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Family structure and the process of social maladjustment of juveniles

Abstract: In the article I presented the results of the research on functioning of adolescents from full and broken families and presented their relationship with selected symptoms of demoralization. I reviewed international research on the relationship between social maladjustment and the family situation as well as its structure and presented the hitherto empirical findings on this topic. The considerations undertaken clearly show that effective prevention of social maladjustment is closely related to the strategy of systemic family support with the active participation of the family court and court probation service.

Key words: family structure, social maladjustment, juvenile, demoralization, probation officers.

Introduction

In their work, probation officers often become witnesses of human tragedies, regularly delve into the complex stories told by participants in court proceedings, and probably, like no other formation, they analyze in detail the life experiences of an individual – an adult and a child – for the purposes of the judiciary. The specificity of the work of a probation officer is primarily the relationship with supervised persons. Their complexity is manifested in the fact that the probation officer, on the one hand, acts as a state official and their task is to control the implementation of the obligations imposed by the court. Therefore, they become a tool to verify the execution of the court order. At the same time however “[...]”

the probation officer is also an educator, a social rehabilitation pedagogue, who should take care of the development and return to proper social functioning of the people they supervise as well as their immediate environment. In this aspect, they are a kind of creator of change, not only personal, but often also environmental, since they usually work in the place where the supervised person lives" (Babicka-Wirkus 2019, p. 103–104). At the same time, the question arises whether the probation officers are properly prepared to undertake the effort of working with a modern family and what knowledge is necessary to stop the various negative processes taking place in it?

The modern family has become a field for various types of clashes involving world views as well as entering into fundamental human and child rights. The question about the definition framework of a modern family, which goes far beyond the definition of a nuclear family, is becoming more and more urgent (Szlendak 2012).

The traditional task of the family has so far been „to perform various caring, developmental, educational, socializing and emotional functions”, on the basis of which the performance of parental functions „creates a favorable educational, caring and socializing environment for a child, in which the optimal development of personality traits takes place and the values and norms adopted in society are shaped” (Cudak 2008, p. 7). The modern family, in spite of such formulated role, experiences numerous changes and is consumed by various urgent problems related to the demographic situation (GUS 2018) and current social transformations (Adamski 2002; Wirkus 2019).

The family is considered to be a social environment of fundamental importance that influences the behavior of each individual and children functioning in different family structures, experiencing many forms of monitoring, parental supervision, emotional engagement and attachment styles. These factors can also play a role in determining why adolescents are at risk of social maladjustment and turn to crime (Hoeve 2009). Beata Czarnecka-Działuk and Katarzyna Drapała (2015, p. 320–321) cite a catalog of deviant behaviors of children and young people identified by practitioners (family court judges, police officers, school educators and probation officers) dealing with the problem of demoralization on a daily basis. They most often indicated its manifestations in the following forms: the use of psychoactive substances (alcohol, drugs, designer drugs, nicotine), truancy, fights, theft, battery, destruction of property, disobedience to parents, cyberbullying, use of vulgarisms, manifestation of mental and physical aggression, running away from home/facility, disturbance during school classes. The indicated symptoms of demoralization coincide with those described in the literature (Pytko 2000).

The complexity of problems consuming modern families and concerning the phenomenon of social maladjustment is also reflected in the increase in the number of jobs in family probation. Currently, about 2196 family probation officers work with families, which constitutes about 43% of professional probation

officers. Professional probation officers cooperated with a group of about 18.5 thousand social probation officers and in 2019 they jointly ran as many as 400 thousand cases (Wacławiak 2020). In my opinion, the above mentioned reasons justify the need to look at the conditions of functioning of young people raised in broken families and to examine potential relationships with selected symptoms of demoralization.

The aim of the article is to verify the relationship between the specific family situation (caused by divorce and single parenthood) and the occurrence of symptoms of demoralization, and to try to indicate the problem areas that may be included in the scope of activities of family probation officers.

