

Well-Being in Emerging Adults First-Year University Students: A Scoping Review

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The prevalence of well-being problems in first-year students is quite significant. This scoping review aims to map studies on well-being in emerging adults, specifically first-year students, and to summarize the protective and risk factors associated with it. The study searched for and identified articles published between 2004 and 2024, and obtained 18 final articles from the 2,011 initial articles identified. The review followed PRISMA 2022 guidelines and the JBI Reviewer's Manual, using eight databases: Scopus, Web of Science, Ebsco, Taylor & Francis, ScienceDirect, JSTOR, Google Scholar, and ProQuest. The protective factors for the well-being of first-year university students consist of, internal factors: self-compassion, self-esteem, social support, sleep quality and frequency of physical exercise, motivation to leave home, adaptability and resilience, and involvement in meaningful activities; and external factors: positive interactions and support, experiences, and attachments to academic institutions, effective roles of the community and appropriate interventions. Risk factors are internal factors: stress, problematic behavior, low self-esteem, feelings of isolation, hopelessness, thoughts and/or plans for suicide, mood and anxiety disorders, and external factors: inadequate support, previous adversity/trauma, maladaptive interactions, and non-conducive educational institutions. The review identified specific internal and external protective and risk factors affecting the well-being of first-year university students, but some factors are common to students' general well-being. Utilization of existing results requires a broader study that accommodates the existing diversity.

Keywords: well-being, emerging adult, first-year, university student, risk factor, protective factor

INTRODUCTION

First-year university scholars frequently encounter substantial mental health difficulties. Research has indicated a significant prevalence of well-being issues among first-year students; in a study conducted in Northern

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Ireland, more than half of the incoming students disclosed having experienced a mental health disorder in their lives, with 19.1% reporting the occurrence of three or more disorders (McLafferty et al., 2017).

Another study found that the lifetime and 12-month prevalence of probable mental disorders among first-year students in Spain were 41.3% and 35.7% (Ballester et al., 2020). An Australian study found that around 19.2% of students reported mental health problems, with 67.4% experiencing subsyndromal symptoms (Stallman, 2010). Specific conditions such as depression and anxiety were highly prevalent, with levels being moderate to severe; the research results of Islam et al. (2022) in Bangladesh reached 69.5% and 61%, respectively, while Mortier et al. (2015) in their research on Turkish students, found a prevalence of 27.1% and 47.1%. Mortier et al. (2015) also revealed that 27% of first-year students experience stress. Transitional conditions make students vulnerable to the transitions and changes they experience, which affect their well-being. Along with mental health, the term well-being is often used interchangeably. Nonetheless, the World Health Organization (2005) posits that affirmative mental health constitutes the 'cornerstone for overall well-being.'

Definitions of well-being, with a variety of theoretical frameworks in the literature, are complex and often exists a distinction between hedonic well-being (encompassing constructs such as happiness and life satisfaction), and eudaemonic well-being (which pertains to optimal functioning and the pursuit of a fulfilling life) a differentiation that is substantiated by empirical data from the general population (Weich et al., 2011). Diener's subjective well-being theory (Diener et al., 1998), developed within the hedonic tradition, emphasizes that cognitive aspects of well-being (e.g., life satisfaction) are distinct from affective well-being but that the two are complementary. The eudaemonic approach to psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989) emphasizes "positive psychological functioning" and argues that subjective assessments of how satisfied we feel with our lives are insufficient. The eudaemonic tradition is further developed by self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which focuses on self-actualization. In Positive Psychology, the PERMA model synthesizes the hedonic and eudemonic approaches to build a combination of positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and purpose, and accomplishment, as well-being (Seligman, 2011).

Attention to the well-being of first-year students is also important because they are in the developmental period of emerging adulthood, a developmental concept proposed as a new conception that ranges from the late teens to the twenties, with a particular focus on the demographic cohort encompassing ages 18 to 25 years (Arnett, 2000). Being in this age range, first-year students are a group of individuals who share several main characteristics, namely identity exploration, instability, many choices, self-focus, and feelings of "in-between" no longer being teenagers but not yet fully adults (Arnett, 2014). These characteristics describe the vulnerable nature of emerging adults. A study of emerging adults who had just graduated from post-secondary education in Canada showed that 35% to 55% of participants were found to be at high to very high risk of experiencing psychological distress (Brown et al., 2022). Psychological distress among students will be associated with lower academic achievement and greater disability (Stallman, 2010). Unfortunately, despite the high prevalence, 22.3% of students with problems reported not intending to seek help (McLafferty et al., 2017).

The prevalence of well-being and mental health issues among first-year college students is relatively high, with various risk factors contributing to poor well-being, and requires further elaboration. Further discussion of the determinants and risk factors will be closely linked to the imperative to implement preventive measures that may be undertaken as prophylaxis. Numerous scoping reviews about well-being have been conducted related to its conceptualization and measurement in students (Dodd et al., 2021), support for well-being from medical institutions, and interventions provided to engineering students (Mohmand et al., 2022; Tait et al., 2024), descriptions of undergraduate and postgraduate nursing students (Juanamasta et al., 2022), and well-being from the students' perspective (Hossain et al., 2023). However, these scoping reviews focused more on articles that examined students' well-being in general, rather than specifically on first-year students. These articles were also limited to students in specific fields of science or majors. The researcher intended to undertake an inquiry employing a scoping review methodology to elucidate the elements that impact (including both risk and protective factors) the well-being of emerging adults who face the challenges of first-year students at university. Various research findings reveal distinct challenges to the well-being of first-year students, and studies across diverse fields underscore the pressing need for this scoping review.

