Article

Caregiver's experiences with kinship care and Child Welfare Services – A Qualitative Evidence Synthesis

by

Anne Apeland Svalastog
Associate Professor in Child Welfare work
Department of Social Studies, University of Stavanger
Norway
E-mail: anne.svalastog@uis.no

Hulda Mjöll Gunnarsdottir
Associate Professor in Social Work
Department of Social work, University of Stavanger
Norway
E-mail: hulda.m.gunnarsdottir@uis.no

Ingunn T. Ellingsen
Professor in Social Work
Faculty of Social Science, University of Stavanger
Norway
E-mail: ingunn.t.ellingsen@uis.no

Keywords:
kinship care, child welfare, social work practice, qualitative evidence, caregivers

DOI: https://doi.org/10.31265/q71yjh24

Abstract

Kinship care placements are significant for meeting the need for alternative care in child welfare systems worldwide. This qualitative evidence synthesis develops a comprehensive understanding of the role of the Child Welfare Service (CWS) in kinship foster care from the perspectives of kinship caregivers. We reviewed 14 qualitative empirical studies that explore caregivers' perspectives on contact with- and support from the CWS. Our synthesis indicates that most kinship caregivers encounter challenges when interacting with CWS. Three overarching themes were identified: 1) CWS' role when becoming a kinship carer; 2) common concerns and how these are met by CWS, and 3) expected to manage on their own, afraid to seek help. Findings show that kinship carers often feel unprepared to be caregivers. They face financial constraints, challenges related to their children's needs, and struggles with their own health, all of which can make the responsibilities of caregiving overwhelming. Additionally, many new caregivers fear reprisals from CWS if they seek help and support, so they are left to deal with difficulties on their own. The implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords: kinship care, child welfare, social work practice, qualitative evidence, caregivers

1 Introduction

Child protection and child welfare systems are responsible for safeguarding children's well-being. These services may include both risk assessment and service provision (Gilbert et al., 2011). When children need out-of-home placement, kinship care has become a prevalent practical child welfare arrangement (Littlewood, 2017; McCartan et al., 2018). The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA, 2010) defines kinship care as 'family-based care within the child's extended family or with close friends of the family known to the child, whether formal or informal in nature' (p. 6). Although such care arrangements can be informal, formal kinship placements involving the courts and social workers take place across countries (Delap & Mann, 2019, p. 12). Western countries operate with several out-of-home measures, and kinship care is considered a preferred option for children (Broadhurst, 2017; McCartan et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2020). Formal placement of children in kinship care has increased over the last few decades in all child welfare systems (Delap & Mann, 2019; Denby, 2016). In this study, we focus on kinship foster care as placements within families grounded in a jurisdictional child protection framework. We draw attention to the role of the child welfare system in relation to kinship care from the perspectives of caregivers, which complements the ongoing practice policy of the past several decades (Delap & Mann, 2019). Although the terms *child protection services* and *child welfare services* may be used interchangeably, they often denote different characteristics of welfare systems. *Child protection* is often a more risk-oriented system; *child welfare* usually refers to a more family-support-oriented system (Blomberg et al., 2010; Gilbert et al., 2011). In this study, we use the term *child welfare services* (CWS) to refer to the public system that works with children and families to ensure that children grow up in safe environments.

Research on kinship care has focused on comparing and measuring stability between types of placements (Chateauneuf et al., 2022; Lutman et al., 2009; Winokur et al., 2018), as well as placement outcomes (Andersen & Fallesen, 2015; Font, 2015; Perry et al., 2012; Winokur et al., 2018). Although Andersen and Fallesen (2015) found equal outcomes on stability in kinship care versus non-kinship care, other studies have shown that kinship care offers more stability than ordinary foster care placements (Farmer, 2009; Perry et al., 2012; Winokur et al., 2018). Kiraly

and Humphrey's (2013) qualitative review found that kinship care offers clear benefits for family connection and belonging. However, significant challenges in parental contact during placements were identified, with a consequent need for stronger professional support to maintain the benefits of keeping children within the family. Research also shows that rates of physical and sexual abuse appeared to be lower in kinship care families, while rates of neglect were often higher than in other care settings (Hallett et al., 2021). The same study also revealed a risk of children staying longer in problematic placements, and that lack of support and training for kinship carers could exacerbate the risk to some children. Moreover, research shows that financial struggles within kinship care families often constitute a barrier to the growth of social capital (Taylor et al., 2020), and that this barrier may have a long-term impact on children's opportunities. Hence, several scholars have argued for greater awareness of social class, poverty and marginalization in child welfare work (Featherstone et al., 2018; Kojan, 2011; Fauske et al, 2018). Social class and marginalization affect the way that CWS recognizes service users, in which parents in non-marginalized positions are more often accorded recognition, unlike parents in marginalized positions (Fauske et al., 2018). However, little attention is given to the significance of such factors in a foster care setting.

Research has shown that providing sufficient follow-up to kinship caregivers and parents is essential to prevent placement disruption (Leathers et al., 2019; Tonheim & Iversen, 2019; Vanderfaeillie et al., 2018). There may be different reasons for the apparent lack of follow-up. Rasmussen and Jæger (2021) argue that the quality and prioritization of kinship care depend on social workers, their managers and organizations. They also note that social workers may struggle to engage emotionally with these families. As highlighted in this section, research has addressed some of the complexities that arise when the CWS engages kin families as caregivers, and missing support from the CWS seems to be an evident factor in kinship care placements. However, there appears to be less knowledge of how kinship carers experience the role of CWS in relation to care placements. As kinship care practices are increasingly used as a CWS measure, more knowledge about this is needed. This qualitative evidence synthesis consolidates literature on kinship carers' experiences with involvement in kinship care and their interaction with the

CWS. We seek to answer the following research question: *How do kinship caregivers perceive their roles and their interactions with Child Welfare Services?*

2 Method

Qualitative evidence synthesis (QES) is an umbrella term for different methods within systematic reviews. The purpose of QES is to improve the understanding of an issue by formulating questions about system complexity by bringing together findings from qualitative research (Flemming et al., 2019). Conducting a systematic review of qualitative studies implies the exclusion of any quantitative research from analysis. The aim of this study is to explore lived experiences from the perspectives of kinship carers, which are less amenable to quantitative research approaches (O'Day & Killeen, 2002). Qualitative research creates the opportunity to arrive at a rich comprehension of lived experiences and social phenomena by exploring how research participants view and attribute meaning to their lived circumstances (Ie et al., 2022). QES gives us an overview of experiences and perspectives of a phenomenon in different locations and contexts.

