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Imprisoned parenting

The impact of parental incarceration
on children's well-being and relationships



Jitka Navrátilová
and Pavel Navrátil (Eds.)

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IMPRISONED PARENTING

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on children's well-being and relationships

**Jitka Navrátilová (ed.), Pavel Navrátil (ed.), Monika Punová,
Žaneta Dvořáčková, Veronika Smutná, Jiří Vander**

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The cover image was drawn by an 8-year-old girl with an incarcerated mother.

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**We dedicate this book to parents
who do not give up on their parental role even behind bars,
and to those who help them accomplish their parenting
with patience and determination.**

Introduction

Parenting behind bars

by Jitka Navrátilová

Children of incarcerated parents are a group that has long been overlooked in the Czech context. Although international research has for a long time pointed to the fundamental impact of parental imprisonment on the child, in the Czech environment this issue has long been on the periphery of professional interest. Yet the issue of parenting behind bars concerns not only the convicts, but especially their children, who often bear the consequences of this situation without support and understanding.

I was first confronted with the issue of children of incarcerated parents in 2019 through a worker from the Prison Fellowship International Czech Republic with a request for cooperation. Little did I know that this encounter would change my professional direction and open the door to an overlooked topic. After more than twenty years of working with families at risk, I have come to realise that children of incarcerated parents remain out of the view of professionals and the public. Yet, the incarceration of a parent represents one of the most significant threats to a child's well-being, despite the fact that not enough attention has been paid to this circumstance. The world of these children is full of insecurity, loss and stigma. Their needs and rights often remain invisible, as does their emotional struggle with a parent's imprisonment.

During the research project "Parenting Behind Bars",¹ when I had the opportunity to spend a lot of time with incarcerated parents, their children and other family members, I discovered a new world full of sadness, pain and childhood suffering. Despite my many years of fieldwork experience, I was very surprised at the severe impact that children of incarcerated parents face and how little professional help and support we are able to give them, despite the profound consequences of their parent's incarceration.

However, ignorance of the number of children of incarcerated parents should not be a reason for not providing the necessary help to this particularly vulnerable group, if we as professionals could perceive their real needs. We believe that the lack of real understanding of what happens to children and their needs is often the result

1 The book is an output of the research project "Parenting Behind Bars" financially supported by TAČR ÉTA (TLO 3000199) and implemented by Masaryk University in partnership with Prison Fellowship International (PFI). The project was implemented between 2020 and 2023. This research was the first to address the conditions of children of incarcerated parents, from the perspective of the parents, the children and those who care for them.

of social workers not reflecting the context of a parent's incarceration when assessing their life situation. As Flaquer (2014) notes, there is a strong tendency to assess the life situation of these children through the established procedures of child protection authorities. In the Czech context, however, this assessment is primarily focused on monitoring whether the child has been provided with basic needs, i.e., nutrition, upbringing, care, and housing (Navrátilová 2018). However, applying this approach to child protection makes it impossible to understand the big picture of what children of incarcerated parents experience, the risks they face in their lives, and what they need to thrive like children whose life situation is not marked by the risks associated with a parent's incarceration. Thus, making an assessment according to established procedures may pose a great risk in the sense that, for the child of an incarcerated parent, aspects of the life situation such as the stigma associated with the parent's conviction, the child's fears for the incarcerated parent, loss of the parent, confusion surrounding the parent's incarceration, shame for the crime committed by the parent, isolation from the environment etc., may not be taken into account. However, these are very important parameters in the lives of children of incarcerated parents. Without reflecting on them, not only can we not help this vulnerable group, but on the contrary, we may increase the risk of the already serious effects of incarceration on the child's life.

The "Parenting Behind Bars" research project was a response to this inattention by professionals and the public. It showed that the departure of a parent to prison is not just a break in contact, but a fundamental interference in the parenting role and the parent-child relationship. Incarcerated parents find themselves in a situation where their parenting is subject to constraints that fundamentally affect their ability to care for their child, provide emotional support and take an active part in their child's upbringing. As a result, parental authority is weakened and sometimes there is a complete estrangement between parent and child. Research shows that children of incarcerated parents are subject to an ambiguous loss that is different from other forms of separation, such as divorce or death. This ambiguous loss, combined with family stigma, leads to psychological, emotional, and social problems that affect their development (e.g., Eddy & Poelmann-Tynan 2019; Murray & Murray, 2010; Turney & Goodsell, 2018).

