

Services to support the integration of unaccompanied immigrant children: A systematic review of international literature

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ABSTRACT

Unaccompanied immigrant children face complex challenges as they resettle in host countries across the world, yet the evidence on effective community services to support their integration remains fragmented across disciplines and global regions. This systematic review synthesizes findings from 185 peer-reviewed studies published between 2000 and 2024 that examined mental health, educational, legal, policy, social, and community supports for unaccompanied immigrant children worldwide. Following PRISMA guidelines and a registered PROSPERO protocol, the review identifies three broad areas of community support: mental health and healthcare, educational and legal policy frameworks, and social and community-based services. Across these areas, studies consistently highlight the influence of trauma, legal precarity, language barriers, and unstable living conditions on children's adjustment and long-term well-being. Evidence points to the effectiveness of trauma-informed and culturally responsive mental health services, integrated models that link legal, educational, and psychosocial supports, and community-based strategies that strengthen belonging through mentorship, family connections, and school engagement. Persistent gaps in service coordination, inconsistent legal protections, and limited access to culturally relevant care continue to undermine integration efforts. Findings underscore the need for rights-centered policies and coordinated partnerships that strengthen support for unaccompanied immigrant children in the community. The review offers guidance for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers in evidence-informed approaches that promote stability and long-term integration.

1. Introduction

Each year forced migration reaches historic levels as violence, warfare, poverty, and environmental hazards force adults and children to seek safety and security in other countries (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2025). By the end of 2024, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] (2025) estimated that 123.2 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide. Among them are unaccompanied immigrant children who migrate to a host country without a parent or legally recognized guardian. Unaccompanied immigrant children who are seeking asylum in host countries are widely recognized as a vulnerable group in need of special protection under international law (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2016). Unaccompanied immigrant children face a multitude of intersectional risks across the migration continuum and following resettlement, including exposure to violence, exploitation, interrupted

education, and legal precarity that can undermine health and development (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2025; Cohodes et al., 2021). Over the past decade, nearly 800,000 immigrant children arrived unaccompanied in the United States (Office of Refugee Resettlement [ORR], 2025) and 400,000 in the European Union (UNICEF, 2025), underscoring the international scale and urgency of coordinated, local responses for reception and integration.

Unaccompanied immigrant children have developmental needs like all children such as the need for shelter, food, clothing, care, education and enrichment, however, given the nature of their forced displacement, many lack access to these basic resources (Avignone et al., 2024; Dako-Gyeke et al., 2023; Inofuentes et al., 2022). Further, given the trauma experienced before, during, and after migration, including separation from their family, unaccompanied immigrant children often present with elevated levels of post-traumatic stress (Berger Cardoso, 2018; Vega Potler et al., 2023) and physical and mental health symptoms

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(Topalovic et al., 2021; Young et al., 2024). While international standards on children’s rights (e.g., convention on the rights of the child) and “best interests” guidance exist (UN High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2021), receiving countries and localities are ultimately responsible for the integration and support of unaccompanied immigrant children based on their own legal and social frameworks. Research suggests that supportive services post-migration can have a significant impact in helping migrant children and families to stabilize and build resilience in the wake of the trauma they’ve experienced and may continue to experience upon arriving in the host country (Berger Cardoso et al., 2023; Cohodes et al., 2021; Scheid, 2024).

Unaccompanied immigrant children face multiple vulnerabilities that make their integration into host communities particularly challenging, including trauma, displacement, language barriers, and disrupted attachment (Cohodes et al., 2021; Silva et al., 2022). Integration refers to the process of economic mobility and social inclusion experienced by immigrants and their children (Migration Policy Institute [MPI]). Integration of newcomer immigrant communities is important because access to supportive institutions facilitates long-term adjustment and belonging, while reducing risks for psychological distress, academic disengagement, and exploitation (Berger Cardoso et al., 2021). However, for unaccompanied immigrant children, most experience prolonged separation from caregivers, exposure to violence before and during migration, and limited access to services after their arrival in the community, which may impact successful integration (Berger Cardoso et al., 2021; Maioli et al., 2021; Menjivar, 2019; Misra et al., 2022). Supports following children’s arrival, such as legal, educational, health, and psychosocial services are often scarce and inconsistent, leaving children and families to navigate complex, foreign systems with little guidance (Digidiki & Sigona, 2018; Evans & Londoño, 2022; Greenberg et al., 2021; Jani, 2018). Persistent gaps in integration services place unaccompanied immigrant children at risk for poor mental health outcomes, disrupted educational attainment, and diminished long-term resilience, underscoring the urgent need for effective and sustainable supports in host communities.

2. Significance of the review

Despite the growing number of unaccompanied immigrant children and the critical importance of integration, there has been limited synthesis of evidence on the effectiveness of services designed to support this population in the United States and globally. Existing studies often examine services in isolation or focus narrowly on health or legal outcomes, leaving little understanding of how different types of supports interact to promote integration and well-being (Berger Cardoso et al., 2019; Maioli et al., 2021). By systematically reviewing available evidence, this study will identify the scope, strengths, and gaps in services for unaccompanied immigrant children, globally. The findings provide guidance for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers seeking to design and implement evidence-informed programming that can address the complex needs of this vulnerable population.

2.1. Research questions

This systematic review is guided by the overarching research question:

- 1. What strategies are used internationally to support the integration of unaccompanied immigrant children into host communities?

To address this question, the review also considers the following sub-research questions:

- a. What types of community services exist to support the adjustment and resilience of unaccompanied immigrant children?

- b. What gaps remain in the evidence on integration services for this population?

3. Methods

This systematic review was carried out in compliance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. The study protocol was prospectively registered in the PROSPERO database. Following the initial PROSPERO submission, the title of the article was revised. The protocol was originally registered under the title “Navigating New Horizons a Systematic Review: Effective Strategies for the Adjustment and Inclusion of Unaccompanied Immigrant Children.” [CRD42024513570]. In March 2024, a social sciences librarian completed a systematic review of the following electronic databases: Scopus, Web of Science (Social Science Citation Index), PsycINFO, and Academic Search Premier. The search was limited to articles published between January 1, 2000, and March 15, 2024. Regional limits were not imposed, and the search included international studies. Language was restricted to publications written in or translated into English or Spanish (languages spoken by the authors).

The search strategy was translated to PsycINFO, Web of Science, Academic Search Premier and the document type ‘article’ in Scopus resulting in a total of 1388 de-duplicated articles that met criteria (see Table 1). These articles were imported into Rayyan, a virtual systematic review platform (Ouzzani et al., 2016), where blinding procedures and organizational functions were conducted. The preliminary review process involved each abstract being independently reviewed by a minimum of two out of the four authors to determine relevance. Full articles were reviewed when abstracts were not available. If two authors disagreed on relevance of an article, the full text was examined by all four authors, and consensus was reached through group discussion. Following screening, articles were reviewed and compared across the research team to identify patterns in focus, intervention type, and service domain, which informed the development of initial categories. Through an iterative process of discussion and comparison, categories were refined and interpreted to group studies and maintain consistency in how evidence was synthesized across domains.