2.1 Search strategy

This QES reviews the qualitative research literature on kinship foster care and kinship foster carers' experiences with CWS. To obtain a preliminary overview of research on this topic, we conducted a pilot search of databases for several common terms and concepts in kinship care. Using the PICo scheme left us with rigid and limited results. The PICo scheme is often used for qualitative reviews, and includes keywords on participants, the phenomenon of interest and context (Hosseini et al., 2024). To review the literature on kinship care, we searched a variety of concepts corresponding to kinship care (see Table 1). Our context-based search of Academic Search Premier, CINAHL with Full Text, SocIndex with Full Text, MedLine, Scopus and PsycINFO provided more relevant results than the PICo scheme did (Page et al., 2020). The search was done in collaboration with a specialized librarian. Articles had to be qualitative interview studies published in English peer-reviewed journals after 2000. The time span was decided in response to the increased trend of the last two decades of foster children living with kin (Hallett et al., 2023; Hassall et al., 2021; Skoglund & Thørnblad, 2019). Moreover, we limited the search to studies involving

kinship care as a CWS arrangement (see Table 2), and manually detected studies that included the perspectives of kinship carers.

Table 1: *Search Terms (combinations with OR)*

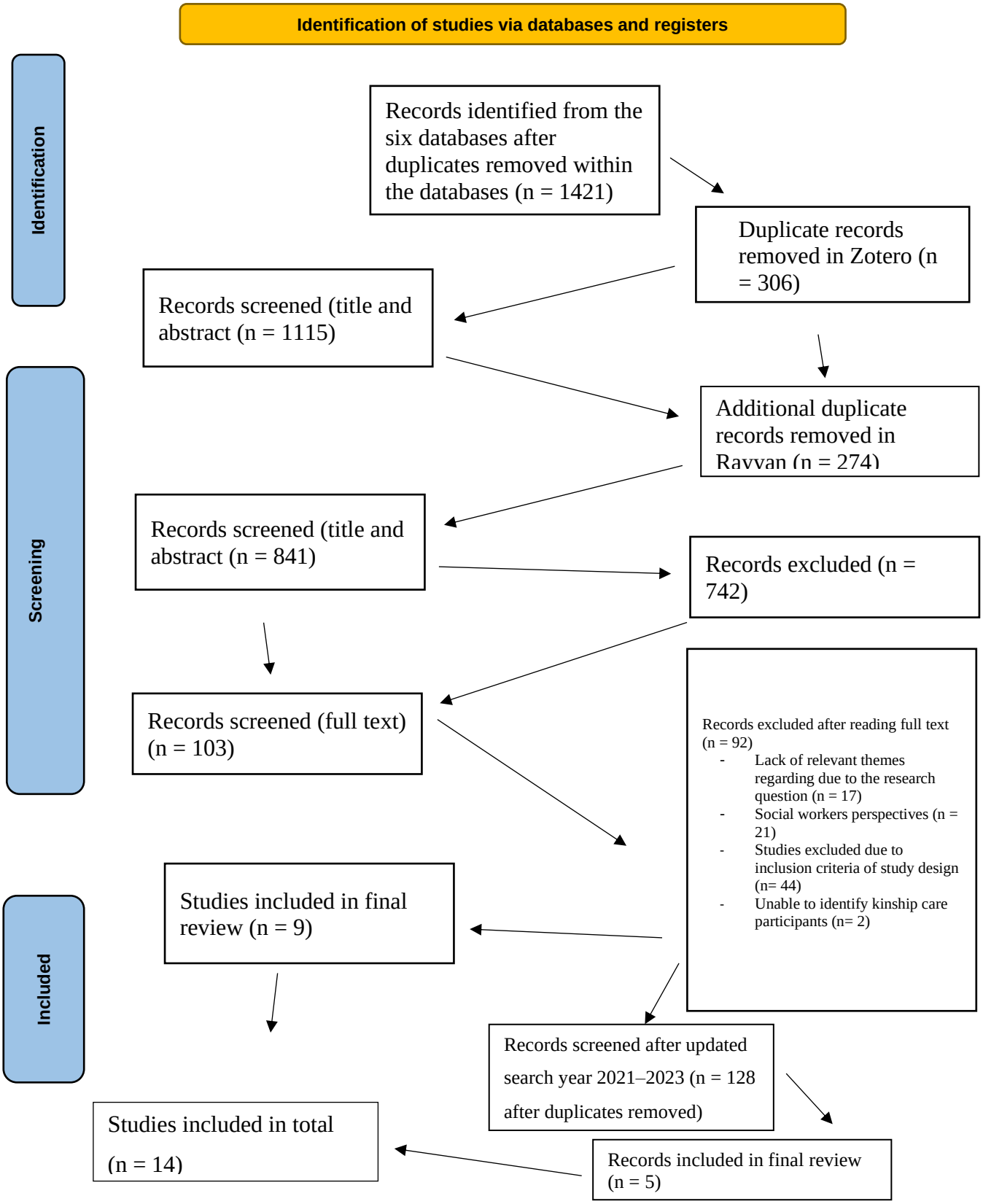
Context: 'kinship care,' 'kinship foster care,' 'formal kinship care,' 'kin care,' 'family foster care,' 'kinship foster placement,' 'family foster placement,' 'informal kinship care,' 'informal kinship foster care,' 'placement with relatives,' 'custodial family care,' 'formal kinship foster care,' and 'custodial kinship care.'

Table 2: *Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria*

Inclusion Criteria	**Exclusion Criteria**
Peer-reviewed studies	Conference presentations, books, doctoral theses, dissertation abstracts
Qualitative interview studies whose findings are presented in the narrative form along with quotes from the participants. For articles using mixed methods, only the qualitative part is included as potential data. In comparative studies of kinship versus non-kinship, only data from kinship care participants were considered for inclusion.	Quantitative studies, review studies
Published after 2000	Published before 2000
Written in English	Written in any other language
High Income-Countries	Middle- and low-income countries

2.2 Search results

Our search strategy resulted in 1,115 studies after duplicates were removed using Zotero (Corporation for Digital Scholarship, 2023). We transferred the studies to Rayyan, a programme designed for collaborative screening during systematic reviews (Ouzzani et al., 2016). Titles and abstracts were examined, sorted and categorized as *include, maybe* or *exclude*. All three authors assessed articles categorized as *maybe*. During this screening process, 276 additional duplicates were removed, and 742 articles were excluded for not meeting the inclusion criteria. A total of 103 articles were read in full text, leading to the exclusion of 92 additional articles. This process resulted in the inclusion of nine articles for this review. The first search and review process took place from March to September 2021. The first author conducted a supplementary search during the spring 2023 to identify articles published after the first search. This resulted in screening 128 additional articles after the removal of duplicates, and five more articles were found suitable for inclusion (see Figure 1). Fourteen eligible qualitative studies were included in total for this review (See Appendix A).


