Contemporary Challenges in Child and Adolescent Protection Systems from the Perspective of Social Work: A Systematic Review Following PRISMA Guidelines

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ENG Abstract: The increase in the number of children and adolescents (NNA) assisted by protection systems highlights the need for comprehensive and coordinated approaches capable of addressing their diverse needs. Social Work plays a key role in facilitating collaboration among professionals and consolidating effective support networks. This study aims to analyze the main current challenges faced by Social Work professionals in residential child care settings. To achieve this, a systematic review of scientific literature was conducted using the Scopus, Web of Science, and Dialnet databases, following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines. Rigorous inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied, resulting in the selection of 69 studies published between 2013 and 2023. The analysis identified four key categories: addressing emerging mental health needs, training gaps among technical staff, professional accompaniment in rehabilitation processes and the role of Social Work in the adolescent emancipation stage. The findings reveal a paradigm shift in professional intervention, moving from an approach focused on basic care and institutional control to one based on comprehensive support, participation, and the strengthening of autonomy. This research contributes to highlighting the specific functions of Social Work within the protection system and offers guidance for future professional practices and public policies aimed at promoting the well-being of children and adolescents at risk.
Keywords: Social Work, Residential Care, Vulnerable children, Needs Assessment.

ES Desafíos contemporáneos en los sistemas de protección infantil y adolescente desde la perspectiva del Trabajo Social. Una revisión sistemática siguiendo las directrices PRISMA

ES Resumen: El aumento de niños, niñas y adolescentes (NNA) atendidos por los sistemas de protección plantea la necesidad de enfoques integrales y coordinados que aborden sus diversas necesidades. El Trabajo Social desempeña un papel clave en la articulación entre profesionales y en la consolidación de redes de apoyo eficaces. Este estudio tiene como objetivo analizar los principales desafíos actuales que enfrentan los y las profesionales del Trabajo Social en contextos de acogimiento residencial infantil. Para ello, se realizó una revisión sistemática de la literatura científica en las bases de datos Scopus, Web of Science y Dialnet, siguiendo las directrices PRISMA 2020. Se aplicaron criterios de inclusión y exclusión rigurosos, lo que permitió seleccionar 69 estudios publicados entre 2013 y 2023. El análisis permitió identificar cuatro categorías clave: la atención a nuevas necesidades en salud mental, carencias formativas del personal técnico, el acompañamiento profesional en procesos de rehabilitación y el papel del Trabajo Social en la etapa de emancipación adolescente. Los resultados revelan un cambio de paradigma en la intervención profesional, pasando de un enfoque centrado en la cobertura básica y el control institucional a otro basado en el acompañamiento integral, la participación y el fortalecimiento de la autonomía. Esta investigación contribuye a visibilizar las funciones específicas del Trabajo Social en el sistema de protección, así como a orientar futuras líneas de actuación profesional y política pública orientadas al bienestar de la infancia y adolescencia en situación de riesgo.
Palabras clave: Trabajo Social, Acogimiento Residencial, Menores en riesgo, Evaluación de necesidades.

Summary: 1. Introduction. 1.1. Evolution of the Needs of Institutionalised Children and Adolescents within Child Protection Systems. 1.2. Challenges in the Intervention of Socio-Educational Teams in Residential Care for Children and Adolescents. 1.3. Social Work and the Approach to Social Intervention within Child Protection Systems. 2. Methodology. 2.1. Search and Selection Strategy. 2.2. Data Analysis. 3. Results and Discussion. 3.1. Addressing Mental Health Needs through Social Work within Child Protection Systems. 3.2. Continuing Professional Development: Emerging Training Needs among Child and Adolescent Protection Teams. 3.3. The

Role of Social Work as a Key Agent of Support in Rehabilitation Processes. 3.4. The Processes of Emancipation from the Perspective of Social Work. 4. Conclusions. 5. References.

1. Introduction

1.1. Evolution of the Needs of Institutionalised Children and Adolescents within Child Protection Systems

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the rights of children and adolescents have undergone a constant process of evolution, marked by ongoing debates concerning the meaning of childhood, the legitimacy of institutions responsible for their protection, and the appropriate ways to intervene, regulate, and guarantee their well-being. The adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) represented a major innovation, as it recognised children as rights-holders. This development has had a broad impact, particularly in acknowledging their rights independently from other family members—both as human beings in general and as individuals with specific characteristics associated with childhood (Magistris, 2015).