Family structure and social maladjustment

The family is a part of social structures. The structure of a family includes not only the number of family members (size), but also the quality of relations within it. Although we encounter many differences and typologies of families, they have some common features. For example, families have important functions in society, among which we can distinguish the following: socializing, caring, protecting, supporting, providing a sense of community and providing space for change (Patterson 2002, p. 233-246). The educational function is also naturally related to the family structure and determined by it in a certain way (Wilk 2016, p. 74). Zbigniew Tyszką proposes a broader interpretation, writing that „Intra-family structures and processes, the family’s behavioral culture and the „family” awareness of family members can significantly condition external family systems and social processes – the microstructural, mesostructural and macrostructural system as well as the social-global system, creating in total a set of variables independent from the rest of the social world. On the other hand, the shape and functioning of the family (or rather of millions of families) [...] significantly depends on the „rest” of the social world [...]” (Tyszką 2003, p. 67).

The Central Statistical Office (GUS) in the study „Demographic situation of Poland until 2018. The creation and break-up of families” [Sytuacja demograficzna Polski do 2018 roku. Tworzenie i rozpad rodzin] states that the decrease in the number of births, recorded in 2018, confirms the changes in the current population processes resulting in Poland entering a period of another demographic crisis of a longer duration, which is mainly due to the postponement by young people of the decision to start a family. In 2019, more than 183 thousand marriages were contracted – a decrease compared to 2018 amounted to more than 9 thousand. According to GUS data, the marriage rate also decreased and amounted to 4.8% (it was at the same level in cities and in the countryside). Statistical data show that over 65 thousand marriages divorced, i.e. over 2 thousand more than in 2018, and in the case of another 1.2 thousand marriages, a separation was ordered (less

than 0.1 thousand fewer than a year earlier). GUS reported that the divorce rate was 1.7%, and the number of divorces in cities is almost 3 times higher than in the countryside. (GUS 2020). Divorce is always a traumatic experience for a child and is associated not only with changes in the current lifestyle, but also results in a weakening of the parental bond and often undermines the values and norms that have so far been recognized. People who have experienced divorce of their parents, present difficulties in establishing a satisfactory relationship, have a disturbed image of the family, often show emotional distance conditioned by fear or inadequate perception of marriage (Czerederecka 2010).

Bałandynowicz cites research on the influence of the family on the formation of deviant behaviors of children and youth and places them in several problem areas identified on the basis of literature analysis: family elements, the paradigm of disregard, the paradigm of conflict, deviant behaviors and the paradigm of behavior, the paradigm of destruction, family interaction, positive parenthood, control and problem solving (Bałandynowicz 2001, p. 245-251). Poor educational results, worse health condition, higher probability of unemployment and dependence on the social welfare system are often a consequence of the existing dysfunctions in the family. Wardle (2000), describing the relationship between the family and the state, pointed out a number of threats that affect the modern family. Among them, the following are distinguished: caring and educational negligence; violence in the family; focus on professional career by guardians; economic migration of parents, or one of them – usually the father.

Research shows that the main factors influencing juvenile delinquency are family structure, which is expressed in the specific type and situation of a child (Apel and Kaukinen 2008; Price and Kunz 2003) and the quality of relationship between young people and their parents (Leiber et al. 2009; Petts, 2009). Research conducted in recent years has shown clear trends in changing patterns of juvenile delinquency, which is related to various social phenomena (Kierkus et al. 2010). Young people are currently raised in different types of families: from single parents to patchwork families, and family and social environments have a significant impact on the mental well-being of young people (Wallman 2010). The quoted research results and the indicated relations with the social situation are similar to those we observe today in Poland. The report entitled „Spotlight on Adolescent Health and Well-Being” published by the international research network HBSC (*Health Behaviour in School-age Children*)¹ showed that self-esteem, health and life satisfaction levels in Polish teenagers deteriorate with age and the feeling of support from the family decreases with age in both genders in each age group, while at the age of 15 only 51% of boys and 49% of girls currently declare it. The research also show that the situation regarding the declared support from

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¹ HBSC collected extensive data on physical health, social relationships and mental well-being of 227 441 students aged 11, 13, and 15 from 45 countries in North America and Europe.

