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## Social distance towards the convicted declared by students of several Polish universities

**Abstract:** The ever-increasing proportion of recidivists serving prison sentences makes it necessary to reflect on why persons released from prisons return there again as a result of committing a crime. Almost all prisons have a variety of programs aimed at helping people released from prison in social re-adaptation. What is their effectiveness, therefore, if persons leaving prison cannot function in society in accordance with the standards of social coexistence and continue to commit crimes. The ex-convicts themselves say that the “stigma” of a criminal makes it harder for them to find a job, a place to live and to enter the environment of people who have never been convicted, because people do not trust them and they will always be the “first” suspects in the event of a crime.

The following paper presents the results of the research on the social distance towards the convicts of students who, after graduation, will perhaps provide assistance to such persons. The survey conducted in January 2019 consisted of 381 students of the University of Economics and Human Sciences in Warsaw (AEH), the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw (UKSW) and the University of Public and Individual Security “APEIRON” in Cracow (ABliP). The method used was a modified Bogardus scale. As has been shown by research, persons convicted of family abuse, rape and sexual abuse of a minor have faced a total lack of acceptance in almost all social roles. A large social distance was also declared by the students surveyed towards people convicted of crimes against life and health and against property. The respondents also showed a considerable distance towards people who systematically abuse alcohol and get drunk, and systematically use drugs.

**Keywords:** Social distance, social roles, criminals, alcoholics, drug addicts, aid to ex-criminals.

## Introduction

The provision of art. 67 of the Executive Penal Code clearly states that the objective of the execution of custodial sentences is: 1/ to trigger in the convict the will to cooperate in developing his socially desirable attitudes, and in particular 2/ a sense of responsibility and 3/ acceptance of the need to observe legal order (cf. Szymanowski, 2017, p. 237)

The most comprehensive system of social rehabilitation, meaning the changing of attitudes of the convicts, is the system of programmed impact, through the establishment of a socially accepted system of values, as well as enabling the acquisition of social and professional skills, allowing for social readaptation in society after release from prison. However, no one can be changed by force and top-down orders, but if a convict is willing to change, then they can count on help and support from penitentiary staff within the framework of the programmed system.

In order to help convicts to change their attitudes, system of values and habits that have had an impact on their criminality, the vast majority of prisons implements therapeutic measures and organizes psychological workshops. In 2017, there were 1167 people in the wards for alcohol addicts and 502 waiting to be admitted to the ward, 509 convicts addicted to psychotropic drugs also underwent the therapy, while 1553 people were detained in the wards for people with non-psychotic mental disorders and mentally handicapped. (Annual Statistical Information 2017). There are also various workshops and trainings for those convicted of family abuse, crimes against life and health, or those displaying sexual preference disorders.

The effectiveness of programs for people addicted to alcohol and psychotropic drugs carried out outside of prison is not very high, so it is not known how effective are the ones for convicts serving a custodial sentence. Unfortunately, so far no studies have been conducted on the effectiveness of therapeutic and psycho-correctional measures taken against prisoners in prison isolation. Sadly, there was never any money for such research.

A fund created from a portion of convicts' earnings, which was originally intended to be used to provide post-penitentiary aid to persons discharged from prisons and victims of crimes, which could also be spent on researching the effectiveness of programs implemented in prisons, is currently, under the name of the Justice Fund (Fundusz Sprawiedliwości), also used for other purposes, such as the Volunteer Fire Brigade or financing of the construction of the Alarm Clock Clinic at Bródnowski Hospital in Warsaw.

Any measures aimed at convicts serving prison sentences, despite the lack of data on their effectiveness, seem to be ineffective, as evidenced by the fact that

the percentage of recidivists in prisons is increasing year by year. As an example, in 2003 the percentage of recidivists among prisoners serving custodial sentences was 44%, and in 2017 it was 56%. (Annual Penitentiary Statistics, 2003, 2017). In this situation, the question can be asked whether the prisoner, even if subjected to intensive penitentiary measures, can change their anti-social attitudes, their system of values, their personality traits. Of course, there are few cases of conversion, but most convicts in prison, being under pressure from often more demoralized and derailed people than they are, tend to perpetuate their anti-social attitudes. Nevertheless, it seems that activation of prisoners, encouraging them to work, learn and participate in various socialization and therapeutic programs is of great importance, as it prevents their psychodegradation.