Following preliminary review, 221 articles were reassessed by the researchers and organized into three overarching themes. These themes were developed through an iterative, inductive categorization process, where articles were first grouped into multiple preliminary categories and then refined across several rounds of team review. Categories were collapsed based on conceptual similarity and overlap in focus, resulting in three overarching domains and corresponding subdomains grounded in the content and focus of the articles. One article was removed after being identified as a duplicate. Four articles were discarded as they did not directly address strategies to support the integration of unaccompanied immigrant children within host communities. An additional six articles were eliminated because the study populations were not unaccompanied immigrant children. Twelve articles were excluded because the full texts were only available in a language other than English or Spanish and twelve studies were eliminated due to incorrect publication type. Through discussion and iterative screening, 185 articles ultimately

Table 1
Search Strategy.

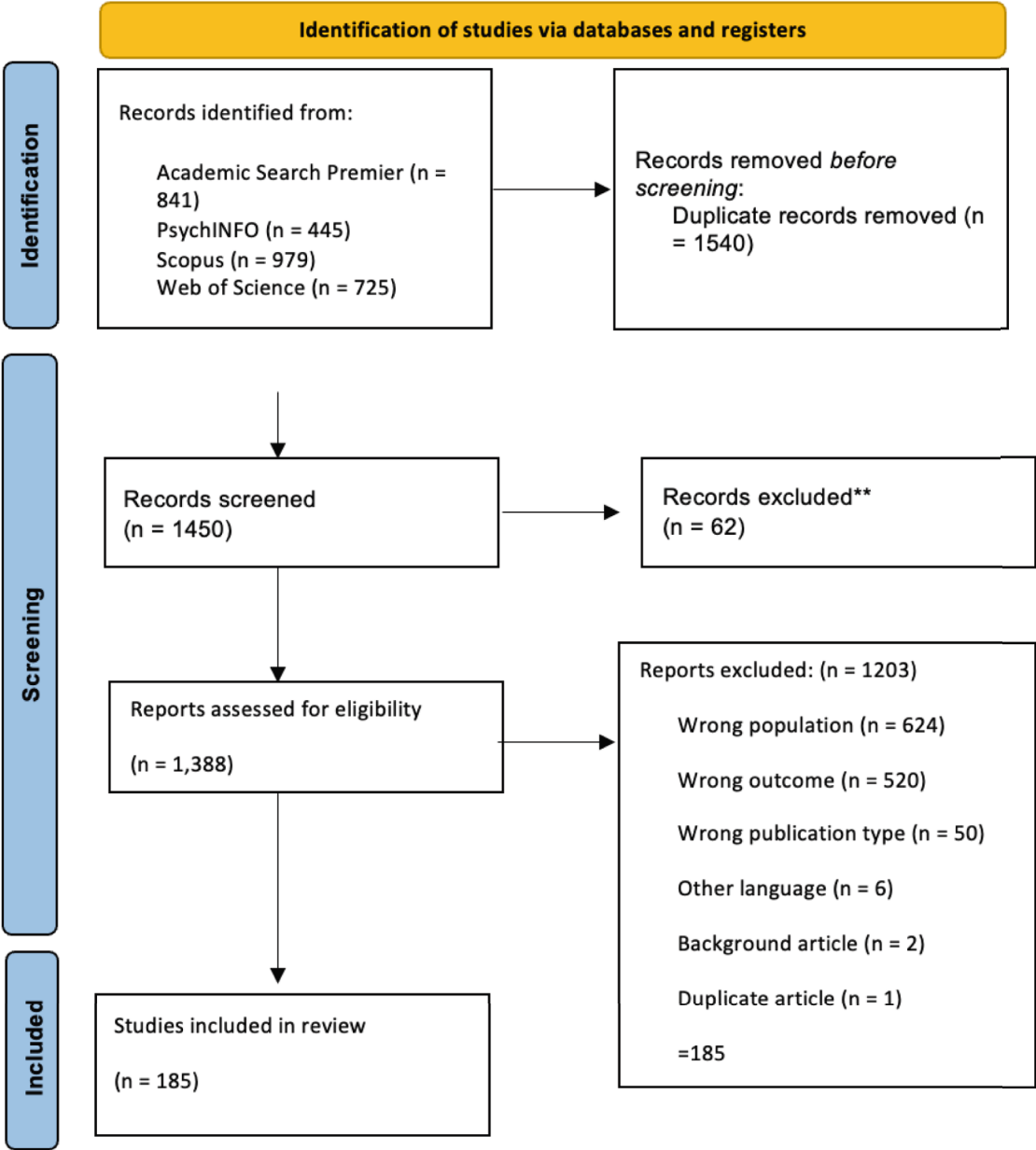
Databases	Search Terms	Date	Limiters
Scopus; Web of Science (SSCI); PsycINFO; Academic Search Premier	(refugees OR immigrants OR emigrants OR migrants OR transients OR migrations OR asylum-seeking) AND (unaccompanied OR unaccompanied) AND (children OR youth OR minor)	Jan 1, 2000 – Mar 15, 2024	Scopus: Articles only; PsycINFO & Academic Search Premier: Peer-reviewed journals; Web of Science: no additional limiters

met criteria for inclusion in this review and were further examined by all authors.

4. Results

This review identified 185 peer-reviewed studies that met inclusion criteria published between 2000 and 2024 that examined strategies for supporting the integration of unaccompanied immigrant children across diverse global contexts. Findings revealed studies conducted in the U.S., European Union (e.g., U.K., Sweden, Norway, Belgium, Italy, Greece, Spain), Australia, Canada, and several Latin American countries. See

Fig. 1, the PRISMA Flow Diagram for details on the number of articles included and excluded. Collectively, these studies included a wide range of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods designs, reflecting considerable variation in the type of research (e.g., human subjects, policy), age ranges, migration backgrounds, and legal immigration status of unaccompanied immigrant children in the host countries. Study topics were inductively clustered into key service domains: (1) Mental health and healthcare supports (n = 81 articles); (2) Education, legal, and policy supports (n = 53 articles); and (3) Social and community supports (n = 51 articles), which are further described below. See Table 2 results summary table. Full references are made available and



(PRISMA Flow diagram depicting article screening, inclusion, and exclusion)

Fig. 1. PRISMA flow diagram. (PRISMA Flow diagram depicting article screening, inclusion, and exclusion).

