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Mentoring for social inclusion with refugees in high-income countries: a scoping review

Il mentoring per l'inclusione sociale dei rifugiati nei paesi ad alto reddito: una revisione di scopo

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to conduct a comprehensive review of the extant literature on mentoring for social inclusion with refugee mentees in high-income countries. A scoping review was conducted to assess the existing literature on the subject. A systematic search of relevant bibliographic databases and online repositories for peer-reviewed studies identified 28 articles employing qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods that met the inclusion criteria. Mentoring has been identified as a promising practice to overcome the barriers to refugee integration by fostering social connections and enhancing linguistic and cultural competencies. However, the evidence on intervention outcomes is scarce. A number of articles have underscored the reciprocal advantages for mentors and mentees, as well as the potential of this intervention to challenge the prevailing narratives of exclusion and indifference. A notable limitation of extant literature pertains to the fragmentation of theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches, and intervention implementation. Future research should prioritise the development of rigorous methodologies to assess the effectiveness of these interventions. Moreover, the conceptualisation of mentoring should be expanded to encompass a broader perspective, one that takes into account its community, societal, and policy ramifications.

RIASSUNTO

L'obiettivo di questo studio era condurre una revisione della letteratura esistente sul mentoring per l'inclusione sociale dei rifugiati nei paesi ad alto reddito. È stata condotta una revisione di scopo per esaminare la letteratura sull'argomento. Una ricerca sistematica di studi sottoposti a revisione tra pari presenti nelle banche dati bibliografiche pertinenti e negli archivi online ha individuato 28 articoli che hanno utilizzato metodi qualitativi, quantitativi e misti e che soddisfacevano i criteri di inclusione. Il mentoring è stato descritto come una pratica promettente

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per superare le barriere all'integrazione dei rifugiati, favorendo le relazioni sociali e migliorando le competenze linguistiche e culturali. Tuttavia, le prove sull'efficacia dell'intervento sono scarse. Diversi studi hanno sottolineato i vantaggi reciproci per i mentori e i mentee, nonché il potenziale di questo intervento nel contrastare le narrazioni prevalenti di esclusione e indifferenza nei confronti dei rifugiati. Un limite significativo della letteratura esistente riguarda la frammentazione teorica, metodologica e nell'implementazione dell'intervento. La ricerca futura dovrebbe dare priorità allo sviluppo di metodologie rigorose per valutare l'efficacia di tali interventi. Inoltre, la concettualizzazione del mentoring dovrebbe essere ampliata per abbracciare una prospettiva più ampia che tenga conto delle sue ripercussioni a livello comunitario, sociale e politico.

Refugees are individuals who have been compelled to seek protection in another nation, often in a hasty manner and with limited resources (UNHCR, 2025a). According to recent data, the global refugee population has reached 42.5 million, representing a 7% increase since 2022. It is noteworthy that 40% of these individuals are children and adolescents under the age of 18. Europe maintains its status as a leading global region in terms of the number of displaced individuals, with 18% of the global population residing within its borders (UNHCR, 2025b). This group faces considerable challenges related to integration into the host society, which may have adverse implications for their well-being, as well as for their academic and economic outcomes. A 'refugee gap' has been proposed to describe the assumption that refugees are at a disadvantage compared to other migrants. This is due to lower language proficiency and educational level, poorer family and social support, poorer mental and physical health, and generally residing in more disadvantaged neighborhoods than other migrants (Connor, 2010).

This study reviews recent studies on mentoring as a strategy to foster refugees' social inclusion in high-income countries. Although mentoring is mentioned as an integration measure for newcomers because it aligns with the key pillars of the European Union's 2021–2027 Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (European Commission, 2020), it continues to receive little attention from the academic research community, particularly in the field of social work. With a few exceptions, such as the Flanders region of Belgium (Vescan et al., 2023), mentoring is not formally recognised as a component of social work in most high-income countries. This indicates that it is not an institutionalised service regulated or funded by the welfare state, and its implementation often relies on voluntary or third-sector initiatives. Nevertheless, social mentoring programmes may play a critical role in supporting refugee populations, providing psychosocial support, enhancing social inclusion, and facilitating access to education and employment opportunities. This phenomenon is especially salient in high-income countries, where refugees frequently encounter intricate social, cultural, and bureaucratic obstacles. The objective of this review is to enhance comprehension of the state of research on mentoring for social inclusion. It accomplishes this by furnishing academics, social workers, and policymakers with valuable information.

Mentoring for social inclusion

Mentoring is a psychosocial intervention in which two individuals are paired to provide structured support, usually through an organisation (Karcher et al., 2006). The organisation – generally a third-sector organisation – plays a key role in recruiting and training volunteers, selecting mentees, and supervising matches. Programmes vary in implementation (e.g. in-person or online) and objectives (e.g. risk prevention or positive youth development). Mentors (or 'buddies') – who must be volunteers – and mentees dedicate time together for various periods. Historically, the cornerstone of mentoring is the personal relationship between an experienced mentor and a less

experienced mentee, theorised to yield positive social, psychological, and developmental outcomes through modelling and emotional support (Raposa et al., 2019; Rhodes, 2005). While this paradigm remains valid, research highlights the potential of mentoring to enhance mentees' social networks, generate social capital, and facilitate access to public resources and social security, particularly for disadvantaged individuals (Raithelhuber, 2024, p. 968). In the context of migration, mentoring has been proposed as a strategy to facilitate migrants' successful integration and social inclusion within receiving societies. Accordingly, this approach to mentoring is referred to as 'mentoring for social inclusion' or 'social mentoring' (Prieto-Flores & Feu Gelis, 2018; Raithelhuber, 2024). A comparative study of mentoring models in the United States and European contexts reveals that, in Europe, most programmes have historically concentrated on forms of mentoring aimed at promoting the social inclusion of the refugee population. Conversely, social mentoring programmes are less prevalent in the United States, where youth mentoring programmes tend to prioritise different psychosocial and behavioral outcomes (e.g. emotional development, school success) (Preston et al., 2019).

The literature on mentoring with migrant and refugee populations

The application of mentoring programmes with refugee populations has received comparatively scant scholarly attention, as evidenced by a paucity of research in this domain when contrasted with the literature addressing similar initiatives with other migrant demographics (Prieto-Flores & Feu Gelis, 2018). A review of the literature by Gower, Jeemi, Forbes, et al. (2022) revealed the beneficial effects of peer mentoring in promoting wellbeing, social connection, and resilience in migrant women. However, the review also highlighted significant methodological limitations in the reviewed studies, which call into question the validity of the results, particularly in regard to the long-term sustainability of these improvements over time. In their review of mentoring in the Norwegian context, Radlick and Mevatne (2023) identified two salient aspects that are frequently overlooked in the extant literature. First, they underscore the reciprocal nature of mentoring, whereby the advantages are for both mentees (e.g. social connection and access to resources) and mentors (e.g. increased cultural understanding). Secondly, the discussion delves into the role of mentoring as a pivotal component of the welfare state's objectives concerning inclusion. This component is centered on outcomes such as skill development, fostering feelings of inclusion, enhancing self-esteem, and increasing social capital. However, it is crucial to consider the potential barriers to cooperation among different actors.

