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QUALITATIVE SYSTEMATIC REVIEWS: MAPPING AN UNDEREXPLORED FAMILY OF EVIDENCE SYNTHESSES

ABSTRACT

Systematic reviews are nowadays regarded as the most solid methodological standard within the hierarchy of evidence. Among them, qualitative systematic reviews are increasingly prominent in academic literature, positioning themselves as a valuable methodology for synthesising results from complex social experiences and phenomena. This study aims to provide an overview of qualitative systematic reviews and their types through a narrative-exploratory review based on the following questions: What proportion of academic literature is traditional systematic reviews compared with qualitative systematic reviews? What are the most frequent types of qualitative systematic review? What types of reviews have been done in countries such as Brazil, Spain and Portugal? The document search was done in the Scopus database. The results showed that while the proportion of qualitative systematic reviews is lower than that of traditional systematic reviews, their growth over recent decades is evidence of recognition of their interpretative and practical potential. Methodologies such as framework synthesis, thematic synthesis, qualitative meta-synthesis, and meta-ethnography are most widespread. The analysis by countries indicates that Brazil has more qualitative reviews in the social sciences and psychology; Spain has a more balanced distribution with an interdisciplinary profile with presence in the social sciences and experimental sciences; and Portugal shows a tendency towards scientific areas such as medicine with a smaller presence of the social sciences. In addition, meta-ethnography creates theoretical metaconcepts while meta-aggregation produces practical categories. In conclusion, qualitative reviews provide contemporary research with rigour, transparency and interpretative sensitivity. Their consolidation and methodological diversification promise an increasingly important role in knowledge production and evidence-based decision making. Including multiple databases and evaluating the methodological quality of primary studies is recommended.

Keywords

Qualitative systematic reviews; Research methodology; Mapping; Evidence synthesis; Social vulnerability.

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1. Introduction

The origins of systematic reviews date back to the middle of the 20th century. In the 1940s and 50s, academic journals such as *Review of Educational Research* started bringing together pieces of research on shared topics, integrating them in narrative reviews. These were valuable owing to their interpretative character, but they were limited in their methodological rigour and systematicity (Glass, 1976, 1977; Glass et al., 1981).

The growth in academic output during the 1960s revealed these limitations, resulting in more standardised classifications and measurements being proposed. The turning point came in 1979, when Archie Cochrane framed the need for evidence to be rigorously and accessibly compiled and synthesised. This approach consolidated systematic reviews, which are now held to be the most solid methodological standard within the hierarchy of evidence.

Systematic reviews are structured and transparent summaries of the available scientific information in response to specific questions. They represent the highest level of evidence, as they are based on multiple primary sources and follow a process that is systematic, transparent and reproducible. Their value lies in the fact that they make it possible to identify gaps in research and guide academic, professional and political decision making. Doing them requires clear search protocols, transparent inclusion and exclusion criteria, specialist databases and bibliographical management tools. There are manuals such as the *JBIM Manual for Evidence Synthesis* (Aromataris et al., 2024) as well as publications by the *Cochrane Collaboration*, an international organisation that has established standardised guides to guarantee rigour and quality (Cochrane Collaboration, 2025).

Despite this, there is methodological confusion with related concepts such as theoretical reviews, bibliographies or bibliometrics that do not follow standardised protocols or guarantee an exhaustive selection of sources. It is also important to specify the relationship between systematic reviews and meta-analyses: a systematic review can exist without a meta-analysis, but every meta-analysis must start with a systematic review. Meta-analysis is, therefore, a statistical tool that is integrated within the systematic review when possible.

The literature has recognised the variety of reviews and their different objectives and focusses. Campbell et al. (2023) distinguish between Scoping Reviews, Mapping Reviews and Evidence and Gap Maps (EGMs): the first of these types is exploratory and conceptual; the second is descriptive and structured; and the third comprises visual maps that identify gaps in evidence. For their part, Grant & Booth (2009) identified 14 types, among which the following stand out: Critical review, Literature review, Mapping review, Meta-analysis, Mixed studies review, Overview, Qualitative systematic review, Rapid review, Scoping review, State of the art review, Systematic review, Systematized review and Umbrella review. More recently, Sutton et al. (2019) have expanded this conceptual map to 44 types, showing how recognition of the value of reviews has intensified over the last decade and hybrid methodologies have emerged that transcend the traditional model. The 11 modalities from the *Qualitative Reviews* category are of note (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Family of Reviews Proposed by Sutton et al. (2019)

As a whole, these classifications reflect the existence of a true universe of reviews, with different aims, scopes and levels of rigour. This obliges researchers to select carefully the most appropriate type for the objectives of their study.

Therefore, the present study aims to provide an overview of qualitative systematic reviews and their types through a narrative-exploratory review: This is expected to contribute to our understanding of the types of qualitative systematic reviews in the literature and to identify academic production of this type of review in countries such as Brazil, Spain and Portugal. Finally, two examples of qualitative systematic reviews that share a common topic will be shown by way of illustration to establish similarities and differences.

2. Methodology

The present study is a narrative-exploratory review. Historically, narrative reviews constitute the oldest form of synthesis of scientific knowledge. Throughout much of the twentieth century, this type of review was the predominant approach for organizing and discussing the academic literature, particularly in the social sciences and humanities. Its main objective is to provide a critical and contextualized interpretation of a field of study, drawing on the author's expertise and a reasoned selection of relevant sources.

Systematic reviews, by contrast, emerged in the late twentieth century, particularly within the field of evidence-based medicine, in response to the need to reduce subjectivity and to increase transparency and reproducibility in the synthesis of scientific evidence. Unlike narrative reviews, systematic reviews are characterized by the use of an explicit and predefined protocol that specifies inclusion and exclusion criteria, search strategies, selection procedures, and methods of analysis (Aguilera Eguía, 2014; Greenhalgh, et al., 2018).

