

Experiences of Parenting while Serving a Prison Sentence

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Abstract

Parents who serve prison sentence are a vulnerable and neglected population exposed to various challenges in achieving their role, and most of all in achieving a stable relationship with the child. As maintaining a relationship of closeness and connection is of great importance for the well-being of both parents and children, it is necessary to point out to experts the perspective of prisoner parents. This paper will present the results of a qualitative research aimed at gaining a deeper insight into the experiences of parenting while serving a prison sentence from the perspective of parents former prisoners who have minor children. The study involved parents former prisoners (N=10) who are currently involved in the probation system. The research was conducted within the official premises of the Probation Offices responsible for the city of Zagreb and Zagreb County and the data were collected using the method of semi-structured interview. The results of the research showed that parents face various challenges, from obstacles in achieving contact with the child, inappropriate conditions and limited rights and opportunities to fulfill the parental role in prison, insensitivity of the system to their needs, etc. Parents' proposals related to improving parenting in prison are mostly aimed at improving prison conditions for maintaining parental-child contact, exercising rights on a larger scale (such as more frequent visits of children, better financial support), as well as investing greater effort of professionals in working with prisoners.

Keywords: children, challenges of incarcerated parents, parents in prison, rights

1. Introduction

Parenting in prison is an undefined term and previous research describing this phenomenon mainly focuses on the needs of maintaining parent-child bonds (Easterling & Johnson, 2015). Parenting of prisoners in the literature is described most often through the effects it produces, e.g. how punishment affects their children, etc. Active parenting in this situation is almost impossible in the practical sense of carrying out care due to structural constraints within the prison (Easterling, 2012). In recent years, an alternative form of imprisonment has been increasingly practiced in Croatia – probation, which also allows the parent and child to live together and have all the possibilities like other families. Probation is defined as the conditional and supervised freedom of the offender during which probation officers carry out procedures aimed at reducing the risk of the offender repeating the crime.

According to the data of the "Report on the State and Work of Penitentiaries, Prisons and Correctional Institutes" of the Ministry of Justice- Directorate for the Prison System Parents of Minor Children make up approximately a third (32.9%) of the population located in the prison system (Franjić Nađ, 2017). There are fewer visits of children in open and semi-open penitentiaries, since a large number of prisoners use the convenience of family visits, and meetings take place most often in the place of residence or residence of the family (Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2017).

The quality of the relationship between the parents of the prisoner and the child depends on the number and length of the meeting, regular contact, leaving room for the child's feelings, and honesty and openness of the relationship (RODA, 2017). It is evident that parenting in prison is significantly limited, so it is important for parents and children that their contacts with each other are regular. But often these contacts are not optimal, as shown by an extensive foreign study that showed that more than half of parents with minor children did not see their children while in prison (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2007, according to Corless, 2012). Similar results were obtained in Croatia. About half of the prisoners of parents were not visited by children at all, and there are cases of disinterested parents for contacts with children (Majdak et al., 2017). The frequency of contacts is influenced by various factors, such as the distance of the prison from the place of residence, material possibilities, relationships in the family, cooperation of the parent who takes care of the child and the decision of the prisoner himself on the arrival of the child to prison (Ombudsman for Children, 2018). Majdak (2017) lists some of the obstacles that parents face in practice regarding quality contact making, namely too few permitted meetings, complicated procedure squirming permission to visit, examinations of the child before visiting, opening and reading letters, opening packages, inadequate spaces where visits are conducted, etc. The results of the research of the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Croatia in 2016 show that the most difficult for parents prisoners during the sentence was separation from the child as well as separation from the family (Franjić Nađ, 2017, according to Majdak, 2017). Consequently, we can conclude that it is primarily to work on maintaining

contacts to alleviate the feeling of mutual loss, because the relationship with the child prisoners represents the strongest motive for active participation in the rehabilitation process because it allows prisoners parents to be more successfully resocialized, to understand the meaning of responsibility, to be more satisfied and mentally healthier (Ayre et al. 2014; Ministry of Internall Affairs, 2017). Maintaining the relationship between parent and child is also necessary for balanced growing up and overcoming developmental crises of the child (RODA, 2017). Through contacts with the parent, the child satisfies his need for closeness, sees and hears the parent, and on the other hand motivates the parent to the professional treatments and tasks that prison puts in front of him because he feels more satisfied (Gabelica Šupljika, 2008). In addition to strengthening the attachment between parent and child, it also makes it easier for the whole family to adapt to the common everyday life after the return of parents from prison.

1.1.Challenges of parenting in prison

Parents in prison are often faced with the stigma of society, which often characterizes them as bad parents. Along with the stigma, there is a feeling of rejection, loneliness, guilt, sadness, fear, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (Garcia et al., 1998). There is often a breakdown of social ties, termination of employment, but also marriage /partner ties, disturbed relationships in the family, problems in resocialization and employment after leaving prison, etc. Research from Bašić (2014) showed some of the challenges faced by mothers in prison: establishing successful contact and stable relationship with children, difficulties in identifying the child's needs and behavior, challenges in the field of upbringing, financial burden on the family and poor psychosocial climate. Research by Arditti et al. (2005), highlights the experiences of fathers while serving their sentences: difficult establishment of quality contact with the child due to the geographical distance of transport, financial difficulties, non-compliance by police officers in prison and demanding visit procedures for families. In addition, they face a feeling of helplessness, uncertainty, loss of control over various aspects of the child's life. In this research, we come across the term "*mothers gatekeeping*" which denotes the tendency of mothers in trying to limit and exclude fathers from the lives of children (e.g. so that they do not take children to visit fathers, do not give them information about children, etc.). It is worrying that as many as 20% of parents-prisoners do not receive visits from children precisely because of the resistance of the other parent with whom the child is located (Jačmenica Pušenjek & Krakan, 2015). Additional challenges of parenting in prisons are the lack of space and facilities in prisons suitable for children, long waits during visits, refusal of children to visit the parent and ignorance of the child where the parent is located (Jačmenica Pušenjek & Krakan, 2015). A survey conducted in 2014 in the Penitentiary in Požega showed that in 30% of mothers, the non-attendance of the child to visit is caused by financial difficulties (Bašić, 2014, according to Sučić et al., 2016).

