Science, Social Sciences Database and PsycINFO, chosen to give a wide range of interdisciplinary results.

2.2 | Exclusion Criteria

Search strategy results were exported to Covidence¹ and rigorously screened against the study's inclusion/exclusion criteria (Supporting Information 1). In keeping with the iterative nature of scoping reviews (Thomas et al. 2017), the inclusion/exclusion criteria were regularly revisited and narrowed as required. To enhance the relevance of findings to contemporary practice, this review only sought to include recent studies. Publications predating 2015 were excluded to ensure the review reflects a decade of contemporary empirical work conducted in an era of growing rights-based discourse concerning child participation (Daley 2015; Percy-Smith 2015; Van Bijleveld et al. 2015).

A key consideration in the inclusion/exclusion criteria was ensuring that the research team, only (Rodger et al. 2024) and consistently, identified breakdown amid a heterogeneous body of work fragmented by inconsistent use of terminology and operational definitions (Unrau 2007). This complexity was recognized by the research team at the outset and reflected in early discussions, provoking questions such as: When is a breakdown a 'breakdown'? (does the placement need to have ended? or is 'at risk' sufficient?) What if 'breakdown' is not mentioned by participant or researcher (*it most often wasn't*)? Is it only a 'breakdown' if the ending is against the child's care plan?

Because none of the available definitions of breakdown offered a solution to these methodological complexities, and in line with a children's rights philosophy, the research team adopted a child-centred lens in defining breakdown, namely, a breakdown was when *a placement ended unexpectedly and negatively as experienced by the child*. The researchers applied this definition across the screening process, only including studies which contained care-experience accounts of placements that had ended unexpectedly owing to negative reasons/circumstances (accounts involving positive or ambiguous placement changes were excluded). The specific term 'breakdown' did not have to be used (by participant or researcher). Further, only care-experienced self-reported accounts were included, with indirect reports (e.g. administrative notes) excluded.

Another methodological complexity revolved around different meanings of 'foster care' internationally. The researchers adopted the European meaning, thus only including narratives of relative and non-relative care, and excluding residential, group-home care. Disentangling such narratives proved difficult in US studies where the meaning of foster care is broader. When there was uncertainty, narratives within studies, or where relevant, the study in its totality was excluded.

2.3 | Selection and Screening Process

PRISMA diagram (Figure 1) illustrates the selection process results. Ninety percent of screening in Phase 1 (2850 publications screened by title/abstract) was completed by one researcher,²

with the remaining 10% screened independently by two researchers.³ In Phase 2, the full text of 210 publications was independently reviewed by two researchers,⁴ which resulted in the exclusion of 187 publications. For both phases, where the double-blind review resulted in a conflicting judgement, differences were discussed and when assessments did not align, caution was exerted, and the publication was excluded.

In keeping with best practice for systematic reviews (Briscoe et al. 2020), the researchers manually searched the citation lists of the 18 publications that met the inclusion criteria (backwards citation referencing) and used Google Scholar to source additional publications referencing these 18 publications (forward citation referencing). The screening process was finalized in March 2025 and resulted in six additional publications being imported into Covidence, of which five met the inclusion criteria. Backwards citation referencing occurred on the five additional publications, with no new publications found. Therefore, a final set of 23 publications, deriving from 20 studies, met the inclusion criteria and were extracted.

2.4 | Data Extraction, Analysis and Evidence Synthesis

A bespoke data extraction template was developed, aligned to the study's aims and framed across the lifespan of breakdown encompassing questions concerning precursors to breakdown, experiences of the move and impact. Two researchers independently extracted the data from each of the 20 studies⁵ and subsequently met to form consensus regarding discrepancies highlighted by Covidence. Table 1 contains a summary of the 20 studies.

During the final step of Arksey and O' Malley's (2005) framework, the authors drew on reflexive thematic analysis, which allowed for reflexive identification, description and interpretation of thematic patterns (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2021). While as researchers we were driven by a children's rights philosophical approach, seeking to 'evoke participant "voices"', we were not passive conduits of these voices (Braun and Clarke 2021: 339). Rather, we interpreted and told *our* stories about the data, utilizing this subjectivity as an analytic resource (Braun and Clarke 2021).

3 | Findings

3.1 | Scope of Available Literature

All 20 studies were conducted in the Global North: five each in the United States and United Kingdom; two studies each in the Netherlands, Canada and Sweden; and one study each in Australia, Ireland, Israel and Switzerland. Only two studies had an exclusive focus on breakdown (Ben-Shlomo and Meir 2025; Bombach, Gabriel, and Stohler 2018; Bombach, Gabriel, Stohler, and Werner 2018), with the former solely capturing care-experienced accounts. The degree of focus on breakdown varied across the remaining 18 studies. Eight studies had a wider emphasis than breakdown, with a focus on issues such as permanence, instability and moves (Moran et al. 2020;