Therefore, the difference between these two approaches does not lie solely in the use or non-use of statistics, but rather in their degree of systematicity, methodological formalization, and purpose. While the narrative review seeks a broad, exploratory, and contextual understanding of

knowledge, the qualitative systematic review aims to answer specific research questions through explicit and replicable procedures, while maintaining an interpretative orientation. In this sense, although both share an interest in interpretation and theory, they differ substantially in their design, scope, and level of methodological control (Theile & Beall, 2024; Turnbull et al., 2023).

Accordingly, the narrative review is the method used to provide an overview of qualitative systematic reviews and their types, and its phases include: defining the subject and objective; literature search; selection of studies; critical reading and analysis of documents; organisation of information; synthesis and interpretation of results; and conclusions (Sukhera, 2022). As an example, specifically in the results phase, two pieces of research are presented representing different types of qualitative systematic reviews on a single topic. One is a meta ethnography by Edwards (2024), *Refugee and asylum-seeker children's experiences: Results of a meta ethnography*, and the other is a meta-aggregation by James (2021), *Can community-based social protection interventions improve the wellbeing of asylum seekers and refugees in the United Kingdom? A systematic qualitative meta-aggregation review*.

The questions that guided the narrative review are: What proportion of academic literature is traditional systematic reviews compared with qualitative systematic reviews? What are the most frequent types of qualitative systematic review? What types of reviews have been done in countries such as Brazil, Spain and Portugal?

The document search was done in the Scopus database as it is multidisciplinary, transversal and generalist. Authors such as Sánchez Castillo et al. (2024) confirm that it is a good database because it offers breadth, quality in the information and usability to evaluate and improve scientific research.

The classification of Grant & Booth (2009) and of Sutton et al. (2019) was used to identify types of qualitative systematic reviews, specifically with the reviews that belong to the qualitative reviews category. A total of 15 types of qualitative systematic reviews were searched for in Scopus under the following descriptors: critical interpretative synthesis, ecological triangulation, framework synthesis, grounded formal theory, meta-aggregation, meta-ethnography, meta-interpretative, meta-narrative, meta-study, meta-summary, qualitative evidence synthesis, qualitative meta-synthesis, qualitative research synthesis, textual narrative synthesis and thematic synthesis.

Qualitative systematic reviews are understood using the definition proposed by Sutton et al. (2019) and they form part of a specific family within their type of reviews. These reviews feature:

- A systematic review that uses explicit and reproducible protocols that are characteristic of a systematic review.
- Qualitative synthesis: they integrate or compare the findings of multiple qualitative studies using methods such as *thematic synthesis*, *framework synthesis*, *meta-ethnography*, *critical interpretative synthesis*, among others.

- A methodological orientation that determines whether it is an aggregating review, focussing on extracting and aggregating literal findings, or an interpretative one, that develops concepts or theories from the studies (as in meta-ethnography).
- Consideration of the context or theory, which can involve using theoretical samples or specialist searches if the aim is to explore or test theoretical ideas within the framework of the topic.

Three search strings were used. The first aimed at finding traditional systematic reviews, the second focussed on qualitative systematic reviews and the third refined the search to countries such as Brazil, Spain and Portugal (Figure 2).

SEARCH STRINGS IN SCOPUS	
SEARCH FOR TRADITIONAL SYSTEMATIC REVIEWS	
TITLE ("systematic review")	
SEARCH FOR QUALITATIVE SYSTEMATIC REVIEWS	
(TITLE (meta-narrative) OR TITLE (meta-study) OR TITLE (meta-summary) OR TITLE (meta-aggregation) OR TITLE ("qualitative research synthesis") OR TITLE ("qualitative meta-synthesis") OR TITLE ("qualitative evidence synthesis") OR TITLE (meta-ethnography) OR TITLE ("critical interpretative synthesis") OR TITLE ("grounded formal theory") OR TITLE ("thematic synthesis") OR TITLE ("textual narrative synthesis") OR TITLE ("ecological triangulation") OR TITLE ("framework synthesis") OR TITLE ("meta-interpretative"))	
SEARCH FOR QUALITATIVE SYSTEMATIC REVIEWS BY COUNTRY	
(TITLE (meta-narrative) OR TITLE (meta-study) OR TITLE (meta-summary) OR TITLE (meta-aggregation) OR TITLE ("qualitative research synthesis") OR TITLE ("qualitative meta-synthesis") OR TITLE ("qualitative evidence synthesis") OR TITLE (meta-ethnography) OR TITLE ("critical interpretative synthesis") OR TITLE ("grounded formal theory") OR TITLE ("thematic synthesis") OR TITLE ("textual narrative synthesis") OR TITLE ("ecological triangulation") OR TITLE ("framework synthesis") OR TITLE ("meta-interpretative")) AND PUBYEAR > 2004 AND PUBYEAR < 2026 AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE , "ar")) AND (LIMIT-TO (AFFILCOUNTRY , "Spain") OR LIMIT-TO (AFFILCOUNTRY , "Brazil") OR LIMIT-TO (AFFILCOUNTRY , "Portugal"))	

Figure 2. Scopus Search Strings

As this is a narrative review, no inclusion or exclusion criteria were established other than date and limitation by countries. No time period was delimited for the comparison of the number of publications relating to traditional systematic reviews and qualitative systematic reviews. However, a period of 20 years (2005–2025) was delimited for the search for qualitative reviews done by institutions from Brazil, Spain and Portugal. This period was established as it was the one with the largest production of this type of reviews seen in Scopus. The choice of these three countries is justified by the increase in reviews as indicated by the study by Murillo & Martínez-Garrido (2019). The methodological quality of the studies was not part of the exclusion criteria, following the traditional focus of Glass et al. (1981). The two studies used as examples were selected through purposive sampling for illustrative purposes. They were chosen because they address a common topic, are explicitly identified as qualitative systematic reviews, and provide sufficient methodological information (search strategy, selection criteria, and synthesis procedure) to allow for the comparison of similarities and differences.