Table 2
Systematic review summary of results. *Result summary of 185 articles.*

Category	Subcategory	Author & year	Country or region	Method: focus	Key findings
1) Physical & Mental Health (6 subcategories, n = 81 articles)	1) UC Experiences & MH (14 articles)	Silva et al., 2022.	Central America	Theoretical: Reasons for migration and mental health supports	Effective post-migration interventions should provide access to mentors and caregivers, address multiple losses, offer culturally affirming care, expand school-based mental health services, and include community education and support.
	2) MH Strengths, Challenges and Needs (19 articles)	Berger Cardoso, 2018	United States	Mixed Methods: Trauma symptoms, coping strategies, and substance use in unaccompanied migrant youth	30 youth reported on average eight traumatic events, with more than half meeting PTSD criteria, highlighting the need for trauma-focused services that build adaptive coping and address risks from avoidant coping and social withdrawal.
	3) Models/Frameworks for Working with UC (15 articles)	Kauhanen & Kaukko, 2020	Europe	Literature Review: Well-being of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children through the modes of recognition—love, rights, and solidarity.	Children's basic needs are met, but systems often neglect stability, caring relationships, guidance, and recognition as individuals, highlighting the need to embed love, rights, and solidarity in policy and practice.
	4) Specific MH Interventions (11 articles)	Draper et al., 2023.	United Kingdom	Quantitative: Sports-based trauma intervention using bilateral movement exercises to reduce distress and process trauma.	Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children showed a significant decrease in distress and an increase in positive cognitions after participating in the Fast Feet Forward (FFF) program, demonstrating the intervention's effectiveness in facilitating trauma processing.
	5) Social Work Supports (12 articles)	Nelson et al., 2017.	Australia	Theoretical: Developing a critical social work model that emphasizes hope, agency, resistance, and human rights.	Critical, rights-based social work helps restore hope and agency for unaccompanied asylum-seeking youth through counseling, advocacy, and resistance to oppressive policies.
	6) Healthcare Services (11 articles)	Ciaccia & John, 2016.	United States	Narrative Literature Review: How to assess and support unaccompanied immigrant children in healthcare settings.	UCs face significant medical, mental health, and access-to-care challenges. Pediatric providers must use trauma-informed, culturally competent practices and comprehensive screening tools to meet their needs.
2) Educational, legal, and policy supports (4 subcategories, n = 53 articles)	1) Trauma-informed educational approaches in schools (15 articles)	Grant et al., 2022.	Scotland	Qualitative: How schools in collaboration with other professionals can support the education and integration of unaccompanied immigrant children.	Strong, collaborative communities of practice, both in and beyond the classroom, are essential in supporting unaccompanied immigrant children, helping them build language skills, confidence, belonging, and gain access to services.
	2) Cultural Considerations & Belonging in Educational Environments (10 articles)	McGinnis, 2018.	New York, USA	Ethnographic Case Study: How digital testimonios provide unaccompanied immigrant youth with a space to share their stories.	Creating digital testimonios in an educational environment gives unaccompanied Central American youth a way to process traumatic migration experiences, assert their identities, and develop voice, agency, and hope.
	3) Policy & Legal Frameworks (13)	Branković & Isakov, 2018.	Serbia	Qualitative: Systemic responses and coordination efforts to protect unaccompanied migrant children during the 2015–2016 migration crisis.	During the migration crisis, child protection efforts were hindered by unclear procedures, limited resources, and weak coordination between the government and NGOs. There is a need to establish a more coordinated and standardized system of care for unaccompanied immigrant children.
	4) Policy and Legal Supports (15 articles)	Kaukko, 2017.	Finland	Participatory Action Research: The influence of intersectional factors on the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.	Unaccompanied asylum-seeking girls are rarely able to meaningfully exercise their right to participate (CRC Article 12) because adult authority, institutional control, and the asylum process itself limit their agency and voice.
3) Social & Community Support (4 subcategories, n = 51 articles)	1) Community Social Supports (18 articles)	Moberg Stephenson and Källström, 2020.	Sweden	Qualitative: How unaccompanied young migrants in kinship care experience belonging.	Belonging for unaccompanied young migrants is shaped by everyday places and relationships, with safety, familiarity, and acceptance being key to feeling at home.
	2) Spirituality/Religious Supports (7 articles)	Ni Raghallaigh, 2011.	Ireland	Grounded theory: Religious coping as a resource to manage stress and adaptation challenges.	Religious faith and practice provides unaccompanied minors with continuity, comfort, meaning, and a sense of control,

(continued on next page)

Table 2 (continued)

Category	Subcategory	Author & year	Country or region	Method: focus	Key findings
	3) Family supports (17 articles)	Corona-Maioli et al., 2024.	Mexico	Qualitative: How unaccompanied Central American adolescents respond to family absence during migration.	making religion a key coping mechanism as they adapt to new environments. Unaccompanied adolescents respond to family absence in three main ways: through forced independence, resilience focused on family as a source of hope and responsibility, and the creation of informal support networks.
	4) Transition to Adulthood Supports (9 articles)	Neve, 2021.	Australia	Ethnography: Life-building and transition to adulthood for unaccompanied minors.	Young Hazara men who arrive in Australia unaccompanied use community and social networks to access housing education, and work despite facing legal uncertainty and limited resources.

Note. $N = 185$. Result summary is divided into three categories: (1) physical and mental health, (2) educational, legal and policy supports, and (3) social and community support. Each category is further organized into subcategories, with one exemplar article highlighted per subcategory.

organized by category in Appendix A (see Table 3).

4.1. Mental health and healthcare supports, $N = 81$

4.1.1. Mental health experiences, $N = 14$

Studies on the experiences of unaccompanied immigrant children highlight complex mental health needs, including pre-migration trauma and limited access to culturally responsive services for trauma recovery and integration into the host country (Gialama & McGilloway, 2020; Hayon & Oates, 2019; Oldroyd et al., 2022; Portnoy & Ward, 2020; Sawyer & Márquez, 2017). Research highlights that the majority of unaccompanied immigrant children have endured severe pre-flight (migration) traumas, such as family separation and violence (Cohodes et al., 2021; Inofuentes et al., 2022; Oldroyd et al., 2022; Sawyer & Márquez, 2017; Thomas et al., 2004), underscoring the need for specialized mental health and social support upon arrival (Gialama & McGilloway, 2020; Silva et al., 2022; Song, 2021). Unaccompanied immigrant children tend to experience profound feelings of loss and isolation, along with significant distress during their adjustment period (Groark et al., 2011; Montgomery et al., 2001), reinforcing the importance of mental health interventions that are culturally responsive and foster resilience (Avignone et al., 2024; Dako-Gyeke et al., 2023).

Further compounding these challenges, research has found that the legal processes for seeking immigration relief, combined with mistrust and stigma, leads to high levels of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, and physical illness among unaccompanied immigrant children (Cohodes et al., 2021; Hayon & Oates, 2019; Song, 2021). The lack of social support and risk of victimization in host countries intensifies mental health symptoms (Inofuentes et al., 2022; Dako-Gyeke et al., 2023; Siegel, 2022), emphasizing the urgent need for accessible community mental health services to support children vulnerable to such adverse experiences. Researchers advocate for a stepwise, culturally grounded and integrated healthcare approach to address the complex needs and service barriers experienced by unaccompanied immigrant children (Portnoy & Ward, 2020).

These findings suggest that mental health outcomes among unaccompanied immigrant children are shaped by the cumulative and interacting effects of pre- and post-migration experiences. In particular, the progression of mental health challenges appears closely linked to structural conditions in host contexts, while also reflecting the continued influence of prior experiences in countries of origin, indicating that health and mental health trajectories are dynamically shaped across contexts.

4.1.2. Mental health strengths, needs, and opportunities $N = 18$

Unaccompanied immigrant children face significant mental health challenges due to trauma experienced before, during, and after migration, including violence, family separation, and instability (Hodes et al.,

2008; Vega Potler et al., 2023). Studies reveal high rates of PTSD, depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation among unaccompanied immigrant children, with elevated risks among those who identify as female and older youth (Baily et al., 2016; Berger Cardoso, 2018). Once in host countries, unaccompanied immigrant children often encounter additional stressors that exacerbate mental health symptoms such as discrimination, unstable living conditions, and challenges in accessing resources to meet their basic and legal immigration needs (Chase et al., 2019; Dubs et al., 2022; Majumder et al., 2015; Michelson & Sclare, 2009). Despite these challenges, many unaccompanied immigrant children demonstrate resilience through faith, hope, educational aspirations, cultural identity, and social relationships (Becker Herbst et al., 2018; Jani et al., 2016; Maegusuku-Hewett et al., 2007).