We often see that incarcerated parents wish to maintain a relationship with their children and remain part of their lives. However, many of them encounter barriers to communication due not only to actually serving the sentence in prison, but also due to systemic barriers and stigma from the environment. On the other hand, children who are able to communicate and maintain a relationship with their parent on a regular basis show less anxiety and social exclusion. Yet, the Czech environment still lacks the attention and support that would enable these children to overcome the difficulties associated with parental imprisonment and maintain a safe and supportive relationship with their parent.

Our research team decided to do its utmost to dispel this fog of inattention shrouding the children of incarcerated parents in the Czech Republic and to actively contribute to changing the situation.

We see the “Parenting Behind Bars” research as a good opportunity to reverse this unfavourable state of disinterest and neglect of the needs of this vulnerable group of children.

We realised that before we can consider and initiate any steps towards change, we first need to have a good understanding of how incarceration impacts the children of incarcerated parents and how it changes children’s lives and well-being. We have adopted a mixed-methods research design for our research, combining research strategies and methods in order to discover step-by-step the impacts of incarceration on children from the perspectives of those incarcerated, caregivers and the children themselves.

I admit that the research interviews with children were a big challenge for our research team, because on the one hand we were aware that without the voice of the child our research would not be complete, and on the other hand we knew that we would have to get this voice from relatively young children. Getting a child’s voice required us to be very sensitive and understanding of the delicate world of children’s emotions and how they experience them. We were greatly supported by the presence of our project partner, Prison Fellowship International, which aided us in creating the proper conditions for the safe and confidential environment necessary for the children participating in the research to talk about their experience of separation from their parents, or to draw or express through picture cards what would otherwise be difficult to convey because of their age.

This book is intended primarily for professionals whose work relates to child protection across various sectors. It is they who can play a key determining role in whether the well-being of children whose parents are in prison improves, or whether they continue to be left without the help they need. The “invisibility” of these children often means professionals do not perceive the specific needs of this vulnerable group and are unable to provide them with adequate support. This book therefore offers a deeper insight into the issue and helps professionals avoid mistakes that are often repeated in Czech practice: (1) **neglecting the context of the parent’s incarceration when assessing the child’s situation** – the child is not assessed in the broader context of the impact of incarceration; (2) **not taking into account the child’s actual needs** – due to the stigmatisation of incarcerated parents, the child may not receive adequate care; and (3) **inadequate mediation of help and support** – if professionals do not see this group of children as at risk, they cannot offer them the necessary services.

Children of incarcerated parents often come into the care of professionals only when they start to exhibit problematic behaviour such as aggression, neglect of school or self-harm. Instead of getting timely help, these children are seen through the lens of risk behaviour, which can lead to confusion between cause and effect. If a child grows up in an environment where his or her needs are not met, it is logical that various forms of psychological or social hardship will manifest themselves (Hickle, 2020). Without adequate support, these children may be at increased risk of repeating the cycle of delinquency – as international studies show, children of incarcerated parents are 6 to 8 times more likely to go to prison themselves as adults (Clear, 2007; Murray & Farrington, 2008).

So how is it possible that a child who is already facing the effects of a parent's imprisonment is also exposed to other negative consequences resulting from the absence of help and support? One of the key problems is that there is no systematic data on these children. No records are kept in the Czech Republic to show how many children are currently affected by parental imprisonment, and most helping professionals do not come across these children in their practice simply because they are not registered as a specific risk group. When a child remains in the care of the other parent or a caregiver after a parent has gone to prison, professionals often do not see the need for intervention, even though the child may be experiencing trauma, stigma or loss of emotional security.