Understanding the nature of childhood and the needs that arise from its particular developmental trajectory requires attention to children's affective, cognitive, and social capacities, combining both biological and psychosocial dimensions. This leads to a holistic conception of development, in which childhood is regarded as a crucial period in life. Early experiences of trauma can leave permanent marks and may even cause irreparable harm. Consequently, children's needs acquire a natural and urgent character, compelling social intervention agents to restore rights and return childhood to those who, for unjust reasons, have been deprived of it (Llobet, 2014).

Scientific literature suggests that the family does not always fulfil its role in providing affection, care, and recognition of children's needs. Within this context, child protection systems emerge and operate under a legal mandate as a State response to safeguard children when their rights are violated within the family environment. Among these, residential care systems represent the last resort for guaranteeing the protection of children's fundamental rights (Gallegos-Fuentes et al., 2018).

According to Boatswain-Kyte (2018), the risk factors present in the care of children and adolescents should be understood as dynamic and complex realities, subject to constant influences from multiple domains or systems. Consequently, the evolving needs of institutionalised children and adolescents across different protection resources require a flexible and adaptive approach from residential care centres, with programmes and services designed to respond effectively to the changing challenges each child or adolescent faces throughout their stay.

1.2. Challenges in the Intervention of Socio-Educational Teams in Residential Care for Children and Adolescents

At present, nearly half a million children and adolescents are protected and institutionalised across Europe and Central Asia, representing a ratio of 232 per 100,000 children (UNICEF, 2024). In the Spanish context, the most recent statistical reports indicate that the number of children entering child protection systems has increased progressively since 2020, with almost a 6% rise in the number of minors cared for across different protection resources compared with previous years (Observatorio de la Infancia, 2022).

The growing number of children and adolescents served within child protection systems calls for a comprehensive and coordinated approach capable of addressing the heterogeneity of current needs. This approach should promote close collaboration between residential care teams and other institutions and organisations that can provide a solid and effective support network for the care and development of children and adolescents.

Academic literature highlights that the trajectories and developmental outcomes of children within protection systems do not depend on a single factor but rather on a combination of interrelated variables (Miguelena et al., 2022). Table 1 refers to the four dimensions identified by Montserrat and Casas (2010), which directly influence these trajectories:

Table 1. Dimensions Characterising the Trajectory of Children and Adolescents Served within Child Protection Systems

Dimension	Description
Family environment	The numerous difficulties often translate into low expectations for these children due to their status as children under care. This situation can negatively influence their development and future opportunities, creating an environment in which the challenges and limitations associated with their condition are perpetuated.
Social relationships	They tend to be guided towards a vocational or employment-oriented pathway, focusing on training for work rather than on other educational opportunities. This orientation may limit their options and perspectives, influencing the path they follow in adult life.

Dimension	Description
Educational experience and trajectory	Educational experiences are often characterised by absenteeism and a lack of family support and involvement. These factors may hinder academic performance and integration within the school environment, which in turn negatively affects personal development and future opportunities.
Aftercare	The inflexible organisation of the educational offer, which ultimately becomes focused exclusively on the vocational or employment sphere.

Source: Own elaboration based on Montserrat and Casas (2010).

Existing concerns within the professional Social Work community primarily relate to the development of long-term life plans that include clear goals and ongoing support for adolescents leaving child protection systems. This process must be sustained by both individual skills and an enabling environment, fostered mainly by the child protection and educational systems, as well as by society as a whole and, in particular, through social policies (Marzo & Galán, 2020).

Several authors point out that when a child enters the protection system and becomes institutionalised, the educational team professionals are responsible for meeting their needs and ensuring the realisation of their rights and interests. However, upon reaching legal adulthood, these young people cease to be protected under national and international laws and acquire full legal capacity, while public administrations significantly reduce the availability of support resources (Miguelena et al., 2022).

