

# THE IMPACT OF A PARENT'S INCARCERATION ON A CHILD IN CARE: A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH STUDY

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**Abstract:** Incarceration has a significant impact on many areas of the imprisoned person's life. The incarcerated person's family is also severely affected. The children of these families in particular are the ones who carry significant and profound traumas into their lives. Some children live in an institutional setting, which is also a fact that causes trauma. In this paper, we will focus specifically on the impact of a parent's incarceration on a child growing up in a children's home. Using a qualitative research design, we sought to identify the areas most affected by a parent's incarceration. We found that the social competencies of the children studied were the most affected. Based on our results, we will recommend modifications to the educational process in children's homes.

**Keywords:** Imprisonment, Children's Home, Inclusion, Aftercare, Psychological Deprivation, Institutional Education

## 1 Introduction

Parents are the most important people in a child's life. The imprisonment of a parent has a severe impact on his or her child. In this paper, we will focus on a specific group of children. Not only do they have the experience of having a parent in prison, but they are also affected by the fact that they live in an institutional setting. The main aim of this paper will be to find out what areas of the life of the studied group of children have been affected by the incarceration of the parent. In this paper, we will first describe the theoretical background, the methodology used and introduce the researched environment. We will then present the process of the research and we will discuss the important findings. The results of the research showed that the impact of a parent's incarceration on a child is devastating. Based on the research findings, we will offer suggestions for modifying special educational practices in children's homes. We will point out the need for an interdisciplinary approach across all the departments involved.

## 2 Theoretical background

In modern democratic society, the question of the influence of a parent's imprisonment on a child is often raised (cf. Dadič et al. 2023; Davis et al. 2011). In the Czech Republic we must mention the important works of Jůzl (2012), who laid the foundations for the modern Czech resocialisation and penitentiary science. The issue of the impact of parental incarceration on the child has recently begun to attract the attention of Czech experts. For example, we can mention the ongoing project realized by Masaryk University Brno "Parenting Behind Bars", which has produced excellent publications (cf. Punová, 2020; Horová, 2021; Navrátilová et al., 2015). The impact of a parent's incarceration on a child is a very complex issue (Cui et al., 2023), so this area must be addressed with interest by the scientific community. Regarding the issue of Czech institutional education in our research, we draw on the author's previous research. The interdisciplinary nature of the problem of incarceration is also dealt with, among others, by Stárek and Víšek (2022).

## 3 Research methods

The research design used for the presented study has proven successful in our previous research (Daněk, 2021). This research design is based on a combination of interviews, long-term observation and analysis of pedagogical documentation. We use unstructured interviews. They allow us more freedom in asking questions depending on the actual respondent's situation (Brinkmann, 2023). The observations take place during the standard operation of the observed children's home. Of particular interest is the access to the pedagogical documentation of the children's home, which is unavailable to other researchers. The

information obtained is then further processed using grounded theory and interpretative phenomenological analysis. We continuously enrich our research design with new research methods in order to avoid the research routine. We tailor the research design to the needs of the target group. Elements of narrative analysis, which can be understood as our interpretation of the stories we collect from the individuals present in the research setting, have proved useful in recent research, thus reconstructing the construction, retelling the narrative (Riháček et al., 2013, p.75).

We benefit from the presence of the researcher in the researched setting; the author is employed in the researched children's home as an educator and prevention methodologist. The children and young adults approach the author as a member of their social structures, which proves to be quite crucial for establishing a quality research contact (Charmaz, 2006, p. 5). In several research experiments conducted, we found that children and young adults modify their responses according to the researchers' expectations (Daněk, 2022). As part of the environment under study, we have a greater opportunity to capture reality. However, we are aware of the danger of confirmation bias that could occur through a biased approach. We, therefore, submit our research results for review by experts with no connection to the research setting (Flick, 2009). While qualitative research provides deeper insight into the problem under study, the results cannot be presented as universally valid. They are valid only for the research setting, for the researched group, and for a clearly defined space-time. Qualitative research makes a significant contribution to inclusive education (Willig, 2017).

## 4 Researched environment

We are conducting a longitudinal study of a children's home in Prague, Czech Republic. A children's home is a school institution for the performance of institutional care. Institutional care is ordered by a civil court in case the child's family is unable to fulfil its responsibilities (Czech Republic, 2012, § 971). The children's home is intended for children and young adults without serious behavioral disorders (Czech Republic, 2002, § 12). This does not mean that the population of children's homes is exempt from problems. The children come exclusively from families that can be described as significantly pathological. We have documented cases of violence, neglect, alcohol, drugs, and abuse (cf. Blažek et al, 2019). This is just a cross-section of the range of negative exposures to which the children have been exposed for a long time. According to our information, the standard duration of pathological influences before the intervention of the social protection authority is approximately five years.

Furthermore, it is necessary to point out that the vast majority of the children in the research have had at least one stay in a facility for children in need of immediate assistance or another form of foster family care. Thus, institutional care was ordered only when the child welfare system failed to rehabilitate the disrupted family and no alternative family care was available for the child. It is clear that all the children came to the children's home severely emotionally deprived. In a large part of these children, we can observe manifestations of CAN syndrome. Children in the children's home can be identified as children with special educational needs. On the basis of our previous research, we can say that the greatest deficits can be observed in the area of social competences. Although the preferred narrative at present is that of the uninspiring nature of institutional care, our results from earlier research confirm the need for a state-guaranteed safe environment for such children for whom it is not possible to offer an alternative in the form of foster family care (Daněk, 2022).

