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What is known about the LGBTQ perspective in child welfare services: A scoping review

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Abstract

Sexual and gender minorities, for example, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) youth, are overrepresented in the child welfare system and an increasing number of LGBTQ people are becoming foster parents. The objective of this scoping review is to provide an overview of the existing empirical research on the practices of child welfare services towards LGBTQ individuals (i.e., youth, carers and foster parents). The review followed the methodology framework outlined by the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI). The electronic databases MEDLINE, Embase, PsycINFO, Web of Science, PubMed and Idunn were searched to identify studies appropriate for inclusion. There were 45 studies that met the inclusion criteria; 24 concerned LGBTQ youth, 10 encompassed foster parents, while nine had the service perspective as the primary focus. The studies originated from the USA ($k = 34$), the UK ($k = 6$), Australia ($k = 2$) and the Netherlands ($k = 1$). Of the included studies, 28 were qualitative, 14 were quantitative, and three studies used mixed method approach. The findings indicate that LGBTQ youth are overrepresented in the child welfare system and that LGBTQ youth and foster parents often face stigma and discrimination. The results reveal a gap in the current knowledge about social workers' attitudes, knowledge and experiences regarding working with LGBTQ individuals.

KEYWORDS

child protection, child welfare, foster parents, LGBTQ, sexual and gender minorities, vulnerable populations

1 | INTRODUCTION

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning or queer (LGBTQ) in the child welfare system have received little attention in practice, research and policy (McCormick et al., 2016). This is somewhat surprising, as Sullivan (1994) over 20 years ago pointed at barriers towards effective child welfare services (CWS) that particularly concerns adolescents from sexual and gender minorities. These barriers included the absence of integration of existing research and

knowledge in policies and practices, inequalities in the understanding of this group's needs, lack of suitable foster homes and group homes/institutions with appropriate competence and limited flexibility in such arrangements for older children. Although the literature on LGBTQ in child welfare is sparse, it has increased the recent years. Recent findings indicate that young people who identify as LGBTQ are overrepresented in the child welfare systems and that LGBTQ youth in the child welfare system are at risk for several adverse mental health outcomes, compared with non-LGBTQ youth (Dettlaff et al., 2018). Furthermore,

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in countries such as Norway (Paulsen et al., 2020), Australia, the UK and the USA (Riggs, 2020), growing numbers of LGBTQ people are becoming foster parents. Hence, to effectively meet the needs of LGBTQ individuals, including youth and foster parents, increasing the awareness, knowledge and skills of social workers and administrators in the child welfare system is crucial (Rosenwald, 2009).

Scoping reviews have been increasingly used to map the existing literature in a field of interest in terms of the volume, nature and characteristics of the primary research (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). A scoping review of the literature in a specific field or topic can be of particular use when the topic has not yet been extensively reviewed or is of a complex or heterogeneous nature (Mays et al., 2001). Scoping reviews provide a rigorous and transparent method for mapping areas of research and can be used as a standalone project or as a preliminary step to a systematic review (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). To date, no systematic reviews have been conducted on the topic LGBTQ foster parents. Riggs (2020) presents an overview of the existing research on LGBTQ foster parents in a newly published book chapter. However, this overview does not include non-LGBTQ foster parents' experiences with LGBTQ youth. Beyond empirical research, there are also a small nonetheless growing number of publications that focus on specific practice and policy issues pertaining to LGBTQ topics in a child welfare context.

In the last few years, the literature on LGBTQ youth in child welfare systems has been synthesized with various degrees of rigorous and transparent methods. One of the first reviews on the outcomes of LGBTQ+ youth involved in child welfare system in the USA was conducted by The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2016). The review included a growing body of research on the experiences of LGBTQ youth and provided a research roadmap to begin understanding their experiences and outcomes and the system and service efficacy. McCormick et al. (2016) synthesized the existing research on the experiences and outcomes of LGBTQ youth in the child welfare system, as well as an exploration of the policy and practice initiatives aimed at creating a more inclusive system of care. In an American context, Detlaff and Washburn (2018) conducted a review of various regional studies and provided prevalence estimates of former foster care youth identifying as LGBTQ. Grooms (2020) published an article that offers a comprehensive look at the LGBTQ foster youth population (USA), its vulnerabilities and its distinct needs, including an exploration of the intersectionality of foster youth who identify as Black and LGBTQ. To the best of our knowledge, there is no existing peer-reviewed/published synthesis of the research on LGBTQ in CWS that incorporates a broad perspective, including LGBTQ youth, LGBTQ foster parents and the perspectives of service providers.