The aim of the book you are holding in your hands is to introduce you, on the basis of research findings, to this group of children about whom little is known and who are hardly talked about in this country.² We seek to raise awareness of this hitherto "invisible group of children" of incarcerated parents and to open a social debate on the possibilities of structural assistance for them. The theoretical framework chosen, which combines the capability approach with attachment theory, allows for a deeper understanding of the effects of incarceration on children while providing tools to find ways to mitigate their negative impacts. The capability approach, whose roots are linked to the measurement of opportunities and freedom to achieve social rights, seems to us very appropriate in view of the fact that children of incarcerated parents are denied many rights in the Czech Republic (Navrátilová et al., 2023). Thus, this book is theoretically grounded in the capability approach, which becomes for us a methodological and interpretive starting point for understanding how parental incarceration does or does not enable children to thrive and live the life they would like to live and should live as children. We used this approach also because of its ability to integrate other theories we have used in our research, such as the attachment theory, resilience theory, and theories dealing with trauma. These theories help us better comprehend what happens to children when a parent goes to prison. In order to understand the effects of incarceration on the child in their complexity, we examined the experiences not only of the children themselves, but also of their caregivers and incarcerated parents.

In nine chapters, the book gradually opens up key themes related to the impact of imprisonment on parenting, the parent-child relationship and the well-being of Czech children of incarcerated parents. The different themes are intertwined and the reader will read some of the statements of the respondents in several places. This interweaving is due to the fact that we observe certain impacts in different contexts, in terms of different theories, in order to make our knowledge and understanding as comprehensive as possible and to be able to verify our findings from different theoretical perspectives.

2 One of the developments in this area was the establishment of the Human Rights Commissioner's Working Group for Children of Imprisoned Parents, whose members include organisations, institutions and individuals who seek to redress the rights and protection of children of imprisoned parents. This working group, established under the Czech Government Office, has been working since 2022.

The first chapter reflects on the multidimensional nature of the concept of child well-being and its theoretical underpinnings, paying particular attention to the capability approach as a theoretical and methodological tool for measuring the impact of parental incarceration on the child. We show the multidimensional layers of the concept of child well-being and its variability in relation to changes in the social context, as well as the variability of children's needs. The second chapter presents childhood in the shadows of the bars, that is, how children, caring adults, and incarcerated parents perceive the impact of parental incarceration on the child. The third chapter focuses on parenting in the prison context, showing how incarcerated parenting changes over time and the limits and specificities children and their incarcerated parents face. The fourth chapter focuses on the relational dynamics between the child and the incarcerated parent and shows how the lack of communication between parents and children changes the children's lives. The fifth chapter focuses specifically on the topic of fatherhood in Czech prisons. The sixth and seventh chapters examine the trauma and resilience of the children of incarcerated parents, respectively, and chapter eight offers appropriate support strategies. Chapter nine discusses the legislative basis for the rights of children of incarcerated parents and reflects on the current state of their protection. The final part of the book summarises recommendations for professionals and the wider society with the aim of supporting children in situations that are emotionally and socially extremely challenging for them.

The content of the book is based on the results of the research project called "Parenting Behind Bars", which was the first effort in the Czech Republic to systematically collect data on the "invisible" group of children of incarcerated parents. Although we have not yet been able to conduct research on a representative sample, we believe that this research probe provides important insights into the impact of parental incarceration on children's lives and well-being. The book not only presents new empirical findings from the Czech environment, but also allows for comparisons with foreign research and opens up space for a broader discussion of how different legal and social systems influence children's experience of parental incarceration. It offers a perspective from a country where systematic support for these children has so far been lacking, and shows how the issue of parenting in prison can be embedded in a broader social and legislative framework. We believe that the book not only records the experiences of the children, but also opens up a space for finding effective helping strategies that can provide the children of incarcerated parents with the hope and support they need to live fulfilling lives.

Chapter 1

Assessing the well-being of children of incarcerated parents: theoretical and methodological background

by Jitka Navrátilová

The imprisonment of parents is a topic that has not gained the attention of the general public or professionals in the Czech Republic for a long time. It was only in the second decade of the 21st century that interest in this issue gradually increased. From the very beginning of this newfound interest, a key question has emerged: what impact does the imprisonment of a parent have on a child's life and well-being?

There are different approaches to measuring these impacts. The aim of this chapter is to conceptualise the consequences of parental imprisonment in the context of child well-being, which we ground in the capability approach that is gaining prominence in the measurement of child welfare. Drawing on evidence from international and Czech research, we show how the effects of parental incarceration on child well-being can be measured.