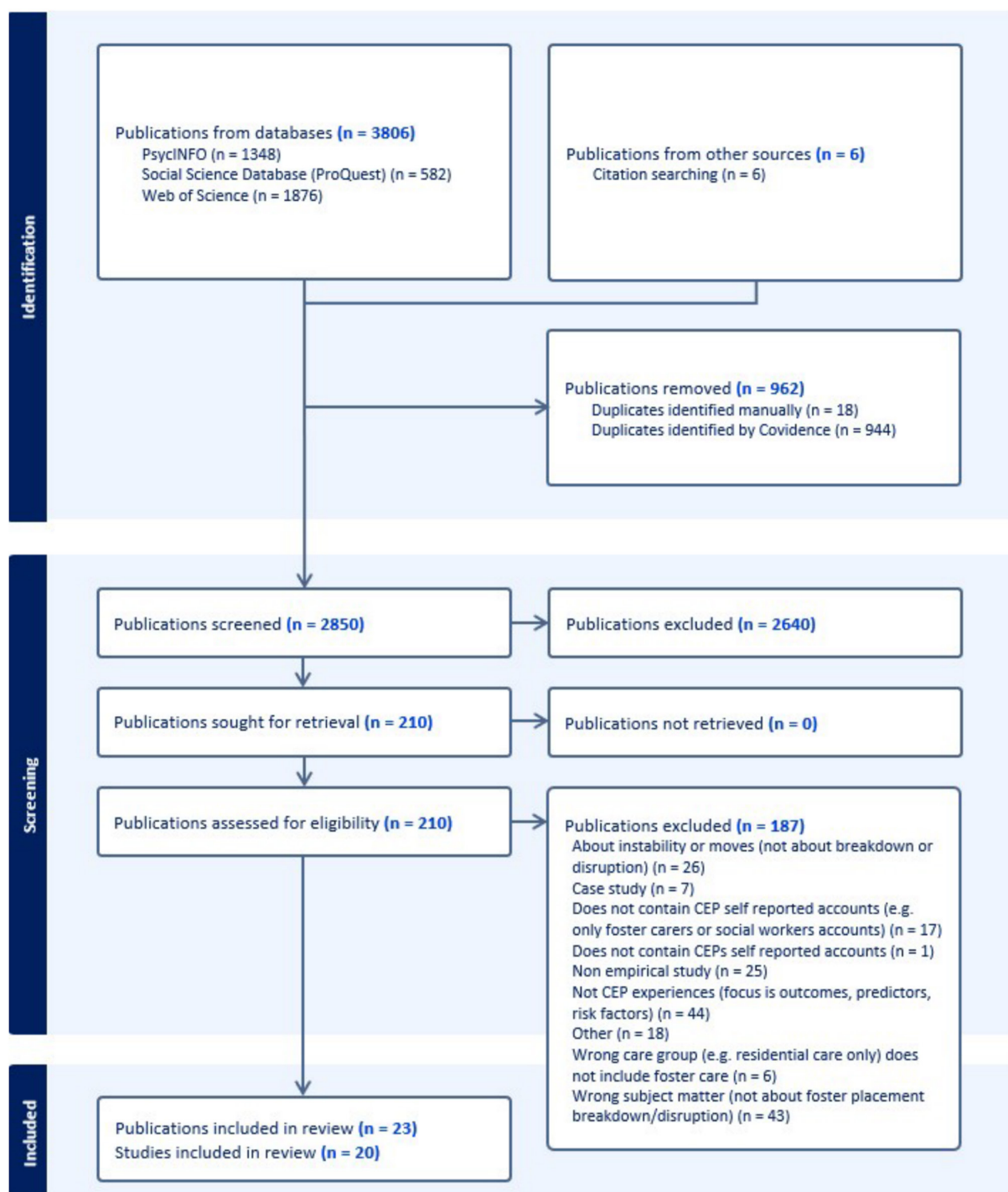


FIGURE 1 | PRISMA diagram.

Hébert et al. 2016; Woodall et al. 2023; Skoog et al. 2015; Rip et al. 2021; Edwards et al. 2022; Chambers et al. 2017, 2018, 2020; Goodyer 2016). A further seven had ‘care/leaving care’ as their primary focus, often through the lens of various topics for example educational success, trauma and sleep experiences (Rip et al. 2020; Riebschleger et al. 2015; McCormack and Issaakidis 2018; Ellis and Johnston 2024; Driscoll 2018; Hedin 2017; Fusco and Kulkarni 2018). The final three studies had wider foci than care: Robinson (2018) focused on LGBTQ individuals experiencing homelessness; Heath and Priest (2016) on issues of transition, instability and coping behaviours for

young offenders and Narendorf (2017) on the intersection of homelessness and mental health.

Regarding participants, 14 studies exclusively captured care-experienced voices, three studies (Bombach, Gabriel, and Stohler 2018; Bombach, Gabriel, Stohler, and Werner 2018; Rip et al. 2020 and Rip et al. 2021) reported from both care-experienced and foster carer perspectives. The three studies with a wider focus than care (Robinson 2018; Heath and Priest 2016; and Narendorf 2017) all had young people as sole participants.

TABLE 1 | Extracted studies.