## 5 Research results

We began working on the question of the impact of parental incarceration on a child in the children's home in January 2022 and concluded the research in April 2023. The research was conducted during the normal operation of the children's home, which allowed us to spend a massive amount of time with respondents. The structured research design proved successful. We start with a pre-survey, where we select suitable respondents based on pedagogical documentation. For this research, we selected two young girls, aged 19 and 20, who have a father in prison. The primary research question was how parental incarceration affects the respondents' bio-psycho-social ecosystem. The girls' fathers are repeat offenders with long sentences. The exact offences were not known to us. However, from in-depth interviews, we found that both fathers had been repeatedly punished for violent crimes. They should be released within two years. We monitored the girls' reactions after the phone calls and discussed the content of their correspondence with the girls. Everything was done with respect to the privacy of all participants and, of course, consent was obtained to conduct the research.

Both fathers say how much they care about their daughters' future. They often write letters, phone their daughters and take the opportunity for their daughters to visit them in prison. The girls see the prison visit as an obligation to their father. In addition, both send their fathers permission slips, which they fund from pocket money and income from part-time jobs. The girls talk about how they will live with their fathers upon release and build new families, suggesting a major problem for the future. The family is the most important social factor in which a child forms patterns of behaviour. It is the family that can become a risk factor for the development of behavioral disorders if various pathologies are present. We are talking about cases when patterns of antisocial or antisocial behaviour are present in family members (Blažek et al., 2019, p.30). The family is also traditionally considered to be the main factor that, through its failure, enables children to engage in criminal behaviour (Sychevová and Halířová, 2014, p.121). It is clear that children of incarcerated parents are at increased risk of developing undesirable behavioral patterns (Davis et al, 2011, p.177).

Furthermore, the economic sphere should also be highlighted. Incarcerated parents are unable to be economically active while accumulating fines and penalties on their debts. When they return from prison, their criminal record makes it difficult for them to re-enter the labour market (Turney and Goodsell, 2018, p. 149). When we consider that daughters will be forced to cope with their own difficulties in integrating into intact society after leaving the children's home and, in addition, the burden of caring for their fathers when they return from prison, we see a significant problem here. Respondents identified the enormous stress that their fathers' incarceration placed on their extended families (Raikes, 2016).

Although we noted we noted a tendency of respondents to relativise the incarceration of a parent, both respondents felt this to be a significant social stigma. One respondent is being monitored by a psychiatrist. She clearly identified the fact that her father is unable to fulfil his parental responsibilities as one of the causes of her psychological problems. The girl spoke of traumatic experiences of visits to prisons.

A major finding of our research concerned the social lives of the respondents. They could not establish any partner relationship during the entire period of the presented research. When interviewed on the topic of partnership, both respondents gave vague and evasive answers. Here we see the influence of disrupted parental attachment. Both respondents pointed out that it is very difficult to trust potential partners when their own fathers have disappointed them. Both respondents turn to social networks and try to satisfy their need for socialization in the virtual world.

## 6 Conclusion

Parental incarceration has a severe impact on the child and negatively affects many areas of the life of the child (Martin, 2017). We observed an impact on the psychological well-being and on the social competence of the children studied. It is important to note that the respondents we observed are not only at risk of the negative impact of parental incarceration but also the fact that their living environment is an educational institution (Drahý et al, 2018, p.86).

A problematic issue for our research was the lack of detailed information about parents' criminal activity. An intervention in special education needs accurate information, otherwise it won't be able to achieve its goals. However, there is no statutory obligation for individual departments to share information. We believe that interdisciplinary cooperation will necessarily need to be strengthened. The ministries of justice, education, social protection, and health must join forces and start effective cooperation together. Social workers will also play an important role in the prison space (Stárek and Víšek, 2022). Inter-agency teams could be a tool to improve the effectiveness of work with children and young adults who have experience with a parent in prison. These teams should include a special pedagogue for behavioral disorders, an etoped, who has the skills to deal with challenging situations (Žolnová, 2018, p. 101). There will also be a need to enrich the curriculum preparing educators in residential care institutions with knowledge of resocialisation and penitentiary issues (Allard and Green, 2011, p. 8).

Based on our findings, a demand should be made to build a quality aftercare system that offers professional counselling and psychotherapeutic support, especially in the form of family therapy programmes. Here we see great opportunities for the involvement of the non-profit sector, which has the potential to play an important role in emergency situations (Stárek and Zpěvák, 2023). Furthermore, the possibilities of technological progress need to be exploited. We see the possibilities of integrating modern information technologies into the educational process as beneficial (Osvaldová, 2015, p. 202). Modern communication channels could facilitate more intensive contact between the incarcerated person and his/her family members. Case conferences involving the convicted person, their child in the children's home and a psychologist or social worker could be very beneficial. The advantage of such conferences should be better psychological well-being of the child in the children's home. It would also improve the convict's preparation for contact with the child after release from prison.

We are convinced that children in care with experience of parental incarceration are among the hardest hit, most vulnerable group. Society needs to realize that the issue of parental incarceration has a greater impact on these children. They require maximum support and a professional approach from the professionals involved. It is therefore essential that the education and training of educators in children's homes be enriched with knowledge of resocialisation and prison issues. In this way, it will be possible to meet the needs of children who experience the comorbidity of trauma caused by the incarceration of their parents and are also exposed to the influence of the institutional environment.

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