1.2. Rights of parents of prisoners and their children

Deprivation of liberty of parents also limits the right to family life and thus indirectly jeopardizes the rights of all other members of the household who have not committed a criminal offense and must bear the consequences (Sučić et al., 2016). According to the Prison Sentence Execution Act (NN/150), a prisoner has the right to visit twice a month and on holidays for at least an hour, while minor children have the right to visit their parents every week and on holidays. Children under the age of 14 must be accompanied by an adult (Law on the Execution of Prison Sentences, NN 150/13, Article 117) Before the visit, it is necessary to obtain certain documentation - permission from the Ministry of Justice to visit and proof of kinship. How the visits will take place depends on whether the prison/penitentiary is open, semi-open or closed type. In addition to visits, children and parents have the right to telephone conversation, correspondence, receive packages and receive and send money and securities (Majdak, 2017). All of the above is supervised by the clerk. A prisoner can also benefit from various benefits while serving his sentence, one of which includes, among others, more frequent contact with the outside world (e.g. going out to visit family members for a total duration of 120 hours per month).

The rights of child prisoners, in addition to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, are guaranteed by the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia, the Family Act and the European Prison Rules. Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989, Art. 9th). These acts stipulate that it is the right of a child separated from one or both parents to regularly maintain personal and direct relationships with both parents if this does not jeopardize his or her well-being. Searching the literature, it is noticeable that these rights are significantly limited in application in practice and are often violated. Majdak (2017) states that the right to privacy, honor, reputation and dignity of the child guaranteed by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989, Art. 16 para. *"No child shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to unlawful attacks on his or her honor and reputation."*) This provision has not been implemented when it comes to children of prisoners, since letters between parents and children are reviewed, telephone conversations are recorded and monitored, children are examined inappropriately when visiting a parent, etc. Also, the Convention and the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia protect the right of the child to freedom to seek, receive and receive information and ideas, which are most often violated by the parent / guardian / expert of the Social Welfare Center in such a way that the child knows how to hide Information about the parent being in prison. Worrying is data that only a third of children whose parents are in prison know where their parents are (RODA, 2017). For the most part, all relevant regulations put emphasis on the best interests of the child. According to the explanation of the Ombudsperson for Children (2009) if the criminal offense of parents was committed to the detriment of the child, then the best interest is not in frequent encounters, but the provision of professional assistance to both the child and the parent. In considering the best

interests of the child, it is necessary to approach each child individually, taking into account in the context in which the child lives (COPE, 2016).

1.3. The impact of parental imprisonment on children

Inmate children are often referred to as "forgotten children", "collateral victims", "forgotten prison victims" or "orphans of justice" (COPE, 2014). Not only are they separated from their parents, but they also experience various forms of discrimination, "bullying", economic difficulties, social isolation, shame, etc. (COPE, 2014). These children are significantly less disadvantaged than other children due to the family situation and the criminal legal status of parents (RODA, 2017). Given the status and position of children whose parents are serving prison sentences, we can divide them into children who were born in prison during their mother's prison sentence, and children who go to prison exclusively to visit their parents (Matak, 2010). The arrest of parents, especially if it took place in front of the child, is a traumatic experience after which the child feels a great loss due to separation. The very reaction of a child to separation from parents depends on age, environmental reactions, support of close people, type of criminal offense, length and place of sentence, family situation, decision with whom the child will live and attitude towards the parent prisoner (Gabelica Šupljika, 2008). The parents' going to prison for the child represents a severe physical and emotional trauma that can be identified with the experienced death of the parents, therefore the primary support of the environment is for these children (Glover, 2009, according to Jačmenica Pušenjek & Krakan, 2015). The reactions of a child whose parent is in prison can generally be divided into emotional, health, social, economic (Gabelica Šupljika, 2008). From emotional reactions there is sadness, anger (towards parents and police officers), shame and loneliness, fear (of the future, what will happen to parents in prison, etc.), a sense of security and belonging is disturbed. Some children may also experience developmental regression (e.g. bedwetting), insomnia, eating disorder (Ayres et al., 2014). Of social difficulties, the most common is stigma, where the environment can condemn them for the criminal act of parents, so children can experience disparagement (Matak, 2010). In addition, there is a higher risk of school failures such as poorer school grades, behavioral problems, etc. Economic difficulties are associated with the absence of parents who cannot earn money, which also reduces the household budget. The family can also be burdened with court costs and travel expenses to visit a parent, which can put them in a state of poverty (Majdak, 2017). All of the above can have long-term consequences on the child's development.

1.4. Examples of good practice

In the last ten years, the Republic of Croatia has recognized the problem of parents prisoners and their children, and during this period various projects have been implemented important for improving the relationship between parents and children and proved to be quite successful. One

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of them was the program "*Responsible Parenting*" in 2010, which aimed to promote parental competence and reduce the negative effects of separation of parents prisoners and psychosocial support to prisoners (Svilar Blažinić, 2014). Similarly, the program "*Prisoner as a Parent*", was implemented in 2014 with the aim of strengthening competences and a sense of responsibility towards children, where parents through various workshops could exchange their experiences and acquire new skills. (Svilar Blažinić, 2014). From February 2014. to February 2016, the project of the association Parents in Action (RODA) called *ma#me* began to be implemented. The aim of the program was to empower female prisoners for parental role and engage in the labour market. Through the project, the so-called "Reading Program" was developed, manuals for officers "Child of prisoners as a motive for changing practice" were distributed, a space for children's visits was equipped. There was also a manual for parents called "Unbroken Relationship - Connecting Parenting Behind Bars" The aforementioned "Reading Program" (parents record the reading of the story and send it to the child) is made for the purpose of maintaining the connection between the child and the parents, in situations when the family does not have the financial resources to visit or there is a long distance / poor traffic connection for the visit and when it is unprepared to maintain contact between the prisoner and the child, etc. (Ombudsman for Children, 2018). Furthermore, in 2015 RODA, in cooperation with the Design Study, launched the project "*Grids are not obstacles*", whose goal is to enable children to travel to visit their parents in prisons through a sustainable financing model in such a way that prisoners will make products that they design themselves. Some of the implemented projects were the "*Super Dad Without Obstacles*" of the Association Status M, which aims to strengthen parental competences through the involvement of men who serve their sentences in the care of children; then the program "*Prophet*" which aims to reduce the negative effects of the separation of fathers of prisoners from children, etc.