In their 2018 study, Prieto-Flores and Feu Gelis (2018) (pp. 9–14) proposed a three-dimension analytical framework for the classification of mentoring programmes. The first dimension is the individualistic vs. community approach, with the former emphasising the promotion of individual skills and resources for better individual outcomes, and the latter a more civic conception of mentoring, where mentors serve as catalysts for mentees' empowerment within the local community. The second dimension refers to the unidirectional benefits for the end user, that is, the mentees, meaning the benefits that they receive from mentoring. Bidirectionality refers to the emphasis on the mutual benefits generated by mentoring for its participants (mentees and mentors) and other agents (social workers and third-sector organisations, family, community etc.). The social model posits shared responsibility between the state and civil society. In this model, mentoring complements social policy as part of a universalist, rights-based welfare framework. In contrast, the neo-liberal model conceptualises mentoring as a substitute for the welfare state. Organisations that promote mentoring primarily rely on philanthropic contributions for funding, and they implement programmes independently of other welfare services. This reduces the role of public administration.

Collectively, these three reviews indicate that migrant mentees experience a wide range of short-term benefits, including enhanced social connections, improved overall well-being, and integration into educational and professional environments (Gower, Jeemi, Forbes, et al., 2022; Prieto-Flores & Feu Gelis, 2018; Radlick & Mevatne, 2023). However, the reviews are either too broad in scope,

considering programmes offered to those at risk of social exclusion (a category that includes, but is not limited to, migrants and refugees), or too narrow, addressing a single country (Norway) or a subpopulation (migrant women) or a specific type of programme (peer mentoring). These limitations underscore the necessity for a more coherent and empirically robust understanding of the mechanisms through which social mentoring programmes function for refugee populations specifically, and how they may complement or interact with formal welfare services.

Objectives

The objective of this scoping review was to map and evaluate the nature and characteristics of studies that have reported on formal social mentoring with refugees in high-income countries. One primary key research question guided this review: What are the findings of research on mentoring for social inclusion with refugees in high-income nations? Three further secondary research questions were: (1) What are the characteristics of the programmes? (2) What theories and methods have been used to study the programmes? (3) What is the evidence of programme effectiveness?

The term 'refugee' was operationalised as an individual unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin due to a substantiated fear of persecution based on factors such as race, religion, nationality, membership in a specific social group, or political opinion (UNHCR, 2025c). Research focusing on asylum seekers and other forced migrants, whether exclusively or in conjunction with refugees, was incorporated despite the distinction in their legal status from that of refugees. The rationale behind this is that these groups have a shared history of involuntary displacement (Reed et al., 2016).

The operationalisation of refugees' social inclusion into the host community was facilitated by the integration conceptual framework developed by Ager and Strang (2008). Despite the complexity and multidimensionality of the concept of social inclusion (Fudge Schormans, 2023), this integration framework offers a comprehensive set of domains that are not restricted to material advantages, such as labour market integration. The framework considers the social dimensions of integration, specifically describing migrants' participation in host societies through language acquisition, social interactions, and community involvement. As such, it broadly covers key dimensions of social inclusion. Ager and Strang's framework is organised into four primary domains of refugee integration. 'Marks and means' denotes access to fundamental resources, including employment, housing, education, and healthcare. 'Social connection' emphasises social interaction and network building. 'Facilitators' refers to knowledge of the local language and culture, as well as a sense of personal safety and stability within the host community. Finally, 'foundation' refers to societal assumptions and practices concerning citizenship and rights. This highlights the influence of social norms and legal frameworks on individual and collective well-being.

Method

The methodology of this review was employed in accordance with the expanded Arksey and O'Malley (2005) framework for scoping reviews. The Open Science Framework guidelines were utilised during the development of this scoping review protocol (Lely et al., 2023). The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis Extension for Scoping Reviews was followed for reporting (PRISMA-ScR; Tricco et al., 2018) (Supplemental A). The review protocol is available in the Open Science Framework database (https://osf.io/r6msn?view_only=8d825e0577f142908789556634b21055).

Eligibility criteria

Criteria for inclusion were: (1) be a peer-reviewed journal article or book chapter, (2) be published between 2015 and 2025, (3) be written in English, (4) have a study population of refugees in the

post-resettlement context in a high-income country, (5) include a formal one-on-one mentoring programme (i.e. one mentor matched with one mentee), and (6) be qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method research. Articles that were research protocols, reviews, single case studies, conceptual, focused on programme description without empirical analyses, or did not include any description of the programme were excluded. We chose to include articles and book chapters to map how mentoring refugees is discussed in the academic community. Therefore, we did not include gray literature.

The temporal scope of our study was determined with the recognition that the year 2015 was characterised by a significant global event, often referred to as the ‘refugee crisis.’ This period was characterised by a significant increase in media attention and a discernible shift in public discourse, particularly in Europe, regarding the issue of refugees (Carrera et al., 2015; Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017). In accordance with the methodologies employed by other reviews on this subject (Kirsch et al., 2024), we opted to examine exclusively studies conducted in high-income countries. This determination was informed by the significant disparities in resources and the distinct requirements of refugee populations in high versus low-income countries. To determine whether a nation falls within the category of high-income economies, the criteria established by the World Bank were employed (2025).

Search strategy

Relevant databases, including ProQuest APA PsycINFO, Elsevier SCOPUS, and Clarivate Web of Science, were searched. The search string was developed iteratively by examining the keywords of the relevant articles, including reviews, mentoring, and refugee populations. Synonyms, wildcards, and truncations are used. First, we divided the research questions into two main concepts related to the target population and intervention. Appropriate date ranges and additional filters (e.g. peer-reviewed articles) were employed when available. The search was limited to the titles and abstracts. The search results in Elsevier SCOPUS, conducted in February 2025, are listed in Table 1. Additionally, we manually searched the reference lists of the included studies for additional sources (ascendancy approach).