It seems that the only effective way to reduce crime as well as recidivism is to educate people in the spirit of respect for the right to live, respect for others, empathy and the ability to take responsibility for one's choices. The majority of persons serving prison sentences, especially recidivists, started their criminal career as minors, often even at the age of 10–13. The disrupted process of socialization, caused by growing up in pathological or educationally inefficient families, early contacts with demoralized youth and later also with criminal groups led to the formation of their antisocial attitudes, reluctance for education and work and disregard for social norms.

The Ministry of Justice is preparing amendments to the Penal Code and the Executive Penal Code. Various reports indicate that liability for a number of crimes is to be increased, including sentencing to life imprisonment without the right to apply for early parole. Ideas are also being put forward to send convicts, who are likely to continue committing particularly serious crimes, to special centers for “therapy” after they have served their sentence. Isolating people in prison for many years will certainly not help them, but only increase the number of people in prison who, if they leave their places of isolation after many years, will no longer be able to function in society. The stigma of a criminal will contribute to their social exclusion.

In conversations with people who, after serving their prison sentence, have again committed a crime and returned to prison, one often hears that it is very difficult to return to society and start living according to the accepted standards. First of all, when they are released, they face a world that is different than it was when they became isolated from it and they find it very difficult to find themselves in it. Moreover, they believe that the Polish society has a reluctant attitude towards persons who served a sentence in prison, which is reflected in the reluctance to hire them, rent a flat, socialize or help. If they do not receive support and assistance in the family, the post-penitentiary support given to them after they are released from prison is insufficient to allow them to start living in freedom without violating norms of social coexistence.

## Aim of the research

In order to determine whether the ex-convicts really encounter reluctance or even rejection, a survey was conducted among students. Of course, students do not constitute a group representing the general Polish society, but due to the course of study in the near future they will work in positions connected with hiring new employees, managing companies or helping people with various problems.

The results presented in this report concern the research on the social distance of students towards persons with a criminal record. The notion of social distance was introduced to sociology in the 1930s by Robert Erza Park in order to define the attitude of urban community towards ethnic groups. He defined social distance as a sense of alienation experienced by an individual and/or a group in relation to an individual and/or groups differing from them in terms of their place in the social structure, lifestyle, religion, nationality, education, etc. (as cited in: Korczyński, Okrasa, 2015). In other words, social distance is a measure of closeness to people who differ in terms of a certain essential feature. (Sztóp-Rutkowska, Kiszkiel, Mejsal, 2013). It can be treated as a certain type of attitude which, in relation to various types of encounters, contacts and interactions, constitutes a continuum “from close, warm and intimate contacts through indifference to antipathy, hostility, and condemnation” (Parc, as cited in A. Szejnberg, Jasiński 2015).

In Poland, the first research on the social distance towards various nations was carried out by Szacki in the 1960s. (Korczyński, Okrasa, 2015).

In the following years, many psychologists, pedagogues and sociologists, as well as CBOS, undertook research into the social distance towards various nationalities and ethnic groups, the mentally ill, people of various religions, people abusing their families, people leaving prisons, the rich and the poor, the discriminated, etc.

## Method of studies

In order to study the social distance, the Bogardus scale is used, which measures the distance without explaining its causes. The coefficient obtained in this scale is constructed on the basis of a set of deliberately selected questions relating to the relationship that hypothetically could occur between the person surveyed and the person to whom they are to express their attitude.

The purpose of the research conducted in January 2019 using the modified Bogardus scale, as already mentioned, was to determine whether the surveyed

students would be willing to accept as a neighbor, colleague, boss, friend, spouse or spouse of their child persons convicted of:

- crimes against life and health,
- crimes against property,
- perpetrators of rape
- perpetrators of family abuse and
- perpetrators of sexual abuse of a minor.

The group of perpetrators of crimes has also been supplemented by persons who may disrupt proper interpersonal relations or even pose a threat to the immediate environment, i.e. a person who systematically abuses alcohol, a person who systematically uses psychotropic drugs or “designer drugs” and a mentally ill person, as well as a foreigner of Muslim faith as a person who, not being a criminal or a person violating the norms of social coexistence, may also arouse resentment as “different”.

According to many studies devoted to the distance towards different nationalities, Arabs of the Muslim faith are not liked by Poles. The inclusion of mentally ill people in the list consisting of persons with a criminal record, alcoholics and drug addicts also results from the fact of excluding mentally ill people from social life and stigmatizing them. The mentally ill are considered, not only by many Poles, but also by representatives of other nations, as dangerous, unpredictable people who suffer from an illness that is chronic and difficult to treat (cf. Iwanicka-Maciura, BoratynDubiel, 2013).