Effective psychosocial support for unaccompanied immigrant children requires trauma-informed, culturally grounded, and developmentally appropriate services that are integrated into legal, educational, and housing systems (Hasson et al., 2023a; Iglesias et al., 2024; Welch, 2024). Holistic post-release services (PRS) and community-based care models, such as those at Terra Firma and La Clínica de la Raza in the U. S., show promise in supporting unaccompanied immigrant children's adjustment and well-being (Hasson et al., 2023a; Migliorini et al., 2022). Research indicates improvement in well-being over time, particularly when children receive stable legal immigration status, stable housing, and access to education and social support (Acosta & Martín, 2024; Iglesias et al., 2024). Gender-affirming care and culturally informed services are urgently needed to address the psychosocial needs and reduce re-traumatization for unaccompanied immigrant children (Dubs et al., 2022; Hodes et al., 2008; Hopkins & Hill, 2010). Ultimately, mental health supports need to center child rights and strengths-based approaches for long-term integration of unaccompanied immigrant children (Lundberg & Dahlquist, 2012; Welch, 2024). Across studies, resilience extends beyond internal strengths and is supported by access to external resources, with positive mental health outcomes closely linked to culturally responsive, developmentally attuned systems of care that meet basic needs, not individual coping alone.

4.1.3. Mental health frameworks, $N = 15$

Research describing frameworks for mental health practice with unaccompanied immigrant children emphasizes the importance of trauma-informed and anti-racist approaches to address their exposure to cumulative trauma (Aggarwal et al., 2016; Galvan et al. 2023; Scheid, 2024). These models advocate for needs-based, culturally responsive, resilience-focused strategies paired with political advocacy to improve the reception conditions for unaccompanied immigrant children in diverse international settings (Aggarwal et al., 2016; Berger Cardoso et al., 2019; Gautier et al., 2024; Galvan et al. 2023; Muñoz Bohorquez et al., 2025). Research stresses the ethical imperative of practitioners engaging in self-reflection and political awareness to mitigate systemic

Table 3Subcategory summaries. *Results from subcategory summaries.*

Category	Subcategory	Summary of Results from Articles
1) Physical & Mental Health (6 subcategories, n = 81 articles)	1) UC Experiences & MH (14)	Unaccompanied immigrant children experience complex mental health challenges due to significant pre-migration trauma, limited access to culturally responsive care, and distress associated with legal processes, isolation, and victimization post-migration. These findings underscore the need for specialized, integrated, and culturally grounded services to support unaccompanied immigrant children mental health and integration.
	2) MH Strengths, Challenges and Needs (19 articles)	Research shows that unaccompanied immigrant children experience high rates of PTSD, depression, and anxiety due to trauma before, during, and after migration, with additional stressors such as discrimination, housing instability, and lack of legal support compounding these challenges, particularly among girls and older youth. Despite these adversities, studies highlight the resilience of unaccompanied immigrant children, noting that trauma-informed, culturally responsive, and developmentally appropriate services, especially when paired with stable housing, legal support, and educational access, improves the well-being and long-term integration of unaccompanied immigrant children.
	3) Models/Frameworks for Working with UC (15 articles)	Trauma-informed, anti-racist, and culturally responsive frameworks are needed to address the cumulative trauma and systemic inequities experienced by unaccompanied immigrant children. Authors emphasize the need for practitioner self-reflection, political advocacy, and systems-level approaches that move beyond individual interventions. Studies also describe cross-sector collaboration, trauma-informed training, and culturally grounded group services as best practices, while underscoring the psychological importance of safety, belonging, and recognition to promote unaccompanied immigrant children's integration and well-being.
	4) Specific MH Interventions (11 articles)	Trauma-focused interventions for unaccompanied immigrant children (UIC), including CBT, Narrative Therapy, and non-verbal approaches like Sandplay and Art Therapy, can reduce trauma symptoms and improve emotional regulation, particularly when culturally adapted and combined with group, somatic, and relational strategies. The literature highlights the importance of community-based, multimodal, and culturally responsive interventions that build trust, address systemic barriers, and promote resilience and healing.
	5) Social Work Supports (12 articles)	Social workers play a multifaceted role in supporting unaccompanied immigrant children, globally, by addressing both practical and psychosocial needs, advocating for rights-based policies, and fostering trust-based relationships rooted in empathy and cultural humility. Studies highlight the importance of trauma-informed, child-centered, and ecologically grounded approaches, emphasizing the effectiveness of collaborative, long-term support systems in promoting resilience, integration, and continuity of care into adulthood.
	6) Healthcare Services (11 articles)	Unaccompanied immigrant children face significant health risks, such as high levels of trauma exposure, PTSD, and infectious diseases compounded by systemic barriers and inadequate healthcare access across various host countries. Studies highlight the importance of culturally responsive, trauma-informed, and integrated healthcare systems, including school- and community-based services, to improve access, trust, and health outcomes for unaccompanied immigrant children.
2) Educational, Legal, and Policy Supports (4 subcategories, n = 53 articles)	1) Trauma-Informed Educational Approaches in Schools (15 articles)	Unaccompanied immigrant children face educational, social, and emotional challenges shaped by trauma and broader systemic factors. Studies call for individualized support, strong collaboration among educators, and community partnerships, alongside language learning and culturally responsive teaching. Research also highlights the value of trauma-informed, school-based supports that provide safe environments, accessible health services, and programs that build trust, resilience, and successful transitions into adulthood.
	2) Cultural Considerations & Belonging in Educational Environments (10 articles)	Unaccompanied immigrant children face cultural and educational challenges that impact language acquisition, school integration, and overall well-being. Research emphasizes the need for inclusive practices, culturally responsive curricula, and supportive school environments to foster belonging and address systemic barriers.
	3) Policy & Legal Frameworks (13)	Immigration laws and policies impact unaccompanied immigrant children. These articles evaluate policy implementation, suggest reforms, or discuss legal mechanisms to support this population across various regions, including the U.S., Europe, and Canada.
	4) Policy & Legal Supports (15 articles)	Unaccompanied immigrant children face significant legal challenges as they navigate complex immigration systems, often without guaranteed representation. Research underscores the need for sustained legal support and highlights collaborative, community-based models that improve access and outcomes. Policies strongly shape these young people's experiences, with growing evidence calling for a shift from punitive enforcement toward protection-centered approaches that promote stability and long-term success.
3) Social & Community Support (4 subcategories, n = 51)	1) Community Social Supports (18 articles)	Integrated, community-driven approaches need to include mentorship, peer networks, school-based support, and inter-agency collaboration to support unaccompanied immigrant children. Culturally competent, trauma-informed, and relationship-based interventions are vital to helping unaccompanied immigrant children rebuild stability and belonging in their new environments.
	2) Spirituality/Religious Supports (7 articles)	Religion and spirituality play an important role in the lives of unaccompanied immigrant children, serving as sources of comfort, identity, and resilience amid the challenges of migration and integration. While these beliefs can sometimes hinder social connections in more secular societies, service providers are encouraged to recognize and integrate them into care as powerful coping mechanisms and pathways to healing.
	3) Family Supports (17 articles)	Unaccompanied immigrant children face significant emotional and mental health challenges due to family separation, and their wellbeing is greatly influenced by the presence of supportive family and community networks. Research emphasizes the value of surrogate

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Table 3 (continued)

Category	Subcategory	Summary of Results from Articles
	4) Transition to Adulthood Supports (9 articles)	caregivers, kinship placements, mentors, and culturally grounded, trauma-informed services in fostering stability, belonging, and long-term integration for UC in host countries. Unaccompanied immigrant children face significant barriers during their transition to adulthood, including legal insecurity, disrupted education, and limited support, which contribute to poor mental health and social isolation. While youth demonstrate resilience and benefit from supportive programs, many lack access to the long-term, holistic interventions needed for stable and equitable adult transitions.