METHOD

The analysis of the scoping review presented in this article uses the PRISMA guidelines presented by Tricco et al. (2018) to ensure the integrity of the reporting process. A systematic and comprehensive methodology is attempted to be upheld, using the Arksey & O'Malley (2005) methodological framework strengthened by the adoption of recommendations from (Levac et al., 2010) and the JBI (The Joanna Briggs Institute) Reviewer's Manual (Peters et al., 2020). To ensure the extensive evaluation procedure adheres to a well-defined protocol (<https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/AWM3T>), each phase is carefully carried out. The combination of the PRISMA guidelines with the Arksey and O'Malley framework provides a thorough, systematically structured examination.

Stage 1: Identifying Research Questions

The scoping review was developed to explore the factors that influence well-being in emerging adults who are first-year university students and the steps that may be implemented to mitigate the prevalence of issues within this domain. The research questions used to guide the exploration of the search results in the context of first-year university students were: 1) What protective factors contribute to the development of well-being? 2) What risk factors can be anticipated to maintain levels of well-being?

Stage 2: Identifying Relevant Articles

The search for pertinent scholarly articles was executed utilizing a keyword-based search that was a combination of ("well-being" OR "mental health" OR wellness) AND ("emerg* adult*" OR "young adult*" OR "early adult*") AND ("college student*" OR "university student*" OR "undergraduate student*" OR "higher education student*") AND ("first year" OR "first grade" OR freshm*n), in six international electronic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, Ebsco, Taylor and Francis, Google Scholar and Proquest (dissertations and theses). Different combinations of keywords were used as part of the search strategy in the database to

optimize the existing process: ("well-being" OR "mental health") AND ("emerging adult" OR "early adult") AND ("college student" OR "university student" OR "undergraduate student") AND ("first year" OR freshmen), in Science Direct and JSTOR. The investigation was performed on scientific publications disseminated between 2004 and 2024. A total of 2,011 articles were obtained from all databases (see Table 1).

Table 1. Search Strategy

Database	Filter	Number Of Articles
Scopus	Document type: Article	290
WoS	Document type: Article	183
Ebsco	Article	10
Taylor & Francis	Article type: Articles	836
Proquest	Dissertation and thesis	200
Google Scholar	Item type: Reviewed article	200
Science Direct	Article type: Research article	250
JSTOR	Item type: Article	42
Total		2.011

Stage 3: Selecting Articles Based on Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The search was conducted separately by two reviewers (hereinafter, IS and IHFA) in each database, and the results were exported as a .ris file. The search results were then combined in Mendeley Reference Manager, which also screened for and removed duplicates. One hundred identical data points were identified and cleaned, yielding 1,911 articles. Further screening was conducted using Rayyan.ai to filter duplicate data again. In this process, two reviewers disagreed on two articles, and the decisions were reached through discussion, resulting in 51 identical data points. After filtering for duplicates, 1,860 (1,660 from databases and 200 from Google Scholar) records were obtained, and further screening was conducted using a detailed search method based on inclusion and exclusion criteria, as delineated in Table 2. The screening was carried out separately by the two reviewers, each turning on the blind-on feature in Rayyan.ai.

Table 2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Time Period	2004–2024	Research outside the period
Article type	Empirical research articles that have undergone peer review	Articles that do not result from empirical research (such as literature reviews and meta-analyses).
Research Focus	Related to well-being and/or mental health in emerging adults	Not related to well-being and/or mental health. Related to well-being and/or mental health, but not in emerging adults.
Setting	Universities with first-year student participants, no disabilities/special needs, not related to the COVID-19 pandemic conditions	Not within the scope of higher education and/or not for first-year students and/or having disabilities/special needs and/or related to the COVID-19 pandemic conditions

This scoping review excluded studies within the COVID-19 context to preserve the conceptualization of well-being among first-year university

students under normative, non-disrupted conditions. The crisis condition brings about an exogenous global shock (contextual confounder) that substantially altered higher education environments; including learning modalities, social interaction patterns, and access to institutional resources. These abrupt contextual changes are likely to introduce atypical stressors and distort the underlying mechanisms of well-being, thereby limiting comparability with non-pandemic evidence. In line with the scoping review guidelines, which emphasize the use of clearly defined contextual boundaries to enhance analytical coherence (Munn et al., 2018; Peters et al., 2020), this exclusion criterion was applied to ensure that the synthesized evidence reflects the typical developmental and academic experiences of first-year university students (increase conceptual validity and comparability).