1.3. Social Work and the Approach to Social Intervention within Child Protection Systems

During the 1980s, the predominant approach in social action focused primarily on individuals rather than on the difficulties they faced. Today, this perspective has shifted towards integrating the community environment with opportunities for individual development and problem-solving. This ecological dimension of social action has had a significant influence on professional Social Work practice.

Currently, Fernández-Sánchez et al. (2023) note that the approach to social intervention adopted by social workers continues to pose significant challenges, constituting a space where regulations, tools, procedures, and practices converge offering notable opportunities for improvement in guaranteeing the well-being of children and adolescents. The idea that changing the environment can alleviate social problems persists, although it is often reflected only through small-scale actions or specific aspects of intervention (Navarro-Pérez et al., 2023).

Focusing exclusively on the family dimension as the primary reason for a child's admission into protection systems has constrained Social Work interventions to a very limited scope. This implies an assumption that poverty and social disadvantage are individual failings, associated with inadequate family care that has failed to provide sufficient protection or stimulation for children (Edwards et al., 2015).

Although children and adolescents are often perceived as inherently vulnerable or potentially problematic, the role of social workers within protection systems encompasses normalisation as an alternative guiding principle seeking to ensure that institutionalised children live in conditions similar to those of children raised in families, while fostering stable and protective environments. In this sense, López et al. (2013) emphasise that the quality of intervention in residential care is closely linked to staff training, team stability, and the capacity to establish meaningful bonds with the children and adolescents under their care.

However, the growing specialisation of protection systems to meet the needs of specific profiles such as young people with functional diversity, unaccompanied foreign minors, or adolescents with emotional and behavioural difficulties can make normalisation and specialisation appear as contradictory principles (González-Navasa & Martín, 2020; Fernández-Sánchez et al., 2023). This tension reflects the ethical and operational dilemmas faced by social work professionals within the protection system, as analysed by Gómez-García et al. (2022), who advocate for a reflective approach based on adaptive and integrative frameworks.

2. Methodology

The purpose of this study is to explore in depth the current challenges and needs of child protection systems from the intervention framework of social work professionals. To this end, a systematic review of the literature was conducted to directly examine the challenges faced by technical and socio-educational teams in residential care for children and adolescents from a social work perspective, ensuring a methodologically rigorous approach throughout the research process.

For this reason, the study followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses; Page et al., 2021) to ensure transparency and methodological soundness in the systematic review process.

2.1. Search and Selection Strategy

The inclusion criteria used to delimit the eligible studies shared the following common characteristics:

— Studies or research focused on the residential child protection system.

– Exclusion of grey literature, such as newspaper articles, doctoral theses, book chapters, or conference proceedings.
– A ten-year publication window was established (2013-2023).
– Peer-reviewed research articles published in Spanish or English, retrieved from specialised Social Sciences databases, including Dialnet, SCOPUS, and Web of Science.

The database search employed three groups of keywords. The first group referred to current challenges in residential child care, such as *"retos" (challenges)*, *"desafíos" (difficulties)*, and *"necesidades" (needs)*, among others. The second group focused on residential care resources, including terms such as *"acogimiento residencial" (residential care)*, *"sistema de protección de menores" (child protection system)*, *"cuidado institucional" (institutional care)*, and *"cuidado de jóvenes" (youth care)*. Finally, to incorporate the Social Work perspective, terms associated with the discipline were included, such as *"Trabajo Social"* and *"Social Work"*. These keyword groups were entered into the search fields of each database, using the Boolean operators "AND" and "OR" to refine and optimise the results. The initial search yielded a total of 131 studies. After removing duplicates and applying the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, 69 articles were ultimately selected for systematic analysis. The complete screening process, conducted in accordance with PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021), ensured traceability and methodological transparency. Using the search results and the references from the selected studies to identify additional relevant sources, a systematic analysis of the collected information was performed. An analytical method was applied, identifying general patterns from which specific conclusions were derived. The selected studies were imported into the RefWorks reference manager to organise the retrieved data. The authors of this article collaboratively carried out the search, selection, data extraction, and narrative analysis of the selected texts.