According to qualified estimates, the number of Czech children with incarcerated parents ranges between 25,000 (COPE³ estimate) and 40,000 (PFI Czech Republic⁴ estimate). While in the USA and some European countries interest in this vulnerable group has increased over the last twenty years (Arditti, 2012; Eddy & Poelmann-Tynan, 2019; Krysik & Rodriguez, 2022; Philbrick et al., 2014), in the Czech environment this interest is still taking shape. The first Czech research on “Parenting Behind Bars” represents a flagship effort to raise the visibility of these children and to understand the impact of parental incarceration on children's well-being.

The concept of well-being has its closest analogue in Czech legislation in the term “child's interest”, which, however, does not fully capture the concept's content as defined by experts (e.g., Ben-Arieh et al., 2014; García-Márquez, 2024). In Czech practice, the child's interest is generally associated with the child's welfare, but the interpretation of this is ambiguous (Kornel, 2013). This ambiguity is particularly problematic for social workers, who have to make decisions about what is in the best interests of the child in situations fraught with risk, and the lack of an interpretive framework can cause significant difficulties. Although there are publications analysing these ambiguities in the assessment of children's life risk situations, the understanding of child protection risks is constantly evolving (Mydlíková, 2018; Punová et al., 2020; Navrátilová et al., 2021).

3 COPE – Children of Prisoners Europe is a non-profit organisation bringing together a European network of institutions working to support children of incarcerated parents.

4 PFI Czech Republic – Prison Fellowship International.

This chapter brings new impetus to the assessment of child well-being, particularly in situations where the child's parent is in prison. Through the capability approach, we identify key areas that should be assessed so that appropriate interventions can be designed which are based on a true understanding of the life situation of children of incarcerated parents.

Changing perspectives on child well-being

Studies tracing the development of the concept of child well-being (Ben-Arieh et al., 2010, 2014; Pollard & Lee, 2003; Jiang & Ngai, 2022) highlight the lack of expert consensus on an unambiguous definition. Although the term is commonly used, its interpretation varies depending on social, cultural and economic factors. The diversity of perspectives means that we focus only on certain fragments of child well-being without considering its overall scope. According to Sandin (2014), this narrow perspective is a consequence of the fact that discussions about child welfare often focus on responses to current problems. This practice leads to child well-being being understood primarily in the context of difficulties, rather than building on children's strengths, resources and potential.

An analysis of well-being studies from 1974 to 1999 showed that almost half (47%) were based on deficit indicators (Pollard & Lee, 2003). The authors identified five major domains of child well-being: (1) physical, (2) psychological, (3) cognitive, (4) social, and (5) economic well-being. However, these categories are far from encompassing all dimensions of child well-being.

At the turn of the millennium, the literature began to focus more on the resources and strengths of the child. This shift is related to the growing emphasis on self-development, the exercise of rights and the fulfilment of potential. Newer approaches have placed greater emphasis on the emotional and psychological well-being of the child, and his or her relationships with family and the nurturing environment (Ben-Arieh et al., 2014; Stafford et al., 2016). At the same time, however, an excessive focus on indicators of mental health can lead to a neglect of the material conditions that are key to achieving child well-being. The OECD (2009) points out that child poverty and material deprivation negatively affect well-being in other dimensions as well. A 2022 OECD report stresses that children's material needs cannot be reduced to food and housing alone – children need access to education, services and activities that support their development and social inclusion. As noted by Ben-Arieh and Frønes (2007), children's well-being encompasses quality of life in a broader sense, including economic conditions, peer relationships, political rights and development opportunities.

Measuring child well-being and its relevance to children of incarcerated parents

In recent decades there has been a proliferation of national and international surveys measuring child well-being using OECD and UNICEF indicators, in some cases extending down to the level of individual cities (Ben-Arieh & Goerge, 2001; Casas & Frønes, 2020; Oh, 2023). This trend reflects the multidimensional nature of the concept of well-being, which is constantly evolving and adapting to new challenges.

Children of incarcerated parents are among the most vulnerable groups whose well-being tends to be significantly impaired. Turney and Goodsell (2018) have shown that parental incarceration affects multiple dimensions simultaneously - impacting the child's behaviour, education, health and economic status. These children face risks and challenges that are not always reflected in traditional measurement frameworks, so it is important that current approaches to assessing children's thriving reflect their experiences.