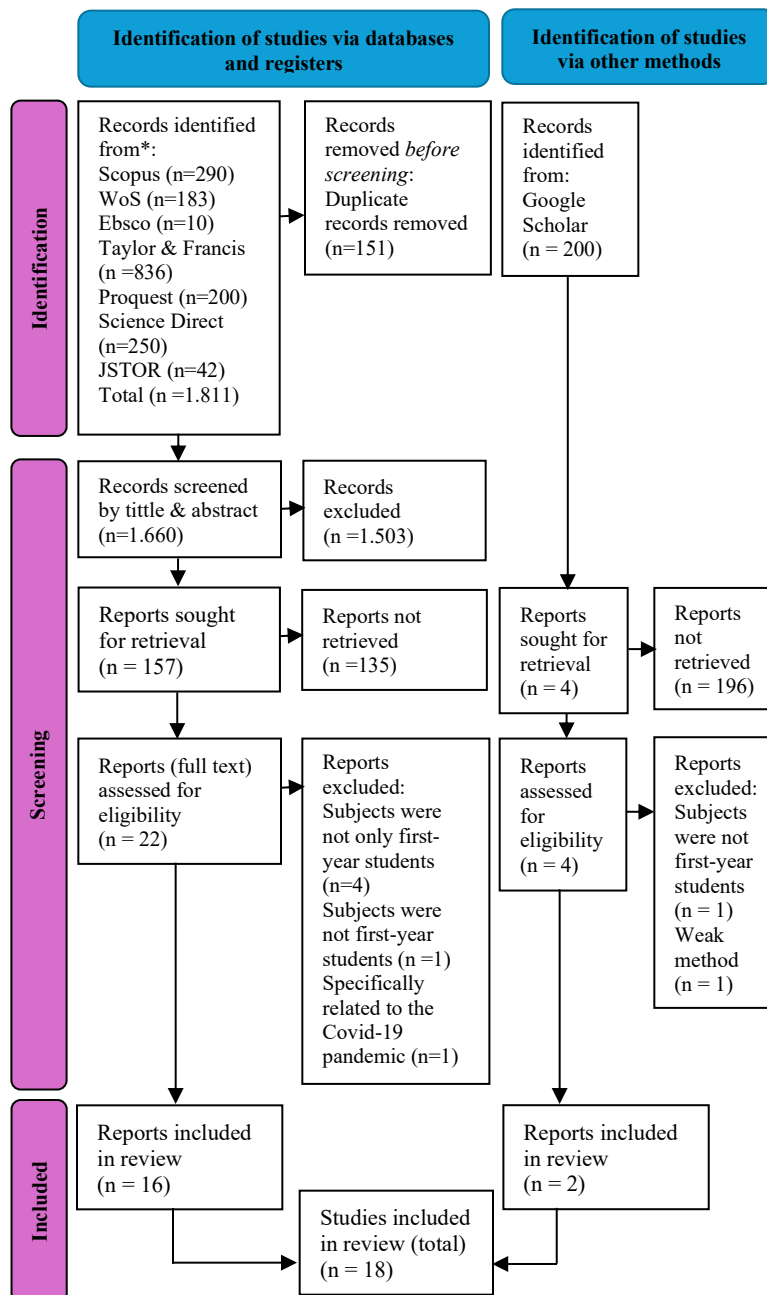


Figure 1. PRISMA flowchart

The screening procedure typically consists of two stages: an initial abstract and title screening, followed by a comprehensive review of the full text. Researchers first determine articles with titles and abstracts relevant to the research. Articles that meet the criteria of relevance in both title and abstract will be included in the full-text review after identifying that the title and abstract are relevant. Of the 1,860 articles, they were screened based on title and abstract, resulting in 26 articles (22 from databases and 4 from Google Scholar) being re-screened in full text. Screening of selected full articles was carried out in accordance with the inclusion criteria, and 18 articles (16 from databases and 2 from Google Scholar) were included in the review. The level of transparency and reproducibility in the screening process is shown in Figure 1. In this scoping review, a formal quality appraisal of the included studies wasn't conducted. In accordance with JBI methodology, a scoping review does not aim to get a critically appraised and synthesized answer to a specific clinical question, but rather to map the existing literature (Peters et al., 2020). So, a formal quality appraisal of the included studies is generally not performed

Stage 4: Mapping and Data Extraction

Both reviewers independently extracted data using a predetermined extraction form. The extraction form was created and tested by IS across three data sets, and the template was discussed with IHFA to agree on the final template to be used. The guidelines and urgency of the formula template trial followed the scoping review guidelines in the JBI Reviewer's Manual (Peters et al., 2020).

The charting process was carried out with the help of Elicit.ai and ChatPDF.ai. The reviewers in this scoping used Elicit.ai and ChatPDF.ai as supporting tools to aid in the initial organization and visualization of data. They were far away from being used for independent data extraction, determination of screening criteria, or conclusive interpretation. All data extracted were meticulously validated by the reviewers against the original full-text articles. Consequently, the proportion of data that underwent manual verification for all synthesized outputs reached 100%.

There were no systematic attempts to quantify an "error rate" between AI-generated outputs and those assessed by human reviewers, as the AI outputs were not regarded as authoritative data but rather as preliminary facilitators. Any discrepancies identified during the manual verification process were rectified through direct cross-referencing with the original articles and, when necessary, discussions among the authors. To ensure methodological rigor, the review followed established scoping review guidelines, and all final data included in the synthesis and graphical outputs were human-validated.

The data extraction form was uploaded to a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for further analysis and tabulation. The extracted data included study information (title, author, year, and location/country), study objectives, sample characteristics, study limitations, risk factors, and protective factors.

Stage 5: Synthesis (Collecting, Summarizing, and Reporting) of Results

Data analysis involved extracting data previously collected by researchers. IS synthesized results with descriptive results from the studies

collected first. The data are presented in tables to facilitate analysis and allow comparison across all identified criteria. All existing criteria are used to characterize the articles' results and answer the research questions. Using these categories, the most relevant themes found in the articles are then identified, summarized, and further elaborated in the discussion. Next, a descriptive and narrative report of the analysis is provided. Following this, the researcher considers the implications of the research findings for practice and policy. Throughout this process, the PRISMA-ScR 2022 checklist serves as a guide for reporting.

RESULTS

Two search strategies were used to obtain 2,011 articles. The screening and extraction yielded 18 articles, which were subjected to final analysis, as shown in Figure 1, which was created based on the PRISMA 2020 Flowchart (Page et al., 2021).