Figure 1. Flow Diagram Based on PRISMA Guidelines
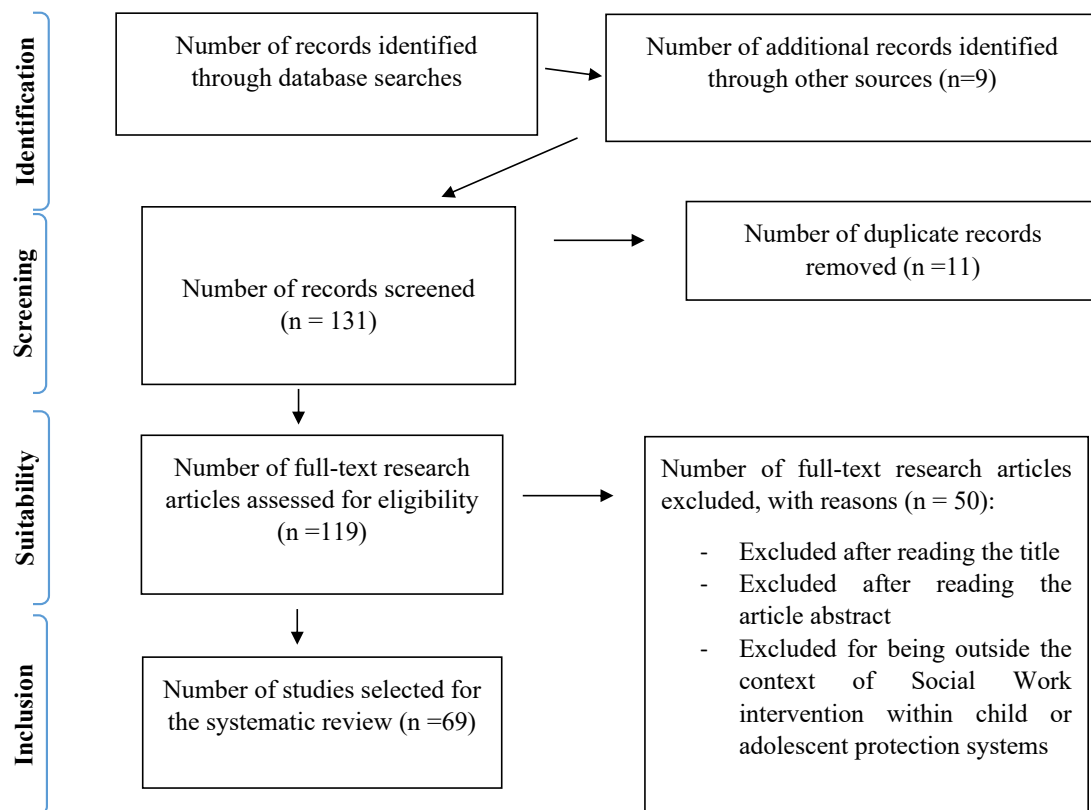
Source: Own elaboration

2.2. Data Analysis

For the analysis of the information obtained, the guidelines proposed by Finfgeld-Connet (2014) were followed. This approach involved the identification of key areas and categories across the different sources reviewed. Four main categories emerged from the analysis: The approach to mental health needs from the perspective of Social Work within child protection systems. The ongoing professional development and training (*formative recycling*) of practitioners. The role of Social Work as a key agent of accompaniment in rehabilitation processes. The processes of emancipation and transition to adulthood from a Social Work perspective.

3. Results and Discussion

Based on the analysis of the selected studies, four key categories were identified, reflecting the main current challenges in Social Work intervention within the field of residential child care.

The first category highlights the need to establish cooperation between the health system and social intervention agents to ensure adequate attention to mental health. Likewise, training gaps were identified in relation to meeting the current mental health needs of children and adolescents in care.

A third theme identified relates to the need for ongoing accompaniment of children and adolescents throughout their transition and emancipation processes. Finally, the analysis revealed the need to promote genuine and meaningful participation of protected children and adolescents in their own rehabilitation and care processes.

3.1. Addressing Mental Health Needs through Social Work within Child Protection Systems

In contemporary society, mental health care is a constantly evolving field that encompasses a wide range of challenges from destigmatisation and access to services to the integration of mental health within general healthcare and the use of technology to enhance service delivery. The reviewed literature reveals that a significant proportion of children and adolescents within child protection systems experience mental health problems but often do not receive adequate diagnosis or early intervention within the protection framework. This suggests the existence of a gap in early detection and access to mental health services for these children.