Multidimensionality of well-being in children of incarcerated parents

Turney and Goodsell (2018) identified several mechanisms of parental incarceration negatively affecting child well-being - physical absence of the parent, trauma, social stigma, and material deprivation. The physical absence of a parent is associated not only with emotional hardship, but also with a decline in available support strategies that a parent normally provides (e.g., supervision, emotional support, financial stability). The trauma of a parent's incarceration is often amplified by the uncertainty of how long the parent will be in prison, which causes children anxiety and a sense of loss of control over their life situation. The social stigma associated with a parent's imprisonment can lead to the child's exclusion from social relationships and difficulties in forming friendships. Material deprivation is a direct consequence of the absence of parental income, which can expose the child to poverty and worsened living conditions. In this respect, the imprisonment of a parent is not an isolated event, but triggers a chain of negative impacts that affect the child in multiple areas of life.

As Fattore et al. (2007) noted, children should be actively involved in the research on their well-being so that its measurement is relevant to their actual needs. Children's participation in defining their own well-being allows for a better understanding of their experiences and the design of more effective interventions. Research shows that children of incarcerated parents often feel that their voices are not heard and their needs are not sufficiently taken into account in social policy or specialist support. It is therefore crucial to include their perspective in the design of strategies to support their well-being and to ensure that interventions reflect the real challenges they face.

Using the capability approach in the assessment of child well-being

A look at the development of the concept of child well-being shows that there is considerable debate about its content. Different approaches to its definition and measurement can be observed.

In an effort to assess the well-being of children of incarcerated parents as comprehensively as possible, we used the capability approach (CA). The methodological construction of well-being dimensions according to CA provides a suitable framework for assessing the situation of this “invisible” group of children and young people in the Czech Republic.

We chose CA also because it reflects changes in the view of the child and childhood in the social sciences. A key feature is the emphasis on child participation in defining the different dimensions of child well-being. The child is seen as an active social actor who participates in the research and communicates his or her experiences. His or her voice determines the formulation of the domains of well-being (Fegter & Richter, 2014). In this way, CA contributes to the transition from an “adultist perspective” (the central role of adults) to a “child perspective”, where the child’s perspective is emphasised. The child is thus given the opportunity to freely express his or her preferences and participate in the definition of his or her own well-being.

The most important argument for the use of CA in assessing the well-being of children of incarcerated parents is its sensitivity to assessing the life conditions and circumstances that allow or do not allow individuals to achieve a life they consider worthwhile.

The capability approach formulated by Amartya Sen (1992, 1993, 1999, 2009) has become the philosophical basis for UNDP’s comparative measurement since the 1990s. Grounded in theories of justice, Sen criticised liberal philosophical accounts of equality of access to human well-being and emphasised the variability of individual experience of well-being (Henderson & Denny, 2015). Sen focused on the question of what people value and the extent to which they can achieve the capacity to be and to act in ways that enable them to live good, diverse and humane lives (Venkatapuram, 2011). This approach has contributed significantly to the conceptualisation of human well-being and the formulation of the Human Development Index (HDI) (Fukuda-Parr, 2003).

Sen defined capability as “a set of vectors of functionings, reflecting the person’s freedom to lead one type of life or another. It represents the various combinations of functionings (beings and doings) that the person can achieve” (Sen, 1992: 40). In his later work, he elaborates on this idea by describing capability as the substantive freedoms people actually have – real opportunities to achieve valuable ways of living that they have reason to value (Sen, 1999: 87). Levels of capability depend on individual characteristics and circumstances. Venkatapuram (2011) points out that it is crucial to observe the relationship between social opportunities and individual needs. It is the emphasis on tracking the interactions between social opportunities and individual needs when monitoring the well-being of children of incarcerated parents that not

only provides us with a rich philosophical background, but also shapes our research approach. This aspect allows us to better understand what factors influence children's opportunities to achieve well-being and what obstacles and risks they face in the Czech environment.