Note. Each abbreviated summary provides an overview of the key findings of the articles.

and legal inequities (Berger Cardoso et al., 2019; Dash, 2020; Galvan et al., 2023; Gautier et al., 2024). This systems-focused approach supports unaccompanied immigrant children by recognizing how institutional responses, reception environments, and professional practices shape children's well-being during resettlement (Kauhanen & Kaukko, 2020; NeMoyer et al., 2019).

Research on programmatic interventions highlight best practices including integrated, trauma-informed training for clinicians, cross-sector collaboration, and individual and group services for children and families (Alto et al., 2022; Bravo and Santos-González, 2017; Linton et al., 2018). Recommendations for sustainability of these interventions include incorporating training on cultural awareness, leveraging foster families and cultural identity as therapeutic resources, and creating linguistically and culturally similar group settings to promote connection (Alto et al., 2022; Berger Cardoso et al., 2019; Kakowa & Kaomba, 2020). Research highlights the psychological significance of safety, belonging, and recognition as critical to the well-being and integration of unaccompanied immigrant children (Kauhanen, & Kaukko, 2020; Kohli et al., 2009; Radjack et al., 2020).

4.1.4. Specific mental health interventions, $N = 11$

Trauma-focused interventions for unaccompanied immigrant children draw on approaches such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Narrative Exposure Therapy, Psychodynamic Psychotherapies, and expressive or symbolic modalities, including Sandplay and Art-based Therapies, to reduce trauma-related distress and support emotional regulation (Cohen & Yadlin, 2018; Dobretsova & Wiese, 2019; Katsounari, 2014; Mattenschlager et al., 2016; Moutsou et al., 2023; Said et al., 2021; Said & King, 2020). Culturally responsive programs such as Fast Feet Forward, Multimodal Co-Therapy for Unaccompanied Minors (MUCTUM), and cognitive-behavioral group approaches integrate coping skills and practical supports (Draper et al., 2023; Guessoum et al., 2022; King & Said, 2019; Said et al., 2021; Said & King, 2020).

These interventions emphasize relational trust-building, interpreter involvement, and culturally attuned communication (Cohen & Yadlin, 2018; Guessoum et al., 2022; Shapiro et al., 2022). Across studies, authors call for larger and longer-term evaluations, stronger community-based supports, and interventions that respond to sociocultural and developmental contexts to enhance accessibility (Katsounari, 2014; Moutsou et al., 2023; Said & King, 2020). Overall, the evidence supports multimodal, culturally grounded, and relationship-centered approaches that prioritize safety and empowerment (Draper et al., 2023; King & Said, 2019; Shapiro et al., 2022). Collectively, the literature conceptualizes mental health practice less as an isolated clinical response and more as a relational, structural, and biopsychosocial-political process. A recurring pattern in the literature is the movement away from deficit-based models toward approaches that link individual well-being to broader reception conditions, institutional practices, and access to culturally responsive systems of care. The emphasis on anti-racist practice, political advocacy, and cross-sector collaboration further indicates that effective mental health support for unaccompanied immigrant children requires addressing the systemic conditions that shape safety, belonging, identity and recognition during resettlement, while equipping providers to operate from an integrated, multi-level lens.

4.1.5. Social work supports, $N = 12$

Social workers play a central role in supporting unaccompanied immigrant children, serving as “co-navigators” who guide them through complex legal and social systems, connect them with essential resources, and assist with future planning (Devenney, 2020; Jani & Reisch, 2018; Kohli, 2006a). Their work integrates practical support with psychosocial care, even as it unfolds within restrictive immigration conditions and chronically underfunded systems (Deckert, 2016; Nelson et al., 2017). Research emphasizes holistic, individualized approaches that attend to children's needs and cultural contexts, with resilience emerging through sustained relationships and supportive care (Horgan & Ní Raghallaigh, 2019; Kohli & Mather, 2003; Richason, 2018; Wright, 2014).

Trust-building is essential, as trauma and fear shape how young people share their experiences, with relationships playing a key role in healing and agency (Kohli, 2006a; Larkin & Lefevre, 2020). To achieve this, social workers require strong supervision, reflective spaces, and training in trauma-informed and culturally humble practice (Devenney, 2020; Larkin & Lefevre, 2020; Wright, 2014). International evidence, especially from Ireland and England, highlights the importance of stable foster care or residential placements and shows that continued support beyond age 18 is critical for navigating transitions to adulthood and uncertain immigration outcomes (Horgan & Ní Raghallaigh, 2019; Kohli, 2006b; Richason, 2018; Wade, 2017; Wright, 2014).

4.1.6. Healthcare services, $N = 11$

Unaccompanied immigrant children face significant physical and psychological health risks, including dehydration, malnutrition, infectious diseases, and high rates of PTSD, which require immediate and ongoing care (Bergevin et al., 2021; Marquardt et al., 2016; Peeler, 2019; Young et al., 2024). Yet these needs are often unmet due to limited medical training, discrimination, cultural-medical differences, and resource shortages that result in unmet chronic health conditions (Chauhan, 2019; Ciaccia & John, 2016; Mather & Kerac, 2002; Young et al., 2024; Moreno-Fernández et al., 2021). International studies document how precarious living conditions and limited psychosocial support contribute to poorer health outcomes, with additional gaps in culturally relevant sexual and reproductive health education (Nordström & Agardh, 2021; Patseadou et al., 2022; Schrier et al., 2019). To improve healthcare treatment, scholars recommend integrated services in schools and community clinics (Patseadou et al., 2022; Schapiro et al., 2018) and cultural mediators to address language and cultural barriers (Sperber, 2018). Building trust with healthcare providers remains essential, as discrimination and unfamiliar healthcare systems often deter children from seeking care (Ciaccia & John, 2016). Overall, evidence calls for culturally responsive and ethically grounded healthcare models tailored to the complex physical and mental health needs of unaccompanied immigrant children (Marquardt et al., 2016).

4.2. Educational, legal, and policy supports, $N = 53$

4.2.1. Trauma-informed educational approaches in schools, $N = 15$

Studies from Scotland, Spain, England, and the United States highlight the central role of language learning, culturally responsive pedagogy, individualized instruction, and assessment practices in promoting academic engagement and integration with unaccompanied immigrant

children (Fernández-Simo et al., 2022; Frankel et al., 2022; Grant et al., 2022; López et al., 2020; Ott & O'Higgins, 2019). Older unaccompanied children benefit from structured digital or blended learning environments, extended educational pathways, and mentoring supports that bridge learning gaps and foster autonomy (Hasson et al., 2022; Parra-González et al., 2021; Wissö, 2017). Relational supports are especially important, as school social workers can be cultural brokers who help unaccompanied immigrant children build trusting connections and a sense of belonging at school (Cedeño, 2021).