The data analysis was done using descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages, with the aim of quantifying the documents. The results were presented in figures. In a first analysis, a search for the term “systematic review” in the titles of documents indexed in Scopus was performed with the aim of establishing the scale of the academic output that is explicitly presented under this designation. A second analysis focussed on identifying publications with terms linked to qualitative systematic reviews in their titles. A third analysis centred on comparing the production of qualitative systematic reviews from Brazil, Spain and Portugal. Finally, a meta-ethnography and a meta-aggregation are presented, both of which have people who are refugees and asylum seekers as their research topic. The analysis of these two pieces of research, which were used as examples, had a comparative qualitative basis with the following criteria: objectives; phases of the review; principal results; conclusion and limitations; and methodological recommendations. The analysis was aimed at finding similarities and differences between a meta-ethnography and a meta-aggregation.

3. Results

Traditional systematic reviews and qualitative systematic reviews. For the 1984 to 2025 time period, 340,565 documents with the term “systematic review” in their titles were found, reflecting the large academic production associated with this type of reviews. Conversely, qualitative systematic reviews represented only 3502 documents, approximately 1.03% of the total (Figure 3). Although this number is smaller than that for the traditional systematic reviews, it does show that qualitative reviews have found a space in international academic literature.



Figure 3. Comparison of Traditional Systematic Reviews and Qualitative Systematic Reviews

Types of Qualitative Systematic Reviews. The most frequent types are: framework synthesis (624 documents), thematic synthesis (582), qualitative meta-synthesis (554), meta-ethnography (548) and qualitative evidence synthesis (507). These five types represent the majority of the publications, showing that they are consolidated methodologies in qualitative research. In contrast, other types of review appear less frequently: meta-aggregation (83), meta-summary (64), qualitative research synthesis (49), critical interpretative synthesis (27), textual narrative synthesis (10), grounded formal theory (4), meta-interpretative (2) and ecological triangulation (0).

These reviews were done between 1984 and 2025 (Figure 4). The limited production observed between 1984 and 2000 reflects the fact that there was little use or recognition of these methodologies. Slow but sustained growth is apparent from 2000 to 2010, linked to the increase in qualitative focusses in health, education and social sciences. Between 2010 and 2020 there is a significant and rapid increase in publications, which is evidence of a greater acceptance of qualitative reviews in the scientific community. Finally, between 2020 and 2024 a peak of more than 500 publications in a single year is observed, followed by a slight fall in 2025, albeit maintaining high numbers compared with previous decades.

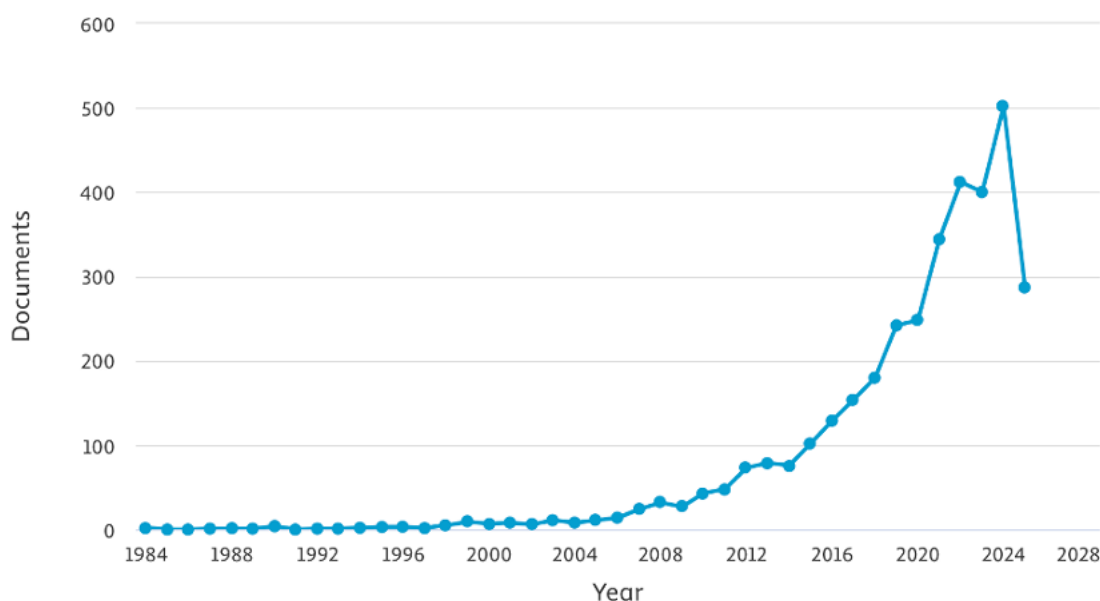


Figure 4. Qualitative Systematic Reviews by Year of Publication

The five journals that publish the most reviews are: BMJ Open (90 documents) with a visible growth from 2016 peaking in 2022 (15 publications in one year); Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews (69 documents) maintaining a stable trajectory from 2013 with moderate increases and constant presence; PLOS One (67 documents) with a growing trend since 2013 with increases in 2020 and 2024; Journal of Advanced Nursing (65 documents) with irregular but sustained growth and an increase towards 2025; and Journal of Clinical Nursing (54 documents) which has an intermediate volume with stability between 2015 and 2024.

The increase is observed between 2020 and 2022, probably coinciding with the intensification of research relating to the pandemic and the need for rapid synthesis of evidence (Figure 5).