Study selection

The search results were exported to Rayyan, a web and mobile application, which allowed the automatic removal of duplicates (Ouzzani et al., 2016). The sifting process consisted of two stages (title and abstract, and full-text reading) and involved two independent reviewers (first and second author). All bibliographic fields (e.g. title, abstract, journal name, publication year, language) except the authors’ name were visible in the screening phases. At the full-text level, in three cases, one researcher contacted the corresponding authors to obtain full-text papers that were not available online. In all three cases, the author(s) provided the full text. The blind screening of citations was conducted by researchers in accordance with the predetermined inclusion and

Table 1. Search strategy and results in Elsevier Scopus.

#	Query	Results
S1	refugee* OR 'asylum seeker*' OR 'Internally displaced' OR 'forcibly displaced' OR 'forced migration' OR migra* OR immigrant*	1,339,554
S2	S1; migra* and immigrant* terms removed	75,331
S3	Mentor* OR Mentee* OR <i>protégés</i> OR 'buddy program*' OR 'buddy scheme*' OR Befriending	81,688
S4	S1 AND S3	889
S5	S2 AND S3	219
S6	S5 AND Date range 2015–2025	171
S6	S5 AND Publication type 'Article' or 'Book' or 'Book chapter'	143
S7	S6 AND Language 'English'	140

exclusion criteria. At each stage of the review process, the second author acted as the primary reviewer and screened all papers, whereas the first author acted as the secondary reviewer and screened a randomly selected subgroup of papers (25%). Percent agreement (>80%) cut-off value was used to demonstrate substantial agreement between reviewers (McHugh, 2012). Divergent screener decisions were resolved through discussions within the research team. When necessary, arbitration was sought from a third reviewer (the third author).

Data extraction

The data from the included studies were extracted by one reviewer (the second author) and cross-checked with a second reviewer (the first author). The data were subsequently entered into an Excel spreadsheet data extraction tool. The initial version of the tool was developed based on other reviews on mentoring with migrant populations (Gower, Jeemi, Forbes, et al., 2022; Prieto-Flores & Feu Gelis, 2018; Radlick & Mevatne, 2023) and included information on publication details (author/s' information, year of publication), the mentoring programme (e.g. setting, characteristics of implementation), and the research study (e.g. theory, methods, key findings). The data extraction protocol was pilot tested in the first five articles to ensure uniformity of the extraction process. All extraction procedures were performed by humans. Given the qualitative nature of the review, the reconciliation process was conducted through open discussions among collaborators. The articles were also classified based on Prieto-Flores and Feu Gelis (2018) three-dimensional analytic framework. The classification process was executed in accordance with the protocol established for the study selection phase (i.e. utilisation of primary and secondary reviewers, and calculation of inter-rater agreement).

Results

A total of 319 references were retrieved from the database search. Following the removal of 130 duplicates, the references were evaluated in two stages. Initially, titles and abstracts were examined to determine their relevance to the subject matter (85.7% inter-rater agreement). The full text was then reviewed to ascertain the reliability of the references. A consensus among the reviewers was reached in 84.2% of the cases. At each stage of the screening process, studies were excluded based on one or more of the following criteria: an ineligible target population (i.e. mentees who were not refugees or asylum seekers), context (i.e. not in a post-resettlement setting in a high-income country), or a lack of relevance to the research focus (e.g. lack of formal and/or individual mentoring). The final dataset comprised 28 references, including three that were identified through an ascendancy approach. Figure 1 presents the study selection process and Table 2 describes each study's characteristics and key results. The results were structured and synthesised using a morphological box based on nine dimensions (Figure 2). The consensus among researchers regarding the analysis of items using the analytical framework developed by Prieto-Flores and Feu Gelis (2018) was 80%.

Characteristics of mentoring Programme

Location

Studies were conducted in the following countries: Australia (N = 6), Germany (N = 5), Austria (N = 3), Spain (N = 3), the United States of America (N = 2), the United Kingdom (N = 2), Belgium (N = 2), France (N = 1), Sweden (N = 1), Israel (N = 1), and South Korea (N = 1). One study was conducted in three countries (Italy, Greece and Germany).

Setting

Twenty-two articles reported on mentoring programmes delivered in community settings. Most of the mentors and mentees met in public. One intervention was delivered online (O'Connell & Lucić, 2021). Three programmes took place in a university (Chevrier et al., 2023; Vickers et al.,

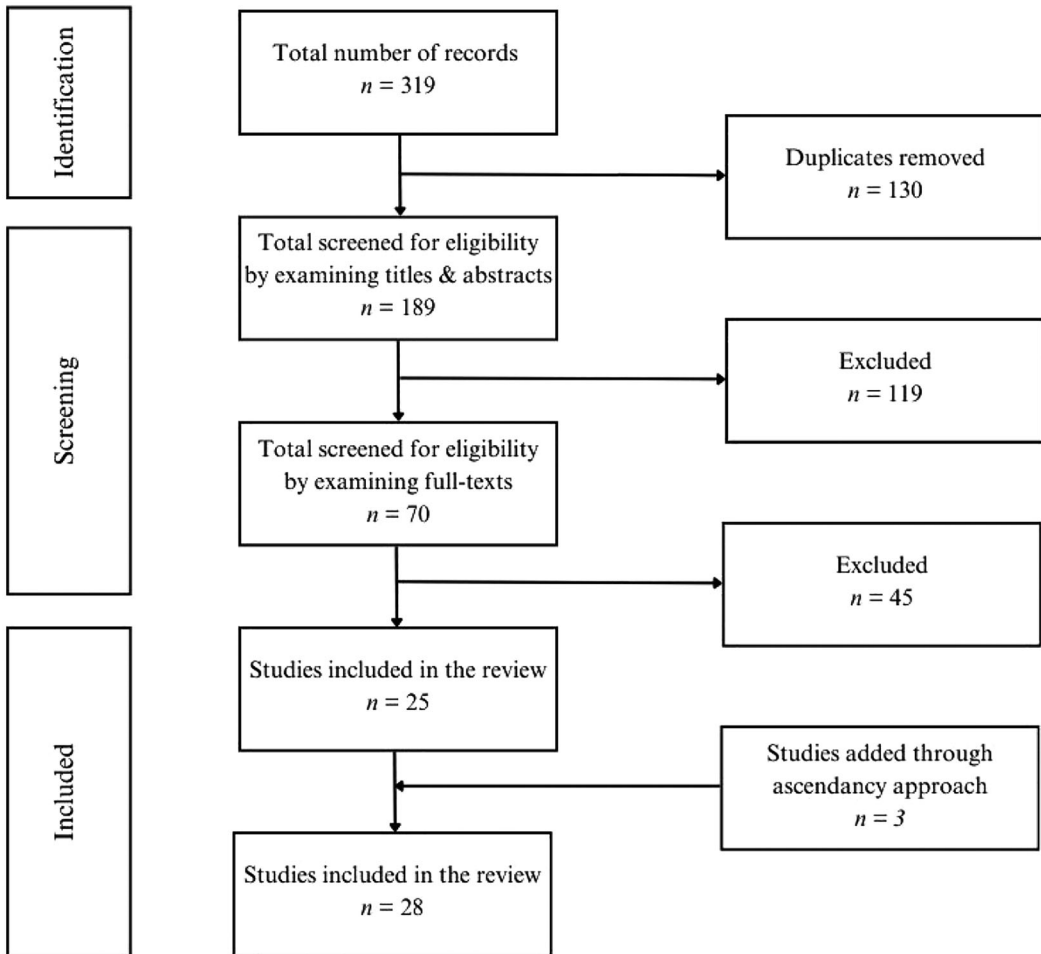


Figure 1. Flowchart of study selection process.

