

# Identifying the Exclusions Within Academic Literature Regarding Free School Meal Practices and Policies: A Scoping Review

## Authors

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## Introduction

Free School Meals (FSM) are a long-standing means tested benefit that have existed within the United Kingdom since the 19th Century. Since 1999, education has been a devolved power, allowing each of the four nations to legislate their own eligibility criteria for the scheme, leading to diverging practices and policies across the board, leaving the potential gaps and exclusions to have formed. This scoping review seeks to fill a gap in research as there has been, to the knowledge of the author(s), no previous evidence synthesis of available academic literature. This review will focus on papers published between 2013 and 2023.

## Methodology

As the research question for this study is broad, a scoping review was chosen as the appropriate method for evidence synthesis as it allows for available knowledge to be mapped and exclusions to be identified (Petersen et al., 2017). The methodology for this study was utilised in line with the guidance developed by the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) (Peters et al., 2020) and a protocol was registered on Open Science Framework to allow for replicability (link: <https://osf.io/x8yr9/>).

Nine search terms were developed with a university librarian and utilised over 10 databases looking for papers that were published between 2013 and 2023; that focused on a UK population; and that had a focus on FSM further than being a proxy measurement for poverty. (See figure 3 for the search strategy).

## Objective

**Research Question:** What themes and in turn, exclusions can be identified within academic literature regarding Free School Meals?

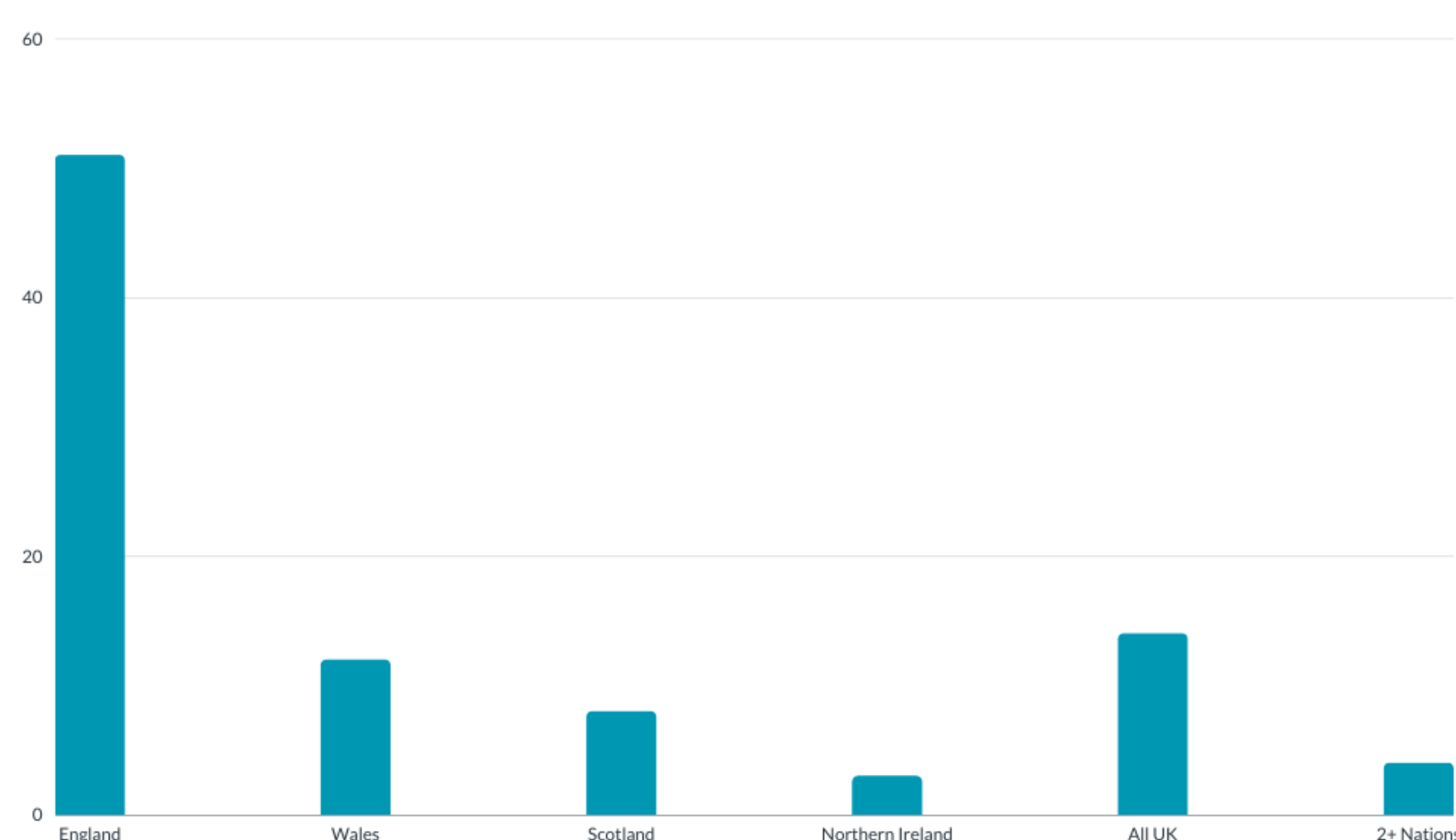
- To identify the existing themes, voices, and conversations, present within academic literature between 2013 and 2023.
- To discuss how these identified themes highlight the exclusions present in policy and practice.
- To create a narrative synthesis of existing academic research regarding Free School Meals.