Identification of studies via databases and registers
Identification
Records identified from the six databases after duplicates removed within the databases (n = 1421)
Duplicate records removed in Zotero (n = 306)
Records screened (title and abstract (n = 1115)
Additional duplicate records removed in Rayyan (n = 274)
Screening
Records screened (title and abstract (n = 841)
Records excluded (n = 742)
Records screened (full text) (n = 103)
Records excluded after reading full text (n = 92)
- Lack of relevant themes regarding due to the research question (n = 17)
- Social workers perspectives (n = 21)
- Studies excluded due to inclusion criteria of study design (n= 44)
- Unable to identify kinship care participants (n= 2)
Included
Studies included in final review (n = 9)
Records screened after updated search year 2021–2023 (n = 128 after duplicates removed)
Studies included in total (n = 14)
Records included in final review (n = 5)

2.3 Study characteristics

There were 424 participants in the 14 articles addressing kinship carers' experiences of contact with the CWS. All of these articles researched kinship care placements, proceeded by court or as a CWS arrangement. Typical themes of the studies were the dilemmas, challenges, benefits and values of kinship care, as well as interaction with- or a need for support from the CWS due to an involvement in kinship care. Topics on experiences with the CWS did not appear in the majority of the studies' titles or keywords but were identified through the full-text screening. Most of the included articles represented grandparents' perspectives, except for a small group of children's aunts and uncles. A recurring topic was the role of kinship caregivers and their understanding of the assignment. Two studies discussed kinship care in Black American families (Johnson-Garner & Meyers, 2003; Murphy, 2008). Five articles focused on the role of kinship grandparents, while other studies used the more generic term 'kinship caregivers'. Four articles explicitly explored interactions and encounters with CWS or service needs (Gentles-Gibbs & Zema, 2020; Harris et al., 2021; McPherson et al., 2022; Murphy, 2008). The studies included in this review were undertaken in different Anglo-Saxon countries and child welfare systems. We are aware that the interaction between kinship foster homes and the CWS is affected by the context, legislation and systemic understanding of child protection (Parton, 2017). However, we aim to uncover common themes based on the participants' experiences as reported in the reviewed studies to contribute to the knowledge of this topic.

2.4 Analytical approach

All three authors carefully read and analysed the included articles using stepwise coding and categorization inspired by thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). Thematic analysis is widely used in qualitative research, and seeks patterns and themes emerging from the data. We focused on the reported findings and quotes from the participants, but also the discussions to broaden the insights of the findings. Categories of findings were extracted into themes, going back and forth between the data and the extracting categories and tentative themes. An overview of findings, themes and sub-themes was created on a whiteboard table, facilitating a

collaborative analysis by all three authors until the final themes representing the synthesis of our findings were settled.

2.5 Limitations of the study

This review aims to conduct a qualitative synthesis of research on kinship care from the perspectives of kinship caregivers in kinship care. Accurate search strategies are essential for the quality of review articles. However, it is difficult to obtain all possible studies on a given topic (Whittmore & Knafl, 2005). The inclusion only of qualitative studies excludes studies with other methodologies that could have addressed relevant perspectives and extended our findings. Most of the articles included in the report focus on the experiences of grandparents. However, other next-of-kin carers may also have distinct experiences that have not been adequately emphasized in this review. Jurisdiction of kinship care proceedings varies across child welfare systems, and we are aware of the contextual differences. Yet, even with the small diversity of kinship caregivers' experiences with CWS in our collected data material, we were surprised by how consistent and united the experiences of feeling unvalued and degraded by the system were in the data.

3 Findings

In our analysis, we identified three main themes from the articles we reviewed: 1) CWS' role when becoming a kinship carer, 2) Common concerns and how these are met by CWS, and 3) Expected to manage on their own – afraid to seek help. Below, we will present these themes, which all address forms of kinship carers' experiences with the CWS.

3.1 CWS' role when becoming a kinship carer

Being able to maintain family relations was reported as a value of kinship care placements, and participants in the included studies reported a strong commitment to children's care and expressed gratitude for keeping the family together (Chipman et al., 2002; Gentle-Gibbs & Zema, 2020; Kiraly et al., 2020; Kiraly & Humphreys, 2016). In several studies, kinship carers reported a fear that children would be 'taken by the system', and that this would prevent them from maintaining contact and relationships with the children. This fear of separation was often a main motivation for

becoming a kinship carer (Johnson-Garner & Meyers, 2003; Kiraly et al., 2020; Zuchowski et al, 2019). Moreover, some caregivers did not see any other sufficient solutions to ensure the child's well-being (Holt & Birchall, 2022; Letiecq et al., 2008). In Kiraly et al.'s (2020) study, a young caregiver for her siblings phrased it as follows:

> Q: How long did the two of you take to make up your mind that you were going to do it?
>
> A: Straightaway, on the spot …There was no way that [brothers] would go anywhere else. There was nowhere else for them to go but [with] us! (Kiraly et al., p. 340)

Several of the reviewed articles show that kinship carers typically took on this responsibility, despite the ways CWS managed the kinship care process, often with insufficient preparation for the caregiver role (Birchall & Holt, 2022; Fergeus et al., 2019; Johnson-Garner & Meyers, 2003; King et al., 2009; Kiraly et al., 2020; Letiecq et al., 2008). Caregivers used terms like 'passing the buck' (Zuchowski, 2019) and 'drop and run' (McPherson et al., 2022, p. 5) to describe the way that CWS transferred the child to kinship care.