2017; Young et al., 2018), and one in schools (Emery & Yang, 2022). One article included a mentoring programme in a social business incubator (Meister & Mauer, 2019).

Mentees

Mentees were described as refugees, displaced people, or humanitarian migrants. In seven studies, the mentees were asylum seekers (Jaschke et al., 2022). Almost half of the studies targeted unaccompanied minors and young people between the ages of 14 and 24. Only two studies had a mentoring programme for men only (Amitay, 2022; Stock, 2019), while two studies reported on a single mentoring programme implemented exclusively for women (Gower, Jeemi, and Dantas, 2022; Gower, Jeemi, Wickramasinghe, et al., 2022). When mentioned in the study articles, mentees' countries of origin were predominantly the Middle East and Africa, with a few having mentees from Asia.

Mentors

Regarding mentors' characteristics, the majority of the mentoring programmes involved adults (N = 20), university students or alumni (N = 6), and schoolteachers (N = 1). One study focused on mentors who were entrepreneurs (Meister & Mauer, 2019), while another study examined community and industry mentors (Vincent et al., 2021). Twenty studies did not provide additional information regarding the

Table 2. Characteristics of included studies (N = 28).

First Author, Year (country)	Mentees	Mentors	Intervention	Methods	Experimental design	Key findings
Alarcon, Bobowik, et al. (2021) (Spain)	Former unaccompanied minors	Adults	Weekly meetings during a period of 8–12 months. Mentors receive training and relationships are monitored.	Mixed methods	Quasi	Increase in hope was observed among the mentees in comparison to the control group. The qualitative results suggest the programme improved young people's well-being and emotional stability, facilitating their transition into adulthood. Mentors' training led to advantages such as increased support and understanding of mentees' needs.
Alarcon, Casademont, et al. (2021), (Spain)	Asylum seekers aged 20–30 years	Adult, mostly women	Same as Alarcon, Casademont, et al., 2021.	Qualitative	N/A	Mentoring fosters understanding of the local culture and language, strengthening bonds within the community and reducing feelings of isolation. It can also reduce negative stereotypes.
Amitay (2022) (Israel)	Asylum seeker males aged 6–12 years	Israeli Jewish middle-class adult volunteers	Weekly meetings are held in public spaces or mentors' homes. Mentors are supervised by a psychologist and a criminologist and must volunteer at an after-school facility before being matched.	Qualitative	N/A	Mentoring can counteract the othering of children by fostering feelings of love and attachment, ensuring a constant presence, and identifying with their circumstances. Mentors act as intermediaries between children and society, expand their social networks, and coach them in the use of their cognitive and social skills.
Askins (2016) (United Kingdom)	Adult refugees and asylum seekers	Adults	Meetings are held in public spaces.	Qualitative	N/A	Through mentoring, diverse residents discover their commonalities and the potential for shared goals. Emotions and local scale are key in a citizenship politics, and befriending can foster a political process of living together.
Atkinson (2018a) (Australia)	Adult refugees	University students and retirees, mostly women	No detail provided	Qualitative	N/A	Mentoring contrasts with a functional approach to integration through English language classes offered to refugees in the community. Negotiating meeting agendas,

Atkinson (2018b) (Australia)	Adult refugees	University students and retirees	No detail provided	Qualitative	N/A	empathy, trust, and genuine learning were fundamental to creating a two-way learning environment. Mentoring provides a bridge between the mentees' own community and the host community. Mentoring is characterised by mutual learning: mentees learn about mainstream culture, and mentors learn how to make a difference. Mentors may experience frustration and emotional confrontation. Mentoring acts as a bridge between the mentee's community and the host community.
Chevrier et al. (2023) France	Adult refugees looking for a job or seeking training	University alumni with advanced professional experience	Three-month training programmes for refugees hosted by partner colleges. Mentees attend weekly classes (e.g. French) and receive one-on-one mentoring to help them build a social network	Qualitative	N/A	Mentoring is seen as a way to help refugees become more competitive in the job market and prevent downward mobility. The success of these programmes hinges on the support of external organisations that can address the needs of refugees.
Emery and Yang (2022) (South Korea)	Refugees aged 14–24 years	School teachers who volunteer to mentor	The programme lasts for 10 months. Mentors are trained annually.	Quantitative	Pre	Participation in the mentoring programme was associated with significantly fewer symptoms of depression. Youth who are securely attached engage better with mentors and benefit more. Mentoring reduces social withdrawal in mentees.
Gower, Jeemi and Dantas (2022) (Australia)	Adult refugee women aged 25–62 years. Includes non-refugee migrant women with limited employability skills and skilled isolated women	Migrant adult women who had established themselves in the Australian workforce	Twice-monthly meetings for a period of three to 12 months. Mentors undergo a three-hour training programme and are then matched with mentees. Mentoring sessions are accompanied by group workshops to help mentees acquire employment skills.	Qualitative	N/A	Thematic analysis revealed five themes related to the role of mentors: (1) intrinsic motivation, fulfilling experience, and volunteer role identity; (2) importance of building connections with mentees and for themselves; (3) mentors' high expectations and mentees' over-expectations; (4) mentees' barriers to engagement (e.g. poor

(Continued)

Table 2. Continued.