## Research subjects

The research presented in this paper involved 381 people – 276 women and 105 men. They were students of the Faculty of Sociology and Pedagogy at the UKSW (62 persons), the Faculty of Psychology at the AEH (70 persons) and the Faculty of Management at the AEH (199 persons), as well as of the University of Public and Individual Security “APEIRON” in Cracow (50 persons).

Each of the respondents could express their acceptance of each of the listed persons in the following roles.

## Study results

As can be seen from the data presented in Table 1, the highest percentage of the respondents expressed acceptance of persons convicted of crimes against property (31% M and 19% W), whereas the least of the respondents would be willing to accept in one of the above mentioned roles persons convicted of rape, sexual abuse of a minor and a person convicted of family abuse.

Table 1. Percentage of respondents expressing acceptance for the functioning of persons with a criminal record or persons who may hinder interpersonal relations in the selected social roles (%)

Person	Women N=276	Men N=105
Person convicted of a crime against property	19	31
Person convicted of a crime against life and health	18	25
Person convicted of family abuse	4	2
Person convicted of rape	0	2
Person convicted of sexual abuse of a minor	0	2
Mentally ill person	20	26
Person abusing alcohol, often getting drunk	17	27
Person regularly using drugs or "designer drugs"	9	17
Foreigner of Muslim faith	46	32

Source: own research.

In the research conducted by M. Butryn in the group of 268 respondents, consisting of pupils and students from schools and universities from Warmińsko-Mazurskie voivodship, 46% of the respondents would significantly reduce all contacts with people who abuse their families, and 38.3% would completely break such contacts. In total, the respondents declaring negative attitudes towards the perpetrators of abuse constituted 85% of all the participants. In the quoted research, the pupils and students also expressed negative attitudes towards persons leaving prison (62%). (Butrym, 2012).

Of the people whose behavior can be troublesome or unpredictable for the environment, the highest acceptance was observed in the case of a mentally ill person (20%W and 26%M) and a person abusing alcohol, often getting drunk (17%W and 27%M), whereas the lowest acceptance was observed in the case of a person systematically using drugs or designer drugs (9%W, 17%M).

The research carried out by W. Goebel and A. Bauman in Germany indicates that 70% of the respondents would not marry a mentally ill person, 40% would be against being in the same hospital room with such a person, and 22% would not want to have such a person as a friend. (as cited in Iwanicka-Maciura, Boratyn-Dubiel, 2013)

Definitely, the most frequently the respondents expressed acceptance for a foreigner of Muslim faith. In various social roles such a foreigner would be accepted by 46% of women and 32% of men.

Comparing the results of the women and men surveyed, some similarities as well as some differences can be observed. Neither the women nor the men interviewed accept persons convicted of rape, sexual abuse of a minor and family

abuse. A foreigner of Muslim faith would be accepted definitely more often by the women (46%) than the men (32%), while the percentage of men accepting people convicted of crimes against property (31%), against life and health ((25%) and people who drink too much alcohol and get drunk (27%) is definitely higher than that of women.

In order to determine the roles in which the respondents could accept the convicts, as well as persons whose behavior may violate the norms of social coexistence, the percentage of acceptance scores for particular roles was calculated.

The data are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Percentage of respondents expressing their acceptance for the presence of the listed groups of people in particular social roles. (The list does not include a foreigner of Muslim faith) (%).

Social role	Women N- 276		Men N-105	
	total	only persons with a criminal record	total	only persons with a criminal record
Neighbor	30	22	29	21
Colleague	22	15	21	17
Friend	16	12	23	17
Boss/supervisor	11	9	13	11
Spouse	5	4	9	8
Spouse of a child	4	3	7	6

Source: own research.

Persons with a criminal record, especially those convicted of crimes against property, life and health, could be accepted in the role of a neighbor, rarely in the role of a spouse, especially a spouse of a child, by about 1/5 of the respondents.

The data concerning the acceptance of persons with a criminal record, as well as those that may violate basic norms of social coexistence, are presented below

Table 3. Percentage of the women surveyed expressing acceptance in various roles of persons with a criminal record and persons who may violate norms of social coexistence (N=276)

Person	Role					
	neighbor	colleague	boss	friend	spouse	spouse of a child
Foreigner of Muslim faith	65	64	49	48	20	22
Convicted of a crime against property	44	35	21	30	12	9

Person	Role					
	neighbor	colleague	boss	friend	spouse	spouse of a child
Convicted of a crime against life and health	50	26	17	22	8	6
Convicted of family abuse	12	10	4	5	1	1
Convicted of rape	2	2	0	1	0	0
Convicted of sexual abuse of a minor	2	3	1	2	1	1
Mentally ill	47	30	16	35	16	12
Abusing alcohol	55	29	16	23	3	3
Abusing drugs	27	18	8	11	1	2

Source: own research.