In Kiraly et al. (2020), many carers had long been involved with the children. In some cases, the CWS appeared to have limited or no information about the children's family. Such conditions led to hastened transfers, thus putting additional strain on carers and children (Chipman et al., 2002; Holt & Birchall, 2022; Kiraly et al., 2020; Letiecq et al., 2008; McPherson et al., 2022; Zuchowski et al., 2019). Chipman et al. (2002) found that some caregivers felt compelled to take care of the child, even if they had not been in contact with the child prior to the urgent situation that necessitated the placement. According to two caregivers:

> *I never actually met her [the child] until she turned up on my doorstep with a social worker when she was five. It was a case of 'if you don't have her, she will go into the care system'. So that was that. She's been with us ever since.* (Holt & Birchall, 2022, p. 1238)
>
> But anyway, when [Child Protection Department] got involved I—they said to me, 'off the record', that was the words that got used, 'if you don't do something we are taking her, [we will] place her with someone' and they don't have to tell me where she was. (Zuchowski et al., 2019, p. 624)

Across the studies, participants reported feeling overwhelmed after becoming kinship carers. They described it as a life-changing experience that led them to sacrifice other opportunities to prioritize the child's well-being and safety (Birchall & Holt, 2022; Chipman et al., 2002; Holt & Birchall, 2022; Johnson-Garner & Meyers, 2003; Kiraly et al., 2020; Murphy, 2008). For some, it meant giving up jobs or plans to continue

their education (Birchall & Holt, 2022; Holt & Birchall, 2022; Kiraly et al., 2020). Murphy (2008) found that being a kinship caregiver compromised their own plans and dreams, and felt that this was what CWS expected of them. That being said, kinship caregiving was also experienced as rewarding. Some caregivers experienced being empowered, and felt seen when being included in decision-making by the CWS (Gentle-Gibbs & Zema, 2020). Some women saw the role of kinship carer as an opportunity to assume a complementary parenting role without replacing mothers (Kiraly & Humphrey, 2016).

3.2 Common concerns and how these are met by CWS

In the studies reviewed here, kinship carers expressed some concerns about the care arrangement. One key concern was about meeting the children's needs. Many kinship carers reported that their kinship foster child needed support and help with handling emotional or medical health conditions, and in some cases, specialized treatment (Chipman, et al., 2002; Fergeus et al., 2019; Gentles-Gibbs & Zema, 2020; King et al., 2009; Kiraly et al., 2020; Letiecq et al., 2008; McPherson et al., 2022; Zuchowski et al., 2019). Fergeus et al. (2019) found that despite having a better understanding of potential intergenerational problems, kinship carers' concerns were often not taken seriously by the CWS. Carers taking part in the study of King et al. (2009) reported worries for the children's health. Moreover, Birchall and Holt (2022) found that grandmothers bore a significant burden of caring when children exhibited challenging behaviour due to trauma and loss.

A complicated factor for meeting the children's needs, evident in the majority of the studies (nine of 14), was that many kinship carers dealt with personal financial worries and an economically challenging situation (Birchall & Holt, 2022; Chipman et al., 2002; Gentles-Gibbs & Zema, 2020; Harris et al., 2021; Holt & Birchall, 2022; King et al., 2009; Kiraly et al., 2020; Letiecq et al., 2008; McPherson et al., 2022; Zuchowski et al., 2019). Kinship care responsibilities often resulted in extended costs and expenses, with financial concerns being an even bigger issue in families with additional medical or health needs. The studies by King et al. (2009), Gentles-Gibbs and Zema (2020) and McPherson et al. (2022), all reported that caregivers sometimes needed to use their savings, retirement pension or loans to pay for

medical support for the children in their care. Kiraly et al. (2020) and McPherson et al. (2022) found that some kinship carers were promised financial support that never materialized. A quote from Kiraly et al. (2020, p. 343) illustrates this well:

> Before I signed up for the children they said, 'You get a regular payment for food, electricity, but [child protection also] pay for everything else like sports activities, uniforms, clothing, beds, everything'… Nothing came … Single mother, working part-time, going to no job to look after the children full-time. I risked a lot (Olivia)

Some accused CWS of deliberately withholding information about financial compensation (Chipman et al., 2002; Johnson-Garner & Meyer, 2003; King et al., 2009; Kiraly et al., 2020; Letiecq et al., 2008; Murphy, 2008). These circumstances made it challenging for kinship carers to remain economically self-sufficient while meeting the child's needs. Participants in Harris et al. (2021) addressed the need for varied support, both emotional and financial, yet the process of obtaining such support is often stressful (Kiraly et al., 2020).

Another common concern revolved around stabilizing the family's everyday life (Chipman et al., 2002; Fergeus et al., 2019; Holt & Birchall, 2022; King et al., 2009; Kiraly & Humphreys, 2016; Kiraly et al., 2020; McPherson et al., 2022). Grandparents often expressed worries about their own age and health, and how this could impact placement stability for their child (Chipman et al., 2002; Fergeus et al., 2019; King et al., 2009). Zuchowski et al. (2019) found that kinship caregivers also noted that their health had suffered under the stress of being kinship carers. As one of the participants stated, 'So, I was just falling down the wayside as well and just neglected in my health, in all of the process' (p. 623). Kinship carers who were grandparents appeared particularly worried about not meeting the child's needs or being able to stay present as the child grew up (King et al., 2009; Zuchowski et al., 2019). One grandparent in King et al. (2009) asked, 'At my age, raising a child, am I going to live to see him graduate?' (p. 232).

The reviewed studies also raised concerns about balancing contact with other family members with the child's well-being and safety (Fergus et al., 2019; Gentles-Gibbs & Zema, 2020; Holt & Birchall, 2022; Kiraly & Humphreys, 2016; Zuchowski et al., 2019). Although an advantage of kin care was that many children were able to maintain positive relationships with their extended family, conflicts among family members often persist in care arrangements (Kiraly et al., 2020). Several studies

mentioned challenging relationships between caregivers and children's parents, many of whom were living with drug addiction and mental illness (Chipman et al., 2002; King et al., 2009; Kiraly & Humphreys, 2016; Zuchowski et al., 2019). This often led to complex and emotional conflicts that forced grandparents to choose their grandchildren over their own children (Chipman et al., 2002; Johnson-Garner & Meyers, 2003; Kiraly & Humphreys, 2016). Chipman et al. (2002) illustrate the difficulties in enforcing rules when caregivers are emotionally connected to the child's parent. Such situations were difficult for caregivers to handle, and a lack of support from the CWS only exacerbated the situation (Chipman et al., 2002; King et al., 2009; Letiecq et al., 2008; Zuchowski et al., 2019). One grandmother in Kiraly and Humphrey's study (2016, p. 234) said, 'I think sometimes Child Protection think access is easy because it's family. Sometimes, it is actually harder because it is family'. Kinship carers often thought that they had to handle sensitive and risky situations, like parental visits, on their own, without the professional support system they needed (Gentles-Gibbs & Zema, 2020; Kiraly & Humphreys, 2016; Letiecq et al., 2008).