teachers also deteriorates with age in both genders (at the age of 15 only 31% of boys and 21% of girls feel support from teachers and this places Poland on the last place in the ranking of 44 countries). The situation is equally bad with the level of support from peers (IMID 2020). The Supreme Chamber of Control (NIK) alerts that mental health problems are growing and are the result of many factors (globalization, socio-economic conditions, difficulties in adolescence, problems in family life (divorce or family breakdown), parents' relations with their children (their limitation may cause loneliness and self-destructive behavior). NIK reported that in Poland, 9 percent of children and youth under 18 years of age (about 630 thousand) require help in the form of psychiatric and psychological treatment. According to the data of the Police Headquarters cited by the NIK, suicides are the second most frequent cause of death among teenagers and Poland is in the top of Europe in terms of the number of suicides (NIK 2020). The research to date show that children living in non-traditional environments are more exposed to many different types of social maladjustment (Price and Kunz 2003) compared to those raised in a traditional family home (Demuth and Brown, 2004). Children and youth living in traditional family structures also experience many forms of monitoring, parental supervision and greater involvement and attachment from the loved ones (Hoeve 2009). These factors may also play an important role in an attempt to explain the reasons for deviant behavior.

There are many studies that confirm the impact of family structure on crime. Price and Kunz (2003) conducted a meta-analysis of 72 studies on the relationship between family divorce and juvenile delinquency. The results showed that children from divorced homes present a higher crime rate (offenses, crimes against other person, robbery, use of psychoactive agents) compared to children from full families, except for the phenomenon of alcohol consumption. Parental divorce is mentioned as a constant predictor of juvenile delinquency and is a main determinant of the risk of developing criminal behavior in childhood and in the period of adolescence (Burt et al. 2008, p. 1668 – 1677). Research by Van de Weijer and the team (2015, p. 89-108) shows that children from single-parent families are more vulnerable to various risks that in the future can be associated with abandonment of education, unemployment, and worse mental well-being.

However, some researchers question the causal link between the phenomenon of social maladjustment and the family situation, indicating that it is the personality traits commonly found in children from divorced families that increase the risk of crime (Guo et al. 2006). Burt, Barnes, McGue and Lacono (2009) therefore decided to investigate whether the divorce of parents or specific genetic characteristics are the cause of crime. Research involving 610 adoption and biological families has shown that it is the experiences of separation of parents and family crisis, not genetic conditions, that determine the relationship between parental divorce and adolescent criminality. The research performed by Burt and

the team shows that juvenile delinquency is not hereditary but, importantly, can be linked to divorce.

The literature also points out that there is a link between the maladjustment of juveniles and difficult family situations that are not caused by divorce (Apel and Kaukinen 2008; Demuth and Brown 2004). One third of all children are juveniles born to unmarried mothers and more than half of the children were raised in a family with a single parent (Demuth and Brown 2004). Family structures are currently diverse not only because of the high divorce rate and the spread of alternative forms of family life, but also because of the increasing number of extramarital births and the growth of consensual unions (Demuth and Brown 2004). UNICEF reports that in 2019 divorced couples with children constituted as many as 56.8% of all divorced couples in Poland (UNICEF 2020).

Research projects carried out so far (Apel and Kaukinen 2008; Kierkus 2010) prove that growing up in a family where partners are in a consensual unit can foster the criminal activity of juveniles compared to growing up in a family where parents are married. Another important factor conducive to the occurrence of crime among adolescents may be the presence or absence of a father in the household. Comanor and Phillips (2002) formulated conclusions from which it follows that one of the most important factors determining the phenomenon of crime in adolescents is the lack of a father in the caring and educational process.

Societies all over the world struggle with the social maladjustment of children and youth and the related problems. In developing countries, these problems are even more visible and a thorough understanding of the risk factors of juvenile delinquency is a prerequisite for taking remedial measures.

The importance of environmental diagnosis in the social rehabilitation of juveniles

When executing family court decisions, probation officers also struggle with systemic limitations that prevent the satisfactory use of their professional skills. This danger was noticed by Konopczyński, who warned that „contemporary social rehabilitation pedagogy in its theoretical layer is losing its importance and is „not translatable” into methodological dimensions realized in institutional practice” (Konopczyński 2019, p. 7). Court appointed family guardians perform their statutory tasks mainly by “granting help to their charges in organizing learning, work and leisure time in a family environment, assessing the environmental situation of minors and juveniles, over whom surveillance has been appointed” (Ostrihanska, Greczuszkin 2000, p. 12).