Despite the considerable diversity in the personal and family circumstances of minors receiving protection, several studies (Tordön et al., 2019; MacNeill et al., 2022) agree that there is a clear need to address the complex challenges faced by children and adolescents in these situations. This requires an effective and coordinated strategy between paediatric care teams and social intervention professionals. Children served within protection systems represent a large and disproportionate share of mental health issues in the child population, creating a substantial burden for current and future care systems (McKenna et al., 2023).

Children involved in child welfare systems are also more likely to have experienced neglect, and prompt, responsive intervention increases the likelihood of achieving an accurate diagnosis and effective treatment that may create protective factors in their future trajectories (Heppell & Raó, 2018; Bertram & McKanry, 2022).

Throughout the reviewed studies, the mental health care of children in protection systems raises an ongoing debate regarding the current validity and adequacy of healthcare systems. Several authors go further, arguing that referral to mental health services alone is insufficient, and that it is necessary to review both the effectiveness of the models and treatments implemented in outpatient mental health services and the functioning of the child protection system itself (González-García et al., 2017).

In this context, collaboration between mental health departments and child protection services represents a significant challenge for professionals in both sectors, underscoring the need to create spaces for mutual support and to generate protective factors among the children and adolescents served (Müller-Luzi & Schmid, 2017). Identifying the mental health care needs faced by child and adolescent protection systems constitutes an inescapable challenge for intervention teams. However, both national and international systems are currently experiencing an unprecedented opportunity to enhance the therapeutic value of interventions, which urgently requires rigorous evaluation (Herrman et al., 2016).

Although emerging research increasingly focuses on the identification of viable, evidence-based models of intervention to improve outcomes, current circumstances describe a transformative process across institutions aimed at enhancing therapeutic care in the contexts where children and adolescents under protection live and grow. Accordingly, professional efforts should focus on achieving coherence in care, prioritising the review of intervention policies and the adaptation of practice to current needs. The goal is to strengthen professional principles and remove barriers that hinder appropriate mental health care within child protection institutions (Izzo et al., 2022).

3.2. Continuing Professional Development: Emerging Training Needs among Child and Adolescent Protection Teams

Assessing the needs of professionals working within child protection systems not only enhances their capacity to address the realities they face, but also contributes to their emotional well-being and long-term professional development. Interventions designed to improve the circumstances and well-being of users within protection systems are therefore essential for enhancing the quality of intervention, particularly when mental health support needs are identified (Greyber et al., 2017).

Integrating principles of effective intervention into service delivery within child protection systems requires training processes that respond to the current challenges of contemporary society. In this regard, Concha-Toro et al. (2023) emphasise the need to consolidate a competency-based model of continuous professional training, tailored to the highly complex contexts in which social work operates such as child protection.

The assumption that professionals consistently maintain stable emotional states, resilience, and coping capacity may in fact limit the understanding of their true support needs, thereby constraining their ability to intervene optimally. Social workers are essential actors in the care and attention of children and adolescents within protection systems; thus, they must remain productive and receive adequate training and organisational support to fulfil their roles effectively.

Recent research advocates for the strengthening of training, supervision, and self-care mechanisms, while also addressing the effects of secondary or vicarious trauma that may arise from professional duties (Dimba-Ndaleni et al., 2022). Developing a comprehensive plan for continuing professional development falls within the responsibility of the institutions and organisations involved in child protection, which should include systematic training in self-reflection and self-acceptance to reinforce the capacity for therapeutic intervention (Steinkopf et al., 2020).

Working with children and adolescents requires adequate and ongoing preparation to ensure that professionals are equipped to address the complex and evolving needs of today's protection environments thereby contributing to both professional well-being and positive developmental outcomes for children. This reveals a mismatch between current protection mechanisms and professional training needs.

Recent studies suggest that the creation of partnerships between different organisations may serve as an effective strategy to deliver more specific and context-sensitive training programmes. Such programmes could empower social work professionals to improve the quality of care provided within child protection environments, while also clarifying the competencies required for effective practice in these settings (Tarín-Cayuela, 2022).