Some other countries in terms of ensuring greater rights and better relations between parents of prisoners and children have gone even further. Brkić (2013) gives an example of good practice in Denmark, in the Pension Engelberg prison (the so-called "angel house"), which is the first country to introduce the practice of not separating families in such a way that prisoners, in the last stages of serving their sentence, stay with spouses and children, regardless of the child's age. Some EU countries, such as Great Britain, France, Sweden, Switzerland, Ireland, organize so-called special visits where children can stay longer than a certain period of time and have swimming pools, gardens, gyms and playrooms at their disposal (Majdak, 2017). In some German prisons, mothers of inmates with school-age children are allowed to return home every day to take care of their families and household. Sweden has introduced an institute of "child officers" in every prison institution whose parents are serving their sentences of imprisonment, which aims to make sure that the premises, procedures and visits are adapted to children.

2. Research objectives and reserach questions

The aim of the research is to gain a deeper insight into the experiences of parenting while serving a prison sentence from the perspective of parents, former prisoners, with special emphasis on the challenges they faced during their time in prison. Three research questions were asked:

1. What are the experiences of former inmates related to their parenting while serving their prison sentence?
2. What do former inmates cite as the main challenges of parenting while serving a prison sentence?
3. What proposals do former inmates parents make for the purpose of improving parenting while serving their prison sentences?

3. Research methodology

3.1. Research participants

The population selected for this survey are parents who have experience serving a prison sentence, and are currently involved in probation. A deliberate sample (N=10) was used.

The criteria for selecting participants for participation is the experience of parenting to minor children while serving a prison sentence, and that they were in contact with the child (whether by phone, that the children visited them, that they used the benefits of going out, etc.). The examined participants live in Zagreb and Zagreb county, and as part of a suspended sentence they are obliged to report to the probation office (on average 1-2 times a month). Nine males and 1 female were interviewed. The average age of the respondents was 40 years; the youngest participant was 29 and the oldest was 56. In addition to age, sociodemographic data were collected (number of children, marital status, duration of serving prison sentences). The longest prison sentence was 6 years and the shortest was 16 months.

3.2. The procedure

Prior to the start of implementation, permits by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Law in Zagreb were requested for conducting research, as well as from the Ministry of Justice and probation offices. Through e-mail, statistical data related to people on parole in probation offices were obtained, which were presented tabularly and classified by categories of prison sentenceduration (in years and months), age, gender, marital status and total number (at that moment there were a total of 141 convicts on parole). Random selection resulted in 10 participants who were ready to talk about this topic. Interviews were conducted during 2020.

3.3 Method of data collection

The method used to collect data was a semi-structured interview. Nine interviews were conducted individually with participants, and a probation office officer was present at one

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interview. One participant did not give consent to the recording with a voice recorder, so the answers were written down manually. The interview contained 19 open-ended questions.

3.4. Ethical aspects of research

During the implementation of the research, ethical principles, awareness, voluntariness, protection of privacy and anonymity, principles of free will, principles of consent, withdrawal at all times were taken into account.

3.5. Method of data processing

The data collected through conducted semi-structured interviews were processed through a process of qualitative analysis that includes the process of segmentation, conceptualization and categorization of data (Milas, 2009). The statements of the respondents were marked according to research questions. After that statements were organized in codes and codes were organized into categories.

4. Results and discussion

The results for each research question are presented through categories and codes in the table, and examples of the respondents statements in the text that follows.

4.1. Experiences of former inmates on parenting while serving a prison sentence

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Table 1. Experiences on parenting during serving prison sentence

CODES	CATEGORIES
<i>Contacts by phone and visits</i>	Maintaining contact with the child
<i>Use the benefits of dating</i>	
<i>Frequency of the child's visits</i>	
<i>Descriptions of the visit of the child</i>	
<i>Unsatisfactory conditions for visits in a closed type of prison</i>	Different options for fulfilling the parental role with regard to the type of institution serving the sentence
<i>More favorable conditions for fulfilling the parental role in a semi-open type of institution</i>	
<i>Short visit time</i>	Limitation of rights and opportunities for fulfilling the parental role in prison
<i>Short and expensive phone</i>	
<i>Support from the extended family</i>	Support ingenuity for parents inmates
<i>Support from a spouse</i>	
<i>Negative attitude towards parents inmates</i>	Negative attitude of the environment towards parents of prisoners and their children
<i>Teasing by peers</i>	
<i>Attending workshops for parents in prison</i>	Motivation of parents prisoners to improve parental competences
<i>The desire for a better way to spend time with children</i>	
<i>Children's visits make it easier for parents to stay in prison</i>	Contacts with the child as a way to facilitate the serving of the sentence
<i>Benefits of going out as a way to facilitate your stay in prison</i>	
<i>Hiding the truth from a child</i>	Avoiding the fact of serving a prison sentence
<i>Avoiding talking about the topic of serving a sentence</i>	
<i>Avoiding contact with children</i>	
<i>Denying the impact of imprisonment on the family</i>	
<i>Having a child while serving his sentence</i>	Motherhood in prison
<i>Mother as primary guardian of the child while serving the other parent's sentence</i>	
<i>Think of family as a way to facilitate your stay in prison</i>	

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<i>The role of a social worker in prison</i>	The role of professional staff in prison
<i>Negligible impact of prison staff on quality of parenting</i>	

The main focus in the relationship with the child parents put on **maintaining contact with the child**. Contacts were usually held by **phone**, and physical encounters were held through **the child's visit** or the parent's **use of the convenience of going out**. Regarding the most common ways of contact with the child, parents state the following: (*"by phone and wife must have come with children to visit" (I_06)*). Previous research has shown that telephone contacts with the child have a positive effect on parents in both psychological and emotional terms, a more positive atmosphere for the implementation of an individual program of execution of sentences and better relationships and greater tolerance among prisoners (Novosel, 2014). Almost all respondents used **the convenience of going out** in some of the following ways (*"First there was a 3-time trip to the city, and then after that it was, I used half the annual at the house from Glina, about ten days, and the rest were weekends for 72 days, or three days.. This weekend was 3 or 4" (I_01)*). Of all the participants, only one of the participants did not use the convenience of going out and did not want to explain the reasons, but only stated that a set of circumstances occurred.