3.3 Expected to manage on their own – afraid to seek help

A final theme deriving from our analysis concerns the lack of CWS support and its impact on the challenges that the kinship carers faced (Chipman et al., 2002; Harris et al., 2021; King et al., 2009; Letiecq et al., 2008; Zuchowski et al., 2019). The extent to which they experienced support varied across the studies. Gentles-Gibbs and Zema (2020) found that most of their participants (grandparents) had a generally positive experience with the CWS, which implied an appreciation for their caseworker's willingness to listen. Still, a consistent finding in this review is the lack of support, information and resources for the carers. That said, when caregivers felt supported, they were also more effective (Johnson-Garner & Meyers, 2003). Moreover, several studies addressed kinship carers (and children's) unmet or unfulfilled needs (Gentles-Gibbs & Zema, 2020; Johnson-Garner & Meyers, 2003; King et al., 2009; Kirlay & Humphrey, 2016). Many of the caregivers mentioned a sense of being treated differently from ordinary foster care placements (Birchall & Holt, 2021; Fergeus et al., 2019; Gentles-Gibbs & Zema, 2020; Kiraly & Humphreys, 2016; Letiecq et al., 2008; McPherson et al., 2022; Murphy, 2008; Zuchowski et al.,

2019). Letiecq et al. (2008) found that kinship carers believed that caseworkers often saw them as part the problem rather than the solution, and perceived them as trying to take advantage of the system. Some talked about being put aside when it came to follow-up, and even degraded compared to non-family foster carers (Fergeus et al., 2019; Kiraly & Humphreys, 2016; Zuchowski et al., 2019), or abandoned by the CWS and other support agencies (McPherson, 2022; Johnson-Garner & Meyers, 2003). Consequently, kinship carers were often expected to handle things on their own. According to a grandparent in McPherson's study (2022, p. 5):

> 'DHHS [the state child protection agency] do a 'drop and run,' they did not see the children for almost five years, they believed that because the children are living with grandparents that they are safe'.

Gentles-Gibbs and Zema (2020) found that although system support was considered crucial for managing kinship carers' responsibilities, such support was frequently absent, and some did not have an assigned caseworker. Not having someone to turn to for help could create critical situations when managing family relationships or obtaining help for their child (Fergeus et al., 2019; Kiraly & Humphreys, 2016; McPherson et al., 2022; Murphy, 2008). Fergeus et al. (2019) cite a male kinship carer who did not think that he was being viewed as part of 'the system' in the same ways as other foster parents: 'I've been told well you know there are kids a lot worse than that, and oh we wouldn't be worried about that. If you had a child in the normal system and that was happening, you'd be going, 'hey there's something really wrong here, but she doesn't make the grade on the DHS system' (p. 80). Some preferred not having the CWS too involved, even though it meant limited assistance in navigating the CWS system (Gentles-Gibbs & Zema, 2020).

In some studies, kinship caregivers reported that communicating with CWS made them fear that they could face sanctions, that the child would be moved into ordinary foster care, or that they would be judged as failed grandparents because their own children were unable to handle parenthood, and lost custody (Chipman et al., 2002; Gentles-Gibbs & Zema, 2020; Holt & Birchall, 2022; King et al., 2009; Kiraly & Humphreys, 2016; Letiecq et al., 2008; McPherson et al., 2022; Murphy, 2008). An example from one of studies illustrates how carers can find themselves in a vulnerable situation:

> I would be scared that they would come back and say: 'Well, if you need help to take care of her then maybe we ought to think twice about you having her if you need

> help'… so I would be scared to ask, or I don't want to make such a big stink that they come knocking on my door and like 'You can't take care of her then well, maybe somebody else will'. (Gentles-Gibbs & Zema, 2020, p. 6)

Some caregivers thought that they were saving the CWS money, but felt undervalued (Zuchowski et al., 2019). Despite some studies showing that some kinship carers did seek help, especially when they felt supported by their social workers (Gentles-Gibbs & Zema, 2020; Holt & Birchall, 2022), the prevailing narrative is that kinship carers often felt abandoned, unsupported and treated as less competent than non-family foster carers.

4 Discussion

This synthesis of research shows that kinship carers faced a variety of challenges in different stages of being kinship carers, and many lacked support from the care system. The articles presented in this review explore kinship carers' experiences from Australia, England and the United States. Despite the limited context, we argue that our findings are relevant to other countries where kinship care is common as a CWS out-of-home placement.

The studies in this review originate from countries that share similar norms for the organization of child welfare systems (Parton, 2017; Gilbert, 1997). The CWS contexts are characterized as child protection and risk-oriented systems (Gilbert et al., 2011). Such welfare systems typically set high barriers to governmental interference. An overarching question is how such barriers might transfer to social workers' contact with kinship carers, and whether the results in the included studies have relevance for CWS and kinship care in other types of welfare regimes. Nonetheless, our findings suggest that lack of CWS support placed kinship carers under greater stress, both in terms of how they became carers in the first place, and in supporting kinship carers to meet children's and their own needs. Compared with more family-service-oriented systems, risk-oriented systems are more inclined to have an individualized risk-focused practice (Featherstone et al., 2018). Nordic countries have typically been characterized as family-service-oriented systems, taking a wide-angled approach to service needs (Blomberg et al., 2010). That being said, Nordic countries have also moved towards a more individualized risk-oriented model (Skivenes, 2011; Sletten, 2022). When a child is placed in care, the risk may

be perceived as resolved, and consequently, the attention to the child can be deprioritized. When kinship carers, as our findings show, are reluctant to seek CWS support, it can be understood as a fear of drawing unwanted attention. Paradoxically, not acknowledging the concerns and challenges kinship carers face constitutes a potential risk caused by the CWS themselves. At the same time, it is important to be aware that children in kinship care often spend too much time in problematic placements, and the absence of adequate support for kinship caregivers can exacerbate this risk (Hallett et al., 2021).

Families often exhibit more altruism towards their own kin (Fukuyama, 2011). However, as this synthesis of research demonstrates, taking the role of a kinship carer can be overwhelming. Being able to take care of children is not only a question of availability, but also of the ability to provide sufficient care in the absence of their parents (UNCRC, 1989, art 9). A key argument for using kinship care placements is the prospect of stability for the child, and kinship care tends to have a higher stability rate than other care arrangements (Bell & Romano, 2017; Gerdts-Andresen et al., 2022; Knudsen & Egelund, 2011; Winokur et al., 2018). However, stability is more than just the absence of placement disruption. Ensuring that children in kinship care receive sufficient emotional, behavioural and educational support, while also recognizing the challenges faced by kinship carers, can help establish long-term stability in the broadest sense. Our review shows that many caregivers struggle to maintain a broad-sense stability for children in their care, and pay a high price for it. There is, however, no indication from our findings that these costs will lead to a placement disruption, but our findings demonstrate that many kinship caregivers experience the absence of CWS during placements as highly challenging and demanding due to an already disadvantaged health and economic situation.