Author	Study focus	Country ^a	Data collection ^a	No. of care-experienced participants	No. of participants with accounts of breakdown
Ben-Shlomo and Meir (2025) ^c	Breakdown in adolescence	Israel	Qual	14	14
Bombach, Gabriel, and Stohler (2018); Bombach, Gabriel, Stohler, and Werner (2018)	Defining(a) and perspectives leading to (b) breakdown	Switzerland	Qual	13	13
Chambers et al. (2017, 2018 and 2020)	Foster alumni defining (2017), perceptions of (2018) and advice on (2020) moves	United States	Qual	43	2‡
Driscoll (2018)	Relationships when leaving care	United Kingdom	Qual	21	3
Edwards et al. (2022)	Black foster youth and instability	Canada	Qual	27	4‡
Ellis and Johnston (2024)	Care-leavers educational success	England and Wales	Mixed methods	234	1
Fusco and Kulkarni (2018)	Foster-care alumni sleep problems	United States	Qual	24	3
Goodyer (2016)	Moving in foster-care	England	Qual	22	6‡
Heath and Priest (2016)	Transition, instability and coping for young offenders	England	Qual	2	1
Hébert et al. (2016)	Instability	Canada	Qual	15	1
Hedin (2017)	Leaving care	Sweden	Qual	5	2
McCormack and Issaakidis (2018)	Out-of-home care	Australia	Qual	4	1
Moran et al. (2020)	Permanence	Ireland	Qual	10	7
Narendorf (2017)	Homelessness and mental health	United States	Qual	14	1
Riebschleger et al. (2015)	Trauma experiences and foster-care	United States	Qual	43	1‡
Rip et al. (2020)	Experiences of unaccompanied refugee children (their carers and workers)	Netherlands	Qual	10	5
Rip et al. (2021)	Discrepancies in perspectives on placement success	Netherlands	Quant	28	3

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

Author	Study focus	Country ^a	Data collection ^a	No. of care-experienced participants	No. of participants with accounts of breakdown
Robinson (2018)	LGBTQ youth homelessness	United States	Qual	21	1
Skoog et al. (2015)	Instability	Sweden	Qual	12	1 ^b
Woodall et al. (2023)	Stability and permanence	United Kingdom	Qual	6	3

^aRelevant to scoping review.^bExact number of participants not clear therefore lowest value ascribed.^cPreprint October 2024 found during forward citation referencing.

Across the 20 studies, there were 568 care-experienced participants with placements in a range of out-of-home care options. It was not possible to ascertain the precise number of participants with breakdown experiences within some studies due to the integration of participant narratives (Riebschleger et al. 2015; Skoog et al. 2015; Edwards et al. 2022; Chambers et al. 2017, 2018 & 2020). Where the exact number of participants with accounts of breakdown within a study was unclear, the lowest value was attributed. Consequently, this scoping review captures at least 74 care-experienced accounts of breakdown.

The exact age of participants who had experienced breakdown was not clearly reported across all 20 studies; however, the age range was available, extending from eight (Skoog et al. 2015) to 69 years (Chambers et al. 2017, 2018 and 2020). Four studies exclusively had participants under 18 years (Heath and Priest 2016; Woodall et al. 2023; Rip et al. 2021; Goodyer 2016), while in two studies (Skoog et al. 2015; Driscoll 2018), participants were 18 years or under. In seven studies, participants were 18 years or above (Hedin 2017; Hébert et al. 2016; McCormack and Issaakidis 2018; Ellis and Johnston 2024; Narendorf 2017; Chambers et al. 2017, 2018 & 2020; Fusco and Kulkarni 2018) and six studies had a mix of participants under and over 18 years (Bombach, Gabriel, and Stohler 2018; Bombach, Gabriel, Stohler, and Werner 2018; Ben-Shlomo and Meir 2025; Rip et al. 2020; Riebschleger et al. 2015; Moran et al. 2020 and Edwards et al. 2022). The age of care-experienced participants was unclear in Robinson (2018) but fell between 17 and 25 years.

Participant gender was not universally captured across the 20 studies. For studies that reported on gender, most comprised a mix of male and female participants, except for Woodall et al. (2023) where all six participants were male. Similarly, participant ethnicity was not universally or consistently captured across the 20 studies. Notable here is Edwards et al.'s (2022) Canadian study with Black youth and Rip et al.'s (2020, 2021) studies with unaccompanied minors in the Netherlands.

In all but two studies, narratives of breakdown emerged from qualitative approaches. Ellis and Johnston (2024) used mixed methods, but it is unclear from which method the narrative of breakdown emerged. Rip et al. (2021) employed quantitative methods, a questionnaire administered via a home visit.

3.2 | Thematic Findings

The synthesis of narratives highlights that while the ending may be unexpected, breakdown is typically a process that evolves over time and one that is highly personalized, complex and multidimensional. Notwithstanding the individualized nature of the experience, two recurrent and dominant themes were identified across the 20 studies: (i) belonging and identity and (ii) communication, voice and agency. These themes permeated accounts across the lifecycle of the breakdown, including the precursors to breakdown, the experience of the move itself and its aftermath.