1.1 | Study rationale

The present scoping review is part of the research project 'LGBTQ perspectives in CWS' that NTNU Social Research and SINTEF Digital has carried out with funding from the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs. The overall aim of the research project

was to investigate how the child welfare system meets individuals with LGBTQ identity and if CWS are succeeding in meeting their needs. To obtain an overview of existing national and international research, systematize findings and identify knowledge gaps, a scoping review is beneficial.

1.2 | Study objectives

The overall objective of the scoping review was to systematically scope the existing peer-reviewed empirical research on how the child welfare system meets individuals with LGBTQ identity and if CWS are succeeding in meeting their needs, including policy, practice, service providers and users' (youth and carers) perspectives, with the following research questions:

1. What is known about the practices of CWS towards LGBTQ individuals (i.e., youth and carers)?
2. What is known about LGBTQ foster parents?

The scoping review examines the extent (i.e., size), range (variety) and nature (characteristics) of the evidence on the topic, summarizes main findings from the research literature and identifies gaps in the literature, which can guide the planning and commissioning of future research and practice.

2 | METHODS AND ANALYSIS

The literature on LGBTQ issues in a child welfare context is complex and heterogeneous in nature, and it has not been extensively reviewed. Hence, as previously mentioned, a scoping review was considered the most suitable approach, as the method provides an overview of a broad topic (Munn et al., 2018; Peterson et al., 2017). Methods were followed as described and outlined by the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) (2015), based on the preceding work by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) and Levac et al. (2010). The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) Extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR): Checklist and Explanation (Tricco et al., 2018) was used throughout the review process (Appendix S4). The scoping review process consisted of six stages: (1) identifying the research question, (2) identifying relevant studies, (3) study selection, (4) charting the data, (5) collating, summarizing and reporting results and (6) consultation (optional). In the following sections, we describe these stages in more in further detail. The review followed a protocol that we developed a priori (Kaasbøll & Paulsen, 2019).

2.1 | Search strategy

The search strategy was underpinned by key inclusion criteria based on the 'population-concept-context (PCC)' framework recommended by the JBI for scoping reviews (Table 1). A structured literature search

was performed by a health sciences librarian (second author) in six electronic databases: MEDLINE (via Ovid), Embase (via Ovid), PsycINFO (via Ovid), Web of Science, PubMed and the Nordic database Idunn. The search was designed to identify record containing the concept 'LGBTQ' in combination with the concept 'child welfare' or 'foster care'. Each concept included alternative free text terms and was also supplemented with database-specific thesaurus terms. The search was limited to records written in British or American English or Scandinavian languages. A simplified presentation of the search strategy is presented in Table 2. The full search strategy for the different databases is provided in Appendix S5. The literature search was updated 13 July 2021. The keywords and subject headings used to search these databases are listed in Table 1.

2.2 | Study selection

Records from the different bibliographic databases were imported to EndNote X9 for Windows. Before manual screening commenced, duplicates were removed. Two reviewers (JK, VP) independently screened titles and abstracts of studies for eligibility, based on a priori

TABLE 1 Inclusion and exclusion criteria based on the 'population-concept-context (PCC)' framework

PCC	Description
P—population	LGBTQ, sexual and gender minorities, any age
C—concept	Child welfare services (e.g., in administration and casework, in out-of-home measures such as foster homes and residential youth care and in-home services such as supervision/guidance to parents and/or young people/youth/adolescents). Potential outcomes include placement, stability, pathways to care, experiences in care, practices, attitudes, policy, service access barriers, stigma, support, acceptance, discrimination, service use and barriers to service access.
C—context	The language was limited to British or American English or Scandinavian languages (Norwegian, Swedish and Danish). Research articles are limited to developed countries (and regions) including the UK, Canada, the USA, continental Europe, Australia and New Zealand where child welfare services will, to a certain extent, be comparable.

Abbreviation: LGBTQ, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning.

TABLE 2 Search strategy for the scoping review

Keywords, search terms
LGBT OR LGBTQ OR lesbian OR gay OR trans* OR bisexual* OR queer OR sexual and gender minorities
AND
Child welfare OR state custody OR care leavers OR foster care OR foster parent* OR substitute caregiver OR resource parent

Abbreviation: LGBTQ, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning.

inclusion criteria. The full texts of studies assessed as 'relevant' or 'unclear' was subsequently independently evaluated by the same two reviewers. Discrepancies were resolved by discussion among the authors until consensus on inclusion or exclusion was reached. In the final step, the reference lists of the included studies were scrutinized, and the 'cited-by' function of Google Scholar was used to search for additional studies. In addition, we conferred with researchers in the field for relevant articles in their country. Studies were included if they reported empirical primary research (quantitative or qualitative), focused on LGBTQ in a child welfare context. We excluded studies published prior to 2000, studies that lacked empirical content were not peer-reviewed and studies that were irrelevant for the research question. Adoptive parents are not included in the search because the current scoping review focuses on LGBTQ youth and foster parents that are in contact with CWS.