Every state holds the responsibility of ensuring that CWS workers assess the needed support and protection for children at risk, and ensure their welfare (Burns et al., 2017). Insufficient support for kinship care placements is shown as a pervasive pattern in the research literature throughout child welfare systems (Delap & Mann, 2019; Knudsen & Egelund, 2011; Winokur et al., 2018). Based on reported experiences of interaction between the CWS and the kinship caregivers in our research synthesis, CWS were often dismissive of caregivers' requests for help.

Moreover, kinship caregivers reported fearing that CWS would misinterpret their need for support as indicative of their shortcomings. Our findings also reveal that some kinship caregivers had made several attempts to apply for= or find support from CWS; they experienced being waved off, and told not to complain because other children suffered more (Fergus et al., 2019). Kinship care is often seen as preferable when children need an out-of-home placement. It is well documented that kinship care has several benefits for those children, as well as for their caregivers and parents. However, there is a concern that kinship care could become solely focused on costs and benefits, potentially leading to the neglect of the rights of both kinship carers and the children in their care.

4.1 Implications and Future Research

This study emphasizes the need for more attention to established support practices and follow-up for kinship carers. It is undeniable that many kinship carers put in great efforts to meet the needs of the children in their care, and they encounter challenges when accessing services that could help meet these needs. Additionally, managing family conflicts can be emotionally draining, and there is a need for CWS to be more cognizant of the complexities arising from children's contact with their parents while in care. This does not necessarily mean that there should be less contact time, but rather that supervision should help manage these relationships, and make the interactions a better experience for children, caregivers and non-custodial parents. Our findings show that emotional connections within the family serve as a key protective factor in kinship care placements, enabling families to stay together despite the challenges of being kinship carers. To achieve this, it is important to acknowledge the concerns of caregivers without passing judgement or raising the fear that the child may be taken away. Based on our findings, this review reveals the research potential of comparative studies of the use and CWS practices in relation to kinship care across various child welfare systems.

Finally, this review reveals the lack of research from the perspectives of the children and birthparents involved in kinship care. Thus, we propose more research on these aspects of kinship care.

References

Andersen, S. & Fallesen, P. (2015). Family matters? The effect of kinship care on foster care disruption rates. *Child Abuse and Neglect, 48*(10), 68–79. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2015.06.005

Bell, T. & Romano, E. (2017). Permanency and Safety Among Children in Foster Family and Kinship Care: A Scoping Review. *Trauma, Violence, and Abuse, 3*(18), 268–286. https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838015611673

Birchall, J. & Holt, A. (2022). Who cares? The grandmother kinship carers shouldering the burden within a gendered care economy. *Journal of Women & Aging*, *35*(5), 465-475. https://doi.org/10.1080/08952841.2022.2135339

Blomberg, H., Corander, C., Kroll, C., Meeuwisse, A., Scaramuzzino, R. & Swärd, H. (2010). A Nordic model in child welfare? In H. Forsberg & T. Kröger (Eds.), *Social Work and Child Welfare Politics - Through Nordic lenses* (pp. 29-45). The Policy Press. https://doi.org/10.46692/9781847424075.003

Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis. A practical guide.* Sage Publications Ltd. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-69909-7_3470-2

Broadhurst, K. (2017). State intervention in family life in England. In K. Burns, T. Pösö & M. Skivenes (Eds.), *Child welfare removals by the state. A cross-country analysis of decision-making systems.* (pp.174-193). Oxford University Press https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190459567.003.0008.

Burns, K., Pösö, T. & Skivenes, M. (2017). Child welfare removals by the state – complex and controversial decisions. In K. Burns, T. Pösö & M. Skivenes (Eds.). *Child welfare removals by the state. A cross-country analysis of decision-making systems.* (pp. 1-17). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190459567.003.0001

Chateauneuf, D., Poitrais, K., Simard, M-C. & Buisson, C. (2022). Placement stability: What role do the different types of family foster care play? *Child Abuse & Neglect, 130*(10), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2021.105359

Chipman, R., Wells, S. J. & Johnson, M. (2002). The meaning of quality in kinship foster care: Caregiver, child and worker perspectives. *Families in Society: The*

Journal of Contemporary Human Services, 83(5), 508–520. https://doi.org/10.1606/1044-3894.51

Corporation for Digital Scholarship (2023). *Zotero* (6.0.26) [Software]. Corporation for Digital Scholarship.

Delap, E. & Mann, G. (2019). *The paradox of kinship care: The most valued but least resourced care option - A global study*. Family for Every Child. https://bettercarenetwork.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/Kinship-Care-Global-Review-Final.pdf

Denby, R. (2016). *Kinship care: Increasing child well-being through practice, policy and research.* Springer Publishing Company. https://doi.org/10.1891/9780826125330

Farmer, E. (2009). How do placements in kinship care compare with those in non-kin foster care: placement patterns, progress and outcomes? *Child and Family Social Work, 14*(3), 331-342. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2008.00600.x

Fauske, H., Kojan, B. H. & Storhaug, A. S. (2018). Social class and child welfare: Intertwining issues of redistribution and recognition. *Social Sciences, 7*(9), 143. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci7090143

Featherstone, B., Gupta, A., Morris, K. & White, S. (2018). *Protecting children – A social model*. Policy Press. https://doi.org/10.1332/policypress/9781447332732.001.0001

Fergeus, J., Humphreys, C., Harvey, C. & Herrman, H. (2019). Supporting foster and kinship carers to promote the mental health of children. *Child & Family Social Work, 24*(1), 77-83. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12583

Flemming, K., Booth, A., Garside, R., Tuncalp, Ö. & Noyes, J. (2019). Qualitative evidence synthesis for complex interventions and guideline development: Clarification of the purpose, designs and relevant methods. *BMJ Global Health, 4*(1), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2018-000882

Font, S. A. (2015). Are children safer with kin?: A comparison of maltreatment risk in out-of-home care. *Children and Youth Services, 54*(7), 20–29. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2015.04.012

Fukuyama, F. (2011). *The origins of political order. From prehuman times to the French Revolution.* Farrar, Strauss and Giroux.

Gentles-Gibbs, N. & Zema, J. (2020). It’s not about them without them: Kinship grandparents’ perspectives on family empowerment in public child welfare.