3.2.1 | Belonging and Identity

The theme of belonging and identity powerfully infused accounts, with researchers identifying this in a multitude of ways, some of which are represented in the three subthemes of (i) 'not home' and 'not fitting in', (ii) identity formation and (iii) breakdown: a time of constructed and concealed identity?

3.2.1.1 | 'Not Home' and 'Not Fitting In'. Sense of belonging is critically important in foster care, and several accounts illustrate its fragility in placements that break down. Hila, who was 17 years old when her placement of five years broke down, suggests that uncertainty about belonging is implicit in the very nature of foster care:

Living with a family that isn't yours is not in your DNA. It's different ... you never feel you belong one hundred percent

(Ben-Shlomo and Meir 2025: 223).

Similarly, 15-year-old Darren recalled that his placement terminated 'after he struggled to connect with his carer', reporting that he felt 'dropped into' the foster home and that his carer 'didn't know enough about me to bring me up and I didn't know enough about her' (Woodall et al. 2023: 782). This quote depicts a potential lack of pre-placement preparation and the 'lost ground' apparent when a child enters foster care.

Beyond the outset of the placement, accounts of breakdown highlight that 'fitting in' to the foster family is a recurrent,

complex concern. To 'fit in' the foster child needs to negotiate relationships with family members individually and collectively as a unit. Both Tayla, in Ben-Shlomo and Meir's (2025) Israeli study focused on breakdown, and Imogen, in Driscoll's (2018) UK research about relationships when leaving care, linked their breakdown experiences to the difficult relationships they had with their respective foster mothers, but both had enjoyed positive connections with other family members. Foster children must also negotiate relationships with other children in the home. Poignantly, Habib, who had lived with his foster family for five years, described feeling increasingly alienated and treated differently to his foster carers' birth children after the death of one of his carers (Driscoll 2018). In Bombach, Gabriel, Stohler, and Werner's (2018) sub-study in Switzerland, care-experienced participants reported differential treatment through unequal imposition of rules, differing choice of gifts, and being given a smaller, unfit for purpose bedroom, which 'shows you are not equal' (Bombach, Gabriel, Stohler, and Werner 2018: 68).

These examples illustrate the complexity and multidimensionality of factors affecting foster care success, especially the many relationships that need to be effectively negotiated to 'fit in'. The narratives further reveal that negotiation is not an isolated event but rather a process that requires attention and renegotiation over time. One participant describes how their sense of belonging within the family changed when a new foster child entered the home: 'I knew then that I no longer belong there' (Bombach, Gabriel, Stohler, and Werner 2018: 68). The critical importance of sense of belonging, of feeling 'at home', to the success of foster care is powerfully captured here:

... if you do not feel at home in a foster family, there is something wrong... I almost never felt at home at the beginning, but then it got worse ... the foster children have to want it ... and they must feel at home...

(Bombach, Gabriel, Stohler, and Werner 2018: 69)

3.2.1.2 | Identity Formation. Identity is a multifaceted issue, especially for children in foster care, and this concept is powerfully infused with care-experienced recollections of breakdown. Narratives highlight that breakdown impacts young people's evolving sense of identity, leading to a psychological shift in how participants felt about themselves, others and the world around them. Many reported feeling rejected, 'never feeling part of a foster family' and being 'kicked out'—which were experienced as 'personal rejections' resulting in changed self-perception and self-worth, specifically, feeling unwanted and undeserving of care (Chambers et al. 2018:80). Participants with multiple breakdowns in Moran et al.'s (2020) Irish study talked about their futures with 'less certainty compared to those with lower numbers of breakdowns' (Moran et al. 2020:1120). This was profoundly illustrated by Sarah, who experienced several breakdowns during 10 years in care, describing it as: 'a cycle...it feeds in to how you feel about yourself and looks completely negative and bleak' (Moran et al. 2020:1121).

In a recent UK study, 16-year-old John described how breakdown pushed him 'further and further away from people' (Woodall et al. 2023:783). Echoing the experiences of others, 23-year-old Ciara describes how her sense of security

and stability was compromised by the experience of breakdown, leading to her feeling uncertain about her 'living arrangements. You never really settle. I don't think we feel secure....' (Moran et al. 2020:1120).

Indeed, core features and symbols of identity were often eroded by experiences of breakdown, with many participants powerfully recalling breakdown as a time of disconnection and involving multiple losses—for example, of school, friends, belongings, community and family members (Bombach, Gabriel, and Stohler 2018; Ellis and Johnston 2024; Chambers et al. 2017; Edwards et al. 2022; Fusco and Kulkarni 2018; Goodyer 2016). Freddie, aged 11, poignantly recalled being unwillingly separated from his brother: 'I had to go to a 4th place, and so we ran ooff...me and my brother...I thought I was going with my brother, I was ok with that but, then my social worker told me it wasn't [the plan]' (Goodyer 2016: 194). Collectively, these narratives illustrate the multidimensional and formative power of breakdown in the child's evolving sense of identity.