Górnicka (2016) presents opinions of probation officers who indicated that the family situation of children and youth has a significant impact on the quality of work with them (32.5%). Probation officers participating in the research

pointed out that an important basis for the planned activities is the proper functioning of the family and good cooperation with parents (20.0% of them emphasized this), as well as the understanding of the problem of the charges by their relatives and active support in the process of change. The research of Kwadrans and others show the spectrum of methods of obtaining information by probation officers, which include the following: interview with a participant in the proceedings (about 94%), observation (over 70%), interview in the environment (over 50%), analysis of court records (56.8%). 33% of respondents support the diagnosis with various documents (medical certificates, hospital treatment reports, opinions of psychological–educational counseling centers, etc.). At the same time, the authors of the research indicated that only less than 1% of probation officers use standardized diagnostic tools (Kwadrans 2019).

Wysocka (2018, p. 214) emphasizes that one of the basic tasks of probation officers, “is to diagnose the defendants (personal identification) and their family environments (environmental diagnosis) for the needs of courts, prosecutors, police and prisons”. Wysocka (2018, p. 230) points out that it has now become a challenge for probation officers to „change the strategy of overcoming the risk of developmental threats towards discovering and strengthening potentials”. The author determines its effectiveness through an in-depth diagnosis [...] of developmental threats and factors of vulnerability to threats, but most of all factors protecting against them, which is connected with the identification of an individual’s resources and their living environment”. Marek Konopczyński presents in a holistic way the process of social rehabilitation, which is a consequence of a correct diagnosis as “[...] supporting the developmental potentials of socially maladjusted people in order to transform their deviant identity into a socially acceptable one. It involves the simultaneous initiation of two processes: the process of development of cognitive and creative structures of the charges and the process of individual and social destigmatization within the framework of designed methodological interactions” (Konopczyński 2013, p. 9–11).

Organization of research

Research project entitled *Funkcjonowanie młodzieży wychowującej się w rodzinach zrekonstruowanych. Perspektywa pedagogiczna, psychologiczna i socjologiczna* / *Functioning of youth growing up in reconstructed families. The pedagogical, psychological and sociological perspective* was completed in 2018 and covered several problem trends identified by the research team². The research was conducted with a quantitative paradigm. In order to gather empirical material,

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² It consisted of: Anna Babicka-Wirkus, Iwona Gumowska, Anna Koprowicz, Ewa Piotrów, Łukasz Wirkus.

the research team used their original questionnaire and several psychometric tools. The survey questionnaire consisted of 41 questions, two of which concerned particulars³. In the questionnaire, which was used to diagnose the quality of the respondents' family situation through, among others, the prism of parental attitudes, family functions and the scope of initiation with drugs, there were questions with cafeteria-style checklist. Respondents participating in the research were between 16 and 24 years old. I conducted the statistical analysis using the SPSS tool.

The research group consisted of 223 students in medium-sized cities (up to 100 thousand inhabitants). The participants were divided into persons from full families and those broken up by a divorce of parents. Diversity of the research group by gender was as follows: 72% of respondents were women and 28% were men.

In this text I will present an excerpt from this research, which was the field of my exploration, concerning the analysis of the socialization experiences of young people brought up in full and broken (through divorce) families. The aim of my research was to analyze the relationship between the psychosocial functioning of adolescents from full and broken families and their socialization experiences (family situation, attitude to drugs, symptoms of demoralization). An important element was also to examine whether young people from full and broken families will differ in the subjective assessment of the quality of family relationships or activity in the use of psychoactive agents.

Therefore, I asked the following research questions:

- What is the relationship between the type of family of respondents and their socialization experiences?
- How is the support from parents perceived by adolescents from broken and full families?
- Is there a connection between the family type and the manifested symptoms of demoralization (truancy, use of psychoactive agents)?

Results of own studies

An important variable characterizing the group of research participants was the type of family in which they grew up. The most numerous group were people brought up in a full family (73%). Every third participant of the research functioned in a family broken up by divorce (the situation in which both biological parents still participate in the upbringing process was taken into account – 9% of participants; when they are raised by one parent only, because the other parent does not exercise parental authority – 10% or they function in

³ The particulars were not extensive because the other tools used in this research project already included questions about demographic issues.

a new reconstructed family – 8%). The proportion of research participants from broken families compared to those from full families is related to the current demographic situation in the country, which I have already signaled in the text.