Although Sen did not formulate a list of capabilities whose presence in an individual's life would be a prerequisite for experiencing a worthwhile and fulfilling life, he inspired many researchers, and Sen's followers developed CA in different directions (Alkire, 2002). In terms of tracking the well-being of children and young people, Martha Nussbaum (1990, 2000, 2003), focusing mainly on the area of human rights, is very inspiring for us. In a critical response to Sen and also based on her own experience with people with disabilities, she pointed out that not all people in society are able to articulate and assert their rights (Nussbaum, 2007). As part of her critical response to Sen's notion of capabilities, Nussbaum compiled a list of ten capabilities that, inspired by Aristotle's work, forms the basis for the dignified life of the individual. Nussbaum's list (*ibid*, 182) is made up of the following capabilities: (1) Life; (2) Bodily Health; (3) Bodily Integrity; (4) Senses, Imagination and Thought; (4) Emotions; (6) Practical Reason; (7) Affiliation; (8) Other Species (such as relationships with animals, plants etc.); (9) Play and (10) Control over One's Environment. According to Nussbaum, it is the task of political representatives to ensure that all residents have access to these capabilities, at least to a minimum degree. While Sen has been accused of being abstract and non-specific in his expression of capabilities, Nussbaum, on the other hand, has been accused by critics of attempting to narrow reality without sufficiently reflecting the diversity of human life (Clark, 2002, 2006; Gasper, 2004). Despite these criticisms, her work has been praised for its distinctive methodological aspect, which has benefited a number of authors.

Nussbaum's list of capabilities indicating positive well-being, as well as her critical view pointing to the existence of inequality of access of vulnerable individuals to the exercise of their rights, is very relevant in the context of the Czech Republic in several respects. First and foremost is the fact that, although the fulfilment of children's rights is a priority in Czech legislation, there are still areas that remain a challenge and where we are learning to deal with these rights. This challenge finds great resonance precisely with the children of incarcerated parents. Navrátilová, Navrátil, Punová and Smutná consider it particularly serious that Czech children have no rights in the process of criminal proceedings with a parent. Their voice is not only unheard, but is not even allowed to be heard (Navrátilová et al., 2023). Knowing that European standards⁵ concerning children of incarcerated parents are not met in the process of criminal proceedings with a parent, we rely on authors for whom the application of children's rights and the participation of children in the formulation of their well-being is a central premise (Trani et al., 2011; Robeyns, 2003; Biggery et al., 2006, 2011; Biggery & Karkara, 2014). The work of Biggery and his colleagues (2006, 2014),

5 Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)5 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to Member States concerning children with imprisoned parents. Adopted on 4 April 2018 at the 1312th meeting of Ministerial Delegates.

who invited children and adolescents themselves to articulate capabilities, has been particularly central to the conceptualisation of our research. Following Nussbaum's (2000) list of capabilities, they also developed such a list for children and adolescents (Biggery et al., 2006: 65–66). According to these authors, the capabilities whose presence in the lives of children and young people is a prerequisite for well-being include:

- 1) Life and physical health – the ability to be physically healthy and enjoy a normal life expectancy.
- 2) Love and care – to be able to love and be loved by those who care for us, to have protection.*
- 3) Mental wellbeing – having the opportunity to be mentally healthy.
- 4) Physical integrity and safety – to be able to be protected from any kind of violence.
- 5) Social relationships – to be able to use social networks and give and receive social support.*
- 6) Participation – having the opportunity to participate in public and social life and to have a fair share of influence and to be able to receive objective information.*
- 7) Education – having possibilities and opportunities to be educated.
- 8) Freedom from economic and non-economic exploitation – to be able to be protected from economic and non-economic exploitation.*
- 9) Housing and environment – to be able to be protected and live in a safe and pleasant environment.
- 10) Leisure activities – having the possibility and opportunity to engage in leisure activities.
- 11) Respect – the opportunity to be respected and treated with dignity.
- 12) Religion and identity – the possibility to choose whether or not to live in accordance with religion and identity.*
- 13) Time autonomy – to be able to exercise autonomy in the allocation of one's time and the implementation of projects.*
- 14) Mobility – being able to move and travel freely.

* Depending on the child's age.