Each study has a different methodological approach and theoretical framework, as seen in Table 3. All articles underwent peer review, with a quantitative approach using the cross-sectional method (8 studies), a longitudinal cohort study (8 studies), and a daily diary observational study (1 study), and a qualitative approach using the interpretive phenomenological analysis method (1 study). Different theoretical frameworks support different methodological approaches, which are the basis for each study. However, these theoretical frameworks can be grouped into several categories. First, the research uses a multifaceted theoretical framework approach (Adams et al., 2021; Duffy et al., 2020; Erol et al., 2023; Kroshus et al., 2021; Nicotera et al., 2015). Second, research with a specific type of well-being theoretical framework (Murdock, 2013; Navarra-Ventura et al., 2024; Wigtil & Henriques, 2015). Third is research with a theoretical framework of stress and coping dynamics (Burke et al., 2016; Fruehwirth et al., 2023; Reid et al., 2016). Fourth, research with a Positive Psychology theoretical framework (Isik Akin et al., 2024; Volstad et al., 2020). Fifth, research with a financial parenting theoretical framework (Serido et al., 2010), and finally, research that does not clearly describe the theoretical framework used (Arterberry et al., 2024; Bray & Kwan, 2006; Goodwin et al., 2016; Koschig et al., 2023).

Table 3. Theoretical Framework and Methodological Approach

Article	Theoretical Framework	Methodology
(Nicotera et al., 2015)	A multifaceted conceptualization of well-being, including psychosocial, academic, and social components, and specific measures such as college self-efficacy, alcohol use, and development.	Longitudinal observational study
(Kroshus et al., 2021)	The cultural-ecological transactional framework	Longitudinal observational study
(Duffy et al., 2020)	Biopsychosocial framework	Longitudinal prospective cohort study
(Adams et al., 2021)	Biopsychosocial framework	Longitudinal cohort study

Article	Theoretical Framework	Methodology
(Erol et al., 2023)	Biopsychosocial framework	A descriptive cross-sectional observational study
(Navarra-Ventura et al., 2024)	Mental Well-being	Longitudinal multicenter observational cohort study
(Wigtil, & Henriques, 2015)	Psychological Well-being (PWB)	A cross-sectional observational study
(Murdock, 2013)	Not mentioned	A cross-sectional observational study
(Burke et al., 2016)	Stress and coping theory, relational maintenance theory, dan family communication/systems theories	A daily diary observational study
(Reid et al., 2016)	The stress buffering theory dan the main effect theory of perceived social support	Longitudinal observational study with a prospective cohort design.
(Fruehwirth et al., 2023)	1) A life course perspective, 2) A stress and coping framework, 3) A stress and vulnerability framework.	A prospective observational cohort study.
(Volstad et al., 2020)	1) Keyes' Dimensions of Flourishing 2) Huppert and So's Flourishing Scale 3) Diener et al.'s Flourishing Scale 4) The PERMA-Profilier	Interpretative Phenomenological Approach
(Isik Akin et al., 2024)	Self-Determination Theory,	A prospective, longitudinal study
(Serido et al., 2010)	Financial Parenting Patterns	A cross-sectional observational survey
(Koschig et al., 2023)	Not mentioned	A cross-sectional, mixed-method
(Goodwin et al., 2016)	Not mentioned	A cross-sectional survey
(Bray & Kwan, 2006)	Not mentioned	Retrospective, observational study.
(Arterberry et al., 2024)	Not mentioned	A cross-sectional survey

The selected articles were conducted in different locations; however, most were conducted in the United States (13 studies), and others in Turkey (2 studies), Spain (1 study), Germany (1 study), and Ireland (1 study). The number of research subjects also varied widely, from 9 to 5,509 students, and almost all studies used more female than male subjects, except for those by Kroshus et al. (2021) and (Nicotera et al., 2015). In addition to involving both male and female subjects, all studies had one characteristic in common: first-year students. Other characteristics varied widely and were adjusted to each research objective.

In accordance with the objectives of the Scoping review, protective and risk factors for the well-being of emerging adults who are first-year university students were identified (see Table 4).

Table 4. Protective Factors and Risk Factors for Well-being

Article	Protective Factors	Risk Factors
(Nicotera et al., 2015)	Involvement in civic activities during the first year of college	Feelings of isolation and low levels of social support
(Kroshus et al., 2021)	Self-compassion was the strongest and most consistent positive predictor	Chronic stress had a strong influence, and self-compassion and coping skills were unable to mitigate its effects.
(Duffy et al., 2020)	Self-esteem, low perceived stress, social support, sleep quality and exercise frequency	Distal risk factors: family history (mental illness in relatives), early life adversity (abuse, neglect, trauma), previous mental health problems. Proximal risk factors: sleep problems, use of hazardous drugs, limited regular physical exercise, lack of social support, low self-esteem, high perceived stress.
(Adams et al., 2021)	Connectedness to university can reduce the risk of persistent or emerging symptoms of anxiety and depression and has a predictive function for recovery.	Drug used
(Erol et al., 2023)	-	Experiencing bullying, feeling hopeless, having suicidal thoughts, planning suicide, and students who experience sleep problems are at higher risk of psychological problems. Insomnia and smoking were identified as the strongest risk factors for mental health. Being diagnosed with a chronic illness, not engaging in physical activity, or being underweight
(Navarra-Ventura et al., 2024)	Being male, foreign-born, having “high” perceived support, and having “high” perceived mental health increased the odds of high mental well-being.	Growing up in a suburban area, stressful experiences and anxiety disorders decreased the odds of high Mental Well-Being.