2.3 | Data extraction, collating, summarizing and reporting the results

Data were extracted from the included studies using a data charting form, adapted from JBI Methodology for Scoping Reviews (2015). The first author (JK) extracted the following information from each article: author(s); year of publication; origin/country of origin (where the study was published or conducted); aims/purpose of the study; study population and sample size (if applicable); methodology/methods; outcomes and details of these (e.g., how measures) (if applicable). To ensure rigour and authenticity, a second author (VP) reviewed the extracted data. As the included studies vary in study design and methods (i.e., qualitative, quantitative and mixed-methods), the included studies were analysed using a thematic synthesis approach (Thomas et al., 2004; Thomas & Harden, 2008). Thematic synthesis has three stages: (1) the coding of text 'line by line'; (2) the development of descriptive themes; and (3) the generation of analytical themes. Although the development of descriptive themes remains close to the primary studies, the analytical themes represent a stage of interpretation whereby the reviewers go beyond the primary studies and generate new interpretive constructs, explanations or hypotheses (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

2.4 | Consultation

To strengthen the reliability of this study, we had a close collaboration with the rest of the research group in our ongoing research project 'LGBTQ perspectives in CWS', which consists of seven researchers (including two of the authors of this publication) with different perspectives and competences. To validate the findings, we also established a reference group/consultation group consisting of relevant stakeholders in the field of LGBTQ and child welfare that we communicated with in three phases: (1) in the search process to get input on relevant keywords; (2) in the analysing process to ensure knowledge translation; and (3) in the end of the process to inform and

discuss interpretation of the findings. The reference group consisted of representatives from different user organizations, one gay foster parent, child welfare workers and a bachelor student in child welfare.

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Literature search

Across six databases, the literature searches yielded a total of 2535 unique records. In addition, two studies were identified through searching the 'cited-by' function of Google scholar. Reasons for study exclusion varied but were primarily due to incorrect study population (e.g., study included adoptive parents) or topic. There were 45 studies that were included for the final review (Figure 1).

3.2 | Article information

Among the 45 included studies, 36 were conducted in the USA, six in the UK, two in Australia and one in the Netherlands (Appendices S1–S3). The articles were published between 2000 and 2021, with the majority published after 2014 (Figure 2). Twenty-eight of the included studies were qualitative studies (e.g., individual and

focus-group interviews and observations). Fourteen of the studies were quantitative and of these, three had a longitudinal study design, while the remaining studies were cross-sectional. Finally, a mixed method approach (i.e., combination of quantitative and qualitative methods) was used in three studies (Appendices S1–S3).

The included studies were classified according to the primary focus of the studies (i.e., LGBTQ youth, foster parents and service perspective) (Appendices S1–S3). Within these themes, subthemes emerged. The included studies ($k = 45$) were divided into three main themes (see Figure 3):

1. LGBTQ youth in contact with CWS ($k = 24$)
 - a. Prevalence and outcomes ($k = 7$)
 - b. Experiences ($k = 17$)
2. Foster parents ($k = 11$)
 - a. LGBTQ foster parents ($k = 9$)
 - b. Foster caregivers of youth in care who are LGBTQ ($k = 2$)
3. Child welfare practice in a LGBTQ perspective ($k = 10$)

The categories/themes are not mutually exclusive, as some studies included more than one perspective (Brooks & Goldberg, 2001; Freundlich & Avery, 2004; Mallon, 2001; Mallon et al., 2002; Mountz & Capous-Desyllas, 2020; Mountz, Capous-Desyllas, & Perez, 2019; Salazar et al., 2018) (Table 1).