Table 4. Percentage of the men surveyed expressing acceptance in various roles of persons with a criminal record and persons who may violate norms of social coexistence (N=105)

Person	Role					
	neighbor	colleague	boss	friend	spouse	spouse of a child
Foreigner of Muslim faith	41	41`	30	37	23	21
Convicted of a crime against property	45	36	27	43	22	16
Convicted of a crime against life and health	39	32	19	33	15	11
Convicted of family abuse	13	9	8	4	3	2
Convicted of rape	4	3	1	2	1	0
Convicted of sexual abuse of a minor	6	3	1	0	1	1
Mentally ill	43	8	15	39	17	12
Abusing alcohol	62	31	15	38	9	7
Abusing drugs	33	24	15	22	3	3

Source: own research.



To sum up, it can be stated that a foreigner of Muslim faith met with much greater acceptance by the students under examination, both as a colleague, boss, friend, spouse than persons with a criminal record, but also people abusing alcohol and getting drunk, mentally ill or systematically taking drugs. The percentage of respondents who accept a Muslim foreigner in various roles does not mean that the majority of respondents accept such a person in their immediate surroundings, because even in the role of a neighbor it would be less than half of the respondents willing to accept them – only 41%.

The women turned out to be much more open to contact with a foreigner of Muslim faith than the men surveyed. And so, in the role of a neighbor they would be accepted by 65% of women and 41% of men, in the role of a colleague – 64% of women and 41% of men, in the role of a friend – 48% of women and 37% of men, in the role of a boss – 49% of women and 30% of men, in the role of a spouse/partner – 20% of women and 22% of men, and in the role of a spouse/partner of their own child – 22% of women and 21% of men.

The lack of acceptance in various roles of persons with a criminal record, getting drunk, using drugs or mentally ill people expressed by the respondents indicates the risk of social exclusion of these people.

The attitude of the students surveyed towards persons with a criminal record depends on the type of crimes committed by them. In many roles, the students would be willing to accept persons convicted of crimes against property, as well as life and health, while completely rejecting perpetrators of crimes against family and sexual freedom.

The research involved students of various faculties, so it was verified whether there were differences between them in terms of their attitude towards the convicts and people who might violate the norms of social coexistence.

Table 5. Acceptance of persons with a criminal record and persons who may violate social norms, depending on the faculty of the respondents (%)

Person	Women N=276				Men N=89*	
	UKSW	AEH		ABPiI	AEH	ABPiI
	Pedagogy N=53	Management N=138	Psychology N=63	N=22	Management N= 61	N=28
Convicted of a crime against property	32	25	17	14	28	27
Convicted of a crime against life and health	22	26	25	32	34	22
Convicted of family abuse	5	5	6	12	7	3

Person	Women N=276				Men N=89*	
	UKSW	AEH		ABPiI	AEH	ABPiI
	Pedagogy N=53	Management N=138	Psychology N=63	N=22	Management N= 61	N=28
Convicted of rape	1	0	2	0	2	1
Convicted of sexual abuse	4	1	3	2	2	0
Mentally ill	40	10	42	9	27	20
Abusing alcohol	21	21	24	21	31	36
Abusing drugs	13	10	13	11	19	15

\* – the group of men in this table excludes students of the UKSW (9 persons) and the Faculty of Psychology of the AEH (7 persons) due to too small groups of respondents.

Source: own research.

Female students of pedagogy at the UKSW expressed the greatest acceptance for crimes against property, while female students of the University of Public and Individual Security – for crimes against life and health. By far the greatest differences were observed between the female students of pedagogy and psychology and the female students of the Faculty of Management and the University of Public and Individual Security in relation to their attitude towards mentally ill people. These differences are probably due to the better knowledge of mental illnesses as well as meeting mentally ill people during student internships done by the students of psychology and pedagogy.

Because people leaving prisons often complain that no one wants to hire them, the students interviewed were asked whether, if they were owners or bosses in a company and were looking for an employee, they would hire a person with the right qualifications but who had served a custodial sentence. The task of the respondents was to indicate what perpetrator of a crime they would employ. Table 6 presents information concerning the crimes indicated by the surveyed persons, whose perpetrators they would employ

Table 6. Declared willingness to employ ex-convicts (%)

The type of crime of which the person applying for a job was convicted	Women N-276	Men N-105
Non-payment of alimony	74	66
Drug trafficking	54	32
Robbery	38	26
Driving under the influence of alcohol and causing a fatal accident	34	27
Battery	26	48

The type of crime of which the person applying for a job was convicted	Women N-276	Men N-105
Fraud	29	18
Burglary	25	20
Family abuse	12	12
Rape	2	3
Sexual abuse of a minor	3	4
They would not hire any person with a criminal record.	16	13

Source: own research.