Across these studies, trauma emerges as a core factor influencing educational engagement, with high rates of PTSD, anxiety, and chronic stress reinforcing the need for school-based mental health supports and practices that promote safety, trust, and choice (Acuña and Valenzuela Escudero, 2015; Crea et al., 2018; Fuller & Hayes, 2020; Mala, 2004; Schapiro et al., 2018). Trauma-informed strategies show promise with unaccompanied immigrant children, including positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS), social-emotional learning, Psychological First Aid, and culturally adapted cognitive behavioral interventions in schools (Davila et al., 2020). Barriers such as language challenges, financial strain, and work responsibilities often impede school participation, yet English acquisition and educational stability are consistently linked to long-term well-being and success in the United States (Canizales, 2021; Crea et al., 2018). These studies emphasize that effective educational programs for unaccompanied immigrant children must integrate individualized academic supports with trauma-informed, culturally attuned, and community-embedded practices that strengthen belonging and self-confidence.

4.2.2. Cultural considerations and belonging in education, $N = 10$

Unaccompanied immigrant children face significant educational and cultural challenges, often struggling with language acquisition, disrupted prior schooling, and systemic barriers that shape their integration within host-country schools. Research shows that language proficiency is central to both academic success and a sense of belonging, with unaccompanied Latinx children in the United States viewing English acquisition as essential for survival and mobility (Canizales, 2021), yet many arrive with interrupted formal education that complicates their transition into mainstream classrooms (Szlyk et al., 2020). Educators' limited preparation to counter stereotypes and prejudices further undermines integration (Fernández-Simo et al., 2022). Across contexts, inclusive practices, culturally responsive curricula, and strong social support systems are linked to improved educational experiences (Rania et al., 2014), while tailored interventions that address acculturation stress are especially important for migrant adolescents in European settings (Bitzi & Landolt, 2017). Creating learning environments that promote emotional safety and belonging has been shown to support identity development and school engagement (Ward, 2022), and innovations such as extended Home Economics community meetings (Janhonen-Abuquah et al., 2017), personalized learning environments that strengthen planning and peer connection (Martínez-Martínez et al., 2021), and bilingual digital testimonios that empower children's narratives (McGinnis, 2018) further enhance students' self-efficacy and inclusion. At the same time, broader forces such as legal uncertainty and negative media portrayals of asylum-seeking children and youth can hinder their integration into school (Vidal de Haymes et al., 2018), underscoring the need for comprehensive policies that prioritize educational inclusion and belonging.

4.2.3. Policy and legal frameworks, $N = 13$

Research critically examines the legal and policy frameworks that affect unaccompanied immigrant children across various regions, including the U.S., Europe, and Canada. Several studies highlight the absence of a consistent and child-centered legal approach, particularly in U.S. immigration proceedings where the "best interests of the child" standard is rarely applied (Statz & Heidbrink, 2019). The available literature underscores the limitations of current legal relief mechanisms,

particularly the restrictive eligibility criteria of the Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS) in the U.S., which often exclude children seeking reunification with non-abusive parents (Hasson et al., 2019; Tenorio, 2020).

European studies, including those focused on Sweden and the broader EU context, emphasize both the structural strengths and policy gaps in guardianship, integration, and child protection systems (Hedlund & Salmonsson, 2018; Bolborici, 2018; Rania et al., 2018). The adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child across member states has not guaranteed uniform application of child-centered protections, with challenges persisting in the implementation of guardianship models and consistent access to education, healthcare, and legal representation (Bolborici, 2018; Hedlund & Salmonsson, 2018). UK-based research reveals how safeguarding frameworks and immigration enforcement policies can create environments of fear and mistrust, discouraging unaccompanied children from disclosing critical needs and undermining social care practices. These findings highlight the urgent need for a rights-based approach that prioritizes children's well-being over immigration status (Leon & Rosen, 2023; Newbigging & Thomas, 2011).

Literature on legal and policy frameworks for unaccompanied immigrant children globally exposes the systemic inadequacies and cultural mismatches embedded in legal and social responses to this vulnerable population. For example, studies from Canada and Serbia reveal how immigration status affects access to essential services such as housing, healthcare, and education (Branković & Isakov, 2018; Montgomery, 2002). The role of local service-delivery networks, such as in Sweden and England, are evaluated with attention to the responsiveness of services to children's individual and cultural needs, as well as the importance of trust, coordination, and adequate resources (Hanberger et al., 2016). The articles collectively advocate for reforms that center on children's rights and well-being, including calls to end child detention (Linton et al., 2017), promote cross-border care coordination, enhance culturally competent mental health services, and ensure that all migration policies prioritize the best interests of the child above immigration enforcement objectives (Ruxton, 2000; Statz & Heidbrink, 2019).

4.2.4. Policy and legal supports, $N = 15$

Research across national contexts offers critical policy recommendations to strengthen support for unaccompanied immigrant children, consistently emphasizing coordinated, culturally responsive, and rights-centered reforms. U.S. studies highlight the need for cross-sector partnerships, holistic trauma-informed services, and child welfare principles that prioritize safety, well-being, and permanency across federal custody and family reunification (Avrushin & de Haymes, 2019; Borbon et al., 2024). European research similarly identifies structural gaps that place children at risk. In Italy, investing in psychosocial services and developing strong interagency networks is shown to support integration and reduce long-term public costs, while fragmented governance and delays in legal regularization heighten vulnerability to exploitation (Ardino & Di Benedetto, 2017; Novara et al., 2016). Work from Greece underscores the urgency of addressing widespread sexual exploitation through expanded safe housing, legal protections, and specialized provider training (Digidiki & Bhabha, 2018). Research from Sweden demonstrates how polarized media narratives frame unaccompanied children as either threats or victims, influencing policy responses and underscoring the need for ethical journalism and public education (Stretmo & Hammarén, 2022). Complementing this, studies in England and Ireland call for standardized assessments, stronger enforcement of legislation, equitable placement practices, and coordinated welfare strategies that build agency, ensure protection from violence, and expand access to healthcare (Mitchell, 2003; O'Connor et al., 2022). These policy-focused studies highlight the need for robust, interconnected systems that place child welfare at the center of immigration and integration policies.

Legal research shows that unaccompanied immigrant children

encounter significant structural barriers when navigating complex immigration systems, especially in countries that do not guarantee legal representation. Comparative studies reveal that while Canada, Australia, and Finland provide counsel for children, the United States does not, resulting in stark disparities in legal outcomes, with children represented by attorneys far more likely to obtain protection than those who appear alone (Huynh, 2021; Kauko, 2017; Smith, 2017). Scholars document how expedited procedures, language barriers, and limited interpreter access fuel fear and confusion, making legal processes difficult to understand and navigate (Huynh, 2021). Research also shows that children develop contradictory understandings of the law shaped by interactions with multiple systems, influenced by fear, trust, stigma, and uneven access to legal information (Galli, 2021). Legal status profoundly shapes access to critical resources, with undocumented children facing systemic barriers that hinder well-being and integration (Donato & Lopez, 2024). Processes such as Special Immigrant Juvenile Status and T-visa applications involve lengthy, complex requirements that necessitate sustained legal support (Clements et al., 2020). Innovative approaches, such as The Rights Hero game, offer promising ways to teach children about their rights and build confidence in navigating legal systems (Dima et al., 2021). Across studies, community-based legal collaborations emerge as crucial for improving fairness and ensuring that unaccompanied children can meaningfully access protection (Smith, 2017).

