

Experiences and outcomes of foster care alumni in postsecondary education: A review of the literature



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Youth involved with the foster care system experience a number of challenges related to educational, employment, social, and inter-personal adjustment into adulthood (e.g., Barth, 1990; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Pecora et al., 2003). Obtaining a post-secondary degree has been shown to increase outcomes related to one's social and financial well-being, particularly for those who come from underprivileged backgrounds (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013). However, there is a lack of information about the number of foster care alumni who attend college and graduate and their long-term outcomes. It is estimated that up to 10% of foster care alumni enroll in 4-year institutions and approximately 3–5% go on to graduate (Barth, 1990; Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010; Emerson, 2006; McMillen & Tucker, 1999; Mech & Fung, 1999; Pecora et al., 2003; Reilly, 2003; Wolanin, 2005).

Much of the research published regarding youth aging out of foster care and foster care alumni related to education focuses on elementary and secondary educational experiences prior to aging out. Although there has been an increase in studies published in the past five years, research published in the area of foster care alumni and postsecondary education is limited. This paper provides a scoping review of research regarding foster care alumni's experiences and outcomes in post-secondary education and offers recommendations for future practice, research, and policy. This paper integrates the knowledge from relevant literature and provides an overview of the strengths and limitations of existing research. There are many terms used to describe children and youth who have experienced foster care. This article uses the term 'foster care alumni' to describe youth who have experienced foster care and those who have aged out of foster care. Youth in foster care and who have aged out of foster care have a range of experiences related to time in care, individual characteristics, caregivers, legal status, and other elements of well-being, and these experiences can influence educational outcomes and experiences.

1. Method

1.1. Search strategy

A systematic search of the literature in the databases EBSCOhost, ProQuest, PsycInfo, Eric, and Google Scholar was conducted using varying combinations of the keywords "foster youth, aging out, foster care, foster care alumni, higher education, post-secondary, college, university, and scholarship." Inclusion criteria involved studies in scholarly journals or reports from reputable policy organizations published in English. During the search, a date range was not specified to ensure screening of all published literature on the subject. Articles and reports of all methodologies and designs (e.g., qualitative, quantitative, meta-analysis), and agency reports were considered for inclusion prior to further examination. Exclusion criteria included articles published in a language other than English, and publications not classified as reports or peer-reviewed journal articles (e.g., dissertations, theses). All searches were conducted between January and March 2016; the last search took place on March 6, 2016.

1.2. Article selection and review

The initial search generated 593 articles, and an additional 38 were identified through manual searches of citations and the authors' personal files. A three-stage review process was used to determine whether the publications would be included in the review. During the first stage, title and abstracts were reviewed and evaluated by two researchers, who are trained and experienced qualitative researchers; during the second stage, the full texts were reviewed by the same researchers. Finally, during the third stage, content was examined closely to determine overall themes and subthemes. Researchers took extensive notes during the review and shared notes and ideas at several stages of the review. Following the first review, articles were excluded if they did not include foster youth/foster care alumni as the target population, or if they did not discuss higher education. Articles were included if they discussed higher education related to foster care alumni either as the