People who have served a custodial sentence for non-payment of alimony would have the best chance of being employed in the institutions run by the respondents. Comparing women's declarations about the employment of ex-convicts, it can be said that the female students surveyed would be more likely to employ people who have left prison after having served a sentence for various crimes – except battery, than the male students.

More than half of the female students surveyed (54%) would also employ a person who was convicted of drug trafficking, and a significant part (more than 1/3) of them would employ a person convicted of robbery and driving under the influence of alcohol and causing a fatal accident. The perpetrators of rape and sexual abuse of a minor would not be employed by both the female and male students surveyed.

Because people leaving prison cannot always return to their old place of residence, the students interviewed were asked if they would agree to rent a place to such a person if they had one. This question was answered affirmatively by 31.5% of women and 35.5% of men. However, some respondents made their consent conditional on what the person was convicted of, or whether they would be able to pay the rent.

Social re-adaptation after serving a custodial sentence is largely dependent on the former prisoner receiving appropriate assistance and support. The respondents were asked who should help ex-convicts. The following are suggestions of the various entities which should provide such assistance

Table 7. Suggestions of organizations and associations that should assist ex-convicts (%)

Name of an institution	Women N=276	Men N=105
State authorities	40	43
Non-governmental organizations	34	33
Religious associations	15	19

Name of an institution	Women N=276	Men N=105
Others – various foundations	3	2
I don't know	5	9
No one should help them	3	4

Source: own research.

As can be seen from the data presented in Table 7, only very few of the students surveyed are of the opinion that no one should help ex-convicts. A vast majority of the students interviewed believe that people leaving prisons should receive assistance, but when asked whether they know any such institutions, as many as 93% of them answered that they do not. A few of the women surveyed mentioned the association “Patronat” (Patronage), and some individuals named: Caritas, Dom Miłosierdzia (House of Mercy), Markot, ANTIDOTUM, and Oaza Rodziny (Family Oasis). The vast majority of the men surveyed (93%) also do not know the organizations providing support, and the few who do know them did not mention their names.

The last question asked to the students surveyed was whether they would be willing to donate 1% of their tax or some amount of money to a charity to help ex-convicts. 49% of women and 44% of men answered affirmatively to this question. Of course, without knowing the institutions providing assistance to ex-convicts, it is difficult to believe that the respondents will make any donations to them.

## Conclusions

The aim of the presented research was to determine the social distance adopted by students who in the near future will be recruiting employees, managing companies or providing assistance to various people, towards ex-convicts and people who may violate the norms of social coexistence. Based on the results obtained, it can be concluded that most of the surveyed students in their immediate environment, and especially in close relationships, would rather not have people with a criminal record, especially those convicted for crimes against sexual freedom, but also people abusing alcohol, systematically taking drugs or mentally ill. Close social distance means the willingness to accept to the family environment a person who is different from us in terms of certain characteristics, to enter into warm intimate contact with such a person, to show them kindness. Such a close distance was not declared by the students surveyed towards persons with a criminal record or persons violating the norms of social life.

In all the recognized social roles, 1/4 of the respondents would only accept persons convicted of crimes against property. Towards the others, however, they would adopt an attitude of greater or lesser distance.

However, when analyzing in which roles persons with a criminal record, as well as people often getting drunk, using drugs and mentally ill people would most often meet with acceptance, it turns out that this is the role of a neighbor. A neighbor, especially for people living in the city, is often someone who is anonymous, unknown and with whom one can have no relationship.

A very large social distance characterizing the respondents can be observed in relation to persons convicted of crimes of rape and sexual abuse of a child, as such persons would only be accepted as a spouse/partner or spouse of their child by a few respondents (0–2%). The majority of the respondents would also not want to have people with a criminal records, abusing alcohol, taking drugs or the mentally ill as their bosses/supervisors.

In the light of the results obtained, it can be concluded that the opinions of persons leaving prisons about the difficulties in social re-adaptation related to the reluctance of society towards them, expressed in excluding them from performing various social roles, are to a large extent justified. If a person has served a sentence and wants to return to society as a fully-fledged member of it, they must receive support and assistance, not only from institutions only appointed for this purpose, but also from the community of people who have never been convicted.

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