Regarding the frequency of contact with the child, more precisely **the frequency of the child's visits**, on average, children regularly visited them, depending on the possibilities but also the attitude of the parents about the child's visit to prison. When asked how often the children visited them, they answer was: (*„... on average maybe once a month, once or twice a month“ (I_02)*). Although there are various problems regarding the visit of a child in prison, about 77% of children visit their parents in prison, while 23% do not visit them (Jačmenica Pušenjek & Krakan, 2015). Visits from a child can move away from negative thoughts, such as concerns about how the parent lives, whether he is well, etc. (Brkić, 2013). At the request to **describe** a little what **the visits of the child looked like**, the activities with the child were mostly related to conversation and play (depending on the age of the child): (*".. We sat like this in one room, there were more families, they sit with the children, they have some toys and that, so they say something and so... We talked about what's up, how's school.. Then we'd take some toys and stuff, we'll talk like that and what you're going to do. That's how we spent our time." (I_03)*).

Through all the conversations, **various possibilities of fulfilling the parental role were noticed with regard to the type of institution serving the sentence** where the participants expressed great dissatisfaction with the scope of parental opportunities in the closed type of institution in relation to the semi-open. This applies primarily to **unsatisfactory conditions for visits in a closed type of prison**: (*".. They're nothing, absolutely none. And the fact that they come to visit we have to sit at the table, we must not get up, I must not go anywhere .. It's your*

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little room, I don't know 3x3 and there's three tables in there and a fuss. There's nothing there." (I_09)). On the other hand, almost all respondents expressed satisfaction **with more favorable conditions for fulfilling the parental role in a semi-open type of institution** where they had a greater scope of opportunities, primarily better conditions for visits ("*.. For example, you can, there in Vukomerec means 2 hours of visitation, you can do homework with the kids. You take it, the child brings you what he has, you can work with him, you can read. And in Remetinec, for example, it is limited to an hour.*" (I_04)), the European Prison Rules stipulate that the organization of visits should provide the maintenance and development of family relations of prisoners in the most usual way, therefore, regardless of the type of institution the parent is in, equally favourable conditions should be provided for meetings and socializing of children and parents.

The very fact that they are in prison and limited in many respects is certainly a great stress for prisoners, and especially when their rights are limited regarding their children. Further statements testify to their experiences of **the limitation of rights and opportunities to perform a parental role in prison**. So parents complain about **the short time of visitation** ("*In that hour and a half, nothing, they, so to speak, immediately forget about me. It's like meeting someone on the street...*") (talks about Remetinec), as well as on **a short and expensive telephone contact**: ("*.. First of all, there's an expensive phone. Calls are limited in time and the tariff is very expensive*" (I_05)).

Almost all participants were entrusted with their children during their sentences **to their mother** ("*wife*"(I_01), "*ex-wife*" (I_07)). These answers are confirmed by the fact that if the father is in prison, 88.4% of the children live with their mother, and if the situation is reversed, only 37% live with their father (Knežević, 2014).

In addition to the other parent as the primary guardian entrusted with children, the prisoners **also had support from the extended family**: ("*sometimes the sister came and brought the children, sometimes all the kids would come.*" (I_08)), but the primary **support** to prisoners was mostly from **the spouse**: ("*The wife was obliged to come to me with the children to visit*" (I_06)). Environmental support is extremely important to the prisoner, especially in terms of the relapse of the crime, and previous research has shown that the chance is two to six times greater that within a period of one year after leaving prison, an inmate without family support commits a crime again than those who have the support (Novosel, 2014). Two fathers **had children while serving their sentences** ("*...So my wife was pregnant while I was in prison, and my second child is now 4 years old...*" (I_10), ("*...but my wife was pregnant then so I didn't insist much that she was coming.*" (I_06)). As for the attitude about children's visits, only one of the respondents explicitly did not want his children to come to him, and one wife prevented seeing children while all the other children were visiting.

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A unique case through all interviews was the participant who explicitly decided that during his time in prison he would not have contact with children or that his children would come to visit the prison. It states: (*"...maybe it's a unique case in prison, but I isolated my children from it and didn't call them at all, and they didn't call. I mean, they can't even call me in prison, but I haven't contacted them."* (I_01)). When asked how he thinks it would have worked on him if he had contact with his family, he replied: (*"It would have worked so that we in prison would settle accounts, and I had a lot of them who I liked. I ignored it for that reason to get out as soon as possible and that's why I went out."* (I_10)). The explanation of this statement is found in the literature where it is mentioned that for both women and men, the expression of greater parental stress is associated with aggressive and violent behavior in prison (Knežević, 2014). Research shows that 85% of parents of prisoners want to make contact, while only 15% of respondents express a refusal to meet and socialize most often for the reason of hiding the truth of being in prison and wanting to protect the child from coming to the prison environment (Jačmenica Pušenjek & Krakan, 2015).

Most respondents have an attitude about **the negative attitude of the environment towards parents prisoners as well as their children**, in a way that they are viewed through the acts they have committed. When asked what they think society's attitude towards prisoner parents, they reply: (*"No one looks at you nicely, nor does anyone think of you in a way as a parent. And now they look at you as a kind of negativity until the end."* (I_01)). Their children are also subjected to pressure from the environment, mostly **peer teasing**: (*"It's a small environment, so everyone knows about it. Sometimes someone would reproach her and this... You know how it is, kids tease each other."* (I_03)). The fact is that the social stigma of children inmates can cause social isolation, hostility and abuse by peers (Knežević, 2014). For this reason, it would be necessary to sensitize the public about the difficulties that children face in order to try to alleviate the stigma (Jelavić, 2009). Contrary to all previous statements, only one of the respondents stated that the fact that they are parents and have children is in their favor and that they are therefore viewed in a more positive way: (*"There are, some people understand it. They understand when they see so many children, they understand"* (I_06)).

Some of the parents attended **workshops while serving** their sentences in order to improve their parental competences: (*"...that reading program, then responsible parenting program, „Roda association“ yes.. I think 4 groups I ended up with."* (I_04)). From this it can be concluded that parents are quite **motivated to improve their parenting competencies**. In addition to attending workshops, the motivation of parents is visible through their efforts and desire to spend time with the child in a better way during their stay in prison: (*"I was afraid of it, meaning either that I go out with a policeman, at least in front of the penitentiary to let me go, at least if I wasn't inside the walls, at least if I was in the park with the children, but I know that's not the practice."* (I_07)). The desire for better spending time can also be seen through a greater affinity for **using the convenience of going out as a better way to fulfill the parenting**

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role: (*"You go out, that two or three weekends have helped so that they feel me outside, that they do not feel me in the room" (I_02)*). Regarding the legal regulation of parents' rights, opinions are divided regarding Croatian legislation: (*"... for that parental role that prison prescribed it... in my opinion it is not so bad at all, because they also have the right to come to these children, I can not say that it is neglected..."*, , , *"...I don't think it's well-arranged" (I_08)*).