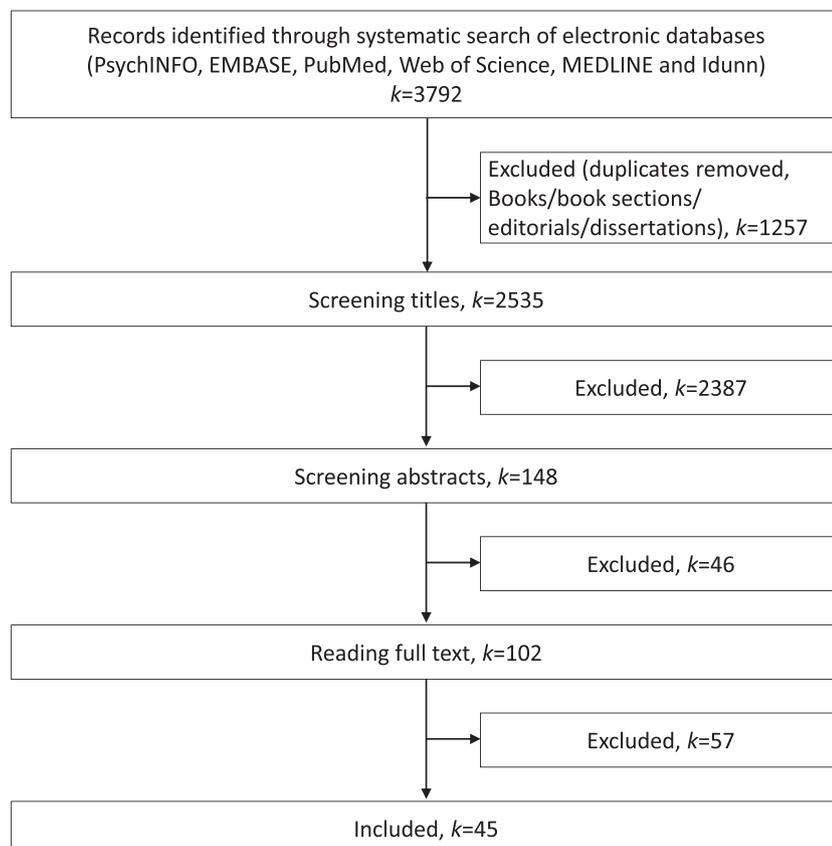


FIGURE 1 Flowchart: Identification and selection of studies

FIGURE 2 Publication year (2000 to June 2021) for the included studies (k = 45)

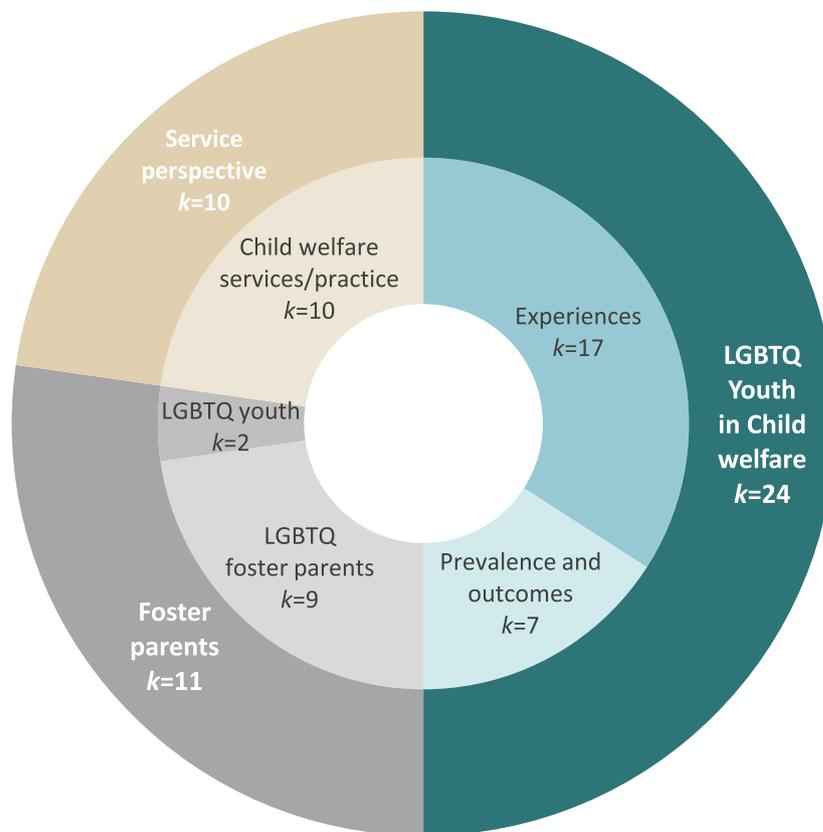
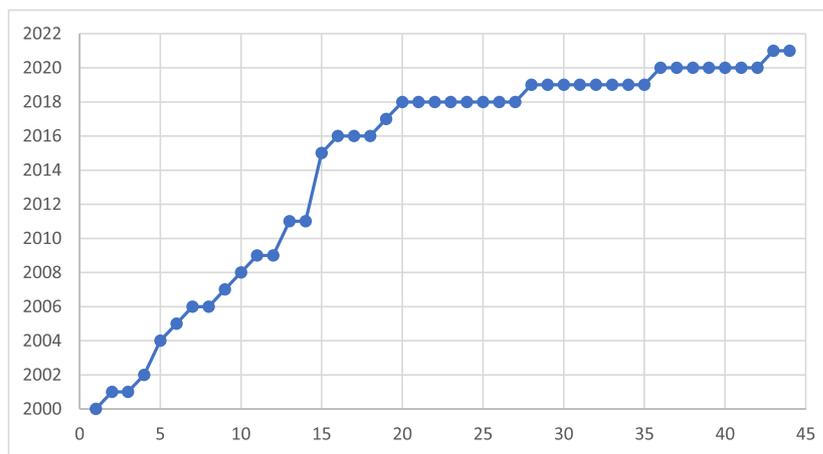


FIGURE 3 The distribution of main and subthemes across the reviewed studies (k = 45)



3.3 | LGBTQ youth in contact with CWS

As presented in Table 3, most of the included studies (22 of 42) concerned LGBTQ youth. In Appendix S1, the studies concerning this topic are presented.