First Author, Year (country)	Mentees	Mentors	Intervention	Methods	Experimental design	Key findings
Gower, Jeemi, Wickramasinghe, et al. (2022) (Australia)	Same as Gower Jeemi, Dantas, et al., 2022.	Same as Gower Jeemi, Dantas, et al., 2022.	Same as Gower Jeemi, Dantas, et al., 2022.	Qualitative	N/A	language skills, mental health issues); and (5) flexibility and commitment to meet mentees' needs. Participants said mentors' social support was more important than employment advice. They reported feeling less isolated, having a bigger professional network, and increased self-esteem and self-efficacy. Trust, support, flexibility, and commitment from mentors were key for positive mental health. Some mentees continued to experience poor mental health, requiring professional attention.
Gozer (2023) (Germany)	Resettled refugees and asylum seekers	Adults	Social workers recruit, train, and match volunteers. UNHCR selects mentees. Weekly meetings are held in public spaces or refugee homes.	Qualitative	N/A	Mentoring fosters social solidarity by establishing egalitarian relationships that transcend class and cultural boundaries and challenge the traditional helper-receiver dynamic. Additionally, it encourages mentors to reflect on their biases and learn about various aspects of the city.
Jaschke et al. (2022) (Germany)	Adult refugees and asylum seekers	Adult volunteers, mostly women	Mentoring pairs meet for two hours each week to share recreational activities and, in rare cases, discuss professional issues.	Quantitative	Experimental	The intervention had no effect on employment, education, life satisfaction, or xenophobia. It had a positive effect on social ties, as indicated by the time spent with Germans relative to non-Germans. It also had a positive effect on housing satisfaction and marginally on local language proficiency.
Mairaj (2024) (United States of America.)	Refugee youth	Unspecified	No details on specific mentoring programmes are provided.	Qualitative	N/A	Lower-level organisations, such as resettlement agencies and subcontracted nonprofits, developed programmes in direct response to available funding rather than to community needs. These programmes prioritised

Månsson and Bogren (2014) (Sweden)	Adult (and family members) refugees, others deemed in need of protection because of exceptionally distressing circumstances	Unspecified	Nine mentoring programmes funded by the Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs were examined. Refugees are matched with mentors based on their previous occupation, education, or experience.	Quantitative	Quasi	compliance over the quality of services provided to young refugees. Mentoring helped men reach a minimum threshold income, but not women refugees. Younger mentees and those with more education and work experience were less affected. Mentoring intensity and mentor characteristics had no effect.
Meister and Mauer (2019) (Germany)	Adult refugee entrepreneurs	Local entrepreneurs	Mentees are matched to an entrepreneur mentor as part of the business incubator programme.	Qualitative	N/A	Mentors provide professional assistance in identifying appropriate resources (e.g. funding, networks). They also provide emotional support.
Mortier et al. (2025) (Belgium)	Newly arrived migrants including refugees	Adults, mostly retired women	Mentees sign up for a local mentoring programme. The organisation encourages regular meetings, usually twice a month. Participants may receive evaluations and participate in group activities.	Qualitative	N/A	Buddies play informational, social networking, and gatekeeping roles. Two coordinator profiles were identified. One promotes sustained integration by facilitating and positively influencing network expansion.
O'Connell and Lucić (2021) (Germany)	Refugees and asylum seekers aged 8–16 years living in shelters	Adults	Digital programme that pairs refugee children in shelters with native English-speaking mentors for homework support and social integration.	Qualitative	N/A	Mentoring helps fill gaps in the system by offering an approach that can be used to promote the learning, social-emotional development, and inclusion of young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds.
Raithelhuber (2019a) (Austria)	Unaccompanied refugee minors, mostly males	Adults	Local adult volunteers receive 20 h of preparation, accompanied by personal assessments and counseling. Once matched, mentors and mentees meet on a regular basis with no set end date.	Qualitative	N/A	Mentoring offers institutions a creative way of dealing with uncertainty and ambiguity. It helps programme participants understand the uncertainty and ambiguity of the relationship, but it doesn't change institutions' overall attitude toward young people.
Raithelhuber (2019b) (Austria)	Same as Raithelhuber, 2019a	Same as Raithelhuber, 2019a	Same as Raithelhuber, 2019a	Qualitative	N/A	The way future mentors use their personal history, as well as the people and places around them, to make sense of the world and

(Continued)

Table 2. Continued.

First Author, Year (country)	Mentees	Mentors	Intervention	Methods	Experimental design	Key findings
Raitelhuber (2021) (Austria)	Same as Raitelhuber, 2019a	Same as Raitelhuber, 2019a	Same as Raitelhuber, 2019a	Qualitative	N/A	interact with others affects how they will set up their lives. Mentoring provides mentees with opportunities to achieve substantial social participation through socialising, learning German, and gaining access to institutions and resources, as well as the chance to acquire social capital.
Sánchez-Aragón et al. (2021) (Spain)	Young first and second generation migrants, irregular and refugee children aged 8–15, mainly girls	University students	Weekly three-hour meetings outside of school hours. Mentors receive 10-hour intensive training. Primary and secondary school teachers select potential mentees.	Quantitative	Pre	Mentees reported less stress, more social support and academic self-efficacy (only for the group of mentees who were over 12 years old), and higher self-esteem. They also reported more positive attitudes toward school and peers, as well as higher educational expectations and aspirations. However, no change in perceived racial discrimination or self-esteem was observed.
Stock (2019) (Germany)	Young adult refugees and asylum seekers, only males	Adults, mostly middle-class women	Volunteers working in shelters for newly arrived refugees provide one-on-one support to one or more individuals.	Qualitative	N/A	Mentoring fosters caring relationships involving unequal power dynamics that promote inclusion for all involved (through 'kinning' practices). Through mentoring, citizens can engage in care practices that promote more inclusive migration policies.
Tynnewydd et al. (2021) (United Kingdom)	Unspecified forced migrants	Adult without professional qualifications or migration experience	Meetings are held once a week for 90 min.	Qualitative	N/A	Participants experienced a range of emotions during their mentorship, including distress, powerlessness, and emotional overwhelm, as well as hope, joy, and inspiration. Mentors find success by focusing on achievable changes. Support for volunteers is essential.
Vescan et al. (2023) (Belgium)	Adult refugees	Adults, ages 40–79 years, mostly highly educated women in	Mentoring is part of the Flemish government's mandatory civic integration programme for refugees. A local organisation	Qualitative	N/A	Both volunteers and refugees viewed their relationship positively. The focus was on practical and informational needs, with less