The most common response to a query that made it **easier** for them to stay in prison were related to **the contacts they had with the child**, from **contact with the child through visits** (*"...so those visits.... It'll be easier if you see them. It's easier for you to talk and have fun." (I_03)*), and **the use of the convenience of exit**: (*".. I was happiest when I went out on the first exit, so after a year and a half, to go out I think." (I_04)*). For some parents, their stay in prison was also facilitated by thoughts about the future life with their children: (*"... I couldn't get a lot of impression of them because I only saw them inside, all the time I was just inside, I didn't see them well and stuff." (I_09)*). It made it easier for parents to know through contacts that their family was safe and that their children were doing well: (*"It made it easy for me to know that my wife was okay at home, that she was taken care of as much as possible, that she was helped by her family, my brothers." (I_06)*). In this way, their concern and concern for the family decreased.

Often parents know **how to hide the truth from the child** that they were in prison, which is confirmed in this research. The two participants did not tell the children the truth that they were in prison: (*"we prepared the children in a different way, so it was not directly stated that I was going there, but that the father had to go on one trip, he had to do something..." (I_06)*, *"they still do not even know that I was in prison." (I_06)*). In addition to hiding the truth, it has been observed that parents **avoid the fact of serving their sentences in various ways**, from **avoiding conversations with children about the subject to avoiding contact with the child while serving their sentence**. One father states, *"I mean, I isolated my children from it and didn't call them at all..." (I_01)*. Jakmenic, Pušenjek and Krakan (2015) state that 11% of children of prisoners do not know where their parent is, and parents do not tell them because of feelings of shame and fear of condemnation of the environment and stigma of the child. Children should know the exact information where the parent is in order to reduce their concern and fear (Knežević, 2014).

Through a conversation with the probation office officials, it is learned that often prisoners have a need to diminish the importance of serving their sentences, in ways to rationalize or say that this is not something terrible. The same was noticed in the conversation with the participants where the father explained to the children that this was not some crime that he committed or anything significant: (*"it was an economic crime, I mean it's not some misdeed or I don't know what terrible for people to say... I explained everything to him, yes. It's not much of a crime, so they've accepted it, let's say it, with understanding." (I_03)*). The suppression of the impact of

punishment is also evident through questions related to **the denial of the impact of punishment on the family**, i.e. that their absence had no impact on their children. Most of the respondents tried to create the impression through the conversation that the impact of punishment on the family was negligible, that the children did not hold anything against them and that it did not leave any mark on them: (*"Honestly they did not feel that I was imprisoned nor could they have known, they were too small, so it did not leave any trace on them."* (I_02)). It is unquestionable how serving a prison sentence negatively affects both children and the entire family. Children whose parents are in prison experience multiple social and emotional problems that can grow into long-term problems of adaptation (Knežević, 2014), so we can accept such answers with caution assuming a possible defense mechanism of parents prisoners in dealing with the fact that their bad life moves have affected the functioning of their family.

When asked **for the role of the social worker**, a similar attitude is observed. Most of the participants don't really even know that there is a social worker in prison: (*"I don't think there is a social worker in prison, there is only a psychologist and a referenti...I've never talked to a social worker (I_02)"*). A possible reason for this is the fact stated in the introductory part, that the Law for the Execution of Prison Sentences does not specifically specify the tasks of a social worker, but it is emphasized that the job of a social worker is related to the treatment department they carry out together with other professional associates. All officers in the treatment of parents prisoners perform the same jobs regardless of which profession they belong to. Judging by the statements, it was noticed that the participants are unaware of the role of the social worker within the prison system and that they do not have the impression that experts inside the prison have a role in improving parenting of this type. The role of the social worker should be essential for maintaining contact between parents and children of prisoners, so it should be more visible in the prison system (Brkić, 2013).

4.2. The main challenges of parenting while serving a prison sentence

Table 2. Challenges of parenting during serving prison sentence

CODES	CATEGORIES
<i>Children's reactions during visits</i>	Dealing with the child's reactions to serve his sentence
<i>Children's reactions to separation from their parents</i>	
<i>Prohibition of contact by the mother of the child</i>	Obstacles in making contact with the child
<i>Difficult material situation of the family</i>	
<i>Long distance from the penitentiary/prison from the child's place of residence</i>	
<i>Expensive and limited phone in prison</i>	
<i>Feeling of heaviness due to separation from the child</i>	Emotional difficulties of parents prisoners
<i>Feeling heaviness due to spending time with your child too short</i>	
<i>Feelings of sadness and worry</i>	
<i>Feeling uncomfortable when visiting</i>	
<i>Inability to be present in the child's everyday life</i>	Inability to participate in the life of the child
<i>Underdeveloped sense of parenting due to lack of presence in children's lives</i>	
<i>Insufficient effort of experts in working with prisoners</i>	Insensitivity of the system to the needs of parents prisoners
<i>Lack of understanding of parents' needs</i>	
<i>Failure of the Social Welfare Center in exercising parents' rights</i>	

Regarding the challenges of parenting while serving a prison sentence, parents describe **the reactions of children during visits and the reactions of children to the very separation from them**. The reactions during the visit are: (*"Only the kid was a little embarrassed by these searches and you know that... it's a routine, but it has to be done so that it was a little uncomfortable for him..." (I_03)*). Although there are different opinions of experts about how much visits to prison are in the interest of the child, previous research shows that even if there are negative consequences of visits, such as irritability, they are not long-lived and there is no evidence of a longer-term negative effect of visits on children (Knežević, 2014). Furthermore, the reactions of the child to the very absence of parents are described as follows: (*"...There were always questions about when you're going to come home, what are you doing here, wanting to*

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come home tomorrow and so... so when are you going to come back? So where are you going?... Do you want to come back again....?" (I_06)). Due to the very situation of one of the parents in prison and the unpleasant feelings that occur in the child, visits should not further contribute to the reinforcement of such emotions, but cause the child to feel more satisfied (Novosel, 2014). For this reason, the task of all experts in prison is to enable the child to spend time with the parent in the most relaxed and positive way possible in conditions suitable for the child.