3.2.1.3 | Breakdown: A Time of Constructed and Concealed Identity?. The review also sheds light on breakdown as a time when identity was at risk of being ascribed and constructed by external actors in the child's life, such as foster carers or social workers. This 'constructed' identity related strongly to the child's 'negative' behaviour, for example, a participant in Riebschleger et al. (2015)'s US study described how, at 13 years, he had been physically abused by his foster mother, retaliated physically, and was then labelled 'out of control':

... I finally got tired of her hitting me ... she picked up an item from the kitchen and hit me with it, and I took it from her and I hit her back. I ended up in a residential home. They said I was out of control

(Riebschleger et al. 2015: 349).

While care-experienced accounts provide just one perspective, several narratives revealed the timing of breakdown coincided with diagnosis and treatment of mental-health issues. Notably, some foster children were placed in psychiatric care following breakdown (Robinson 2018; Bombach, Gabriel, Stohler, and Werner 2018) while others described that their trauma-induced behavioural issues during breakdown led to them being forced to take psychotropic medication, which made them feel 'groggy' and 'did not work' (Riebschleger et al. 2015: 350). Alaina's account, in Robinson (2018) US study with LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness, illustrates how responses to their sexuality resulted in placement breakdown and consequent admission to psychiatric care: 'She didn't want me there, 'cause I was with a girl still ... so she ended up putting me in a hospital...' (Robinson 2018:38).

Some young people were acutely aware of the formative power of external actors in a child's life; specifically, how they could ascribe, label and ultimately construct a child's identity in a decisive way. In a recent Canadian study with Black foster youth, Tiana described how behaviour in one placement follows the young person, acting as a stigmatizing 'label' which affects future placement decisions (Edwards et al. 2022:1226). Aware of this power, Christopher recommends other foster children avoid

being labelled a 'bad kid': 'make sure you get good references, like from foster parents...you don't want to go back to the courts talking about how "he been acting up"' (Chambers et al. 2020:4).

Certain participants felt that they lived a conditional life in foster care, where they were unable to fully reveal or express their needs and identity. Instead, they were concerned with conforming to carers' expectations and showing gratitude for the 'gift' of foster care. This conditionality resonates through 26-year-old Nirit's reflections: '...they're doing me a favor and I don't want to hurt them ... If I say they did one thing or another they might not like it...' (Ben-Shlomo and Meir 2025:222). This Israeli study focused on breakdown during adolescence and found it was a time when revelations of identity, and a reluctance to conceal this, led to breakdown. For example, 23-year-old Naama described: ' ... adolescence as the time I started to develop a backbone, where I said, that's not me, I want to do this, I started to have an opinion of my own, my own ideas ...' (Ben-Shlomo and Meir 2025:224). Similarly, 21-year-old Jacob identified exploration of his sexual identity as the 'breaking point' of his placement, noting that when his carers found out '... everything started to collapse ...' (Ben-Shlomo and Meir 2025:224).

Reinforcing the individualized nature of this experience, a small number considered breakdown positively influential in terms of identity. In Hedin's (2017) Swedish study about leaving care, 21-year-old Anna framed the breakdown of her placement four years previously as a turning point and motivator in her life: 'I might have had another view on life, and maybe I wouldn't have gone abroad ... Above all I got a kick in the behind' (Hedin 2017:510).

3.2.2 | Communication, Voice and Agency

Like the theme of belonging and identity, the second theme of 'communication, voice and agency' was strongly evident across the lifecycle of breakdown. Three subthemes were identified: (i) behaviour: cause or communication? (ii) orchestrated breakdowns and (iii) powerless or powerful endings?

3.2.2.1 | Behaviour: Cause or Communication?. Across the 20 studies, participants commonly identified their own behaviour as a reason for breakdown. One participant in Narendorf's (2017) US study on the intersection of homelessness and mental health recalled being 'kicked out' of his foster home at 17 years because he stopped taking medication and was 'acting up'. This participant acknowledged the extremity of his behaviour, which included '... setting fires, getting in fights, punching holes in the wall...' (Narendorf 2017:57).

Tiana, whose placement also ended due to externalized behaviour, recognized that she caused 'a lot of problems, I flipped tables'. However, she also described the reasons underlying her behaviour, recalling that she felt 'very displaced, I wanted my mom...I actually have not seen white people a lot when I was a kid...' (Edwards et al. 2022:1225). Similarly, Tasmin recalled being 'really badly behaved' in school because she was unhappy and her pleas to move were ignored (Driscoll 2018:544). While Tasmin's behaviour was not the specific cause of breakdown, her account reveals the unmet needs behind her behaviour.

In Fusco and Kulkarni (2018) US study about sleep disturbances among foster care alumni, two participants reported how their sleep problems, arising from traumatic experiences, caused breakdown:

Before I went into foster care I saw my brother get shot ... I was waking up at night really scared. My foster mom was really nice ... for the first few nights ... But then I heard her telling my caseworker that she couldn't deal with it ... a new placement for me.

(Fusco and Kulkarni 2018:45)

While a range of internalized and externalized behaviours are illustrated in the accounts above, they share commonality in that behavioural 'issues' led to breakdown. However, the distinct, personal stories of some reveal the past trauma and unmet needs behind their behaviour. For several others, behaviour was a way of communicating current traumatic experiences such as maltreatment in placement, an issue that is explicitly named in three studies (Heath and Priest 2016; Rip et al. 2020; Riebschleger et al. 2015).