3.3.1 | Prevalence, characteristics and outcomes

There were four quantitative studies investigating the prevalence/proportion of LGBTQ Youth in CWS and various risks (e.g., criminality and victimization) and outcomes (e.g., mental health and substance

use) (Baams et al., 2019; Dettlaff et al., 2018; Fish et al., 2019; Wilson & Kastanis, 2015) (Table 3). In addition, Shpiegel and Simmel (2016) described the functional outcomes of sexual minority youth emancipating from the child welfare system and Brandon-Friedman et al. (2020) compared the sexual health among youth formerly in the foster care system. These studies were published between 2015 and 2020, and they were conducted in the US, except one from the Netherlands (Baams et al., 2019). All studies used relatively large datasets, with the number of participants ranging from 786 to 895 218 (Table 3). The age of the youth in the included studies ranged from 11 to 19 years, and the target groups were; LGBTQ youth in unstable housing and foster care (Baams et al., 2019), LGB

TABLE 3 Overview of main themes and subthemes of the included studies

References	LGBTQ youth		Foster parents		Service perspective
	Prevalence and outcomes	Experiences	LGBTQ foster parents	LGBTQ youth	
Alvarez (2020)					
Baams et al. (2019)					
Brandon-Friedman et al. (2020)					
Brooks and Goldberg (2001)					
Capous-Desyllas and Mountz (2019)					
Carabez and Kim (2020)					
Clements and Rosenwald (2007)					
Dettlaff et al. (2018)					
Downs and James (2006)					
Erney and Weber (2018)					
Fish et al. (2019)					
Freundlich and Avery (2004)					
Hicks (2000)					
Hicks (2005)					
Gallegos et al. (2011)					
Goldberg et al., (2019)					
Goldberg et al. (2020)					
González-Álvarez et al. (2021)					
Greeno et al. (2021)					
Jayarathne et al. (2008)					
Mackenzie-Liu et al. (2020)					
Mallon (2001)					
Mallon et al. (2002)					
McCormick et al. (2016)					
Mountz et al. (2018)					
Mountz, Capous-Desyllas, and Perez (2019)					
Mountz, Capous-Desyllas, and Sevillano (2019)					
Mountz and Capous-Desyllas (2020)					
Paul (2020)					
Ragg et al. (2006)					
Riggs and Augoustinos (2009)					
Riggs (2011)					
Robinson (2018)					
Rosenwald (2009)					
Salazar et al. (2018)					
Salazar et al. (2020)					
Salerno et al. (2020)					
Scannapieco et al. (2018)					
Schofield et al. (2019)					
Shpiegel and Simmel (2016)					
Weeks et al. (2018)					
Whyatt-Sames (2017)					
Bianca D. Wilson and Kastanis (2015)					

TABLE 3 (Continued)

References	LGBTQ youth		Foster parents		
	Prevalence and outcomes	Experiences	LGBTQ foster parents	LGBTQ youth	Service perspective
Wood (2016)					
Wood (2018)					

Note: The main theme/focus identified for the study is represented by dark grey colour. Light grey colour indicates related themes/focus in the article. Abbreviation: LGBTQ, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning.

youth within the child welfare system (Dettlaff et al., 2018; Wilson & Kastanis, 2015) and youth emancipating from the child welfare system (Brandon-Friedman et al., 2020; Shpiegel & Simmel, 2016).

In summary, the main findings indicate that LGBTQ youth are overrepresented in the child welfare system, compared with heterosexual youth (Mallon & Woronoff, 2006; McCormick et al., 2016; Wilson et al., 2014). An estimated one and a half to two times as many LGBTQ youths are in foster care compared with the general population (Wilson et al., 2014). Moreover, the results indicate that LGBTQ youth report higher levels of mental health problems (i.e., emotional distress) and are less satisfied with the child welfare system (Dettlaff et al., 2018). Youth formerly in the foster care system reported lower levels of sexual well-being and experience more sexual victimization and unintended pregnancies compared with non-sexual minority peers (Brandon-Friedman et al., 2020). Limitations in existing research on the prevalence of LGBTQ individuals in the child welfare system concerns lack of consistent and comprehensive measures of sexual orientation in large representative studies.