The difficulties of parents also created various **obstacles in achieving regular contact with the child** in a way that created difficult communication with the child. A specific case in this research was **the prohibition by the mother of the child from contacting the father in prison**. According to the participant, his ex-wife prevented him from contacting the child during his entire time in prison. The participant explains this situation in a picturesque way: *("Look, I will tell you honestly, I did not hear from the children in general until I got the first exit, because I was not granted phone calls because I did not have proof of kinship. I needed a copy of my ex-wife sent to me, she wouldn't send it... She didn't give me any information... I sent 20 letters and didn't get any responses... For a year or so, I don't know what happened." (I_04)).* In Croatia, about 60% of prisoners have school-age children and almost as many say that children do not visit them in prison (Novosel, 2014). If one of the parents is in prison, the other parent or guardian is responsible for visiting the child. Although this is in the interests of the child, the other parent often knows how to resist it. The provisions of the Family Act stipulate that parents, regardless of whether they receive care jointly or separately, should exchange information about the child's health, upbringing, school and extracurricular obligations.

The most common obstacles in making contact with a child are: high and hard-to-bear costs, distance from prison from the child's residence, prohibition of contact by a third party (which has been confirmed in this research), lack of space and content appropriate for children, long wait for visits, short duration of visits, absence from kindergarten/school/work, etc. (Jačmenica Pušenjek & Krakan, 2015). Almost all of the parents' difficulties were expressed through the experiences of former prisoners and in this research. Obstacles in contact were also **a difficult material situation of the family**, which reduced the possibility of more frequent communication and seeing the child: *("I was in a difficult financial situation and I could not do anything, if someone from the outside does not give you money, you can't do anything for the weekend, or anything." (I_05)),* In addition to finances, the obstacle to more regular contact with the child was the **great distance of the penitentiary/prison from the child's place of residence**: *(„Prisons are too far from the place of residence, when someone comes to visit loses the whole day to it and it is tiring for both, parents and children)." (I_05)),* and **an expensive and limited phone in prison**: *("calls are limited in time and the tariff is very expensive..."(I_08)).* Serving a prison sentence is often a financial problem, and the family is in many cases prevented from allocating money for a trip that is often long and exhaustive (Novosel, 2014). Regarding this problem, attempts were made in various ways to find a solution, and as one of the solutions was the sending the proposal to the Ministry of Social

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Policy by the Prison System Directorate to introduce the possibility of granting one-time assistance for the cost of travel if the family could not settle it into the Law on Social Welfare (Novosel, 2014).

Furthermore, when asked what was most difficult for them as a parent during their sentence, the answers referred to **the feeling of heaviness due to separation from the child** ("*...so that absence means, we were always used to it before, so I was constantly present and driving to school and kindergarten and anything...*" (I_06)), and **the feeling of heaviness due to spending too short time with them**: ("*Well, the hardest part was that you can't be, let's say it, longer with children, because it's that hour, it's very short...*" (I_03)). The two participants add that it was the hardest thing for them to go to prison because of separation from the children: ("*well leaving, leaving alone when I had to go to prison.*" (I_010)).

It is unquestionable how separation from the child and the inability to fully participate in the child's life also caused **emotional difficulties for parents**. It was noted that they avoided talking about the emotions they faced while serving their sentences. Participants did not give a direct answer, but would often talk in general about experiences in prison or would respond something like: ("*And how can it be...*" (I_03)). Only the female respondent directly replied that she felt like a parent in prison ("*Well, it was sad all that, for the children very sad, especially for me.*" (I_05)), and other respondents (men) did not give a direct response regarding feelings, which could possibly be explained by the fact that women are more open to talking about emotions (but this could only be taken at the level of possible assumption). Separation of parents in prison and children can cause pain and suffering since leaving significantly reduces mutual contact, increases the chances of family discord and increases concern about the consequences on children (Knežević, 2014). In addition to the aforementioned feeling of heaviness due to separation, some of the answers in which one could conclude about the emotions they were facing were **feelings of sadness and concern** for the family ("*And what can I say, I was sad and worried. I was thinking about when I'd see them again.*" (I_07)) and **a sense of unease when visiting**: ("*You have to sit there, the cops are looking at you...*" (I_02)), ("*They'd come into a room where there were more families so you can't even relax properly.*" (I_05)).

The inability to participate in the life of the child posed difficulties to almost all parents. Although communication with the child reduced the feeling of separation, the very awareness of parents that their days were passing and they were **prevented from participating in the everyday life** of the child created a burden for them: ("*the hardest thing for me was that I could not hear the kids, because I did not know what it was like in school, how home was, what grades... nothing. I didn't really know who the teacher was.*" (I_04)). One father states that not participating in the child's everyday life prevented him from gaining **awareness of being a parent** at all: ("*Well honestly, only when I went out, when I spent time with them, when I was in the same house, only then did I realize that I was a parent. Until then... I got the impression that they were my children, but it wasn't that, because I wasn't there.*" (I_02)).

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According to the experience of parents prisoners, **the insensitivity of the system to their needs is visible**. Former inmates claim that officials are underworking hard to work with the prisoner: (*"...You're actually locked up there. Now what? But nobody did anything with you, that's the problem. I think the biggest problem is that they just kick people out. No one does anything with the prisoner, absolutely nothing."* (I_02)), and how they do not respect their requirements and needs: (*"There was one case, a woman came to visit her husband with a child, the child is 6,7 months old and now she says she forgot her birth certificate and now what... she has to leave the child in the car and then she can visit, I think where is the logic... He doesn't want to see the evidence, he wants the paper to see the evidence and that's it."* (I_04)). From the statements we see that in fact their parenting was neglected in a prison that mostly adheres to "rigid" prison rules without much effort in working with them, and by the very fact that they committed some criminal offense not to take their needs essential: (*".. That's what it is - he's in jail I don't give a... it hurts me. I mean, but that's not the solution."* (I_08)). Consequently, there is general agreement on the lack of legal aid and counseling in the procedures of exercising certain rights, given that parents inmates most often do not know how to draw up and send a request, who to contact, etc., and when they are instructed, they are usually absent by an urgent response from the institutions or the silence of the system follows (Jačmenica Pušenjeak & Krakan, 2015). One of the participants describes a bad experience with a social worker, more precisely a participant whose wife prevented him from making contact with children, and states that the Social Welfare Center did nothing about contacting his wife and helping him to make contacts in some way: (*"...I told you here's that letter I wrote, so please call her for an interview, let me hear the kids, and no one anything, we'll do it, we'll do it... and nothing changed...."* (I_04)).