Article	Protective Factors	Risk Factors
	“High” positive relationships on campus and with family increased the odds of high mental well-being. “Medium” self-perceived support, sleeping ≥ 8 hours per day, and “high” self-perceived mental health decreased the odds of low MWB. Conversely, “medium” and “high” positive relationships on campus and “high” positive relationships with family decreased the odds of low mental well-being.	Mood and anxiety disorders increase the possibility of low Mental Well-Being. Betrayal, quarrels, cheating, or breakups increase the odds of low mental well-being. Conversely, family maladaptation, betrayal, quarrels, cheating or breakups, and physical or sexual violence decreased the odds of high mental well-being.
(Wigtil & Henriques, 2015)	-	Intelligence levels tend to be negatively related to psychological well-being. However, higher intelligence is not always positively correlated with better well-being in emerging adults, contrasting findings in children and adolescents. Developmental differences during emerging adulthood, suggesting that the transition to adulthood is a unique stressor.
(Murdock, 2013)	Social Support via Texting, at moderate levels, can serve as a protective factor as a form of social support and connection, which can buffer stress. The context and content of text messages are important, as supportive interactions can enhance well-being. Effective Coping Strategies to develop effective mechanisms for managing stress. Students who are proficient at managing their interpersonal relationships and related stressors are likely to achieve better mental health outcomes.	The incidence of interpersonal stress is elevated and exhibits a substantial correlation with reduced emotional well-being and increased levels of burnout. Such stressors may arise from cognitive dissonance within relationships when anticipated outcomes diverge from actual experiences, resulting in psychological distress. High Daily Texting Behavior significantly negatively impacts emotional well-being, especially when combined with high interpersonal stress. Excessive texting can exacerbate feelings of stress and burnout.

Article	Protective Factors	Risk Factors
		Sleep problems, common among university students, can further cause burnout and emotional distress. Poor sleep quality is often associated with higher stress levels and lower overall mental health.
(Burke et al., 2016)	Fostering affirmative, transparent, and comforting quotidian discourse with caregivers has been correlated with enhanced psychosocial well-being. Specifically, higher levels of daily openness and assurance moderated the association between daily stress and loneliness, suggesting that maintaining effective relationships may protect against the adverse effects of stress.	Higher levels of daily stress in college students also increased daily loneliness and depression and decreased happiness. Higher levels of stress were a significant risk factor for poorer psychosocial well-being.
(Reid et al., 2016)	Perceived family social support during early college adjustment may protect first-year students who have been bullied from anxiety during their college adjustment.	A history of childhood bullying is positively associated with depression and anxiety.
(Fruehwirth et al., 2023)	-	Eating disorder symptoms, poor sleep, and lack of vigorous physical activity may be exacerbated by perceived chronic stress. Stress related to appearance and health is associated with eating disorder symptoms; stress related to health and relationships is associated with poor sleep; and stress related to health is associated with a lack of vigorous physical activity.
(Volstad et al., 2020)	Positive relationships with peers, faculty, and family members are essential to fostering a sense of belonging and support, which promotes flourishing. Engagement in Meaningful Activities that align with personal interests and values can	Low-level support systems that are difficult to access can hinder students' ability to thrive, leaving them feeling isolated and unsupported during transitions. Negative Self-Perception, from self-esteem or self-image, makes it challenging to engage positively with

Article	Protective Factors	Risk Factors
	increase a sense of purpose and satisfaction, contributing to flourishing. Resilience and adaptability to new situations and bouncing back from setbacks allow students to flourish despite challenges.	the environment, which impacts their overall development. Overwhelmed by new responsibilities and struggling to find balance, they can diminish their development.
(Isik Akin et al., 2024)	Parent-Child Relationship Warmth: Relationships with mothers and fathers characterized by higher warmth and satisfaction were positively associated with life satisfaction, suggesting that supportive, warm relationships can enhance well-being. Autonomy Support: Increased life satisfaction was associated with greater parental autonomy support. When parents support their children's independence, it can serve as a protective factor for children's mental health. Motivation to Leave Home: Emerging adults who felt motivated to leave home tended to have better well-being outcomes than those who did not feel ready to leave home, highlighting the importance of personal motivation in facilitating a smoother transition.	Conflict with Parents: Higher perceived stress and lower life satisfaction were associated with increased conflict, particularly with mothers. It is concluded that negative relationships with parents may be a significant stressor for emerging adults during this transition. Homesickness: Students who move away from home often experience homesickness, which can negatively impact their well-being. Lack of Autonomy Support: Increased stress was associated with decreased autonomy support from parents, particularly for women. Thus, inadequate support for autonomy may be a risk factor for mental health problems.
(Serido et al., 2010)	Perceived parental financial communication, perceived parental financial expectations, parental social status, and financial coping behaviors can improve well-being.	Financial stress and psychological stress
(Koschig et al., 2023)	Mentally healthy universities with regular offerings, development of new structures, networking, service delivery, good accessibility, clear information for students and university staff, and	Barriers to developing mental health centers at universities with no health objectives, inflexible structures, lack of support from university management, lack of knowledge (university staff), lack of funding, and

Article	Protective Factors	Risk Factors
	external partner initiatives.	lack of motivation to learn about “Healthy Universities.”
(Goodwin et al., 2016)	Public knowledge about mental health issues and awareness of help-seeking resources lowers the likelihood of having motivation to seek help.	Lower likelihood of having the motivation to seek help.
(Bray & Kwan, 2006)	Involvement in Physical Activity is strongly associated with better psychological well-being and lower stress levels, suggesting that maintaining an active lifestyle may help protect against mental health challenges during the transition to university.	Life Stress, which is higher, is associated with an increased incidence of illness and psychological distress among students. A Decrease in Physical Activity, which tends to decrease significantly from secondary school to university, may exacerbate the negative health implications of stress associated with this transition.
(Arterberry et al., 2024)	Social Enjoyment: Positive social environments were associated with higher social enjoyment and may act as a buffer against mental health problems. Academic Enjoyment: Fewer mental health symptoms were associated with higher academic enjoyment. Positive academic experiences may be a protective factor. Intervention Condition suggests that programs aimed at increasing a sense of belonging may reduce mental health problems.	Social Experience related to close friendships was associated with higher substance use and lower mental health symptoms. However, more challenging social experiences were associated with lower alcohol use and more mental health symptoms, suggesting that challenging social interactions may negatively impact mental health. Academic Challenge: More academically challenging semesters were associated with increased mental health symptoms. Specifically, students who faced more academic challenges reported worse mental health conditions, including higher levels of perceived stress, anxiety, and depression.