Research reports on the relationship between the functioning of adolescents and the phenomenon of social maladjustment provide a lot of interesting information. Demuth and Brown (2004) pointed out that the youth raised by single parents exhibit more criminal behavior than teenagers from full families. However, weaker correlations occur when authors take into account various family processes, such as involvement in the educational process and emotional closeness. Appropriate parental practices increase the level of social control because adolescents are less likely to commit criminal offenses and exhibit various types of behavioral deviation.

As a result of the statistical analysis conducted for the purpose of the research, I found that there is a relationship between the type of family in which the respondent grew up and the perception of the level of emotional support received from parents ($\text{Chi}^2 = 14.260$, $\text{df} = 2$, $p = 0.001$). More than 12% of the adolescents admitted that their achievements were underestimated in the broken family in which they grew up. Meanwhile, in a full family as much as 82.2% of the participants confirmed the support from their relatives. The research on correlations between family situation and social maladjustment of children have identified poor parenting skills, disturbed family structure, family conflicts, parental delinquency, single parenthood and upbringing based on punishments as risk factors for juvenile delinquency (Wasserman, Seracini 2001). Rathinabalan and Naaraayan (2017) identified also the advanced age of a parent – the father, the problem of professional activation of the mother and single parenthood as important independent risk factors for social maladjustment among juveniles. In another study, which dealt, among others, with the issue of the implementation of socialization and education as well as emotional and expressive functions in full and broken families (Wirkus, Babicka-Wirkus 2018), it was found that there is a relationship between the type of family in which the respondent grew up and the atmosphere at home ($\text{Chi}^2 = 10.834$, $\text{df} = 2$, $p = 0.04$). Respondents who grew up in broken families indicate that there was an atmosphere of fights, misunderstandings and chaos almost two and a half times more often than those from full families. The atmosphere in full families was assessed in the vast majority of cases as joyful, warm and cheerful.

The analysis of the results of the presented research also showed that there is a relationship between the type of family in which the respondent grew up and the level of support received from parents ($\text{Chi}^2 = 16.196$, $\text{df} = 2$, $p = 0.000$). Respondents raised in a full family, in 85.9% of cases, indicated that they felt understood and accepted in their homes, and 12.1% of participants from broken families reported that they did not receive this form of support from their relatives. Interestingly, there is a relationship between the type of family in which the

research participant grew up and the perception of living conditions ($\text{Chi}^2 = 8.228$, $\text{df} = 1$, $p = 0.004$). Adolescents from full families expressed a positive attitude to this issue (87.2%), while those from broken families were more likely to answer *rather yes* (77.6%) and *rather no* (12.1). 82.9% of research participants from full families also indicated that they are satisfied with the scale of financial support they receive from their families, while in broken families this attitude is presented by 72.4% of adolescents.

Laursen's work (2005) on the relationships between family structure (single mothers, full families and reconstructed families) and the conflicts between an adolescent and a parent showed a picture which indicates that teenagers reported more problems in relationships with single mothers and mothers in reconstructed families than with mothers in full families. Laursen suggests that families with only one biological parent are not capable of adequately disciplining a teenager causing educational problems, and of monitoring or supervising their social functioning as opposed to full families. Other research results indicate that juveniles using psychoactive agents tend to have learning difficulties, have weaker relationships with peers and family, and exhibit various health problems (Petersen et al. 2018). In the process of data analysis, I also diagnosed the relationships of various intensity between the type of family and the manifested symptoms of demoralization. The research found that there is a weak relationship between the type of family in which the participant grew up and the frequency of smoking ($\text{Chi}^2 = 0.516$, $\text{df} = 2$, $p = 0.772$). Respondents from full families admitted to frequent (26.2%) and daily (26.8%) smoking at a level similar to that of participants from broken families (often – 25.9%; daily – 22.4%). Interestingly, the analysis shows that the problem is more visible in the group of participants from full families. A similar relationship occurs in case of the contact of adolescents with alcohol and other psychoactive agents. 62.8% of young people from full families admit to frequent drinking, while among those from divorced families, 58.6% made a similar declaration. Approx. 20% of adolescents in both types of families admitted to the frequent use of other psychoactive agents. This allows the view to be formulated that the full family is not as stable protective factor as it was in the past and it is worth looking for more optimal solutions for addiction prevention among adolescents.

