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Are we solving the wrong problem? Rethinking empowerment through the lens of power: A systematic review and qualitative meta-synthesis on asylum-seeking unaccompanied minors

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ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION

Support - This doctoral research is part of a larger research project that is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), Canada.

Review Stage at time of this submission - Data analysis.

Conflicts of interest - None declared.

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Amendments - This protocol was registered with the International Platform of Registered Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis Protocols (INPLASY) on 18 March 2025 and was last updated on 18 March 2025.

INTRODUCTION

Review question / Objective Through this systematic review, we aim to explore the forms of power that structure the choices available to asylum-seeking unaccompanied minors (UMs), and consequently influence their control over their lives, or their empowerment.

Rationale Empowerment, or control over one's own life, has been linked to positive health outcomes and greater health equity. While fostering an enabling environment is essential for empowerment, health promotion initiatives often focus on strengthening individual capacities. This tendency, which overlooks power structures, limits the potential for emancipation. To better address empowerment, it is crucial to examine the different forms of power, how they function, and whether they can be challenged. This study aims to fill this gap by examining how different forms of power—compulsory, institutional, structural, and productive—affect the empowerment of unaccompanied

minors. Unaccompanied minors are children and adolescents who migrate to another country without their parents or legal guardians. They face multiple vulnerabilities due to their status as immigrants, minors, and individuals without parental support.

Condition being studied Empowerment is the extent to which individuals can control the factors that influence their health and their ability for autonomy or self-determination. According to the World Health Organization, empowerment is "the process of enabling... through which people gain control over the factors and decisions that shape their lives." In this context, "enabling" means that empowerment cannot be directly given by others through persuasion, rewards, punishment, or manipulation. Instead, empowerment is a self-driven journey where individuals, with an enabling structure, can take charge of their lives and make changes according to their own desires. Since power is central to the concept of empowerment, in this research, 'structure' refers to different forms

of power. This study, drawing on the experiences of UMs, seeks to explore the various forms of power that exist and how they impact the ability of UMs to control their lives.

METHODS

Search strategy The search strategy was developed to identify studies reporting on the experiences of UMs. Searches were conducted in MEDLINE, EMBASE, and PsycINFO to optimize the systematic retrieval of qualitative studies across medical, psychological, public health, and social science disciplines. The search was completed in April 2024. The strategy was piloted and refined through multiple iterations in consultation with a librarian. Since there was a shortage of literature on the specific topic of empowerment of UMs, we decided to identify all relevant studies about the experiences of UMs, regardless of the topic. As a result, we used different formations of the following keywords for the search:

1. ((Unaccompan* or Non-accompan* or Non Accompan* or separat*) adj5 (minor or minors or child* or youth* or teen* or adolescen* or young or juvenile*)).ab,kf,kw,ti.
2. (asylum* or refug* or migra* or immigra*).ab,kf,kw,ti. or exp "emigrants and immigrants"/ or "transients and migrants"/ or refugees/ or "Emigration and Immigration"/
3. ((Unaccompan* or Non-accompan* or Non Accompan* or separat*) adj5 (asylum* or refuge* or migra* or immigra*)).ab,kf,kw,ti.
4. (minor or minors or child* or youth* or teen* or adolescen* or young or juvenile*).ab,kf,kw,ti. or child/ or adolescent/
5. ((asylum* or refuge* or migra* or immigra*) adj5 (minor or minors or child* or youth* or teen* or adolescen* or young or juvenile*)).ab,kf,kw,ti.
6. (Unaccompan* or Non-accompan* or Non Accompan* or separat*).ab,kf,kw,ti.
7. exp "country"/.

Participant or population The participants explored in this systematic review are refugee-claimant or asylum-seeking UMs. UMs are children and adolescents who migrate to another country without their parents or legal guardians.

Intervention No intervention is explored in this systematic review.

Comparator No comparative intervention is explored in this systematic review.

Study designs to be included Qualitative studies or case studies that include direct experiences of UMs are included in this review.

Eligibility criteria Inclusion criteria

1. Peer-reviewed papers using qualitative empirical data (interviews, focus groups etc.), and include the direct experiences of UMs.
2. The research conducted in Canada and the United States for the North American context: Austria, Germany and the Netherlands (the three top countries UMs seek asylum in Europe); and France (the top Francophone country receiving UMs). With this, we aimed to explore the Western context regarding the empowerment of UMs.
3. Studies conducted in the last 20 years (2005-2024).
4. Papers written in English or French.

Exclusion criteria

1. Conference abstracts.
2. The papers that do not include empirical data (e.g., commentary, editorial, systematic review).
3. The papers that do not include experiences (quotes) of UMs.
4. The papers about the forced separation of minors from families at the United States-Mexico border. This criterion was applied due to the high number of papers on this specific phenomenon, which is unique to the United States-Mexico border and not relevant to other countries.
5. The papers that have been conducted in countries other than those specified in the inclusion criteria.

Information sources Searches were conducted in MEDLINE, EMBASE, and PsycINFO.

Main outcome(s) Not reported.

Quality assessment / Risk of bias analysis A specific quality assessment criterion was not applied; instead, a sensitivity analysis suggested by Thomas and Harden (2008) was used. That is, the quality of the studies was assessed based on their ability to answer the review question. Consequently, all papers were included, regardless of their quality, as long as they provided insights into the research question.

Strategy of data synthesis Thomas and Harden (2008) outline three main overlapping phases of analysis: line-by-line coding, generation of descriptive themes, and generation of analytical themes. In this respect, we begin with a line-by-line coding of the data. We code the results and discussion sections of the selected papers. During this free coding stage, we use an inductive model

in which we seek to make connections between different factors and the events in unaccompanied minors' daily experiences. The connections and reorganization of these free codes serve as our descriptive themes, each encompassing various factors that interact with unaccompanied minors' daily lives. This initial phase produces a synthesis that remains closely aligned with the original findings of the included studies.

In the subsequent phase, we move beyond the original content to develop analytical themes. This more reflexive process addresses our review question more directly. In this stage, we examine the interrelations between different forms of power—namely compulsory, institutional, structural, and productive—and their potential influence on UMs' efforts to achieve their goals.

Subgroup analysis We do not apply subgroup analysis in this review.

Sensitivity analysis A sensitivity analysis suggested by Thomas and Harden (2008) was used. That is, the quality of the studies was assessed based on their ability to answer the review question. Consequently, all papers were included, regardless of their quality, as long as they provided insights into the research question.

Language restriction Articles written in English or French have been included in this review.

Country(ies) involved Canada.

Keywords Empowerment; power; unaccompanied minors; refugee; migrant; qualitative; systematic review; meta-synthesis.

Contributions of each author

Author 1 - Tefvik Bayram - Author 1 led the study and was primarily responsible for the conceptualization, literature search, screening, data extraction, and quality assessment of the included studies. Author 1 also did the coding, performed the statistical analysis, and interpreted the results.

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Author 2 - Lara Gautier - Author 2 refined the research questions early on and provided constant feedback throughout the study, including on inclusion/exclusion criteria. She significantly contributed to study design, methodology, and data analysis strategies, and played a key role in interpreting findings and shaping the overall systematic review approach.

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Author 3 - Katherine Leigh Frohlich - Author 3 refined the research questions early on and

provided constant feedback throughout the study, including on inclusion/exclusion criteria. She significantly contributed to study design, methodology, and data analysis strategies, and played a key role in interpreting findings and shaping the overall systematic review approach.

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