## Results

Ninety-two papers were identified for inclusion in this study, with four key themes identified. These themes were; attainment differences; health and related inequalities; social concerns; and policy differences, with sub themes including mental health, stigma, and others (see Table 1).

With the identification of these themes, the differences in practices relating to FSM were highlighted, such as differences in communication to parents from one local authority to the next; a lack of voice provided to stakeholders in non-leadership roles within schools; and children aged 9-11 years old often being excluded from data collections, as many studies which included children focused on younger children (who are eligible for universal provisions in England and Scotland), or older children transitioning to secondary school. These exclusions will be used to provide a rationale for future studies.

Figure 1: The scope of articles selected for inclusion in this study



The papers included in this study also highlighted that there is a lack of research on the devolved nations, as many papers treat the *United Kingdom* and *England* as synonymous, as highlighted in Figure 1 and 2.

## Conclusion

The themes identified in this study will allow for future research to be conducted looking at the exclusions created by FSM practices and policies across the UK.

These future studies will focus on the highlighted exclusions by aiming to provide children aged 9 to 11 with a voice to share their thoughts on FSM in line with Article 12 of the UNCRC. Future studies will also gather the experiences of other stakeholders such as those in non-leadership positions in schools, including canteen staff and administrators, alongside parents and guardians of school aged children.

Future studies will be conducted across all four nations of the UK to ensure a picture is developed for each nation and fill a gap of limited research on the devolved nations.

Table 1: The number of papers identified under each theme

Attainment Differences	36 papers
Health and Related Inequalities	26 papers
Social Concerns	15 papers
Policy Differences	15 papers

Figure 2: A heat concentration map of the most researched regions and authorities across the UK