Protective Factors

Internal Factors

Self-compassion is considered the strongest and most consistent predictor of well-being (Kroshus et al., 2021). Other factors that can promote well-being include self-esteem, social support, sleep quality, and the frequency of physical exercise (Duffy et al., 2020). Motivation to leave

home among emerging adults tends to contribute to better well-being than among those who do not feel ready to leave home, as it facilitates a smoother transition Isik Akin et al. (2024). The skills that are then related are the ability to adapt, be resilient to new situations, and bounce back from setbacks, which allows students to flourish despite challenges (Volstad et al., 2020). Engagement in meaningful activities aligned with personal interests and values can increase a sense of purpose and satisfaction and contribute to flourishing (Volstad et al., 2020). In particular, financial coping skills also support the well-being of first-year students (Serido et al., 2010).

External Factors

Positive Interactions and Support. Engaging in positive, disclosive, and reassuring daily communication with parents is associated with better psychosocial well-being (Burke et al., 2016). Specifically, higher levels of quotidian openness and reassurance served as moderating factors in the relationship between daily stressors and feelings of isolation, suggesting that maintaining effective relationships may help protect against the adverse effects of stress. High positive relationships on campus (including peers and professors) and with family increased the likelihood of high mental well-being, whereas moderate and high positive relationships on campus and high positive relationships with family decreased the likelihood of low mental well-being (Navarra-Ventura et al., 2024), as they foster a sense of belonging and support, which enhances students' flourishing (Volstad et al., 2020). Higher levels of warmth and satisfaction in relationships with maternal and paternal figures are positively correlated with overall life satisfaction. Moreover, this suggests a role in enhancing well-being (Isik Akin et al., 2024). As perceived by college students, moderate levels of support (Navarra-Ventura et al., 2024) also play a significant role in well-being. Perceived family social support during early university adjustment can protect first-year students who have previously been bullied from anxiety during their college adjustment (Reid et al., 2016). Parents who provide autonomy support to foster their children's independence can also protect their children's mental health (Isik Akin et al., 2024). A positive social environment that provides greater social enjoyment can buffer against mental health problems (Arterberry et al., 2024). Perceived parental financial communication and financial expectations play a positive role in the well-being of first-year college students (Serido et al., 2010). Along with using electronic social media, social support through texting, at moderate levels, can serve as a protective factor, a form of social support and connection that can buffer stress. The context and content of text messages are important to consider, as supportive interactions can enhance well-being (Murdock, 2013).

Experience and Attachment to Educational/Academic Institutions. Positive academic experiences and enjoyment can protect well-being (Arterberry et al., 2024). On the other hand, attachment to the university can reduce the risk of persistent or emerging symptoms of anxiety and depression and has a predictive function for recovery (Adams et al., 2021).

Effective Role of the Community. A mentally healthy university with regular program offerings, development of new structures, networks, service delivery, good accessibility, clear information for students and university staff, and external partner initiatives serves as a buffer for

student well-being (Koschig et al., 2023). Of course, such a role requires support from community knowledge about mental health issues and awareness of help-seeking resources (Goodwin et al., 2016).

Appropriate Interventions. Intervention development is more appropriately directed toward effective mechanisms for stress management to help students navigate their interpersonal relationships and stressors (Murdock, 2013), and/or toward programs aimed at increasing a sense of belonging (on campus), which can reduce mental health problems (Arterberry et al., 2024).

Risk Factors

Internal Factors

Stress. Stress is a risk factor for low well-being in first-year college students, especially subjectively perceived high stress (Duffy et al., 2020) and chronic stress (Fruehwirth et al., 2023; Kroshus et al., 2021). Stress, in general, will increase the incidence of disease and psychological distress (Bray & Kwan, 2006). Chronic stress increases the likelihood of developing symptoms of eating disorders, lack of sleep, and lack of physical activity. Stress related to appearance and health is associated with symptoms of eating disorders; stress related to health and relationships is associated with lack of sleep; stress related to health is associated with lack of vigorous physical activity (Fruehwirth et al., 2023). Stress can take the form of financial or psychological stress (Serido et al., 2010), as well as increased daily stress (which also increases daily loneliness and depression and decreases happiness and psychosocial well-being) (Burke et al., 2016). Higher interpersonal stress was significantly associated with increased burnout and lower emotional well-being; it may stem from cognitive dissonance in relationships when expectations do not match reality, or from a combination of interpersonal stress and high daily texting behavior (Murdock, 2013). Stressors could include academic challenges (Arterberry et al., 2024), conflict with parents (especially mothers), and lack of family autonomy support (especially in female students) (Isik Akin et al., 2024).

Previous Adversity/Trauma. Distal risk factors can come from early life difficulties (violence, neglect, trauma), stressful experiences (Navarra-Ventura et al., 2024), being diagnosed with a chronic illness (Erol et al., 2023), previous mental health problems (Duffy et al., 2020), and experiences of bullying (Erol et al., 2023; Reid et al., 2016). High levels of these factors will be associated with lower well-being among first-year university students.