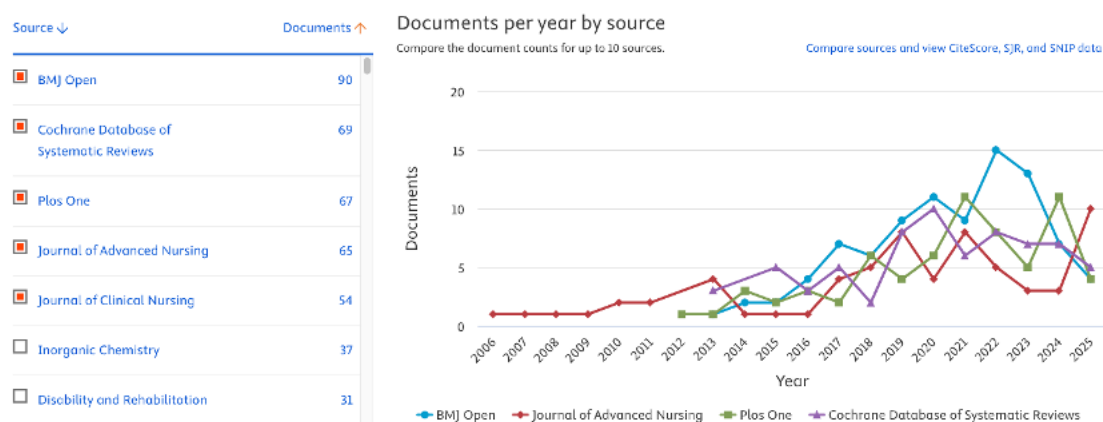


Figure 5. Publication of Qualitative Systematic Reviews in Scientific Journals

The geographical distribution by countries of the institutions where research is done (Figure 6) shows clear leadership by the English-speaking world (the United Kingdom, United States, Australia, Canada and Ireland), with the United Kingdom as the centre of production of qualitative systematic reviews. The United Kingdom (1173 documents) is by some distance the most productive country in the field, with four times the output of the United States. This reflects the strong British leadership in the methodological development of reviews, strengthened by key institutions and universities that promote the synthesis of evidence. Meanwhile, China stands out as an emerging figure in the production of reviews. South Africa and the Netherlands, with around 100 documents each, show the spread of these practices beyond the traditionally dominant countries into Africa and continental Europe.

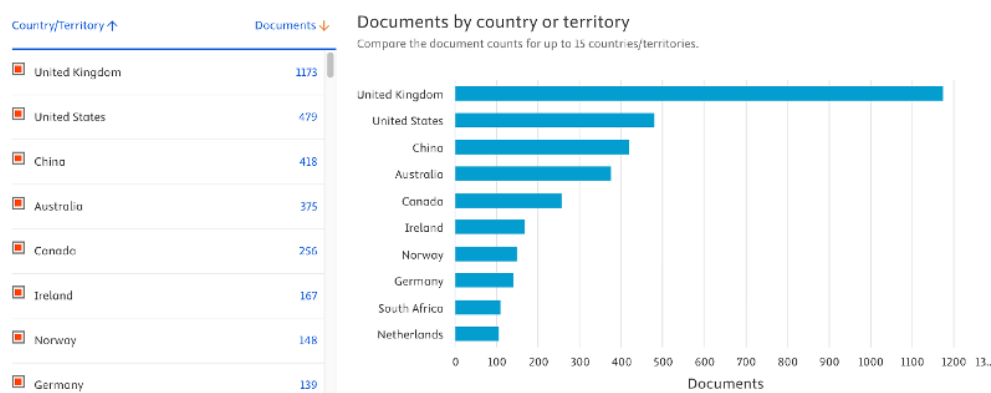


Figure 6. Qualitative Systematic Reviews by Countries

Medicine (31.2%) stands out as the most productive area of knowledge as it represents almost a third of the publications. This figure confirms that reviews first emerged and became established in the field of health, especially under the impulse of the Cochrane Collaboration. The Social Sciences (12.7%) are the second most represented area, reflecting the growing importance of qualitative syntheses in education, sociology, public policies and other social fields. Nursing (11.1%) is in third place, emphasising this discipline's key role in the early adoption of qualitative systematic reviews, particularly thanks to the work of JBI (Figure 7).

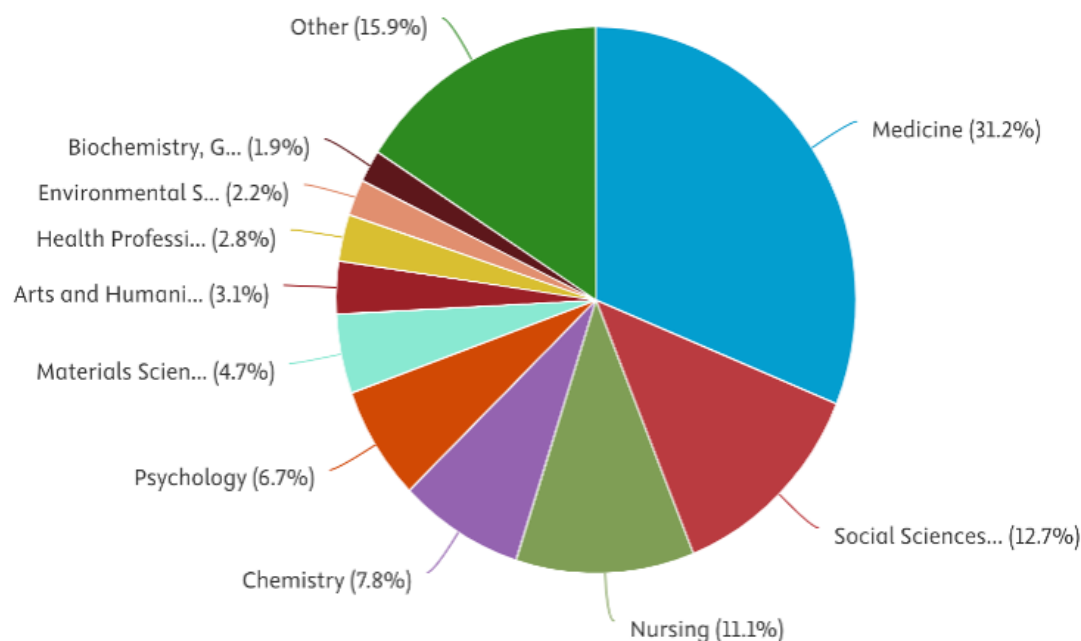


Figure 7. Qualitative Systematic Reviews by Areas of Knowledge

The following bodies are the main sponsors of this type of research. The National Natural Science Foundation of China (≈ 150 documents) is the leader in number of publications financed, confirming China's strong commitment to supporting research synthesis, especially in the area of health and social sciences; the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR, United Kingdom, ≈ 95) is in second place (this body has been key in encouraging systematic reviews as the basis of evidence-based medicine); the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE, United Kingdom, ≈ 80) in third place strengthens the UK's leading position in this field as it is directly linked to the preparation of clinical guidelines; and the Medical Research Council (United Kingdom, ≈ 65) is also among the top positions, helping consolidate the United Kingdom as a central actor in the funding of reviews (Figure 8).