As Biggery et al. (ibid) further point out, the assessment of one's capabilities is based on the age and maturity level of the child or adolescent, and this list is open-ended and flexible. At the same time they (ibid) draw attention to the fact that for some capabilities (such as love and care) it may be appropriate to focus research on other domains as well (e.g., love and care from parents, siblings and other relatives, or support from teachers, neighbours, friends or peers). In other work, the authors in turn emphasise the nurturing and formative influence of parents and others (Biggeri & Kalkara, 2014). In fact, their attitudes and decisions significantly affect the child's ability to transform capability into action. This work points to an important characteristic of capabilities that takes on particularly important contours for children and young people. The point is that the mere presence of capabilities,

which represent positive possibilities for experiencing well-being, does not mean that children and young people are able to exploit these possibilities and potentials. As noted by Palovičová (2011), there is a distinction between capability and action, characterised by the difference between the potential to achieve social action and its actual achievement, between potential and outcome. In order to transform these capabilities, children need help and support, especially children in particularly high-risk groups, such as children of incarcerated parents. As Biggeri and Kalkara (2014) note, those who help children to transform capability into actual potential must respect the child's freedom and wishes while helping the child to develop or achieve his or her potentials, even when this is contrary to the child's wishes and perceptions. We were also aware of this requirement in our research. Although the children's perspective on their well-being was central to our research, we also included the perspectives of the incarcerated parents and those who care for the children. We were aware that children, moreover, in a situation as vulnerable as when their parents are imprisoned, may not be fully aware of the impact of imprisonment on their lives, just as they may not be aware of the kind of help and support they need.

The Czech context of children of incarcerated parents

In contrast to international research, which has addressed the issue of incarcerated parenting since the 1980s (e.g., Ayre et al., 2006; Arditti, 2012; Eddy & Poehlmann-Tynan, 2019; Dallaire, 2007; Fritsch & Burkhead, 1981; Jones & Wainaina-Woźna, 2013; Krysik & Rodriguez, 2022; Murray et al., 2014; Philbrick et al., 2014; Turney & Goodsell, 2018), in the Czech Republic this issue has long remained on the periphery of scientific interest. The lack of research, and the absence of legislative measures and discussion among professionals, have led to the topic being overlooked and to children whose parents are in prison being disadvantaged.

The consequence of this inaction has been the absence of any systematic measures to support these children of incarcerated parents, whose number, according to qualified estimates, is between 25,000 and 40,000 in this country. Their living conditions, needs and well-being have not been sufficiently mapped. For a long time, the professional community, especially child welfare workers, has not been able to take a clear position on promoting contact between children and incarcerated parents. As a result, there has been no comprehensive support for maintaining family ties during imprisonment.

A certain shift can be observed around 2020, when interest in children of incarcerated parents began to increase, which was, among other things, a result of the implementation of the Parenting Behind Bars research project. This project was the first systematic research project in the Czech Republic to provide broad findings on the impact of parental incarceration on the well-being of the child and highlighted the structural oppression of this vulnerable group. The research has opened up professional as well as public debate on the possibilities of maintaining family ties and supporting the parental role in the context of imprisonment.

Methodological framework of the research study

The Parenting Behind Bars research project was based primarily on a qualitative strategy, complemented by quantitative approaches. The qualitative design allowed for a deeper understanding of phenomena that are difficult to capture using quantitative methods alone. This approach provided room for detailed analysis of respondents' experiences and perspectives, which is consistent with the qualitative research approaches described by Strauss and Corbin (1999). Where the nature of the research problem allowed, qualitative data was supplemented with quantitative surveys to better capture the scope of the phenomena under study. The combination of these approaches provided not only deeper insight into the issue, but also the ability to triangulate the data, which helped to increase the validity of the research findings.

Conceptually, the research was grounded in the capability approach (e.g., Biggeri et al., 2006), which provided for a comprehensive understanding of the impact of parental incarceration on child well-being while establishing a linking framework between the qualitative and quantitative components of the research. This approach has proved particularly appropriate for analysing the impact of incarceration on children, as it takes into account both the individual experiences of children and the structural conditions that shape their life opportunities (Sen, 1992; Nussbaum, 2000).

For the qualitative component, we used several methods to capture the experiences of the children and their caregivers in as much depth as possible. Data collection was conducted through focus groups (FG), in-depth semi-structured interviews and, for the youngest children, through drawing pictures.

- The **focus group (FG) method** was used with **caregivers and children aged 9-14 years**, allowing for the sharing of a common experience in a safe environment and the generation of new themes related to parental incarceration.
- Drawing **pictures** was used with **children in the 5-8 age group** because it allowed us to capture their experiences and emotions in a non-verbal way, which was key to understanding the impact of imprisonment on the youngest age group.
- In-depth **semi-structured interviews** provided room for a detailed understanding of the individual experiences of children, caregivers and incarcerated parents.