3.2.2.2 | Orchestrated Breakdowns. Many participants who were unhappy in their placement and felt their concerns went unheard demonstrated agency and ended the placement themselves. Participants in Bombach, Gabriel, and Stohler (2018) sub-study in Switzerland described resorting to difficult behaviour to gain the attention of professionals and actively cause breakdown by 'acting particularly stupidly ... provoking reactions by disobeying rules, stealing' (Bombach, Gabriel, and Stohler 2018: 52). Similarly, 17-year-old Ben, who had also been maltreated in his placement, described feeling that although the eventual outcome of his placement was inevitable, he took control of how and when it ended: 'I knew I'd be there a short time.... I made sure of it' (Heath and Priest 2016: 9). A Canadian study with Black foster youth found that participants often engaged 'in acts of resistance to provoke institutional responses in the hopes of being moved' (Edwards et al. 2022:1234). Running away was one such act of resistance, and a theme which emerged across several studies (Driscoll 2018; Goodyer 2016; Hébert et al. 2016; Robinson 2018; Skoog et al. 2015). In a Canadian study about instability, Annabelle combined purposeful actions with running away to orchestrate the end of her placement:

So I decided to run away, I decided to do bad things so that I would change foster families ... I did things to make sure that they had to change my foster family. So it was all planned ...

(Hébert et al. 2016: 234)

Similarly, in a UK study, 14-year-old Evangeline developed a strategy of giving new foster homes a trial-period before running away: 'If I'm not used to them after two weeks, I'm out of there' (Goodyer 2016: 193).

3.2.2.3 | Powerless or Powerful Endings?. The narratives above highlight how many care-experienced young people acted powerfully, with agency to orchestrate the ending of unhappy

placements. However, across the 20 studies, the ending itself was overwhelmingly characterized by a distinct loss of control, where they had little/no notice of the move or participation in the process. Bombach, Gabriel, and Stohler (2018) described such endings as 'fast, hard cuts'. Some felt 'whisked' away (Edwards et al. 2022:1225), with 9-year-old Daniel recalling that his placement ended when social workers 'just took me' (Goodyer 2016: 192). One participant in McCormack and Issaakidis's (2018) Canadian study described how their placement ended with a final betrayal etched with feelings of abandonment: 'She rang me and said ... she didn't want to be my mother anymore' (McCormack and Issaakidis 2018:135). Peter explained that his placement ended during a 'chaotic' time, where 'nobody really knew what exactly was going on'; yet interestingly, distinguished between himself as 'uninformed' in contrast to informed professionals (Bombach, Gabriel, and Stohler 2018: 53).

These selected narratives convey an intense sense of powerlessness, resulting in the care-experienced person feeling disenfranchised with little to no voice, participation or agency. For some, breakdown was also a time characterized by a profound sense of disposability, as illuminated by Tricia's experience:

... we met with a ... worker who had my stuff in a parking lot, transferred the stuff into my car ... It was in bags, like reusable shopping bags
(Edwards et al. 2022:1229).

Tricia's account was not unique, with other participants recounting the placement ending and onward move as a time when they felt dehumanized, treated like objects or passed around like a 'parcel' (Woodall et al. 2023:785). In contrast, and highlighting the deeply individualized nature of the experience, Jacqueline, who orchestrated her breakdown in a powerful way described it as an 'experience of empowerment' that was 'right for her life' (Bombach, Gabriel, Stohler, and Werner 2018:50).

4 | Discussion

The review identified 20 studies containing care-experienced narratives of breakdown. Adopting a child-centred lens in defining breakdown revealed valuable, and hereto widely elusive, insights into the experience of breakdown from the standpoint of the care-experienced person. Findings will be critically examined through the lens of seminal pre-2015 lived experience literature and integrated with the often separately presented empirical evidence on risk factors of breakdown. The synthesized analysis will then be anchored in recognition theory.

The review highlights the importance of the child's sense of belonging in a foster family but equally uncovers the complexity surrounding achieving this, specifically the multiple dynamics and relationships that need to be successfully negotiated for the child to realize, and sustain, an integrated, harmonious life in foster care (Montserrat et al. 2020). The continuing draw of birth family ties was one such dynamic which permeated sub-themes, with separation from siblings felt profoundly and intertwined with reasons for breakdown (Rock et al. 2015). Also supporting earlier literature, this review emphasizes how relationships

with foster carers' birth children can have a powerfully influential role on the trajectory of the placement (Höjer et al. 2013; Montserrat et al. 2020). Recollections of feelings of alienation from foster carers' birth children (Driscoll 2018) and unequal rules, differing choices of gifts that 'shows you are not equal' (Bombach, Gabriel, Stohler, and Werner 2018: 68), deepen understanding of the ways in which foster youth experience and can internalize carers' hierarchy of value (Butler and Charles 1999). Notably, the review suggests that for some, 'fitting into' a foster family requires conformity to the carer's expectations, resulting in possible loss of authenticity (Ben-Shlomo and Meir 2025) or a concealed identity- exemplified by Jacob (Ben-Shlomo and Meir 2025) and Alaina (Robinson 2018), who both reported their placements ended owing to their carers reactions to revelations about their sexuality.