Problematic Behaviors. Several problematic behaviors are also risk factors for first-year college students' well-being, such as sleep problems (irregular sleep, insomnia), substance use, limited/reduced regular physical exercise (Adams et al., 2021; Arterberry et al., 2024; Bray & Kwan, 2006; Duffy et al., 2020; Erol et al., 2023) and high daily texting behavior (Murdock, 2013). Being underweight may also be a risk factor (Erol et al., 2023).

Other Factors. Other internal risk factors include negative perceptions of self-esteem or self-image (Duffy et al., 2020; Volstad et al., 2020) making it challenging to engage positively with the environment, as well as being overwhelmed by new responsibilities as a first-year student (Volstad et al., 2020), feelings of isolation (Nicotera et al., 2015; Volstad

et al., 2020) feelings of hopelessness, suicidal thoughts and/or plans (Erol et al., 2023). The role of mood and anxiety disorders also influences low mental well-being (Navarra-Ventura et al., 2024). In an academic context, intelligence level certainly cannot be ignored. However, higher levels of intelligence are not always positively associated with psychological well-being (Wigtil & Henriques, 2015). Not only academic, the emerging adult developmental stage that students must also face can also contribute to a negative relationship with well-being, meaning that the transition to adulthood can be a unique stressor that affects well-being (Wigtil & Henriques, 2015).

External Factors

Inadequate Support. A significant external factor is the separation of students in the first year from their parents causing homesickness (Isik Akin et al., 2024), low social support (Duffy et al., 2020; Nicotera et al., 2015; Volstad et al., 2020), with inadequate support systems and difficulties in access, especially the lack of autonomy support which is more dominantly felt by female students (Isik Akin et al., 2024). These factors are also related to low motivation to seek help (Goodwin et al., 2016). Family conditions also play a role in the low well-being of first-year students, in particular, family history (mental disorders in relatives) (Duffy et al., 2020), family maladaptation (Navarra-Ventura et al., 2024), and increased conflict with parents (especially with the mother). Family conditions and growing up in a suburban area can also influence low well-being (Navarra-Ventura et al., 2024).

Maladaptive Interactions. Betrayal, quarrels, cheating, breakups, and physical and sexual violence (Navarra-Ventura et al., 2024) are also risk factors for well-being. Meanwhile, close friendships associated with more substance abuse can also reduce well-being in first-year university students (Arterberry et al., 2024).

Unconducive Institutions. Barriers to the development of mental health centers at universities increase the risk of low well-being in students with no health goals, inflexible structures, lack of support from university management, lack of knowledge (university staff), lack of funding, and lack of motivation to learn something about "Healthy University" (Koschig et al., 2023). High academic pressure also has an impact that is negatively correlated with well-being in the form of stress, anxiety, and depression (Arterberry et al., 2024).

This scoping review demonstrates that protective and risk factors for well-being among first-year college students are not simply divided into internal and external categories. The results indicate that assessing well-being in first-year university students should balance the demands they encounter with their available resources. Identifying risk factors that create demands on students must be accompanied by an examination of their resources and how these resources can play a protective role in their well-being. Therefore, the theoretical framework used to examine first-year college students' well-being would be stronger if it were not merely multifaceted and focused on a single well-being (such as psychological or mental well-being), but also adopted a balanced, integrative approach to examining demands and resources (Bakker & Mostert, 2024; Luruli et al., 2020).

All studies included in this scoping review focused on first-year university students. Therefore, the description of protective and risk

factors obtained is unique to that subject. This overview and synthesis differ significantly from existing scoping reviews on well-being, which focus on university students as a whole (Dodd et al., 2021), at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels (Juanamasta et al., 2022), or only students in specific majors (Mohmand et al., 2022; Tait et al., 2024).

DISCUSSION

Self-compassion, considered the strongest protective factor, is supported by findings that well-being is predicted by self-compassion and resilience, even though the two concepts form an inseparable chain (Juanamasta et al., 2022). Self-compassion and well-being have a significant positive relationship (Poots & Cassidy, 2020), as well as self-compassion and academic well-being (Fathi et al., 2024; Khodapanah & Tamnaei Far, 2022). High self-compassion allows a person to understand that failure, suffering, and shortcomings are part of life. Students who are compassionate toward their failures and shortcomings experience higher levels of well-being than those who frequently judge themselves (Karakasidou et al., 2023).

The research findings highlight the protective role of positive interactions on campus and social support for well-being in first-year students. This condition occurs because, during emerging adulthood, the parent-child relationship should improve (Lindell & Campione-Barr, 2017), grow closer, and involve less conflict (Nelson et al., 2015), especially after students enter university (Lefkowitz, 2005). However, Worsley's previous research (Worsley et al., 2021) suggests that first-year resident students require support when navigating a new academic environment, but potentially without a pre-existing family and friends support network. Furthermore, the study also showed that, despite the pressure to excel academically during the transition, many students conceal their difficulties from family and friends as they navigate the stereotypical student lifestyle. These findings are in line with McLafferty's research (McLafferty et al., 2017) which state that first-year students have low motivation to seek help. Nevertheless, our scoping review findings also indicate that the desire to depart from the familial residence among emerging adults has a positive correlation with enhanced well-being in comparison to their counterparts who do not perceive themselves as adequately prepared to leave home, as this motivation serves to facilitate a more seamless transition for first-year college students (Isik Akin et al., 2024).

Our study found the importance of the community's effective role and how experiences and engagement with the university can positively affect well-being. As a part of networks, service delivery, good accessibility (Koschig et al., 2023) to mental health issues, and awareness of help-seeking resources (Goodwin et al., 2016), Worsley et al. (2021) said that during the transitional phase, academic advisors should adopt a more proactive stance in familiarizing themselves with their students, facilitating an environment wherein young individuals feel at ease in seeking assistance when they encounter difficulties in their academic pursuits. Academic advisors could be dedicated well-being advisors and build a supportive well-being peer group for incoming students in their inaugural year. Engaging first-year students is a fundamental aspect of facilitating a successful transition from secondary to higher education (Kahu et al., 2020). Investigations into the engagement of first-year university students represent a significant and contemporary empirical

domain within the broader research concerning the transition to university (Coertjens et al., 2017).