The law stipulates that the Social Welfare Center in cases such as this, for example that one of the parents prevents the child from visiting prison, may impose a measure to protect the child's personal rights and well-being on that parent. To begin with, it can issue a measure of warning of errors and failures in the exercise of care, warn the parent of failures in writing, and if the parent continues to disrespect the child's rights, he can impose more difficult measures such as measures of professional assistance and support in the realization of care for children or a measure of intensive professional assistance and supervision of the realization of child care (Novosel, 2014).

4.3. Opportunities to improve parenthood while serving a prison sentence

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Table 3. Possibilities for improving parenthood during serving prison sentence

CODES	CATEGORIES
<i>More suitable rooms for children's visits</i>	Improved prison conditions to fulfill the parental role
<i>Longer visiting hours</i>	
<i>It's easier to exercise the right</i>	Greater rights and opportunities in prison
<i>Longer phone calls</i>	
<i>More frequent opportunities to use the benefits of going out</i>	
<i>Increased financial support</i>	
<i>A large number of workshops for parents</i>	
<i>Possibility of visiting the extended family to the prisoner</i>	
<i>Work on confronting prisoners with reasons for serving their sentences</i>	Work on better resocialization of prisoners
<i>Benefits of going out as an easier adaptation to the outside world</i>	
<i>Rad na edukaciji zatvorenika</i>	
<i>Equal rights for parents and their children regardless of the type of institution serving a prison sentence</i>	

Due to dissatisfaction with the conditions within the prison for performing the parental role, especially in the closed type of prison, parents make proposals for **improved conditions in the prison for the fulfillment of the maternity role**, starting from **more adequate rooms for visiting the child**: ("better rooms for staying, means larger rooms, playroom for children in prison do not, so that parents can play with them finely... You've got to let him play, jump, play and play." (I_04)). So, the proposal is to create a space in prisons where the child can play, equip a room with different facilities on a richer scale - from toys, books, etc. A space that is adapted to children (so-called child friendly) and friendly atmosphere by prison officials will reduce the child's fear and confusion when visiting the prison (Brkić, 2013).

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Furthermore, the proposal is a **longer time of visit**: (*"I would like to say in Remetinec longer visits, that is number 1"(I_02)*). Frequent contacts between parents and children reduce difficulties during separation, parents become more responsible, create a stronger emotional bond that creates protection for both parent and child (Knežević, 2014). In his paper Knežević (2014) also mentions research that has shown that more than half of respondents say that visits do not last enough, and that a small number of visits and limited contact with the child contribute to the stress of parents, which can reduce parents' motivation for parenting and children can create inaccurate and unrealistic perceptions about them. One father also states the proposal that more than one family member has the right to visit, not just their parents or spouse/other parent: (*"...and what's the most important thing, more family members, not just parents say mom, dad and that.. So brother, cousin, it needs to be done, auntie...Grandma is coming, uncle..." (I_09)*).

Parents would like them to **exercise greater rights and opportunities in prison**, than an **easier way to exercise rights** (*"so it is easier to exercise these rights" (I_05)*), **longer telephone conversations** (*"...there should be longer telephone conversations, that would not be bad." (I_03)*), **more frequent opportunities to use the benefits of going out** (*"so it would be best if they gave more to go home." (I_03)*) and **a larger number of workshops for parents**: (*"More workshops should be done for parents." (I_04)*). Through a greater number of educations to improve parental skills, the aim is to improve the prisoner's skills and knowledge of parenting and thus improve the overall family functioning (Novosel, 2014).

In support of greater use of the benefits of exit are family opportunities in support, in terms of if the prisoner has family support from children and the rest of the family, there is a greater chance that the extended time of socializing with the family will also contribute to the improvement of family relationships (Novosel, 2014). In this way, when returning prisoners, the overall adjustment after the absence of one of the parents will be easier.

Since finances have been the cause of difficult communication between parents and children, parents propose **greater financial support** from the system to make socializing and communication with the child more frequent: (*"Well, the system should contribute more financially to parents, because you can't do anything if you don't have money" (I_05)*). One of the proposals cited by Novosel (2014) is that it would be useful to provide from the state budget funds for at least partial coverage of the costs of calls and letters between prisoners and children as well as to discuss the introduction of more modern ways of communication in prison (communication via internet, for example). When asked about their attitudes regarding experts within the prison system and what they could do to improve the quality of parenting, the impression was given about the insignificant impact of prison staff on the quality of parenting, i.e. parents do not have the impression that experts in prison can influence improvements in this area: (*"Those conditions that have, say, this prison doesn't have much influence from the staff on it. You have these rooms, they bring you here and you have that hour and a half of yours,*

you stay with them, you end up and you go back. So as far as the staff is concerned, they can't really do anything." (I_07)).

We can conclude that greater sensitization of experts in prison would achieve that parents have the impression of the influence of staff in improving the attitude of professionals towards parent prisoners and greater awareness and empathy for their needs. As parents have expressed their position on the insensitivity of the system and staff to their needs, some of the parents give suggestions on ways to do more **to resocialize prisoners**. One father states that prisoners should **be faced with their failures to become more aware of the consequences of the crime they have committed**: (*"According to me there should be a service in prison, now if it is called that social worker or I have no idea, I don't care what her name would be, who should work with these people and prove it to them and say: Sir, you did this, this and that. That's why you're here." (I_01)*). The second father, as a better possibility of resocialization and later adaptation to family life, suggests that the prisoner should be given **the benefits of exit long before serving his sentence in order to better adapt to the parental role** after serving his sentence: (*"...Probably a little while ago that they gave you going out to the city and that external socialization and all.. I'm after 5 and a half years, or after 6, so to speak they just kicked me out now, you come home to your children and I've seen them probably 5 times and so" (I_02)*). The same father also proposes the implementation of a program for the purpose of easier employment of prisoners after leaving prison, **work on the education of prisoners**, which would reduce the material difficulties of the family that followed due to the absence of one of the parents: (*"...that a group for, I do not know, for some writing a resume, for someone to try to get a job... It would be to me... I begged books about some entrepreneurship, no one brought me anything or generally told me that they would bring them. I prayed that I would be trained a little in that direction, that I would know taxes and surtaxes and these things, nothing." (I_07)*). The authors (Jačmenica Pušenjek & Krakan, 2015) state that it is necessary to try to change the negative elements of the personality of prisoners with better social skills in order to easily reintegrate the prisoner into society and family community after leaving. For this reason, additional workshops and various educational programs that are in line with the needs of prisoners and the needs of the modern labor market should be introduced (Jačmenica Pušenjek & Krakan, 2015).