4.3. Social and community supports, $N = 51$

4.3.1. Community supports, $N = 18$

Unaccompanied immigrant children often face significant barriers to integration, making robust social and community support systems essential to their well-being. Across multiple studies, mentors, peers, schools, religious communities, and supportive institutions were shown to foster resilience, promote mental health, and facilitate integration. Structured mentorship was found to enhance self-esteem, hope, and social capital (Alarcón & Mirković, 2024; Alarcón et al., 2021), while informal relationships with host families and/or community members helped fill gaps in formal care (Bjernerdt et al., 2018; Bjernerdt & Puthoopparambil, 2022). Eriksson et al. (2018) and Moberg Stephenson and Källström (2020) emphasized how both bonding and bridging social capital influenced language acquisition, employment, and social trust. In Los Angeles, Guatemalan Maya adolescents used peer-led support groups to express cultural identity and build leadership skills (Canizales, 2015). Community engagement also helped unaccompanied immigrant children in the Hudson Valley and in ORR foster care through partnerships between schools, legal services, and healthcare providers (Evans et al., 2022; Roschelle et al., 2018).

Schools and churches frequently provided structure, safety, and early support, especially when post-release services were fragmented or unavailable (Jani, 2018; Roth & Grace, 2015). However, children often faced challenges like isolation, stigma, and bureaucratic delays in getting services. Peer support was especially important for psychological health, as shown in studies from Iceland, Norway, and Belgium, where it helped buffer PTSD and depressive symptoms (Cardenas et al., 2023; Mels et al., 2008; Oppedal & Idsoe, 2015). Even in cases of limited formal support, caring adults and mentors promoted a sense of trust and hope (Thommessen et al., 2015; Thommessen et al., 2017). Yet, many unaccompanied immigrant children still encountered systemic barriers, including disrupted housing, legal uncertainty, and abrupt transitions out of care (Garcia & Birman, 2021; Kauko & Forsberg, 2018). Children themselves often showed strong motivation for education and work but emphasized the importance of faster asylum processing and better access to trauma-informed services (Bjernerdt et al., 2018; Thommessen et al., 2015).

4.3.2. Religion and spirituality, $N = 7$

Religion, spirituality, and faith are recognized as important sources

of comfort and meaning for many unaccompanied immigrant children navigating the challenges of migration and integration (Ekström et al., 2020; Newton-Guest et al., 2021). Unaccompanied immigrant children often engage with spiritual practices such as prayer, attending services, and reading religious texts, which foster a sense of stability amid displacement (Ni Raghallaigh and Gilligan, 2010; Scott et al., 2024). Spiritual beliefs also serve as a framework for coping with trauma and separation from family, helping children develop acceptance and hope for the future (Fortuna et al., 2023; Newton-Guest et al., 2021). In some contexts, however, religious expression may be perceived as a barrier to integration, particularly in more secular societies (Scott et al., 2024). For service providers, engaging in open dialogue about the role of faith and spirituality is essential, allowing children to define its significance and ensuring that it is used as a source of empowerment rather than guilt or self-blame (Canizales, 2019; Ni Raghallaigh, 2011).

4.3.3. Family supports, $N = 17$

Articles describing family dynamics and support needs of unaccompanied immigrant children included the challenges faced by these children and the critical role of family and community networks in their well-being. Studies highlight the void left by family separation, with children noting feelings of disconnection and isolation even after reunification (Barros-Lane et al., 2022; Corona-Maioli et al., 2024; Gimeno-Monterde & Mendoza-Pérez, 2022; Hasson et al., 2023b; Meloni, 2020; Rafieifar et al., 2023). The absence of familial support strains unaccompanied immigrant children's adaptation and mental health, as many grapple with loneliness and new family systems (Barros-Lane et al., 2022; Meloni, 2020; Rafieifar et al., 2023). Surrogate caregivers, extended kin, and mentors help fill these gaps, providing essential stability and support when biological family are unavailable (Mirsky & Wittenberg-Szekely, 2007; Moberg Stephenson and Källström, 2020), creating "caringscapes" of relational support and belonging for children in new contexts (De Graeve and Bex, 2017; Orjuela-Grimm et al., 2022). Further, Patel et al. (2021) emphasize the impact of household composition post-resettlement on resilience, finding that unaccompanied immigrant children placed with supportive relatives have stronger emotional health. Lee et al. (2018) noted conflicts with balancing Americanized values and their parents' traditional expectations and emphasized the importance of their native culture as a support mechanism.

Apellániz et al. (2009), Crea et al. (2018), and Evans et al. (2023) advocate for interventions that incorporate family and cultural connections, even symbolically, to strengthen unaccompanied children's emotional resilience and cultural identity. The literature collectively supports families in using community-based resources, such as mentors (Alarcón and Prieto-Flores, 2021), kinship placements (Evans et al., 2023; Mirsky & Wittenberg-Szekely, 2007; Moberg Stephenson and Källström, 2020), and local networks (De Graeve and Bex, 2017), to promote long-term stability and reduce isolation. Further, there is a focus on families being supported through trauma-informed care, culturally relevant services, and the need for family-based programming. Crea et al. (2022) and Evans et al. (2023) identify a range of services that are important for families, including parenting resources, stable placements, community support, mental health services, collaboration with education systems, and legal aid. Overall, there is consensus on the importance of fostering belonging and emotional security within systems of support to aid unaccompanied children in their adjustment and ensure their long-term well-being in host societies.

4.3.4. Transition to adulthood, $N = 9$

Unaccompanied immigrant children need strong and sustained support as they transition into adulthood. Studies from Sweden, the UK, and Australia show that although children strive for stability, education, and employment, they frequently encounter barriers such as stigma, legal insecurity, and inconsistent institutional support that undermine their efforts (Bradby et al., 2019; Devenney, 2017; Robinson and Williams,

2015). Stable immigration status is central to planning and developing a coherent sense of self, while uncertainty fosters fear, distress, and stalled transitions (Bradby et al., 2019; Robinson and Williams, 2015). Care systems in England and Australia illustrate these disparities, with younger children sometimes benefiting from foster care and older adolescents often placed in semi-independent settings with limited guidance, heightening risks of isolation and difficult transitions (Miller et al., 2013; Neve, 2021; Wade, 2011). U.S.-based studies further reveal how adolescents lacking secure legal status often move into adulthood through exploitative labor rather than education, facing cumulative disadvantages including poor health, social isolation, and economic instability (Canizales, 2022; 2023; Hasson et al., 2021). Across national contexts, research demonstrates that unaccompanied immigrant children require holistic, sustained interventions that integrate legal advocacy, educational opportunities, mental health support, and stable housing to promote equitable and healthy transitions into adulthood.

Findings across domains indicate that outcomes for unaccompanied immigrant children are influenced by interconnected systems, with structural conditions playing a central role in the emergence and progression of challenges they may face. Across studies, legal immigration status consistently affects access to housing, education, healthcare, and social resources, while also influencing psychological well-being over time. At the same time, their trajectories may reflect both the cumulative impact of pre-migration experiences and the ongoing influence of post-migration conditions, particularly legal precarity, instability, and limited access to coordinated services. While unaccompanied immigrant children demonstrate important internal strengths including resilience, cultural identity, hope and aspiration, and relational capacities, these strengths are most effectively supported when embedded within stable and responsive systems. Social networks, including peers, mentors, families, schools, and faith-based communities, emerge as critical resources that promote belonging and buffer distress, yet their impact is often shaped by broader structural constraints. In this context, policy functions as a form of intervention, with rights-based and inclusive policies enabling access to essential resources and shaping developmental trajectories over time.