3.3.2 | The youth' experiences with the CWS

There is also limited research focusing on queer youths' experiences with the CWS. At the same time, the young people's own perspectives are something that has been given most attention in the limited research available and 17 of the articles deal with young people's experiences (age 11–28 years) in meeting different parts of the CWS. Most studies that dealt with young people's perspectives were qualitative studies, mainly involved in-depth interviews with adolescents/young adults, one used narratives (Mallon, 2001), one used qualitative interviewing and eco-mapping techniques (Paul, 2020), one used photovoice (Capous-Desyllas & Mountz, 2019), and one was an ethnographic study that follows one child through 4 years (Whyatt-Sames, 2017). Four of the included studies (Mountz & Capous-Desyllas, 2020; Mountz, Capous-Desyllas, & Perez, 2019; Mountz et al., 2018; Mountz, Capous-Desyllas, & Sevillano, 2019) were based on the same data material: an interview study including 25 LGBTQ former foster youth. Essentially, the interviews are done with adolescents and young adults, which make many of the studies retrospective.

Most of the studies focused on young people in out-of-home care settings: in foster care/homes and institutions. One study included

LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual and other forms of sexual identities and orientations) youth that had experience from both foster care and residential care (González-Álvarez et al., 2021). Only one of the studies examined encounters with child welfare workers and was not focused on out-of-home care settings (Ragg et al., 2006). Many studies focused on young people who are subjected to harassment and violence within the child welfare system and consequently thematized how to ensure safety for children and young people in out-of-home care. The studies also focused on if and how queer youth in CWS experienced the opportunity for identity development and supportive care services while being in out-of-home care. The studies also identified accepting versus non-accepting foster parents (and in one study social workers) and consequences of being met with acceptance and recognition or the opposite. Summarized, the findings indicate that LGBTQ youth often experience marginalization, discrimination and a lack of acceptance in different phases of the contact with CWS, from referral into the system to aging out or leaving care.

3.4 | Foster parents

The perspectives of foster parents were addressed in 11 of the included studies, presented in Appendix S2. All studies were qualitative interview studies, except two studies using quantitative survey data (Goldberg et al., 2019, 2020).

3.4.1 | LGBTQ foster parents

Seven of the included studies concerned foster parents identified as gay men or lesbians (Brooks & Goldberg, 2001; Goldberg et al., 2019; Hicks, 2005; Riggs, 2011; Riggs & Augoustinos, 2009; Wood, 2016, 2018), one study included informants that self-identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual (Downs & James, 2006), and one study included foster parents that identified as LGBTQ (Goldberg et al., 2020). Across the qualitative studies, 135 foster parents were included. The quantitative studies were based on the same data material, which included a total 2736 individuals: 448 transgender adults, 774 cisgender sexual minority men and 1514 cisgender sexual minorities women. In addition, in the study of Hicks (2005), the numbers of informants (foster parents) were unspecified. The studies were

conducted in the USA, the UK and Australia. Most of the studies aimed at investigating the foster parents' experiences of foster care systems and interactions with social workers, including challenges, successes and roles (Riggs, 2011; Wood, 2016). Brooks and Goldberg (2001), Wood (2018) and Goldberg et al. (2020) investigated issues specific to the process of adoption/fostering by LGBTQ individuals.

The existing research indicate that lesbian and gay foster parents experience several challenges and discrimination as they encounter the child welfare system (Goldberg et al., 2019). Many report considerable scrutiny of their parenting ability and capacity to raise children and a pressure to provide an exaggerated display of their suitability, in particular gay (aspiring) foster parents (Brooks & Goldberg, 2001; Downs & James, 2006; Riggs, 2011; Riggs & Augoustinos, 2009; Wood, 2016). Moreover, several informants expressed that they were 'second best' to heterosexual families and that they felt dependent on the goodwill of the individual social workers (Hicks, 2005) for positive outcomes (i.e., children being placed with them) (Riggs, 2011; Riggs & Augoustinos, 2009). Goldberg et al. (2020) found that trans adults reported more fears of discrimination and that they were more open to children that were over the age of 12, of colour, LGBQ and children and youth having behaviour or mental health problems—compared with cisgender sexual minorities men and women. The research literature also provides insights as to the positive aspects of foster parenting. The commitment to foster parenting is often a first option for building their family, making them a highly motivated resource (Wood, 2016). The results suggest that lesbian and gay foster parents also may bring a unique perspective to their parenting, creating a unique, and in some cases better (i.e., a 'safe-place' and more understanding/accepting) environment for vulnerable children (compared with placement within heterosexual-headed households) (Riggs, 2011). The research literature displays contradictory interpretations of policy. Some participants suggested that there should not be a specific focus on sexuality, whereas some advocated for foster carer systems to openly engage with lesbian and gay parents as lesbians and gay men (Riggs, 2011).