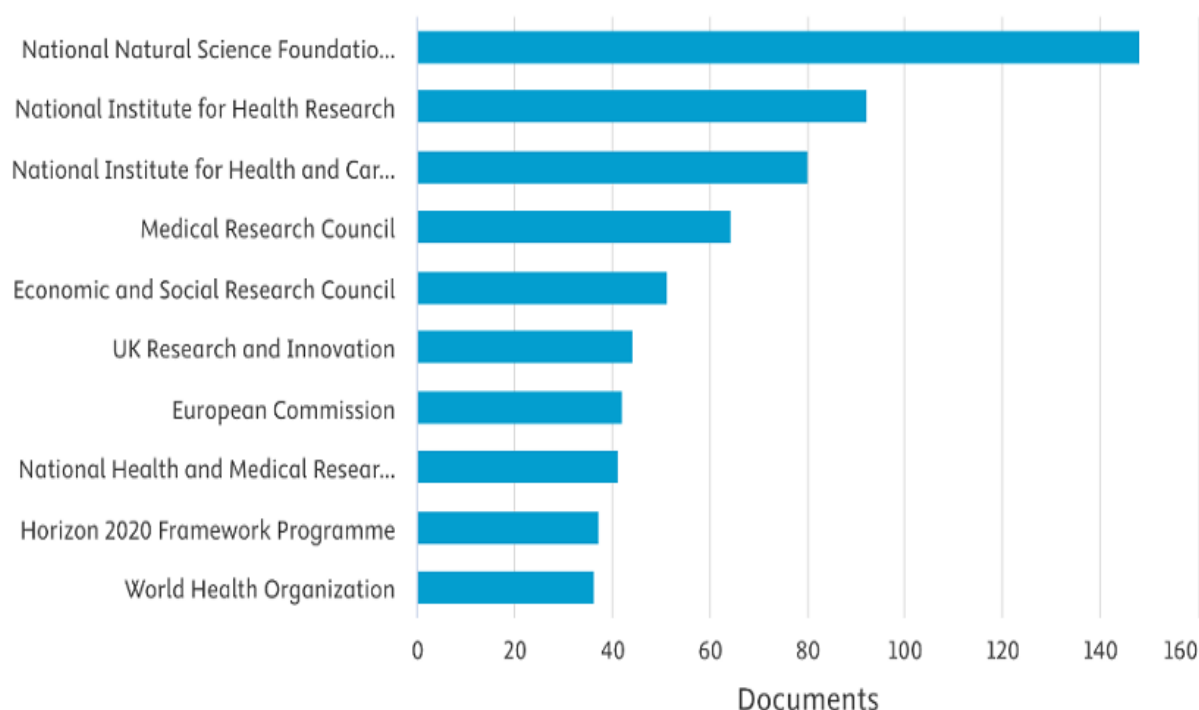


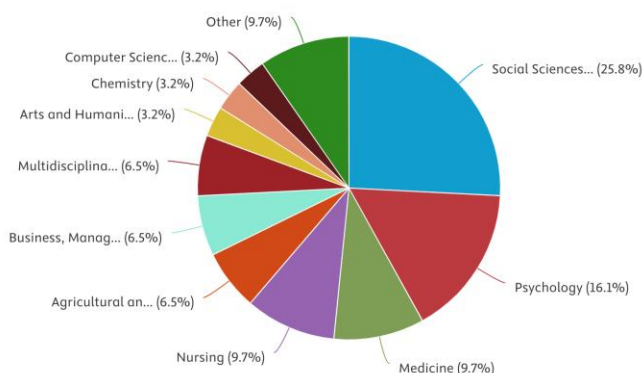
Figure 8. Qualitative Systematic Reviews by Sponsors

Production of Qualitative Systematic Reviews from Brazil, Spain and Portugal Between 2005 and 2025 these countries produced a total of 77 documents. In Brazil, the largest proportion of publications was in Social Sciences (25.8%), followed by Psychology (16.1%) and Medicine (9.7%). This reflects a clear predominance of areas focussed on social and human phenomena, with a particular interest in the analysis of experiences, educational practices and healthcare contexts. In Spain, the three main fields were Social Sciences (18.5%), Other (18.5%; e.g. toxicology, astronomy, multidisciplinary fields) and Medicine (14.8%). Medicine (21.1%) and the Social Sciences (15.8%) stood out in Portugal. Production in Portugal is principally focussed on scientific and clinical fields, with less emphasis on psychology compared with Brazil (Figure 9). The identification of qualitative systematic reviews in Chemistry in the Scopus database is a spurious result. This is because there are 17 pieces of research where the database erroneously identified “framework synthesis” qualitative reviews in titles such as “Thiophene-based covalent organic frameworks: Synthesis, photophysics and light-driven applications”.