Questionnaires were used for quantitative data collection, which allowed for the measurement of different dimensions of well-being and their association with parental incarceration. This mixed methodology provided us with a comprehensive insight into the conditions of children of incarcerated parents, combining a deep understanding of individual experiences with the possibility of making broader generalisations based on quantitative data.

Sample selection and data collection methods

Three main groups of respondents were included in the research: incarcerated parents, their children and caregivers. The sample was selected based on criterion sampling,

with the main criteria being parental responsibility and the relationship between the child and the incarcerated parent prior to the start of serving the sentence. Only parents who had been actively involved in the child's upbringing before going to prison were included in the research.

The incarcerated parents were selected by the prison service on the basis of voluntary participation. Caregivers were approached through incarcerated parents or social services using a snowball sampling method. Additional respondents were recruited through the state authorities overseeing the social and legal protection of children, the Probation and Mediation Service, asylum shelters, and foster care organisations. The project partner Prison Fellowship International (PFI) played an important role in recruiting respondents.

The study sample consisted of three main groups of respondents:

- **182 incarcerated parents**
- **96 caregivers**
- **233 children of incarcerated parents** (of these, 179 completed in-depth interviews, and 132 completed a questionnaire)

The research with the children was the most methodologically diverse. Written parental consent was obtained before the research began, and the children were made aware of the purpose of the research.

Three types of age-appropriate questionnaires were used:

- **Children 5–8 years old:** Picture book with symbolic answers
- **Children 9–12 years old:** Standard questionnaire supplemented with 15 emotion cards to help express feelings
- **Children 12+ years old:** A more extensive questionnaire covering dimensions of values, trauma and well-being

In addition to the questionnaires, we conducted seven focus groups (with 54 children) and 179 in-depth interviews.

The research took place in the environment of the Angel Camp organised by PFI CZ. Thanks to the presence of experts who have known the children for a long time, it was possible to create a trusting environment for open communication.

For incarcerated parents and caregivers, quantitative data was first collected through a questionnaire anchored in the capability perspective. In-depth interviews (lasting 45 to 70 minutes) were then conducted. Data collection took place in five male and two female prisons.

Data analysis

The qualitative analysis of data from all respondent groups was based on thematic analysis, which aimed to capture and categorise the personal experiences of participants and to understand the meanings they attached to these experiences.

We also drew inspiration from the procedures of interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

The first step in the analysis was to reflect on our own assumptions about the needs of children of incarcerated parents and the parenting needs of incarcerated people (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The initial interpretation of the data focused on a careful reading of the interview transcripts, during which we took note of comments relating to the main areas of interest for each group of respondents. At the same time, we matched relevant quotes to these areas. The comments were categorised as descriptive, conceptual and linguistic, following Smith et al. (2009). This preliminary analytical process involved rereading the texts from all the respondents, with all observations noted regardless of the strength of their relevance.

In the next phase, we systematically sorted the emerging themes into thematic units, working mainly with commentaries and returning to the original texts as necessary. In the final step, we looked for connections between themes, creating clusters of themes within and across texts. Finally, we defined thematic categories, which we illustrated with verbatim quotations from the interviews.

Limits of the research

We identified several constraints to our research that affected how it was done. One of the main limitations was the selection of the sample of respondents. In the Czech Republic, there are no official statistics on the number of children with incarcerated parents or on the number of incarcerated parents who have children. The SARPO system, used by the Prison Service of the Czech Republic, does record whether convicts have children, but it does not provide detailed information about their previous cohabitation or child care. This lack of data prevented us from accurately defining the population for our study.

Another limitation was the difficulty of the topic for child respondents. Discussion of experiences related to a parent's incarceration often evoked emotionally challenging memories, which may have limited the depth of some interviews. We tried to minimise this limitation by conducting part of the research during the "Angel Camp" organised by the Prison Fellowship International, where children had the support of familiar persons. Psychological help was also available if needed.

However, we believe that although we did not have the opportunity to identify a baseline sample and struggled with the problems associated with the "invisibility" of a group of children of incarcerated parents, our research is a unique and valuable probe into a previously unexplored area of the impact of parental incarceration on child well-being in the Czech Republic, and provides many new insights into what happens to the parent-child relationship after a parent goes to prison.

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