3.4.2 | Foster caregivers of youth in care who are LGBTQ

Two of the included studies addressed (heterosexual) foster parents and their perspectives on LGBTQ youth foster children (Clements & Rosenwald, 2007; Schofield et al., 2019). The qualitative studies were conducted in the USA (Clements & Rosenwald, 2007) and the UK (Schofield et al., 2019) included a total of 51 foster parents. The results of Clements and Rosenwald (2007) indicated that foster parents expressed concerns about the placement of a lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) child in their home. Schofield et al. (2019) found that foster parents emphasized the importance of availability, sensitivity and acceptance to help young people manage stigma and other challenges associated with minority sexual orientation and gender identity.

3.5 | CWS/practice

We identified 10 studies that focused on the LGBTQ perspective related to child welfare practices/services (Appendix S3).

All the studies were from the USA, except one that were conducted in the UK (Hicks, 2000). Four studies were based on quantitative data from surveys of employees in the CWS (Greeno et al., 2021; Jayaratne et al., 2008; Rosenwald, 2009) and with foster care public health nurses (Carabez & Kim, 2020). One correspondence study (Mackenzie-Liu et al., 2020) analysed e-mails ($n = 2294$) from agencies that provide placement services. Two of the articles (Salazar et al., 2018; Weeks et al., 2018) focused on developing interventions to strengthen foster parents (Salazar et al., 2018) and the CWS (Weeks et al., 2018) in their meetings with queer children and young people. Both studies had as a starting point that there is a need to improve child welfare practice in how to meet queer children and young people and emphasize that the CWS lacks the necessary competence and methods for accommodating queer children and young people in a good way. Last, one study was a case study and document study design (Mackenzie-Liu et al., 2020).

Two of the studies (Hicks, 2000; Jayaratne et al., 2008) focused on the attitudes of child welfare workers. Jayaratne et al. (2008) investigated employees' attitudes towards placement in foster homes where foster parents are either lesbians/gays or single. Hicks (2000) explored how employees assess when lesbians apply to become foster parents or to adopt. There were two studies that focused explicitly on the child welfare practice (Greeno et al., 2021; Rosenwald, 2009). Both studies were exploratory studies where CWS employees answered questionnaires. Rosenwald (2009) pointed out that child welfare agencies could improve their support for providing an inclusive environment, creating supportive policies and selecting childcare providers regardless of sexual orientation/gender identity. Furthermore, it was pointed out that it would be an advantage for children and young people that employees were more aware of sexual orientation and gender identity in risk assessments, when using various programmes and in training and guidance for foster parents. The same study also showed that larger services succeeded better in safeguarding the LGBTQ perspective than smaller services. The overall findings from the survey conducted by Greeno et al. (2021) suggest that that on average the sample of child welfare employees 'do not know' how they feel about the LGBTQ population. The authors conclude that the child welfare workforce may need additional training, coaching and policy-level support to be successful in providing culturally responsive care to LGBTQ individuals.

Some of the most recent published studies, all from the USA, (Alvarez, 2020; Carabez & Kim, 2020; Greeno et al., 2021; Mackenzie-Liu et al., 2020; Salazar et al., 2020) encompass different aspects related to the foster care system. On the basis of the results of their survey, Carabez and Kim (2020) suggest that public health nurses working with LGBTQ youth are in a unique position to advocate by promoting gender inclusive forms in child welfare agencies and addressing disparities in access to care. Mackenzie-Liu et al. (2020) conducted a correspondence study where they investigated e-mails

to foster care agencies. The results indicate that, although foster care agencies respond at somewhat similar rates to gay male couples, gay female couples and heterosexual couples, responses sent to gay males are of lower quality. Salazar et al. (2020) described and investigated a module designed to support relationship building between LGBTQ+ youth in foster care and their caregivers. Overall, participants provided positive usability feedback about the module activities, as well as a wide variety of recommendations for strengthening the content for widespread use. The authors pointed out that materials focused on building foster caregivers' knowledge and support have the potential to help LGBTQ+ teens in the foster care system.

4 | DISCUSSION

The objective of this scoping review was to examine the peer-reviewed primary research published between 2000 and 2021 concerning CWS in an LGBTQ perspective. Overall, the results indicate that although the amount of published literature is increasing, there are relatively few empirical peer-reviewed studies on the broad topic 'LGBTQ in a child welfare context'.