Through the results obtained, it is concluded that the parents of prisoners propose to invest greater effort of experts in working with them and greater sensibility for their needs. Bearing in mind the experiences of parents as the central proposal is that children and parents should be allowed **an equal range of rights** related to their mutual contacts **regardless of the type of institution in which they are located**, which is described by the statement of one father: (*Regardless of whether it is a closed type or semi-open type, parents of children when it comes to being an environment, that this visit lasts longer, not for an hour but for 3 hours." (I_06)*). The reduced possibility of the scope of rights and opportunities in the closed type reduces the possibility for the child to see the parent more often, i.e. in some way they are also "punished",

so listening to the attitudes from the perspective of parents, we draw the suggestion that if the prisoner is a parent, regardless of the institution in which he is located, the rights of them as parents should be allowed to the same extent in order to try to reduce the additional "harm" of serving the sentence on children and put the primary focus on the parent-child relationship and preservation of family connection. A lot of respondents didn't even have any idea of the proposal with the explanation that they can't really influence anything related to the system in prison, regardless of what they said through an interview or to any of the experts, which is once again proof of the neglect of this population: (*"...nothing will ever change what I said here, it was tried to co-finance or so, but that's all 0 points."(I_05)*).

Overall, according to the proposals of the participants, it comes to the knowledge that it is primarily necessary to work on unsatisfactory conditions in prison, starting from the conditions in which visits take place, pay greater attention to the improvement of their parental competences with the offer of greater rights and opportunities and equality of parents' rights regardless of the type of institution in which they reside.

Regarding the socio-demographic data that were taken to inspect the specifics of the relationship with the child, given the marital status, it is concluded that divorced parents have a potentially higher risk in difficult communication and contact with the child. Of all the respondents, half of them were married and half of them were divorced. It was noticed that divorced parents had more difficulty in achieving a stable relationship with the child, such as a respondent whose ex-wife completely prevented from reaching the child. On the other hand, one participant did not have the support of the father of the children and was in a difficult material situation, so she could not see the children often. Furthermore, the specifics in gender-related experiences were explained in the challenges of parenting where avoidance of men's speech about emotions was observed, while the woman made it clear how she felt. But on the other hand, it is interesting that the only female person in the study refused to record with a voice recorder and least "opened up" in conversation. Considering the fact that during the research, mostly fathers participated in both trials as authoritative role models, in addition to the fact that men are more often perpetrators of criminal offenses, the most common role of the mother of children as the primary guardian of the child is confirmed. Given the length of the sentence, no more detailed descriptions of the experiences of parents who served their sentence longer compared to those who spent longer in prison were observed.

5. Research limitations

The results obtained can be taken into account with certain limitations of the research in mind. Primarily, a small number of respondents participated in the study, so for this reason it is not possible to generalize the results. Then, generalization is not possible due to the fact that former prisoners on parole entered the sample only in the city of Zagreb and Zagreb County. In addition, the study presents gender disproportionateness since 90% men participated in the

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study, so due to the overrepresentation of the male sex, heterogeneity was not achieved in terms of fathers and mothers as parents. One participant did not agree to record with a voice recorder, so the results were written manually, which reduces the amount of information and increases the possibility that some information is omitted.

Given that the interviews were conducted in the official premises of the Probation Offices, there is a possibility that the participants did not feel relaxed and were more restrained in the conversation.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that the experiences of former inmates who are parents testify to the primary focus of parents on maintaining contact with the child and family in order to preserve their connection in this aggravating situation, but also to facilitate parents' stay in prison. An affinity for the practice of using the benefits of going out as the most optimal way of socializing with a child is noted due to the greater possibilities of content in spending time together. Experiences about parents' satisfaction in fulfilling their role vary depending on the type of prison/penitentiary they are in. More precisely, dissatisfaction was observed in the closed type of penitentiary due to the smaller scope of rights and opportunities, and consequently it is proposed to equal the rights of parents prisoners and children regardless of the type of institution of serving the sentence. While serving their prison sentences, parents face a number of challenges. Some of them were the insensitivity of the system to their needs and obstacles in achieving more frequent contact with the child, most often due to the distance of the penitentiary from the child's place of residence, but also financial difficulties, which through most previous studies proved to be one of the main difficulties for parents in more frequent contact with children.

Participants' proposals for improving the position of parents prisoners and children range from improving the conditions in prison for holding visits of the child in order to spend better and more meaningful time together, achieving greater rights and opportunities for the purpose of more frequent contact with the child and improving parental competences, such as longer telephone conversations, more frequent use of benefits, greater financial support of the system and greater commitment of prison staff to their needs. In terms of finances, although there is a possibility of co-financing travel expenses at the state level and the system is making efforts to improve the financial capabilities of parents who are also prisoners, by encouraging greater cooperation with different institutions, more progress could be achieved from civil society organizations onwards.

This research confirmed the fact of the neglect of this population and the negative attitude of society towards parents prisoners. Due to the considerable motivation of parents to improve parental competences, better education and greater sensibility of prison staff towards this

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population, greater visibility of the influence of prison staff on improvement, including social workers whose job specification within the prison is "invisible" due to the equalization of jobs of all treatment professionals, can be achieved.

It is concluded that the system's assistance to parents prisoners is primarily necessary in order to be able to realize themselves in their role and reduce the harmful consequences of punishment on children, and their opinion, difficulties and needs should be taken into account before any planning of interventions and projects. Despite the limitations, this research has practical value because it could contribute to the identification of future points of action of experts in creating new projects, designing new research and other interventions that focus on parents prisoners and their children. International examples of practice should guide us towards designing new policies towards this population. Greater media coverage on this topic would encourage greater public sensibility and reduce stigma towards this population.

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