

Exploring mental health care standards in child welfare services across Canada

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INTRODUCTION

Many children and youth lack timely access to appropriate mental health services due to obstacles such as difficulties finding a trusted provider, scheduling conflicts, and lack of public transportation.

These obstacles are exacerbated for youth exiting the child welfare system, especially those from equity-deserving communities or facing language barriers. This situation is especially concerning given the well-established links between aging out of child welfare, mental health problems, homelessness, and involvement with the judicial system.

OBJECTIVES

The scoping review sought to identify current mental health practices and standards within the context of child welfare systems across Canada. The following questions guided the review:

1. What mental health care standards are used in child welfare services in Canada?
2. How have mental health problems experienced by children and youth in child welfare services in Canada been treated by child welfare workers?

METHODS

Inclusion criteria

- Articles written in English or French
- Articles written after 2000

Grey literature included

- Quebec Ministry (MSSS)
- Canadian government

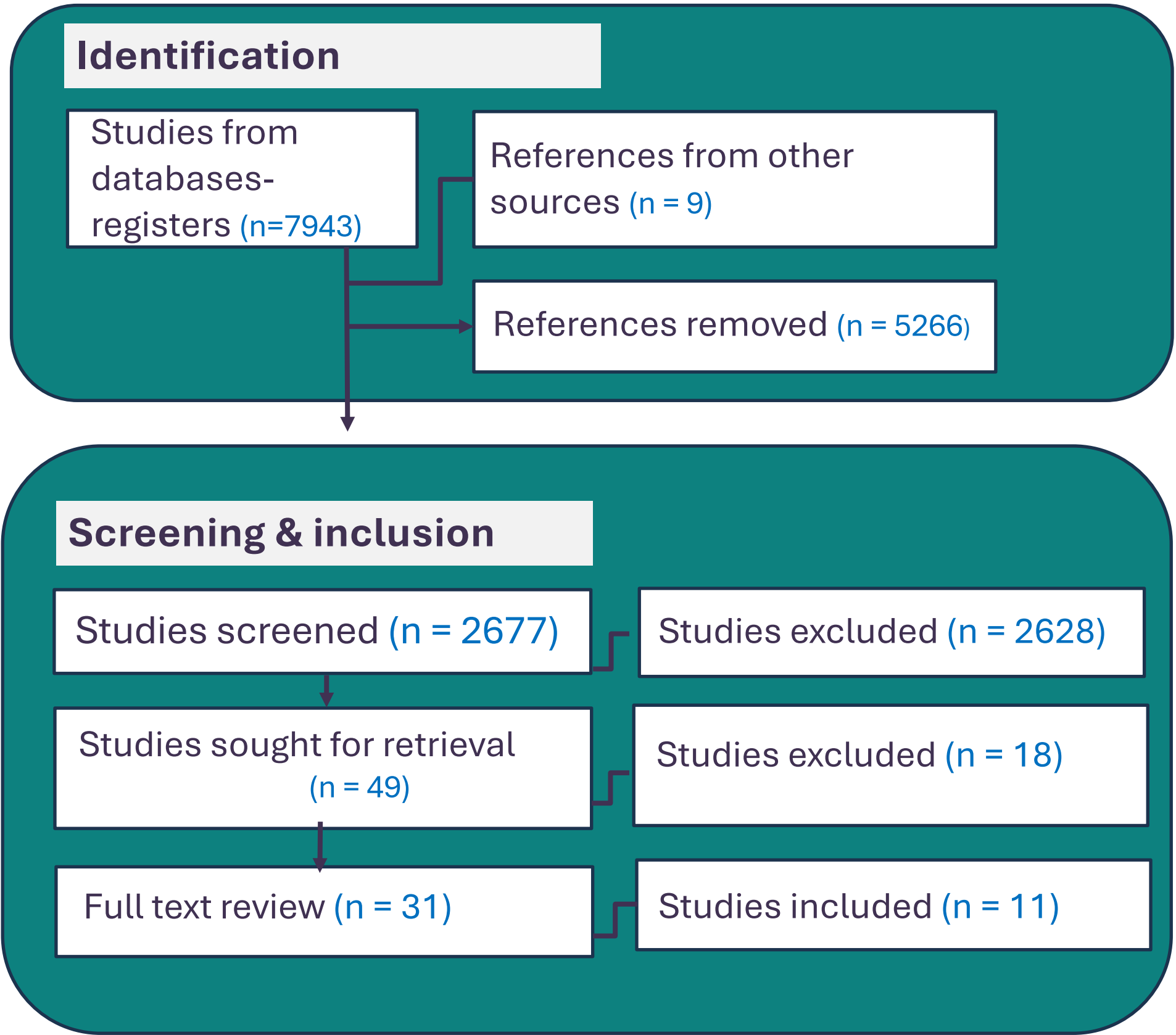
Data bases included

- MedLine
- Social Services Abstracts
- Social Work Abstracts
- PsycINFO

Table 1 : Research strategy

	Keywords	Alternatives	MeSH
Participants	Child, youth	Children, young adult	Child
Concept	Mental health care standards Child welfare services	mental health models of care, best practices mental health, psychiatric models of care, youth protection services	Mental health, child welfare
Context	Canada	Québec, Alberta, Ontario. Etc...	Canada

Table 2 : Scoping review



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References



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RESULTS

1. ABSENCE

Mental health service standards within child welfare services are not formally established in Canada. This gap, coupled with the absence of clear organizational processes, contributes to fragmented and rigid care environments and the marginalization of mental health and well-being concerns. There is a lack of research on the mental health needs of equity-deserving youth within child welfare services.

2. EXISTENCE

Our analysis also identified practices that could be elevated to standards in the following areas: youth-friendly services, specialized training for child welfare workers (e.g., trauma-informed care, cultural responsiveness), timely and appropriate referrals to mental health services, and improved coordination between child welfare and mental health services.

3. ASPIRATIONS

Commonly noted in the literature were calls to prioritise youth-friendly services, timely access to mental health care, intersectoral collaboration, relationship-based practices, individualized, innovative approaches that consider the impact of childhood trauma, and sensitivity to the specific circumstances, needs, and obstacles facing indigenous youth.

CONCLUSION

Conclusions emerging from the scoping review include:

- Child welfare systems would benefit from the **implementation of standards of care and guidelines** for practice with youth experiencing mental health problems.
- There is a **critical need for training on trauma-informed care, relationship-based practice, intersectional perspectives, cultural sensitivity and responsiveness, and youth-inclusive/friendly** approaches.
- **Intersectoral collaboration** aimed at facilitating youth access to appropriate mental health services is vital to youth well-being.
- **Challenging essentialised notions of childhood and adolescence** so as to attend to the multiple and diverse circumstances and needs of youth living in uneven social contexts.
- Further research is needed to better understand the challenges and pathways to implementing appropriate, equitable, and flexible mental health standards and guidelines for practice in child welfare systems across Canada.