3.3. The Role of Social Work as a Key Agent of Support in Rehabilitation Processes

Beyond the policies and practices of child protection systems, from the perspective of Social Work, efforts should focus primarily on two fundamental areas: intervention with the family unit and direct work with children and adolescents.

Regarding social intervention with families, the core of professional practice should ensure the establishment of a support network that integrates community and social resources capable of providing the necessary elements of prevention both within family environments and for the children and adolescents involved. For several decades, one of the main challenges in child and adolescent protection systems has been the effective inclusion of families in the intervention process. However, families have still not been fully integrated into residential treatment (Creswell et al., 2015). Promoting family integration spaces that can directly contribute to therapeutic processes remains a challenge within the field of Social Work.

The process of improving family dynamics and functioning, and increasing the possibility of family reunification for children at risk, must guarantee maximum access to community services to support child protection interventions, including employment opportunities and educational support resources (Esposito et al., 2017).

On the other hand, Social Work practice with children within protection systems must place children and adolescents at the centre of intervention. Scholars increasingly highlight the importance of ensuring that minors receive clear and complete information about the process, enabling them to exercise their right to participate and be protected. Child protection systems can be emotionally challenging for minors, who require both emotional and physical safety. Feeling part of the process and achieving their goals is as crucial for children and adolescents as having food or shelter (Van Breda, 2015; Dillon et al., 2015; Wilson et al., 2020).

Nonetheless, the participation of children and adolescents in protection systems continues to face obstacles that limit their involvement such as time constraints and organisational barriers, which often conflict with participatory approaches. Children are still frequently perceived as vulnerable and in need of protection, which may lead to limited participation due to fears of infringing their rights or placing them at risk. However, recognising and valuing children's participation can lead to a deeper understanding of their needs and to more effective protection of their rights (Van Biljlevel et al., 2014).

Social Work must assume a key role within protection systems, adapting interventions to the pace and style of young people and moving beyond the limitations of institutional care frameworks. Exploring both the internal and external perspectives of young people regarding their life experiences can provide a deeper understanding of how protection systems can become more flexible and responsive. The scientific literature suggests the adoption of a malleable and open approach that allows for diverse responses and enables children and adolescents to engage with the system without requiring a complete understanding of the issues at hand (Naert et al., 2019).

3.4. The Processes of Emancipation from the Perspective of Social Work

The transition processes of adolescents leaving institutional care and moving toward independent living have become a subject of research in many countries. However, over the past decade, the concept of *"transition"* has not been clearly defined within the academic field of Social Work, indicating the need for further theoretical development in this area (Storo, 2017).

Social Work plays a fundamental role in preparing adolescents who are about to leave child protection systems, by assisting them in building positive relationships and support networks that can provide stability across educational, family, employment, and housing domains once formal protection measures end. Nevertheless, the scientific literature stresses that youth participation in preparation processes must increase substantially, particularly through a holistic perspective that facilitates the integration and understanding of contextual factors shaping each adolescent's trajectory (Verulava & Dangadze, 2021).

In this regard, adolescents completing institutional measures should experience a continuous transition one that does not end with the termination of protective measures, the attainment of legal adulthood, or a mere administrative transfer. Instead, they should have the opportunity to prepare for independent living while being accompanied in the development of relational and life skills necessary for establishing strong and positive interactions in various spheres, such as education and employment (Berejena, 2018; Jackson et al., 2022).

Despite the structure and regulation that characterise protection systems, Social Work practice should promote the gradual inclusion of adolescents in decision-making processes related to their healthcare or social support, encouraging the assumption of responsibilities from an early age to reduce potential long-term

dependency on social resources. As noted by Sevillano-Monje and Martín-Gutiérrez (2022), the success of emancipation processes depends not only on individual preparation but also on the availability of stable institutional support aligned with young people's trajectories particularly during the transition to adulthood. This includes ensuring efficient case management, promoting housing alternatives, service coordination, and personal support throughout the transition process (Liabo et al., 2017).