		the workforce or in retirement	matches dyads, who then meet regularly, often for a limited time, in informal settings.			emphasis on emotional support. The support exchange was imbalanced, with most of the support flowing from mentors to mentees.
Vickers et al. (2017) (Australia)	First-year refugee and immigrant students	Second/third year university refugee students (teaching, psychology and humanities)	For-credit peer mentoring programme for college students. Weekly face-to-face meetings.	Qualitative	N/A	Mentors described a widened perspective and greater personal understanding of their mentees. Over time, interactions evolved into a rewarding friendship or comfortable relationship within a learning community. Purposeful intercultural pairing, sustained interactions, and regular reflection in debriefing peer groups were key to intercultural understanding.
Vincent et al. (2021) (Australia)	Adult refugees aged 25–35 years	Community and/or industry adults	Twelve-month mentoring experience as part of a leadership development programme. Mentees are paired with community and/or industry mentors.	Qualitative	N/A	An ethic of thriving guides a resettlement practice that focuses on refugees' strengths, dreams, and aspirations. This practice reconnects people with their pre-migration life trajectory.
Weiss and Tulin (2021) (Germany, Greece, Italy)	Humanitarian migrants	Adults	Unspecified mentoring programme.	Mixed methods	Pre	Refugees who received mentorship were more likely to be employed, especially if the mentorship involved education and local relationships. Formal mentorship assignments also proved beneficial.
Young et al. (2018) (United States of America)	Refugees	White U.S.-born management students attending a predominantly White, private 4-year university	Peer mentors train in small groups led by refugee student facilitators. Mentors spend 20 h with mentees over four weeks to complete the required course assignments.	Quantitative	Quasi	The mentoring experience had a positive impact on the behavioral and metacognitive aspects of cultural intelligence among the student mentors. No relationship was found between mentoring and perspective taking. A significant effect was found for empathic concern: there was a decline in the control group and a rise in the treatment group.

Dimensions		Characteristics			
Mentoring program	Location	Europe (18)	U.S.A (2)	Australia (6)	Others (2)
	Setting	Community (22)	Education (4)	Business (1)	Unspecified (1)
	Mentees	Children & youths (12)		Adults (16)	
	Mentors	W/o migration background (23)	W/ migration background (3)		Unspecified (2)
	Approach	Individualistic (11)		Community (17)	
	Direction of benefits	Unidirectional (14)	Bidirectional (11)		Unclear (3)
	Societal policy framework	Neo-liberal model (14)	Social model (11)		Unclear (3)
Study	Method	Qualitative (21)	Quantitative (5)		Mixed (2)
	Experimental	No (23)		Yes (5)	

Figure 2. Morphological box.

demographic characteristics of the mentors. Seven studies indicated that mentors were predominantly middle-class and highly educated women. Three studies reported that mentors were selected with a refugee or migration background (Gower, Jeemi, & Dantas, 2022; Gower, Jeemi, Wickramasinghe, et al., 2022; Tynewydd et al., 2021).

Implementation

Mentoring activities varied across programmes. Notably, some studies did not specify the defining characteristics of the mentoring programmes they examined. The duration of the programmes ranged from one month to two years, and the frequency and intensity of meetings also varied. All programmes reported weekly meetings with varying numbers of hours committed (e.g. Alarcon, Casademont, et al., 2021; O'Connell & Lucić, 2021; Tynewydd et al., 2021). Most programmes included preparatory training for mentors and a formalised process for mentor – mentee matching. Training curricula addressed themes such as cultural diversity and social integration and were delivered by the organisation. Relatively few studies monitored the development of the mentor – mentee relationship (e.g. Alarcon, Casademont, et al., 2021; O'Connell & Lucić, 2021), and only a limited number reported on mentors' supervision and counselling (Amitay, 2022; Mortier et al., 2025; Raithelhuber, 2019a). In a few studies, one-to-one mentoring was integrated with group activities (Gower, Jeemi, Wickramasinghe, et al., 2022; Mortier et al., 2025).

Classification into Prieto and Gelis (2018) analytical framework

Individualistic vs. community approach. The analysis of the selected items identified 11 individualistic and 17 community-oriented studies. The individualistic model focuses on developing mentees' competencies to facilitate their adaptation to the host society. This includes initiatives to improve educational outcomes, soft skills, and mental health (e.g. Atkinson, 2018a; Chevrier et al., 2023; Emery & Yang, 2022). The community-oriented model promotes the social and labour inclusion of mentees by cultivating meaningful relationships between mentors and mentees and engaging them in community initiatives (e.g. Stock, 2019; Vincent et al., 2021). Amitay (2022) examined a mentoring initiative

that strengthened mentees' sense of agency and reduced experiences of othering, alienation, and powerlessness, highlighting a civic and participatory approach to mentoring.

Unidirectional vs. bidirectional. Fourteen studies featured mentoring programmes emphasising unidirectional benefits for mentees, particularly in areas such as health and well-being, and facilitating entry into the workforce (Gower, Jeemi, Wickramasinghe, et al., 2022; Weiss & Tulin, 2021). In contrast, 11 mentoring programmes classified as bidirectional were deliberately designed to produce meaningful and reciprocal benefits for both mentees and mentors. These benefits include the cultivation of strong interpersonal relationships (e.g. Askins, 2016; Gozzer, 2023) and the enhancement of cultural competence and intercultural awareness (Vickers et al., 2017; Young et al., 2018). Three studies could not determine the directionality of the benefits.

Neo-liberal vs. social policy framework. To clarify, the distinction between the neo-liberal and social policy frameworks employed in the analyses corresponds, respectively, to the neo-liberal versus social system dimensions. Fourteen initiatives aligned with the neoliberal model, and 11 aligned with the social model. Three studies lacked sufficient information. In the neoliberal paradigm, mentoring initiatives are promoted, financed, and managed by third-sector organisations or informal civil society actors (O'Connell & Lucić, 2021; Raitelhuber, 2021). For instance, two studies in the UK and France described refugee inclusion as entrusted to local organisations within the context of restrictive immigration policies (Askins, 2016; Chevrier et al., 2023). Mairaj (2024) study illuminates the U.S. context, wherein a subsidiarity-based approach allocates responsibility for mentoring services to lower-level organisations, compelling them to prioritise funding acquisition and regulatory compliance over community needs and quality. The social model is characterised by mentoring programmes supported by public policy frameworks and state funding. For instance, studies in Spain have highlighted the collaboration between the Catalan government and public universities (Alarcon, Bobowik, et al., 2021; Alarcon, Casademont, et al., 2021; Sánchez-Aragón et al., 2021). The Flanders region in Belgium integrates mentoring into mandatory civic integration pathways for migrants (Vescan et al., 2023). Concurrently, Sweden's National Board of Youth Affairs endorses nine mentoring initiatives with a focus on enhancing refugee employability. This finding illustrates public commitment to structured integration efforts (Månsson & Delander, 2017).

Characteristics of studies

Theoretical framework

The utilisation of theoretical models in these studies varied, with some studies employing more elementary models and others adopting more sophisticated ones. The latter category includes Allport's contact theory, which was employed in the context of attitudes and empathy toward refugees (Alarcon, Casademont, et al., 2021; Young et al., 2018), and Ager and Strang (2008) integration framework (Jaschke et al., 2022). Wenger's theory of communities of practice has provided a framework for studies examining how participants in mentoring programmes can learn and develop shared identities through collaborative and participatory engagement (Atkinson, 2018a, p. 2018b). Theories of agency and empowerment were used to underscore how mentoring can counteract the marginalisation and discrimination of refugees (Gozzer, 2023). At the organisational level, frameworks such as vertical complexity in a network of organisations (Mairaj, 2024) and the loose coupling perspective (Raitelhuber, 2019a) have been used to understand how organisational dynamics influence the implementation and outcomes of mentoring programmes.