Brazil

- 1.Social Sciences
- 2.Psychology
- 3.Medicine

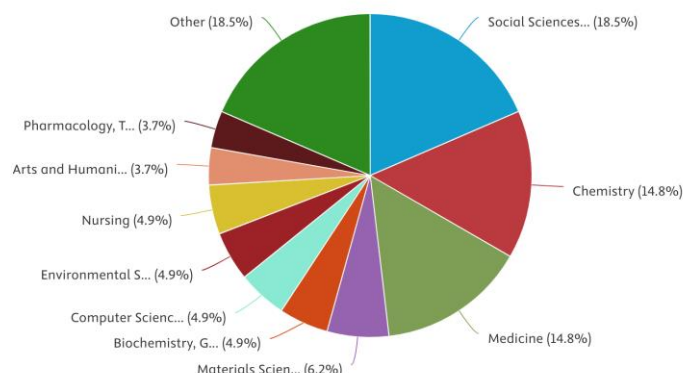
Documents by subject area



Spain

- 1.Social Sciences
- 2.Chemistry
- 3.Medicine

Documents by subject area



Portugal

- 1.Chemistry
- 2.Medicine
- 3.Social Sciences

Documents by subject area

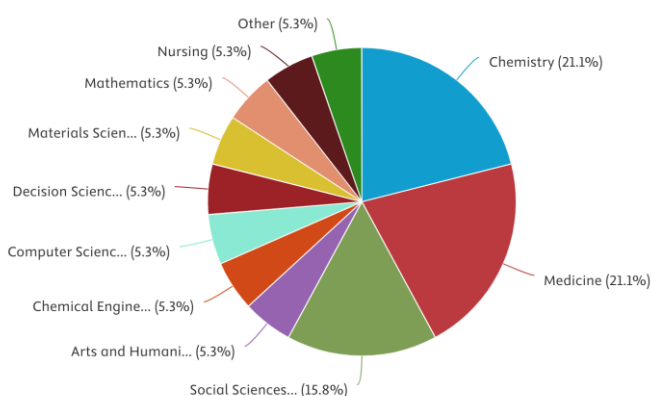


Figure 9. Qualitative Systematic Reviews from Brazil, Spain and Portugal

The most productive institution in Brazil is the *Universidade de São Paulo* (USP) with 5 documents, followed by various federal universities (*Rio Grande*, *Alagoas*, *Paraná*, *Santa Catarina*), with 2 documents each, reflecting a decentralised distribution in different regions of the country. There were also isolated international collaborations, such as with *Osnabrück University* (Germany) and the *Université du Québec en Outaouais* (Canada), which evinces international networks of cooperation (Figure 10).

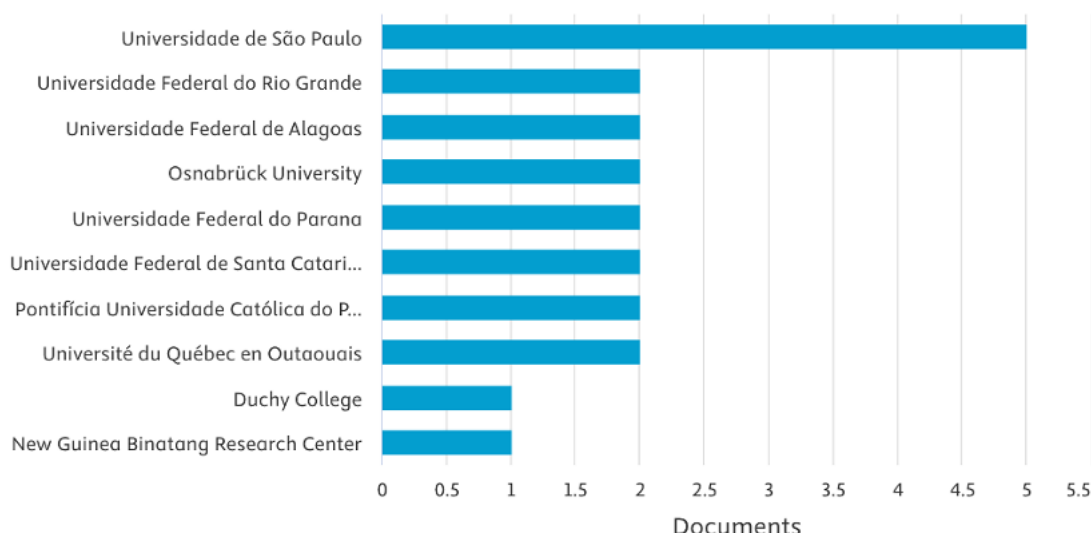


Figure 10. Institutions in Brazil that Have Done Systematic Reviews

In Spain, the *Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona* leads with 7 documents, followed by the *Universidad de Zaragoza* with 6. Other significant institutions are the *Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha* and the *Instituto de Salud Carlos III*, both with 5 documents. These are followed by various universities with 3 documents each (*Universitat de Barcelona*, *Universidad de La Laguna*, *Universidad de Jaén*, *Universidad de Granada*), as well as collaborations with foreign institutions (*Göteborgs Universitet* and *Högskolan i Borås* in Sweden) (Figure 11).

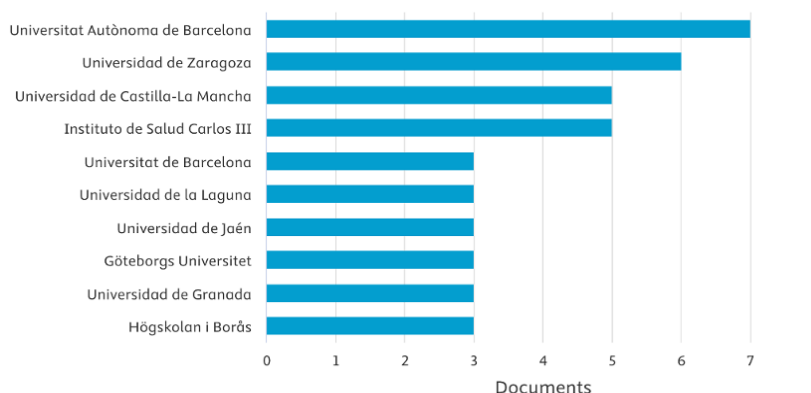


Figure 11. Institutions in Spain that Have Done Systematic Reviews

For its part, the *Universidade de Aveiro* is in first place in Portugal with 4 documents, followed by various institutions with 3 documents, including: *CICECO–Instituto de Materiais de Aveiro*, *University of Trás-os-Montes and Alto Douro (UTAD)*, *Universidade de Lisboa* and *Jadavpur University* (international collaboration with India). There are also institutions with 2 documents (*Instituto Politécnico do Porto*) and with 1 document (*Paracelsus Medical University*, *Klinikum der Universität München*, among others) (Figure 12).