As adolescents in protection systems approach the age of majority, the risk factors to which they are exposed tend to increase, a reality that is even more acute for unaccompanied minors. In these contexts, Social Work practice must act as a guarantor of legal protection, social support, and security, even beyond the age of legal adulthood (Martínez-Salvador et al., 2021).

4. Conclusions

Social Work professionals face a series of challenges and demands when designing future interventions with children and adolescents (C&A) within child protection systems. They require appropriate preparation to meet these needs and must provide careful attention that ensures, on one hand, optimal care and support for their well-being, and on the other, the fulfilment of fundamental rights as a guarantee of their holistic development.

Numerous studies particularly at the European level (López et al., 2013; González-García et al., 2017; Liabo et al., 2017) highlight the need for comprehensive care within residential resources and effective follow-up once young people leave the system. As Sainero et al. (2015) note, children and adolescents under institutional care, whether in foster homes, residential centres, or other protection programmes, often face a variety of emotional and psychological challenges that increasingly require specialised attention beyond conventional medical care.

In this context, Social Work professionals play a vital role in the identification, assessment, and response to mental health needs, as well as in service coordination and the provision of ongoing support. Children in protection systems often share traumatic experiences such as abuse, neglect, or separation from their parents, which have a significant impact on their mental health and may manifest in behavioural disorders, depression, or anxiety (Oswald et al., 2013). This reality poses an important challenge for Social Work both in terms of coordination with other intervention agents and professional training to equip practitioners with the skills necessary to effectively address the needs of children and adolescents.

Accordingly, Social Work intervention in this context assumes the responsibility of providing emotional and psychosocial support, helping young people develop coping skills, strengthen resilience, and promote overall well-being. This may include the implementation of evidence-based intervention programmes, individual or group therapy, and recreational or therapeutic activities, as well as the promotion of protective factors and the creation of safe, supportive environments.

The reviewed studies also highlight the role of Social Work as a key agent of accompaniment in the rehabilitation of traumatic experiences among children and adolescents. Social workers must focus their efforts on encouraging user participation in their own individual processes, placing minors at the centre of all planned interventions (Fonseca & Maiztegui-Oñate, 2017). Equally essential is the integration of family environments in the development of minors. Promoting participatory spaces for both the children in protection systems and their families is crucial, as it significantly increases the likelihood of family reunification (Esposito et al., 2017).

Finally, Social Work within child protection systems must engage in a critical reflection on emancipation processes, focusing on the prevention of vulnerability and lack of opportunities that may arise when young people become *"care leavers."* The studies reviewed underscore the importance of strengthening transition programmes to adulthood, promoting extended educational and emotional support, and ensuring public policies that guarantee access to housing, employment, and stable support networks (Martínez-Salvador et al., 2021; Sevillano-Monje & Martín-Gutiérrez, 2022).

From a social research perspective, Social Work occupies a privileged position to address recurrent situations of vulnerability once institutional care ends, helping to reduce the invisibility of challenges faced by care leavers by preventing them before emancipation occurs. Social Work should not adopt a neutral stance; as Campos et al. (2020) emphasise, it is essential that professionals guarantee a successful transition to independent living, counteracting insufficient preparation, limited resources, stigma, and discrimination. This would promote a less abrupt transition, in which social work intervention can mitigate risk factors while providing practical life skills, resource navigation, advocacy, social inclusion, and access to mental health and emotional support services.

The findings of this research reveal a paradigm shift in the needs that must now be addressed by Social Work interventions with children and adolescents within protection systems. Traditionally, the focus has been on basic care, legal guardianship, and behavioural control. However, emerging priorities now include mental health care, emotional accompaniment, life skills development, and the creation of lasting support networks (López et al., 2013; González-García et al., 2017). These evolving needs call for more comprehensive, sustained, and rights-based approaches.

Based on the reviewed evidence, several areas for improvement are proposed to strengthen child protection systems: Implement individualised emancipation plans initiated prior to reaching adulthood. Guarantee access to mental health resources, with teams specifically trained in trauma and attachment. Promote long-term professional accompaniment programmes for care leavers, and reinforce continuous training for socio-educational teams in relational, intercultural, and crisis intervention competencias. Foster the active participation of children and adolescents in decision-making regarding their own lives.

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