Children and Youth Services Review, 108, 1-9. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.104650

Gerdts-Andresen, T., Eide, K., Krane, V. & Kvello, O. (2022). *Fosterhjemsplassering i familie og nære nettverk. Flyttinger i regi av barnevernet. Delrapport 1*. (Skriftserie no. 99). Universitetet i Sørøst-Norge. https://www.bufdir.no/rapporter/dokumentside/BUF00005560/

Gilbert, N. (1997). *Combatting child abuse: International perspectives and trends.* Oxford University Press Incorporated. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195100099.001.0001

Gilbert N., Parton, N. & Skivenes, M. (2011). *Child protections systems: International trends and orientations.* Oxford University Press New York. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199793358.001.0001

Hallett, G., Garstang, J. & Taylor, J. (2021). Kinship care and child protection in high-income countries: A scoping review. *Trauma, Violence and Abuse, 24*(2), 632–635. https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380211036073

Harris, K., Ashirifi, G., Harris, C. & Trauth, J. (2021). Are grandparents raising grandchildren receiving the services they need? *Journal of Childhood, Education & Society, 2*(2), 167–177. https://doi.org/10.37291/2717638X.20212288

Hassall, A. J., Van Rensburg, E. J., Trew, S., Hawes, D. & Pasalich, D. (2021). Does Kinship vs. Foster Care Better Promote Connectedness?. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review, 24*, 813-832. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-021-00352-6

Holt, A. & Birchall, K. (2022). 'Their mum messed up and gran can't afford to': Violence towards grandparent kinship carers and the implications for social work. *British Journal of Social Work, 52*(3), 1231–1248. https://doi.10.1093/bjsw/bcab156

Hosseini, M.-S., Jahanshahlou, F., Akbarzadeh, M. A., Zarei, M. & Vaez-Gharamaleki, Y. (2024). Formulating research questions for evidence-based studies. *Journal of Medicine, Surgery, and Public Health, 2,* 1-5. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.glmedi.2023.100046

Ie, J., Ursin, M. & Vicente-Mariño, M. V. (2022). Foster children's views of family: A systematic review and qualitative synthesis. *Children and Youth Service Review, 32,* 1-10. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1025883726991

Johnson-Garner, M. & Meyers, S. (2003). What factors contribute to the resilience of African-American children within kinship care? *Child & Youth Care Forum, 32*(5), 255-269. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1025883726991

King, S., Kropf, N. P., Perkins, M., Sessley, L., Burt, C. & Lepore, M. (2009). Kinship care in rural Georgia communities: Responding to needs and challenges of grandparent caregivers. *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships, 7*(2–3), 225-242. https://doi.org/10.1080/15350770902852369

Kiraly, M. & Humphreys, C. (2013). Family contact for children in kinship care. A literature review. *Australian Social Work, 66*(3), 358–374. https://doi.org/10.1080/0312407X.2013.812129

Kiraly, M. & Humphreys, C. (2016). 'It's about the whole family': Family contact for children in kinship care. *Child & Family Social Work, 21*(2), 228–239. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12140

Kiraly, M., Humphreys, C. & Kertez, M. (2020). Unrecognized: Kinship care by young aunts, siblings and other young people. *Children and Youth Services Review, 26*(3), 338-347. https://doi.og/10.1111/cfs.12814

Knudsen, L. & Egelund, T. (2011). *Effekter av slægtspleje: Slægtsanbragte børn og deres udvikling sammenlignet med plejebørn fra traditionelle plejefamilier* (Report 11:20). Kobenhavn SFI – Det Nationale Forskningscenter for Velfærd. https://viden.sl.dk/artikler/boern-og-unge/anbragte-familiepleje/effekter-af-slaegtspleje/

Kojan, B. H. (2011). *Klasseblikk på et barnevern i vekst*. [PhD thesis], Norwegian University of Science and Technology. http://hdl.handle.net/11250/267808

Leathers, S., Spielfogel, J., Geiger, J., Barnett, J. & Vande Voort, B. (2019). Placement disruption in foster care: Children's behavior, foster parents support, and parenting experiences. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 91*, 147-159. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2019.03.012

Letiecq, B. L., Bailey, S. J. & Porterfield, F. (2008). 'We have no rights, we get no help': The legal and policy dilemmas facing grandparent caregivers. *Journal of Family Issues, 29*(8), 99–1012. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X08316545

Littlewood, K. (2017). New directions for kinship care policy and practice: A position paper from the Kinship Summit at Albany. *Child Welfare Journal, 95*(4), 137–165.

Lutman, E., Hunt, J. & Waterhouse, S. (2009). Placement stability for children in kinship care. *Adoption & Fostering, 33*(3), 28-39. https://10.1177/030857590903300304

McCartan, C., Bunting, L., Bywaters, P, Davidson, G., Elliot, M. & Hooper, J. (2018). A four-nation comparison of kinship care in the UK: The relationship between formal kinship care and deprivation. *Social Policy and Society, 17*(4), 619-635. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746418000179

McPherson, L., Gatwiri, K., Day, K., Parmenter, N., Mitchell, J. & Macnamara, N. (2022). 'The most challenging aspect of this journey has been dealing with child protection': Kinship carers' experiences in Australia. *Child and Youth Services Review, 139,* 106550. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2022.106550

Murphy, Y. S. (2008). Voices of African American grandmothers raising grandchildren. *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships, 6*(1), 25–39. https://doi.org/10.1300/J194v06n01_03

O'Day, B. & Killeen, M. (2002). Research on the lives of persons with disabilities: The emerging importance of qualitative research methodologies. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies, 13*(1), 9-15. https://doi.org/10.1177/10442073020130010201

Ouzzani, M., Hammady, H. & Elmagarmid, A. (2016). Rayyan—A web and mobile app for systematic reviews. *Systematic Reviews, 5*, 210. https://doi.org/10.1186/s13643-016-0384-4

Page, M. J., McKenzie, J. E., Bossuyt, P. M., Boutron, I., Hoffmann, T. C. & Mulrow, C. D. (2020). The PRISMA 2020 statement: An updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *BMJ,* 2021;372:n71. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n71

Parton, N. (2017). Comparing child protection systems. In P. Dolan & N. Frost (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of global child welfare*. Routledge https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315672960-21

Perry, G., Daly, M. & Kotler, J. (2012). Placement stability in kinship and non-kinship foster care: A Canadian study. *Children and Services Review, 34*(2), 460–465. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2011.12.001

Rasmussen. B. M. & Jæger, S. J. (2021). The emotional and other barriers to kinship care in Denmark: A case study in two Danish municipalities. *Child and Adolescent Social Work. 38(2),* 201-209. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-021-00743-2

Sletten, M. S. (2022). Proceduralisation of decision-making processes: A case study of child welfare practice. *Nordic Social Work Research*, *14*(1), 149–161. https://doi.org/10.1080/2156857X.2022.2088606