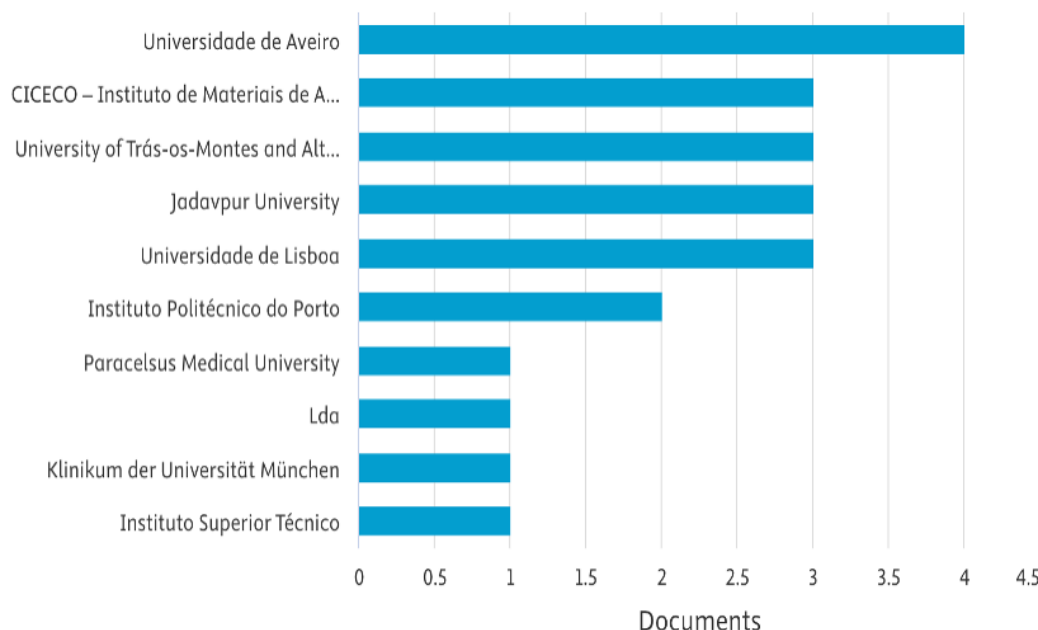


Figure 12. Institutions in Portugal that Have Done Systematic Reviews

Therefore, Spain has the most consolidated system, Brazil the most varied and decentralised, and Portugal an emerging and fragmented profile with growing international links.

Examples of qualitative systematic reviews. Finally, the comparative analysis of a meta-aggregation and a meta-ethnography that share the research topic of people with the status of refugees and asylum seekers provided an example to understand the similarities and differences between these two types of qualitative systematic review.

Study 1 Meta ethnography. Refugee and asylum-seeker children’s experiences: Results of a meta ethnography (Edwards, 2024). This study uses meta-ethnography, a method created in the 1980s by Noblit and Hare and established in health since the 1990s. Its aim is to synthesise findings from relevant qualitative studies, comparing thematic and conceptual material to generate new perspectives.

The research question was: How do child refugees and asylum seekers describe their experiences within the systems designed to support them? To answer this, eight qualitative studies including interviews with 288 children aged under 13 years were analysed.

The inclusion criteria were: articles in English (2014–2024), published in peer reviewed journals, featuring interviews with at least one child who is a refugee or asylum seeker aged 13 years or younger. Research with immigrants who were not seeking asylum, interviews centred on adults or studies that did not privilege children's perspectives were excluded.

More than 50 concepts relating to experiences were identified: personal losses, a feeling of limbo, stigmatisation, problems with integration, violence, nutritional deficiencies, school leaving, and others. These were condensed into 9 key metaconcepts:

1. Losses and traumas from the past affect the present.
2. The limbo of the asylum process creates insecurity.
3. The immigration system is an intrusive force.
4. Disruptive experiences influence decisions.
5. Education opens a hopeful future.
6. Gender influences experiences.
7. Relationships with adults are protective or destructive.
8. Children use strategies to maintain autonomy.
9. The expectation of a normal life is conserved.

The authors conclude that child refugees and asylum seekers face extreme vulnerability (trauma, loss, insecurity), but they display resilience with the support of school, peers and community services. It is emphasised that their voices must be included in policies and practices for receiving them.

With regards to the method, the following limitations are mentioned: (a) the meta-ethnography was done by a single author, without triangulation of perspectives, (b) there is a risk of under-representation of children's voices owing to lack of direct interviews and (c) the inclusion criterion was restricted to interviews with children, which reduced the sample.

The study presents some recommendations: (a) creating interdisciplinary teams to reduce biases, (b) expanding inclusion criteria towards other qualitative focuses with children and adolescents, (c) including external reviewers in the whole of the process, (d) prioritising direct testimonies by children and (e) greater transparency in the interpretation and construction of metaconcepts, to facilitate reproducibility.

Study 2 Meta-aggregation. Can community-based social protection interventions improve the wellbeing of asylum seekers and refugees in the United Kingdom? A systematic qualitative meta-aggregation review (James, 2021). This study analyses whether community social protection interventions improve the well-being of asylum seekers and refugees in the United Kingdom, using the meta-aggregation method and the JBI methodology. This is characterised by exhaustive searches and the extraction of findings without new interpretations, organised into categories with at least two results each.

The objective was to synthesise the impact of these interventions on adult refugees and asylum seekers. Of 601 documents reviewed, 23 fulfilled the quality criteria. Qualitative studies (2000–2021) that focus on refugees and asylum seekers, with direct testimonies about formal and informal community interventions were included. Data from before the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 were excluded.