Although trauma-informed, culturally responsive, and relational interventions are widely emphasized, their effectiveness is often constrained by fragmented systems and resource limitations. While integrated, cross-sector models are increasingly identified as promising; much of the evidence remains based on qualitative or short-term findings, with fewer studies examining long-term outcomes. Overall, these findings point to the importance of coordinated, accessible, and rights-informed systems that can address children's needs across contexts and over time.

5. Discussion

Findings across studies included in this review emphasize the needs and experiences unique to unaccompanied immigrant children as they integrate into host communities, such as significant exposure to trauma before, during, and after migration, as well as ongoing stressors within the host country. Indeed, unaccompanied immigrant children across the world are exposed to multiple traumatic events, including family separation, death, warfare, exploitation, and human trafficking (Cohodes et al., 2021; Hodes et al., 2008; Inofuentes et al., 2022; Oldroyd et al., 2022; Sawyer & Márquez, 2017; Thomas et al., 2004; Vega Potler et al., 2023). Despite the well documented need for protection, results from this systematic review revealed significant challenges and barriers to unaccompanied immigrant children's integration in host communities including discrimination, unstable housing, limited social support, and complex legal systems.

Research consistently highlights the imperative of applying “best

interests” and “universal rights of children” standards across policy domains with all children, however most host countries have immigration policies that limit relief mechanisms and fail to consistently apply “best interest” standards (Statz & Heidbrink, 2019). International research on unaccompanied immigrant children asserts that having stable immigration status is critical for young people to plan for the future and develop a coherent sense of self, while legal uncertainty fosters fear, distress, and exploitation that results in cumulative disadvantage in health, social, and economic indicators across time (Bradby et al., 2019; Canizales, 2022; 2023). As such, effective practices combine direct practice with political advocacy to ensure country and community-level reception conditions adequately meet the needs of unaccompanied immigrant children (Aggarwal et al., 2016; Berger Cardoso et al., 2019; Gautier et al., 2024; Galvan et al. 2023).

Despite the many documented challenges, this review identified several strategies that promote the integration and well-being of unaccompanied immigrant children in host communities. Trauma-informed and culturally responsive mental health services are consistently shown to improve outcomes, particularly when paired with interventions that are embedded, relational, focus on trust-building, provide language support, and are developmentally appropriate. Interventions including Fast Feet Forward and Multimodal Co-Therapy for Unaccompanied Minors illustrate how embedding cultural responsiveness, developmentally appropriate care, and relational supports within treatment models can meaningfully enhance engagement and strengthen mental health outcomes for trauma-exposed children and adolescents (Cohen & Yadlin, 2018; Draper et al., 2023; Guessoum et al., 2022; King & Said, 2019; Said et al., 2021; Said & King, 2020).

Holistic service models that connect legal, educational, mental health, and social support have also shown promise in supporting integration and well-being outcomes, as have community-based approaches that promote belonging through mentorship, faith communities, schools, and consistent caregiving relationships. The literature highlights several U.S.-based programs that combine holistic support (healthcare, legal, education) in strategic locations (community centers, schools) to provide integrated, relational care to unaccompanied immigrant children, their families, and communities in safe and accessible locations (Migliorini et al., 2022; Shapiro et al., 2022). One such program, developed in response to an increase in unaccompanied immigrant children in New York, involved service providers coordinating an interconnected network of educators, legal advocates, healthcare providers, and community organizations to deliver support in schools and local service centers (Roschelle et al., 2018). Stable housing, legal immigration status, access to education, and policies grounded in child rights are critical to support long-term adjustment and well-being following child migration. Drawing on the life histories of adults who entered the United States as unaccompanied children, Donato and Lopez (2024) show that permanent and temporary legal status facilitated long-term integration and well-being by enabling access to stable housing, education, healthcare and employment, while undocumented status significantly constrained these outcomes despite individual resilience. These studies highlight the cumulative and compounding nature of inequities over time, where early structural barriers, such as legal uncertainty and limited access to resources, set in motion trajectories that shape later outcomes in education, health, and social integration. This temporal dimension suggests that integration is an evolving process, in which early conditions and interventions have lasting effects across developmental stages. Providers and support networks play a critical role in mediating developmental trajectories, as the timing, continuity, and coordination of care can either mitigate or reinforce existing constraints faced by unaccompanied immigrant children and their families.

Across international contexts, integrated, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive models of care spanning legal, educational,

healthcare, and social systems consistently promote positive integration outcomes for unaccompanied immigrant children (Hasson et al., 2023b; Migliorini et al., 2022; Welch, 2024). Sustained, relational, socio-politically grounded, and well-coordinated support systems are essential for promoting long-term well-being. For practitioners, these findings emphasize the value of relational, community-based approaches to working with unaccompanied immigrant children and the importance of connecting psychosocial care with concrete supports, including legal navigation, housing, healthcare, and educational access. For policy-makers, this review highlights the need for rights-centered policies that prioritize stable legal status, coordinated service delivery, and sustained access to education and healthcare, as legal precarity and fragmented systems are repeatedly shown to undermine long-term adjustment and well-being for unaccompanied immigrant children. Findings from this systematic review highlight the need for future research that examines integrated, cross-sector models linking legal, educational, mental health, and community-based supports using longitudinal and mixed-methods designs to capture developmental trajectories over time. Researchers are also encouraged to prioritize participatory, rights-centered, trauma-informed, and culturally grounded approaches that center lived experiences, strengths, and voices to address persistent gaps in services.

5.1. Limitations

While a major strength of this review is the inclusion of international scholarship, studies published or translated in languages other than English or Spanish were not included. The review was also limited to peer-reviewed literature, excluding grey literature, dissertations, and other reports that may have provided additional insight into community-based supports for unaccompanied immigrant children. In addition, the reviewed studies varied widely in methodology, sample size, and outcome measures, particularly across mental health, education, and legal domains, which limited the ability to assess comparative effectiveness of specific interventions or draw causal conclusions. Finally, the review focused on studies published between 2000 and 2024, which may have excluded earlier foundational work or more recent developments not yet captured in the peer-reviewed literature.

6. Conclusion

This international systematic review highlights that unaccompanied immigrant children integrate most effectively when services are coordinated across three interrelated domains: mental health and healthcare, education and legal-policy supports, and social and community-based services. These findings emphasize the central role of trauma-informed and culturally responsive care, educational stability and language access, and rights-centered legal and community frameworks in promoting safety, belonging, and continuity. Across contexts, integrated models linking psychosocial care with schools, legal advocacy, stable placements, and both peer and community-based mentoring were most consistently associated with reduced trauma symptoms, improved emotional regulation, stronger school engagement, and greater long-term stability. At the same time, persistent gaps, especially legal uncertainty, inconsistent protections, fragmented service coordination, and limited culturally relevant care, continue to undermine integration and well-being. As unaccompanied children continue to migrate globally, these findings underscore the need to strengthen cross-system collaboration, expand access to developmentally and culturally attuned services, and advance rights-centered policy reforms that prioritize child welfare, stable legal pathways, and equitable access to care, education, and protection.

Data availability

Data from this study are publicly available and made accessible via

PROSPERO.

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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.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2026.109262>.

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Physical and mental health (n=81)

Experiences of unaccompanied children & mental health (n=14)

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