Skivenes, M. (2011): Toward a child-centric perspective. In: N. Gilbert, N. Parton & M. Skivenes (Eds.), *Child protection systems: International trends and orientations* (pp. 154-180). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199793358.003.0008

Taylor, E. P., Di Folco, S., Dupin, M., Mithen, H., Wen, L., Rose, L. & Nisbet, K. (2020). Socioeconomic deprivation and social capital in kinship carers using a helpline service. *Child & Family Social Work, 25*(4), 725-982. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12763

Tonheim, M. & Iversen, A. C. (2019). We felt completely left to ourselves. Foster parents' view on placement disruption. *Child & Family Social Work, 24*(1), 90–97. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12585

United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) (2010). *Guidelines for the alternative care for children 64/142*. United Nations. https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/5416.pdf/

Vanderfaeillie, J., Van Holen, F. & Carlier, E. (2018). Breakdown of foster care placements in Flanders: Incidence and associated factors. *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 27*(2), 209-220. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-017-1034-7

Winokur, M., Holtan, A. & Batchelder, K. (2018). Systematic review of kinship care effects on safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes. *Research on Social Work Practice, 28*(1), 19-32. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049731515620843

Whittemore, R. & Knafl, K. (2005). The integrative review: Updated methodology. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, *52*(5), 546-553. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.2005.03621.x

Zuchowski, I., Gair, S., Henderson, D. & Thorpe, R. (2019). Convenient yet neglected: The role of grandparent kinship carers. *British Journal of Social Work, 49*(3), 615–632. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcy085

Appendix A: Overview of the included articles

Title	***The meaning of quality in kinship foster care: Caregiver, child, and worker* perspective**	***What factors contribute to the resilience of African American children within kinship care?***	***Voices of African American grandmothers raising children. Informing child* welfare kinship care policy-practice**	***'We have no rights. We get no Help' The legal and policy dilemmas facing* grandparent caregivers**	***Kinship care in rural Georgia communities: Responding to needs and* challenges of grandparent caregiving**	***It's about the whole family: Family contact for children in kinship care***	***Supporting foster and kinship carers to promote the mental health of children***
Author	Chipman, R., Wells, S. & Johnsen, M.	Johnsen-Garner, M.Y. & Meyers, S. A.	Murphy, S.Y	Letiecq, B., Bailey, S. & Porterfield, F.	King, S., Kropf, N.P., perkins, M., Sessley, L., Burt, C. & Lepore, M	Kiraly, M. & Humphreys, C.	Fergeus, J., Humphreys, C., Harvey, C. & Herrman, H.
Journal	Families in Society: Journal of Contemporary Social Services	Child & Youth Care Forum	*Journal of intergenerational Relationship*	*Journal of Family Issues*	*Journal of Intergenerational Relationship*	Child and Family Social Work	Child & Family Social Work
Publication year	2002	2003	2008	2008	2009	2016	2019
Country	USA	USA	USA	USA	USA	Australia	Australia
Sample	33 kinship caregivers, 7 children (age 11-18), 30 caseworkers	30 kinship caregivers	22 grandparent's caregivers with custody for children	26 kinship caregivers	30 kinship caregivers (grandparent)	73 kinship caregivers	31 participants (14 kinship caregivers)
Methodology	Focus groups with combined sample groups	Individual interviews	Focus groups	Narrative life-interviews	Individual interviews	Mixed-methods, survey, focus groups and induvial interviews	Individual interviews
Aim/topic	Explore values, perspectives and experiences relate to kinship foster care, the quality of kinship care and support needs.	Explores resilience and follow-up services in kinship care placements	Explore cultural solutions of changes experiences by Afro-American kinship caregivers (grandmothers) on how to raise children with guidelines surveillance from the Child Welfare Service	Explore kinship caregivers' perspective of legal and practical dilemmas in kinship care placements.	Explore follow-up needs for kinship caregivers.	Explore family contact in kinship care placements from kinship caregivers view, especially child-safety and well-being	Explores kinship caregivers perspectives on how to promote mental health for children in foster and kinship care.

Title	**Convenient yet neglected. The role of grandparent kinship carers**	**It's not about them without them: Kinship grandparents' perspectives on family empowerment in public child welfare**	**Unrecognized: Kinship care by young aunts, siblings, and other young people**	**Are the grandparents raising grandchildren receiving the services they need?**	**Their mum messed up and Gran can't afford to: Violence towards grandparent kinship carers and the implications for social work**	**Who carers? The grandmother kinship carers shouldering the burden within a gendered care economy**	**The most challenging aspect of this journey has been dealing with child protection: Kinship carers experiences in Australia**
Author	Zuchowski, I., Gair, S., Henderson, D. & Thorpe, R.	Gentle-Gibbs, N. & Zema, J.	Kiraly, M., Humphreys, C. & Kertesz, M.	Harris, K., Ashirifi, G., Harris, C. & Trauth, J.	Holt, A. & Birchall, J.	Birchall, J. & Holt, A.	McPherson, L., Gatwiri, K., Day, K., Parmenter, N., Mitchell, J. & MacNamara, N.
Journal	British Journal of Social Work	Child & Youth Services Review	Child & Youth Services Review	*Journal of Childhood, Education & Society*	*British Journal of Social Work*	*Journal of Women & Aging*	Child & Youth Services Review
Publication year	2019	2020	2020	2021	2022	2022	2022
Country	Australia	USA	Australia	USA	England	England	Australia
Sample	77 in total (20 kinship caregivers, 31 grandparents, 12 parents, 8 social workers, 6 foster carers)	8 kinship caregivers	41 young kinship caregivers (age 18-30)	4 kinship carers	27 grandparents' kinship carers and 9 social workers	27 grandparents' kinship carers	519 kinship carers
Methodology	Semi-structured open-ended interviews and focus groups	Semi-structured qualitative interviews	Qualitative individual interviews	Focus group discussion	Qualitative in-depth interviews	Qualitative in-depth interviews	Mixed methods approach Qualitative interviews (n=9) Quantitative survey (n=510)
Aim/topic	The role of kinship caregiver as a grandparent	Kinship caregivers experiences with empowerment I contact with CWS	The prevalence, experiences and support needs of young kinship carers	Examine the effectiveness of service programmes for custodial grandparents raising grandchildren	Kinship carers who are experiencing child and adolescent violence and how this context shapes the violence, its impact and, in turn, carers' help-seeking practices.	Highlight the gendered context of kinship caregivers.	Experiences of kinship carers in caring for their kin children and engaging with services designed to support the kinship placement.