The review offers a new depth of understanding of 'behaviour' as a risk factor for breakdown, uncovering the importance of considering the needs being communicated through behaviour. While extreme behaviours, like fire-setting (Narendorf 2017), pose specific risks, it is nevertheless crucial that root causes of behaviour are recognized and addressed rather than systems 'punishing the symptoms of trauma' (Edwards et al. 2022:1226). Consequently, there are clear merits to adopting a trauma-informed approach to understand and support children during times of breakdown (Kisiel et al. 2014; Riebschleger et al. 2015). Additionally, this review suggests the possibility that breakdown is a time when foster children's identity is at risk of being negatively constructed by others. Edwards et al. (2022) argue that behaviours are misunderstood and pathologized; this review further illuminates how foster children are at risk of being labelled a 'bad kid' during breakdown, a label which can have significant and long-lasting negative consequences. To the researcher's knowledge, this concept of 'constructed' identity has not emerged in previous literature on foster children but resonates with misrecognition experiences reported among unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors (Korkiamäki and Gilligan 2020).

Similar to earlier work (Barber et al. 2004), this synthesis found that when foster youth concerns about placement, including experiences of maltreatment, go unheard or fail to have influence (Lundy 2007), reflecting a concept McMillen et al. (2024) refer to as 'audience failure', some seek to regain control through externalized behaviour such as 'acting out' or running away, behaviours they know *will* be acted upon (Bombach, Gabriel and Stohler 2018). Accordingly, we coined the term 'orchestrated' breakdowns to reflect this phenomenon. Terminology aside, the findings strongly support 'externalized' behaviour as a risk factor for breakdown (Vreeland et al. 2020) and the nuance uncovered should provoke care systems to reflect on what type of communication receives a timely response and what message this imparts to foster children.

Breakdown experiences being predominantly recalled as a time of powerlessness, loss of control and one where the young person was reduced to a disenfranchised position echoes findings of earlier literature (Rostill-Brookes et al. 2011). It further resonates with McTavish et al.'s (2022) recent meta-analysis, which found that children's participation during breakdown is lacking. This stagnant position is consistent with wider research, which

highlights a gap between children's rights as articulated in legislation and as experienced in practice (Falch-Eriksen et al. 2021). This gap is most poignantly depicted by those who felt disposable, dehumanized and passed around like a parcel. While the long-lasting impact of breakdown is established in research (Rostill-Brookes et al. 2011), the synthesis of contemporary literature adds depth of knowledge as to *why* it is felt so profoundly, and how it can be a powerfully *formative* experience. Woodall et al. (2023) posits that breakdown likely creates an undercurrent whereby young people automatically internalise subsequent placement endings and loss of relationships as their fault, perpetuating the cycle of negative self-perception and reluctance to invest in relationships (Woodall et al. 2023: 785). This finding adds important context as to why one breakdown can become a risk factor for future breakdowns (Montserrat et al. 2020).

Considered through the lens of recognition theory, the findings suggest that breakdown inflicts a 'struggle for recognition' by impairing the child's access to love. Instead, breakdown can engender misrecognition as it often involves felt personal rejection, and relational disconnection and ruptures (Honneth 1995). Findings further suggest that breakdown experiences can damage young people's esteem through loss of community, belongings and authenticity, with the latter triggered by struggles to fit in, conform to expectations or conceal elements of their needs and identity. Indeed, misrecognition can occur through negative images being 'constructed' about them (Honneth 1995; Korkiamäki and Gilligan 2020). Overwhelmingly, the review findings expose breakdown as a time when a child's rights to voice, participation and respect (Houston and Dolan 2008) are at an intensified risk of being violated and where they are vulnerable to both immediate, and long-term identity harm.

Despite negative experiences dominating the accounts of breakdown, care-experienced narratives were also infused with positive stories of agency, resistance and power. These findings serve to shift the common conceptualization of breakdown from an exclusively negative, to a more nuanced position, echoing sentiments that breakdown should not be considered an antithesis to stability (Backe-Hansen 2010). The findings also remind us of the importance of avoiding a narrow view of what breakdown means (Vanderfaellie et al. 2008) and of capturing care-experienced voices to better understand *their* truth, meaning and lived realities (Bombach, Gabriel, and Stohler 2018). Collectively, the lived-experience narratives captured in this review add depth and nuance to otherwise 'sterile' indicators (Barber et al. 2004) and outcomes of breakdown. Moreover, the review offers an important epistemological contribution, as it seeks to embed children's experiences not only as a legitimate, but indeed a normative, reference point for knowledge production (Braun and Clarke 2021).