A significant group, as much as 85% of the adolescents from broken families, indicated that it was at the junior high school when they skip classes for the first time. Slightly less, as 77.3% of their peers, who grew up in full families, admitted to truancy also at the same educational level. Young people brought up in families that broke up as a result of divorce were more likely to admit to contacting a probation officer because of their inappropriate behavior (17.2%) compared to their peers from families where they were brought up by both parents (9.8%). The research carried out by Wojnarska shows that the youth covered by the educational measure in the form of supervision of a probation officer compared

to the control group, evaluated their social competences, including communication competences (noticeable in their greater reluctance to communicate honestly and openly with their relatives) at a lower level. Juveniles also obtained lower results in terms of reading and sending non-verbal messages as well as in terms of verbal communication. Research participants avoided eye contact more often and showed a lower level of ability to adequately recognize emotions (Wojnarska 2013).

Conclusions

The risk factors associated with demoralization and juvenile delinquency are divided into three broad categories: individual, social and community factors. Individual factors include psychological features, related to behavior and wellbeing; social factors include influence from family and peers and community factors include determinants related to relationships at school and in the neighborhood. Researchers and practitioners, taking into account the risk factors identified, are able to improve prevention programs by focusing on circumstances that are known to lead to anti-social behavior (Shader 2004). The research I have conducted concerns social factors and indicates that adolescents brought up in broken families do not have a sufficiently favorable educational environment and that one of the biological parents, who has a primary role in their lives, is not able to actively monitor or supervise the social functioning of their child as it may be in full families. Families in which both biological parents actively play their roles, provide greater support and involvement in the process of raising a child and are able to monitor its behavior more effectively. The research carried out highlights an important conclusion in the area of addiction prevention because it reveals a problem in the form of lack of dependence between the family type and frequency of use of various psychoactive agents. This proves that even in full families there is a lack of sufficiently effective tools to protect against the potential addictions.

The analyses I have carried out prove that a much better solution in preventing social maladjustment can be actions focusing on maintaining a family structure that will ensure a proper socialization process for juveniles. Such effects can be achieved through compulsory education of families at risk of breaking up their marital relations in the scope of applied parental practices, especially by raising issues including knowledge about the phenomenon of attachment, practical skills of monitoring and involvement in the care and educational process. One of the ways of implementing these activities is the issue of availability in the area of specialist classes improving, among others, educational competences in the form of workshops for parents. This is not a simple matter due to the frequent lack of availability of this type of offer, especially in rural areas. Other ways may be conferences or workshops for parents and children to encourage

both sides to get involved in their lives. The analyses carried out prove that „[...] prevention, counteraction as well as social response to demoralization are very complex problems, requiring a comprehensive, strategically thought-out approach, with procedures for close and effective cooperation between different institutions” (Czarnecka-Działuk, Drapała 2015, p. 343). Also in the context of international research on the problem of family structure and juvenile delinquency, recommendations have been formulated which indicate specific spheres of action limiting the problem of social maladjustment of children and youth. The following are distinguished:

- 1) emphasis on maintaining stable family structures as a way to offer children safe homes where they can learn and adopt socially recognized values;
- 2) conducting responsible economic policies to alleviate poverty in families;
- 3) the need to change the approach to the problems caused by juveniles in the justice system in such a way as to take into account and address the factors determining social maladjustment and not focus solely on the guilt of a juvenile;
- 4) implementation of multi-sectoral commitment to offering solutions to the problems of juveniles through extensive cooperation in the local environment (Mwangangi 2019, p. 52–63).

In my opinion, probation officers have already been undertaking systematic work in the context of at least some of the suggested proposals. One example of these activities is the response to the diagnosis of social problems of local communities and the creation of probation centers for children and youth at risk of social maladjustment and showing symptoms of demoralization (Kozłowski, Stasiak 2006). There, juveniles and their families can find a support in the processes of (re)integration and (re)socialization, which makes it clear that institutional activities in these areas can be effective and that they are needed. The research that identifies risk factors for demoralization and juvenile delinquency indicates the right way to plan prevention strategies. Prevention programs should target young people at risk of maladjustment, and countermeasures in the form of implementing coping strategies can be part of an institutional system of social rehabilitation and prevention based on the example of the work of probation officers.

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