The findings show that governmental support is insufficient, leading to disempowerment and dependency, while community support offers positive results. The principal axes were synthesised in eight dimensions: (1) positive impact of volunteers, (2) physical meeting spaces, (3) practical and material support, (4) training and skills development, (5) solidarity and inclusion, (6) peer support, (7) risks of exploitation owing to lack of formal support, and (8) acknowledgement of inadequate formal support.

The study concludes that refugees and asylum seekers expressed a strong desire to work and support themselves, but government help was insufficient, lacked specificity and was opaque. The following stand out among the limitations: (a) a lack of primary literature with first-hand stories, (b) dependence on interviews that reduced the diversity of perspectives and (c) heterogeneity of interventions, which made comparing results difficult. The following recommendations for future works are made: (a) expanding the inclusion criteria, (b) prioritising studies with first-hand accounts, (c) considering different types of interventions in future analyses, and (d) improving transparency and systematicity in the bibliographic search.

Consequently, meta-ethnography (study 1) and meta-aggregation (study 2) are qualitative methods that aim to synthesise findings from previous studies and work with published primary qualitative studies. Both seek to create a broader understanding of social and human phenomena by integrating dispersed results. They are both based on structured processes of search, selection and synthesis of qualitative studies, albeit with different focuses. However, while meta-ethnography provides interpretative depth, centring voices and subjectivities and building shared meanings, meta-aggregation provides objective and applicable synthesis, aimed at practice and at the formulation of social policies.

The comparative table displays the methodological similarities and differences between the two types of research (Table 1).

Table 1. Comparison of Meta-Ethnography and Meta-Aggregation

Methodological aspect	Meta-ethnography (study 1)	Meta-aggregation (study 2)
Origin	Developed by Noblit & Hare (1988)	Developed by JBI
Focus	Interpretative: seeks to reinterpret and translate concepts between studies to generate new theories or metaphors	Aggregative: seeks to extract literal findings and present them in an organised way, without reinterpreting them
Final result	Produces “metaconcepts” or new theories that emerge from the comparison and translation between studies	Produces categories and useful practical conclusions for policies, guidelines or decisions
Level of analysis	More abstract, seeks to examine meanings and explanations in more depth	More descriptive, seeks pragmatic and applicable syntheses
Frequent use	Social, cultural and educational topics (i.e. experiences of refugee children)	Fields of health, well-being and social policies, where practical evidence is required for decision making

4. Final Considerations

The results of this study show that while qualitative systematic reviews represent only 1.03 % of the total number of systematic reviews indexed in Scopus, they have undergone sustained growth over the last two decades. This finding agrees with Booth et al. (2021), who underline the growing legitimacy of qualitative evidence as a necessary complement to quantitative reviews, especially in fields such as health, education and the social sciences. The predominance of methodologies such as framework synthesis, thematic synthesis and qualitative meta-synthesis reinforces the idea that interpretative synthesis techniques are the most consolidated types for making sense of complex phenomena, as Flemming et al. (2019) confirm in applications in the field of health.

The leading role of the United Kingdom and of institutions such as Cochrane Collaboration, the Centre for Reviews and Dissemination at the University of York and the EPPI Centre at University College London reflect the tradition of synthesis of evidence and the institutional support that underpins these practices. This pattern was also identified by the Royal Society & Academy of Medical Sciences (2017), which underlines how the funding of the NIHR in the United Kingdom has been decisive for expanding the production of qualitative reviews. However, the study also identifies the growth of China, agreeing with Thelwall & Nevill (2021) who document a rapid increase in qualitative reviews in Asia, especially in public health and social well-being.

The comparative analysis of Brazil, Spain, and Portugal provides important nuance: while Brazil's reviews are largely concentrated in the social sciences and psychology, Spain and Portugal show a trend toward diversification into experimental and medical sciences. However, this diversification should be interpreted with caution, as in Spain the "Other" category also includes studies from a range of additional disciplines (e.g., toxicology, pharmaceuticals, astronomy, multidisciplinary fields, and energy). This contrasts with Mercado-Martínez (2002), who claims that qualitative reviews in Latin America remain strongly associated with education and social work. The evidence suggests that Spain and Portugal are gradually aligning themselves with STEM fields, expanding the possibilities for application of these methodologies.

As for the methodological examples, the comparison between the meta-ethnography by Edwards (2024) and the meta-aggregation by James (2021) clearly illustrates the complementarity of interpretative and aggregating focusses. Recent studies (Ames et al., 2024; Soundy, 2024) affirm that meta-ethnography enables a deeper understanding of subjective experiences, while meta-aggregation provides syntheses that are applicable to decision making in social policies. These findings agree with what this work shows: the first article captures meanings and builds theory based on children's voices, while the second organises practical findings relating to the well-being of adult refugees.

However, this study also has some limitations. The fact it depends solely on Scopus, while being justified by its multidisciplinary coverage, might mean that relevant literature indexed in databases such as Web of Science or CINAHL is missed. Furthermore, the absence of a critical

evaluation of the methodological quality of the studies restricts the strength of the conclusions, as noted by Pollock et al. (2018). Finally, the comparison between only two specific cases of qualitative reviews limits the generalisation of the findings.

In future research, it would be of value to expand the search to cover multiple databases, include evaluations with high methodological quality and explore the potential of less widespread methodologies such as critical interpretative synthesis or ecological triangulation. It would be particularly relevant to examine the role of funding policies, institutional frameworks, and disciplinary traditions in shaping this type of review across different countries. Such an approach would contribute to a better understanding of how methodological decisions and thematic priorities are articulated in relation to specific scientific and national contexts. It would also be of value to analyse the specific impact of qualitative reviews on the design of public policies, an aspect that has received little attention in the literature (Booth et al., 2021; Dacombe, 2018).

In conclusion, qualitative systematic reviews are an invaluable methodological resource for understanding complex phenomena from a holistic perspective. Although they are uncommon compared to traditional reviews, their interpretative and practical value make them essential tools for moving towards research that is more inclusive and sensitive to the diversity of human contexts and experiences.

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Informed Consent: This work did not involve human participants or identifiable data; therefore, obtaining informed consent was not applicable.

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