Methods

Qualitative methods using interviews and focus groups were the most common (N = 21). These qualitative studies focused on aspects related to the experience and sense-making of building a mentoring relationship and the challenges that arose during the process (Askins, 2016; Raitelhuber, 2021; Vescan et al., 2023). Three qualitative studies examined the design dimension of mentoring

programmes, focusing on project management and value creation (Chevrier et al., 2023), the dynamics and decision-making processes underlying programme development (Raithelhuber, 2019a), and the use of tools to evaluate programme quality and effectiveness (Mairaj, 2024).

Five of the studies employed a quantitative approach, while two utilised a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to assess programme efficacy for mentees—except for Young et al. (2018) and identify mechanisms of change. These studies employed a variety of research designs, including experimental, quasi-experimental, and pre-experimental. Jaschke et al. (2022) was the only case of a fully experimental design or Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT). Three studies employed a quasi-experimental design with pre- and post-mentoring surveys and a non-randomly assigned control group to compare outcomes (e.g. Månsson & Delander, 2017). Three studies were characterised by the absence of outcome measurement at the baseline or due to the lack of a control group. Overall, the seven quantitative evaluation studies demonstrated significant methodological shortcomings, including the absence of a control group, a pre-intervention assessment of group comparability, and a likely inadequate sample size (i.e. power analysis was not conducted) (Rubin & Babbie, 2017). These factors complicate the determination of the certainty of intervention effects and the exclusion of type 1 and 2 errors or false positive/negative results. It is noteworthy that certain studies were marred by high rates of attrition. For instance, in the study by Jaschke et al. (2022), out of the 234 refugees assigned to the mentoring condition, only 85 were eventually matched, and of those, only 30 met with their mentors on a regular basis. The absence of process evaluation data hinders the comprehension of the mechanisms of change, barriers, and facilitators to achieve the intended outcomes. The only exception to this finding was reported by Månsson and Delander (2017). Their process evaluation indicated challenges in identifying potential mentees and respecting eligibility criteria.

Evidence of effectiveness

In this section, we employ Ager and Strang (2008) domains of integration to elucidate the salient outcomes for mentees documented in the reviewed articles.

Marks and means

Mentoring activities improved the psychological and emotional well-being of mentees by offering emotional support and reducing symptoms of distress (Alarcon, Bobowik, et al., 2021; Emery & Yang, 2022). Mentoring also promoted higher academic self-efficacy and educational aspirations of young mentees (Sánchez-Aragón et al., 2021). In relation to job market integration outcomes, mentoring can improve job competitiveness and, among men, positively influence income (Chevrier et al., 2023; Månsson & Delander, 2017; Weiss & Tulin, 2021). The implementation of mentoring projects did not yield any notable advancements in access to housing.

Social connection

A substantial body of research has underscored the pivotal function of mentors in their capacity as social mediators, effectively facilitating the interaction and exchange between the mentee's community and the host community, and ultimately mitigate social isolation (e.g. Alarcon, Casademont, et al., 2021; Amitay, 2022; Mortier et al., 2025). Moreover, the role of mentors has been identified as a pivotal factor in facilitating the access of mentees to institutional resources and services (Chevrier et al., 2023; Raithelhuber, 2021). In the study by Jaschke et al. (2022), the results demonstrated a positive effect, particularly on the social dimension.

Facilitators

Regular interactions with mentors has been shown to improve mentees' linguistic abilities and cultural understanding, thereby facilitating their adaptation to the host society (e.g. Alarcon, Casademont, et al., 2021; Jaschke et al., 2022; Raithelhuber, 2021). Additionally, several studies examined

how mentoring encouraged mutual learning between mentors and mentees, with mentors also reporting personal growth and increased intercultural awareness and empathy (e.g. Atkinson, 2018b; Vickers et al., 2017; Young et al., 2018).

Foundation

One study demonstrated how mentoring can cultivate a form of 'emotional citizenship', characterised by everyday solidarities, mutual care, and shared political engagement (Askins, 2016). Furthermore, programmes that prioritise solidarity have demonstrated the capacity to establish egalitarian helping relationships, thereby challenging conventional helper-receiver dynamics and relational biases (Gozzer, 2023). However, the impact of institutional engagement with mentoring programmes is often constrained and limited in scope, failing to positively influence societal attitudes or exclusionary practices (Raithelhuber, 2019a).

Discussion

This study aimed to conduct a comprehensive review of the scientific literature on formal social mentoring with refugee mentees in high-income countries. The geographic distribution of the 28 studies reveals a preponderance of research conducted in Europe. This finding confirms the results of previous studies suggesting that this form of mentoring is more prevalent in Europe (Preston et al., 2019). The reviewed studies reveal that the literature on mentoring with refugees is fragmented. This demonstrates the vitality of this field of study but also its main limitation: a lack of a general consensus on what mentoring is, its goals and mechanisms of change, and evidence of effectiveness. In contrast, the literature on youth mentoring has produced large-scale meta-analyses and internationally recognised guidelines (Herrera et al., 2025; Raposa et al., 2019). A close examination of the mentoring programmes reviewed here reveals considerable variation in terms of duration, frequency, and the types of activities offered. The majority of these programmes are implemented in community settings by third-sector organisations, employing local adult volunteers and mentees under the age of 18 years. In some cases, mentees were explicitly described as unaccompanied foreign minors. A number of studies have documented the implementation of programmes that utilise mentors with migratory backgrounds. These programmes leverage the common experience of migration and resettlement to promote the development of a robust relationship between mentors and mentees (Gower, Jeemi, Forbes, et al., 2022). Nevertheless, it is important to consider the potential drawbacks of such an approach. Specifically, it has the potential to restrict the social capital of refugees beyond the confines of migrant communities and offer little in terms of refugees' social, cultural, and labour market integration (Boerchi et al., 2024; Gericke et al., 2018).