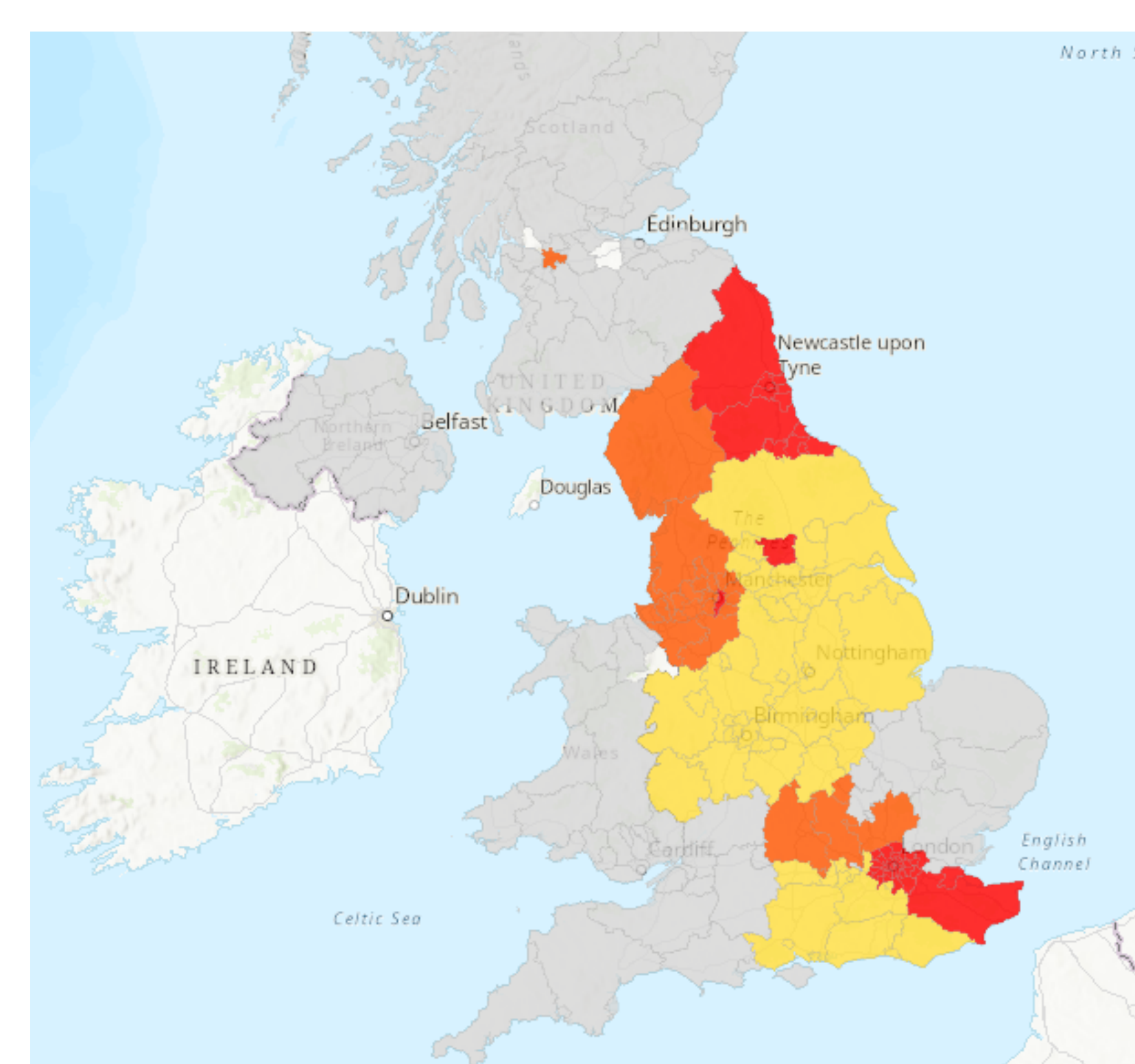
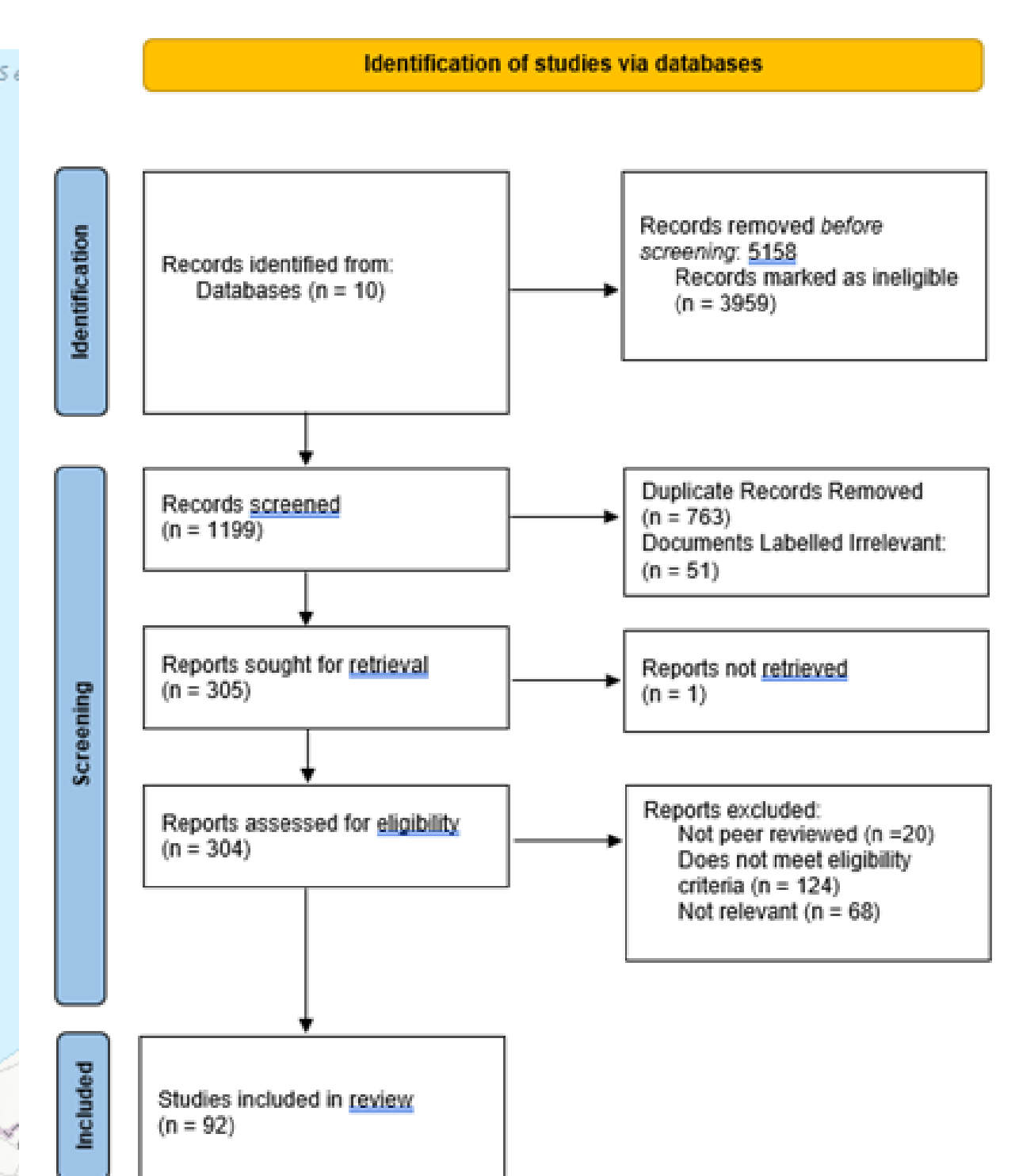


Figure 3: Search strategy



From: Page MJ, McKenzie JE, Bossard PM, Boutron I, Hoffmann TC, Mulrow CD, et al. The PRISMA 2020 statement: an updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *BMJ* 2021;372:n71. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n71

## References

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Petersen, J., Pearse, P.F., Ferguson, L.A., Langford, C.A., (2017), Understanding Scoping Reviews: Definition, Purpose and Process, *Journal of the American Association of Nurse Practitioners*, 29, pp. 12-16.