While the review sheds light on lived experiences of breakdown, there are noteworthy research gaps. Foremost, only two studies exclusively focused on breakdown; a stark figure reflecting the limited attention care-experienced perspectives has been afforded in contemporary research. Significant geographical gaps were identified, with just nine jurisdictions represented in the 20 studies, all of which were located in the Global North. The review contained no geographical boundaries, and while we excluded non-English language studies, our search terms

were constructed to find studies from this region. Consequently, the absence of studies from the Global South is significant, yet consistent with scholarly work highlighting how authorship and research outputs are heavily skewed towards the Global North (Afolabi 2020; Sağınç et al. 2026).

Notwithstanding the complexity involved in researching the topic of breakdown (Bombach, Gabriel, and Stohler 2018), the gaps identified are striking and consequential given the prevalence (Eltink et al. 2025) and known negative consequences of breakdown (Rock et al. 2015) and, indeed, the contemporary landscape which foregrounds children's rights and child participation (McTavish et al. 2022). Understood through recognition theory, this research invisibility suggests institutional misrecognition of care-experienced people, as their voices have been largely overlooked in knowledge production on the topic (Honneth 1995). Further, the review found that voices emanating from the Global South are decidedly less represented, reinforcing the dominance of Global North voices in shaping knowledge production in the field (Afolabi 2020).

5 | Limitations

This review provides a synthesis of contemporary literature of care-experienced narratives of breakdown; however, there are certain limitations. Potentially relevant studies may have been omitted, as the review drew from three databases, excluded non-English language publications and forward citation referencing of the five imported publications was not completed. The absence of studies emanating from the Global South implies reduced transferability of findings to this region.

A further limitation relates to the heterogeneity of sources, given that just two of the 20 studies had an exclusive focus on breakdown. While our research team only extracted information relevant to *our* research question (Rodger et al. 2024), it is important to recognize that participant narratives within the 20 studies will have been shaped by *that* study's focus and research question (Clark et al. 2021). Finally, while the review gathered contemporary studies published from 2015, all accounts were retrospective and may have been influenced by the passage of time.

6 | Conclusion

The reviewed literature provides critically important, and previously obscured, insights into the experiences of breakdown through the voices of care-experienced people. The findings should provoke all actors in foster care systems including policymakers, practitioners, carers, educators, trainers and other professionals, to critically reflect on their conceptualization, intervention and prioritization during breakdown. Specifically, reflections should centre on whether and how all actors in care systems:

- support children to achieve and sustain a sense of love and belonging
- support and educate foster carers regarding the importance of accepting and understanding the child so that they do not

feel obliged to conform or conceal elements of their needs or identity

- adopt a trauma-informed approach to understanding behaviour, both internalized and externalized
- consider whether a child is purposefully orchestrating breakdown, and if so, why
- educate key stakeholders on the importance of adopting a record-keeping perspective and avoid misrecognizing the child through labelling, pathologizing, or 'constructing' an adverse identity
- recognize the impact of breakdown on the child's developing sense of identity and offer support to buffer against enduring identity harm
- uphold the child's rights by allowing for meaningful participation during breakdown, such as practitioners ensuring children are:
 - present and involved in decision-making moments
 - given the opportunity to visit a prospective foster family before moving in
 - supported to bring important belongings with them when they move
 - afforded continuity in contact with family members, friendships and hobbies thereby protecting their social esteem and enhancing social inclusion

Finally, aligned to Lundy's (2007) model of child participation, where a child's voice/wishes have been heard, but cannot be adhered to, this should be communicated to the child to avoid 'audience failure' (McMillen et al. 2024).

7 | Future Research

In seminal work on placement moves almost two decades ago, there was a call for the development of 'clear conceptual definitions of placement moves so that research findings can better contribute to systematic knowledge building efforts' (Unrau 2007:133). In this study, we adopted a novel, child-centred lens to better understand moves caused by breakdown. This lens should underpin future research in the field and serve to embed children's voices as a normative reference point for knowledge production on breakdown (Braun and Clarke 2021). The synthesis of literature in this review demonstrates the power of platforming care-experienced voices by uncovering compelling narratives and offering new insights into breakdown experiences.

Concurrently, the review identified substantial gaps, which highlight the patent need for more research from the standpoint of care-experienced people. While ethical considerations regarding interviewing care-experienced people, particularly children, exist, these are not insurmountable and are arguably 'largely rooted in an adult-centric perspective of protection' (Garcia-Quiroga and Agoglia 2020:1). In keeping with recognition theory, researchers, supported by foster care systems, should promote institutional recognition of children who have experienced breakdown by advancing care-experienced research on the topic globally (Honneth 1995). Deepening understanding

of lived experiences of breakdown is crucial, first, to recognize the experiences of children and young people affected by breakdown; second, to mitigate harm caused during and after its occurrence; and finally, to endeavour to reduce its occurrence over time.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that supports the findings of this study are available in the supplementary material of this article.

Endnotes

¹ <https://www.covidence.org/>.

² Author one.

³ Evenly divided between authors two, three and four.

⁴ Author one screened all 210 publications, with the double review completed by authors eight, four, two and three.

⁵ Author one extracted all 20 studies, alongside authors two, three, four, five and six.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **DATA S1:** Inclusion and exclusion criteria. **DATA S2:** Web of Science example search.