The included studies originated from only four countries, with the vast majority conducted in the USA. Despite changes in laws and norms concerning the rights of LGBTQ people around the world, the acceptance of LGBTQ issues in society remains sharply divided by country, region and economic development. In general, those in Western Europe and the USA are more accepting of homosexuality than are those in Eastern Europe, Russia, Ukraine, the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa (Poushter & Kent, 2020). This review highlights the need for research in non-LGBTQ accepting countries as well as studies in (and within) other countries that are more or less conservative regarding LGBTQ issues. Furthermore, most of the research on the topic has been qualitative interview studies. Qualitative research methods can contribute towards an increased understanding of LGBTQ youth and foster parents' experiences related to the child welfare system. These findings can be especially useful for generating hypotheses and laying the groundwork for future research. However, most of the LGBTQ literature relies solely on LGBTQ respondents, making it problematic to compare characteristics of LGBTQ populations with the general population. Studies of how LGBTQ individuals are doing in the longer term are also desirable (longitudinal quantitative and qualitative studies), to deepen and nuance knowledge and understanding, as well as develop good measures and CWS.

From the reviewed literature, it is evident that data on population sizes/prevalence on LGBTQ youth in the child welfare system are scarce. Research on the prevalence and outcomes of LGBTQ youth in the child welfare system is needed in other contexts and countries, as the included studies are mainly conducted in the USA. Moreover, no studies have estimated the number of LGBTQ people who are foster parents. Obtaining high-quality samples of relatively small populations such as sexual and gender minorities can be challenging. Because of stigma, discrimination and privacy concerns, some individuals are

reluctant to disclose their membership in a sexual- or gender-minority group. Respondents may be more willing to reveal personal sensitive information when their participation is anonymous or when they understand that their responses are confidential (Institute of Medicine, 2011). Furthermore, it is recommended to develop/use multidimensional measuring instruments to capture a wider range of gender and sexual identities, as this is pointed out as a weakness of existing population-based studies (Dettlaff et al., 2018). The lack of standardized measures contributes to the variability of population estimates and can make comparisons across studies challenging. Future research should thoroughly evaluate the suitability of the operational definition(s) of sexual orientation and be specific about this issue when reporting results.

The findings across the reviewed studies indicate that youth who identify as LGBTQ are disproportionately represented in the child welfare population and have increased risk for adverse health outcomes compared with non-LGBTQ youth in the child welfare system. Youth and foster parents often face stigma and discrimination within the child welfare system. This review exposes a gap in the current knowledge about social workers' attitudes, knowledge and experiences regarding working with LGBTQ individuals. To address the unique needs of LGBTQ youth, child welfare workers should get enhanced training aimed at creating a practice that recognizes LGBTQ youth and creates a safe and affirming space. Furthermore, the research on non-LGBTQ foster parents of LGBTQ youth and initiatives and the research on programmes or interventions to support LGBTQ individuals are limited and scarce. There is also a need for dedicated research on overlooked issues such as trans- and intersex people within child welfare, along with further research that specifically focuses on intersectional experiences of being LGBTQ and seeking healthcare, including disability, age, class, race/ethnicity and rural isolation. Moreover, there is a lack of studies that are based on interviews with younger children, and there are few studies on children and young people's experience, although they are still in contact with the CWS and/or in foster home/institution. The young persons' view while in care is still important because they are in many countries still in contact with the CWS, and the foster parents are 'hired' by the CWS. Further dedicated research and dissemination activities are required on LGBTQ experiences of child welfare including areas where change can be seen, good practice identified and areas for improvement.

4.1 | Strengths and limitations

The current scoping review has several strengths worth highlighting. LGBTQ topics represent an increasing priority, and this review focuses on the latest research. The literature search was performed by an experienced information scientist, and the screening and extraction of articles were performed in duplicate. Third, the search and the protocol for the scoping review were peer-reviewed. The research group and consulting group validated the emerging and final themes. Some limitations must be acknowledged. First, scoping reviews do not assess study quality, and as such, information extracted from both

weak and strong studies is considered. We have not included books, book chapters and government documents that reported on LGBTQ individuals' experiences with the CWS. Although the review was broad, some relevant studies may have been overlooked. Furthermore, the review only included literature published in English in the period 2000 and 2021. Hence, relevant literature that was published outside the year range and/or in other languages may have been omitted. Despite these limitations, the review does provide important understandings of the existing knowledge on LGBTQ topics in a child welfare setting and subsequently knowledge gaps and need for research.

4.2 | Conclusions

This scoping review provides a comprehensive summary of primary research findings concerning the LGBTQ perspective in CWS. This review underlines the limited research conducted on the LGBTQ perspectives in CWS. An integrated understanding of LGBTQ issues across a broader context (i.e., youth, foster parents and service providers) of CWS may support tailored and feasible interventions to improve the quality of CWS for vulnerable populations. This requires further large-scale research in child welfare systems in various countries and settings that can inform education, practice and policy that can develop CWS that support LGBTQ individuals.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

JK and VP conceived of the idea and developed the research question and study methods. SAP conducted the literature search. All authors contributed meaningfully to the drafting and editing of the final manuscript.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

No additional data are available.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

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