Stress was the most substantial risk factor identified by the scoping review. In first-year students, perceived stress (Duffy et al., 2020) can be psychological (Bray & Kwan, 2006) or financial (Serido et al., 2010), and can be chronic (Fruehwirth et al., 2023; Kroshus et al., 2021) and/or interpersonal (Murdock, 2013). Stressful experiences, while recognized as an inevitable part of the academic experience, can negatively impact well-being (Poots & Cassidy, 2020; Poudel et al., 2020). Shirmohammad et al. (2023) found a negative relationship between perceived academic stress and academic well-being. This finding aligns with research findings that found a significant correlation between poor academic stress and low mental well-being in college students (Barbayannis et al., 2022) and that low psychological well-being in first-year students follows a consistent pattern, with stress worsening at the end of the semester before exams (compared to the beginning) (Slykerman & Mitchell, 2021). The correlational pattern suggests a negative relationship between educational stress and first-year students' well-being.

Bad self-esteem or self-image, being overwhelmed by new responsibilities, will be closely related to feelings of isolation and hopelessness, suicidal thoughts and/or plans, and will play a role in the low well-being of first-year university students. In reality, first-year students who have just begun higher education do face various demands, especially study demands that require significant cognitive, emotional, and physical effort, which can drain psychological resources and cause learning anxiety, fatigue, and even burnout (Gusy et al., 2016; Madigan & Curran, 2021; Salmela-Aro & Upadyaya, 2014). However, students can also find various resources while studying that help manage existing demands and facilitate student engagement (Bakker et al., 2015; Gusy et al., 2016).

The review of well-being among first-year students cannot be limited to the independent effect of a single variable, given its complexity and multifaceted nature. The results of this scoping review show that the studies reviewed have been based on a multifaceted theoretical framework. Several studies have also used correlational analysis to examine the magnitude of the role and/or influence of multiple independent variables. The review of well-being among students, conducted as a comprehensive study, aligns with the study's results (Botha et al., 2019), which show that well-being is evident in the high indicators: emotional, psychological, social, spiritual, and physical well-being. Thus, synthesizing hedonic and eudemonic approaches in interpreting well-being (Seligman, 2011) is quite effective.

The results of the scoping review, which specifically targeted first-year university students, rather than students in general, provide a more accurate basis for assessing the well-being of the target population. However, because the scoping review is limited to mapping risk and protective factors, it cannot yet provide comprehensive information for determining effective, concrete interventions to improve well-being. But, it could be more focused on effective stress management mechanisms that help university students navigate interpersonal relationships and the demands they face, and/or that aim to enhance their sense of belonging (on campus). This would certainly align with institutional steps to develop flexible structures, provide significant and systematic support, and foster communication and interactions that engage students, which are fertile ground for first-year university students' well-being.

Limitations of the Study

This scoping review has several limitations. First, it includes only peer-reviewed journal articles and articles that are written in English, which increases the risk of overlooking potentially relevant studies published in other reports or languages. Second, the percentage of articles with cross-sectional designs in the scoping review is relatively high, thereby limiting causal testing.

Third, the research in this scoping review is limited to countries in the Americas and Europe; the majority were conducted in the United States ($n = 13$). Important concerns regarding the cultural and contextual generalizability of the findings stem from this uneven distribution. So, the conceptualization of both emerging adulthood and the well-being of first-year university students in the included studies may be implicitly grounded in individualistic cultural assumptions. Emerging adulthood itself is a culturally contingent developmental construct, and its expression may vary substantially across socio-cultural contexts (Arnett, 2000, 2014). On the other hand, cross-cultural theories highlight that the meaning and determinants of well-being are embedded in socio-cultural systems, in which relational and collective dimensions may play a central role (Humphrey et al., 2025). Therefore, caution is warranted in extrapolating these findings to contexts where interdependence, family obligations, and community-oriented values are more salient.

The study also identified the dominance of quantitative studies. The dominance indicates a lack of qualitative reports from first-year students about their understanding of well-being on campus. Qualitative reports can also complement quantitative findings.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the limitations identified in this scoping review, several recommendations can be made for future research. First, in a future literature review, a broader range of sources, including institutional reports, dissertations, conference proceedings, and articles in languages other than English, is needed to minimize publication bias and provide a more comprehensive picture of first-year college students' well-being.

Second, given the predominance of cross-sectional research designs, further research should develop longitudinal and experimental designs to test causal relationships and more deeply understand the dynamics of first-year college students' well-being during the transition to higher education.

Third, research locations should be expanded to other countries outside the Americas and Europe to get the diverse cultural and social contexts that influence first-year college students' concepts, experiences, and assessments of well-being. This will allow research findings to be more contextualized and more broadly generalizable.

Several conclusions need to be underlined. The developmental stages of emerging adulthood that students must navigate may also contribute to a negative relationship with well-being, suggesting that transitioning to adulthood is a unique stressor that affects well-being. Some risk and protective factors are unique to the well-being of first-year university students. However, the scoping review generally indicates that certain strong protective factors (such as self-compassion, social support, and the effective role of the community/institution) can buffer against the development of existing risk factors. Because the influencing factors are not limited to the personal context of emerging adults who are first-year students, it is important to develop follow-up research on appropriate

preventive measures and a systematic, integrative approach involving the triad of education, campus, home, and community.

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