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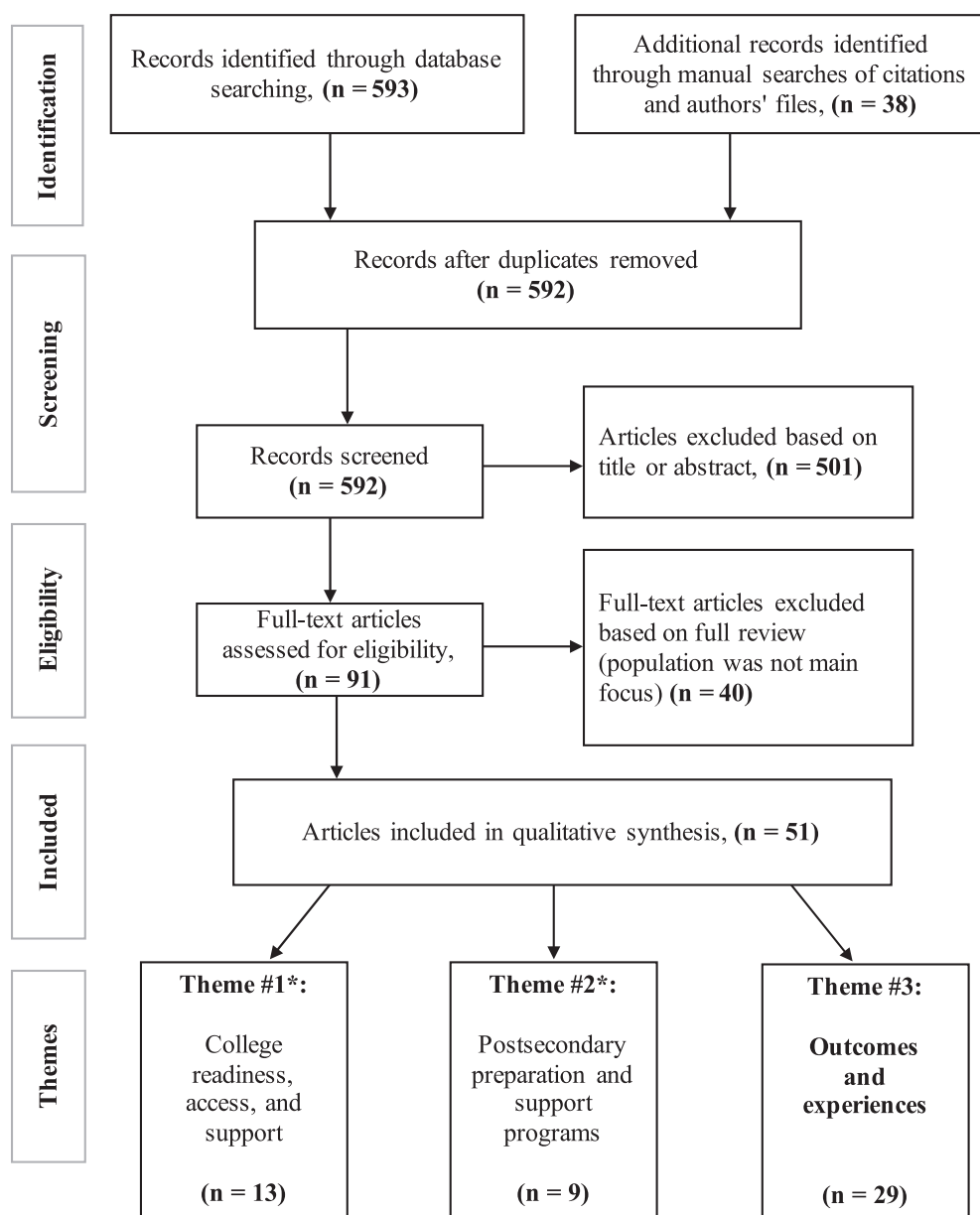


Fig. 1. Flowchart of study selection protocol. *Themes 1 and 2 presented elsewhere.

focus of the paper, or in detail. For example, if the study discussed a variety of outcomes for foster care alumni and included postsecondary education as one domain, it was included. Following these criteria, 91 articles were selected for further review based on title, abstract and initial review. The Fig. 1 flowchart outlines the complete article selection process. The authors then reviewed each article in depth and agreed to exclude an additional 40; these articles discussed foster care and higher education in the context of child welfare worker preparation and training, discussed education, but it was not the main focus of the article, or it was a duplicate. Summarized information regarding the study design, setting, sample, and key findings of the 51 articles included in the review were then inserted into a table. Themes and sub-themes across the studies were also determined to help organize the studies reviewed. The authors arrived at three overarching themes: college readiness, access, and support ($n = 13$); postsecondary preparation and support programs ($n = 9$); and outcomes and experiences of foster care alumni in higher education ($n = 29$). For the purpose of this review, the third theme, the outcomes and experiences of foster care alumni in higher education are presented and reviewed in depth in this manuscript and the other two themes are examined in another

manuscript.

2. Findings

Studies primarily focused on student successes, barriers, and overall experiences in higher education. The most dated article was published in 1997; all other articles and one report were published after the year 2000. While the subject appears to have received inconsistent attention prior to 2008, at least one article exploring foster youths' outcomes has been published every year since 2008. The majority of the articles (23) employed quantitative ($n = 20$) or mixed ($n = 3$) methods. A smaller number of articles (4) and one (1) report used qualitative methods ($n = 5$). Pecora (2012) was a review of factors associated with success. Many of the quantitative studies relied on data collected from the CALYOUTH Study (Okpych, Courtney, & Charles, 2015), Midwest Study (Courtney et al., 2010), Casey National Alumni Study (Harris, Jackson, O'Brien, & Pecora, 2009; O'Brien et al., 2010; Pecora, Kessler, et al., 2006; Pecora, Williams, et al., 2006; Salazar, 2012, 2013; Sim, Emerson, O'Brien, Pecora, & Silva, 2008), or the Pathways to College Study (Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005; Merdinger, Hines,

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