The primary objective of mentoring programmes is to provide benefits to refugee mentees; however, some articles in this review emphasise the mutual benefits for mentors and mentees. For instance, mentors derive benefit from the cultivation of robust relationships and the enhancement of intercultural competence (e.g. Askins, 2016; Gozzer, 2023; Vickers et al., 2017). This finding is consistent with the literature, which demonstrates that mentoring relationships are mutually beneficial (Wisdom et al., 2025). It also aligns with the broader body of research on the positive impacts of voluntary engagement on volunteers (Poulin, 2014; Pozzi et al., 2014). It is noteworthy that two studies addressed how mentoring can challenge conventional power dynamics (Gozzer, 2023) and influence discourse and exclusionary practices in society (Raithelhuber, 2019a). A further significant finding concerns the extent to which mentoring programmes are integrated within the overarching societal policy framework. This review reveals a wide array of approaches, ranging from explicit contraposition (Askins, 2016; Raithelhuber, 2019a) to comprehensive integration within public policies and services. A notable example of the latter is the Flemish region, where mentoring constitutes a component of the mandatory civic integration programme for refugees (Mortier et al., 2025; Vescan et al., 2023).

Australia has emerged as a country where social mentoring is practiced, with peer mentoring emerging as a distinctive approach to support refugees and migrants both in educational and community settings. University programmes rely on peer-to-peer relationships in which senior students guide refugee-background students through academic and social transitions (Vickers et al., 2017), while community initiatives involve established migrant women to mentor newly arrived women, strengthening confidence, well-being, and access to employment (Gower, Jeemi, & Dantas, 2022; Gower, Jeemi, Wickramasinghe, et al., 2022). The Australian approach emphasises refugees' empowerment, combining practical and emotional support to frame mentoring as a relational and reciprocal process that fosters mutual learning and deeper connections between host and migrant communities (Atkinson, 2018a; 2018b; Vincent et al., 2021).

At the methodological level, the majority of studies were qualitative. This is likely to reflect the nascent stage in which the research is conducted, the numerous challenges associated with studying the refugee population, and a general epistemological orientation towards understanding the lived experience of refugees and mentors (Huizinga et al., 2025). This is important, but a mature literature benefits from a range of methods and approaches. The greatest gap in the literature on mentoring with refugees concerns the lack of substantial evidence on intervention outcomes. Nevertheless, the 28 studies offer insights on the potential benefits of social mentoring on key integration and social inclusion domains (Ager & Strang, 2008). In accordance with the relational nature of the intervention, the greatest potential of mentoring appears to be in promoting refugees' social connection and facilitators, domains, and cultivating meaningful intercultural relationships between local volunteer mentors and mentees. This is of particular significance given the well-documented benefits of social connectedness and active participation in community activities for refugees' health and well-being, especially during the resettlement process (Song et al., 2025). Research indicates that mentoring programmes can yield positive outcomes in various domains, including health, professional, and educational pursuits. These findings suggest that mentoring initiatives can promote active citizenship, particularly within the context of ambiguous integration policies (Raithelhuber, 2019a). However, despite mentoring representing a practice of civic solidarity (Brady & Dolan, 2009; Raithelhuber, 2024), the selected studies offer little evidence of the social impact or degree of societal openness following mentoring interventions.

A notable aspect of social mentoring, namely the fact that mentors are volunteers, appears to have been given insufficient consideration. As demonstrated in the extant literature, voluntariness has important implications for the nature of the mentor-mentee relationship and the achievement of outcomes (Gettings & Wilson, 2014). Furthermore, volunteers embody the spirit of a community that offers support and assistance to individuals facing circumstances of fragility, marginalisation, or adversity (Euh & Snyder, 2024). This act, indicative of social generativity, is a valuable component of citizenship education, wherein mentees learn civic values and mentors demonstrate solidarity values. This symbolic gesture is of considerable importance to the community and to society as a whole, as it has the potential to challenge prevailing narratives of exclusion and indifference (Snyder & Clary, 2004).

Limitations and future research directions

A number of limitations must be acknowledged in the context of the present review. These were related to the search strategy, which was limited to the academic literature written in English, and to the process of data extraction, in which one reviewer extracted data while another reviewer checked the work of the first reviewer rather than two reviewers independently extracting the data. Both these procedures are not optimal and may be contributing factors to the observed limitations in data loss and misrepresentation.

The collective caliber of the reviewed studies was identified as a significant constraint. The studies differed in terms of scope, setting, and population; therefore, it was not possible to draw conclusions about the most effective approach. A significant number of studies lack detailed information regarding participants and practices, thereby impeding the determination of the applicability of these

practices to diverse settings and countries. It is crucial to understand the functionality of interventions when implemented on a large scale. Implementation is a multidimensional construct encompassing elements such as fidelity, dosage, participants' engagement, and reach of the target population (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). These elements should be applied to mentoring programmes in order to design process and effectiveness evaluation.

Despite the growing recognition of participatory research in studies involving migrants and refugees, it is also surprising that no study included in this review explicitly employed a participatory research approach (Filler et al., 2021). Engaging refugees and migrants as co-researchers has the potential to enhance cultural relevance, enrich the entire research process, and foster greater safety and impact within marginalised groups (Hearn et al., 2022).

Implications for Practice

The mentoring field's practice-based, grassroots approach is dynamic but could be improved by relying more on research evidence. Programmes such as the UNHCR Community Matching Programme are widely implemented alongside numerous local interventions, yet they are not thoroughly evaluated (Crijns & Cuyper, 2022; Marchetti, 2024). It is essential for social workers in third-sector organisations to better operationalise mentoring interventions and align them with the existing literature. Elements crucial to the effectiveness of social mentoring programmes include generating different relational outcomes, proper mentoring training, matching strategies, and monitoring and evaluating pairs to obtain results that align with initial objectives, regardless of the target population (Aresi et al., 2021; Crijns & Cuyper, 2022; Herrera et al., 2025; Pozzi et al., 2021; Prieto-Flores & Feu Gelis, 2018; Raposa et al., 2019).

Another element that merits inclusion is that the efficacy of mentoring with refugees is likely to be contingent upon its integration within a comprehensive initiative that incorporates mentoring as one of its core components, in close coordination, or at least mutual information exchange with relevant services offered to this population. However, no evaluation study to date has examined this issue by comparing interventions with different levels of integration.

Conclusions

This review provides valuable insights into mentoring for refugees, identifies gaps in the literature, and represents a significant advancement in this field, particularly from the perspective of social workers. The implementation of social mentoring programmes at the social welfare system has the potential to facilitate the inclusion of refugees in high-income countries. Mentoring can help refugees integrate by developing social connections, linguistic and cultural skills, and civic action through volunteering. However, the scientific basis of mentoring effectiveness remains unsubstantiated. Researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and third-sector organisations active in the field of refugee reception can use the findings of this study. The results can improve mentoring at the local level and increase its scalability.

Author note

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Ethical approval

This scoping review did not entail the collection of participants or primary data; consequently, formal ethics approval was not necessary.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, GA, upon reasonable request.

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