

Sonia Dzierżyńska-Breś

Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań [sonia.d@amu.edu.pl]

“Invisible children” – about social situation of prisoners children

Abstract: Children of prisoners in Poland are ignored not only by researchers, but also by the practitioners connected with resocialization. There is still lack of research which would diagnosis social situation of prisoners children and institutions which would support and help them. All of this makes children of prisoners “invisible”. That’s why the main aim of my quality researches, which I had conducted in years 2013-2014 was diagnosed the social situation of prisoners families, including their children. I had realized interview both with prisoners wife’s and life partners (32 persons) and their children (12 persons), in the place of their residence. I divided tested families on such which have contact with convicted and such which hadn’t contact with him. Convicted husbands/ life partners and fathers were held in different kinds and types of prisons. The research sample were selected in differential way to capture the variability of the families social situation. Selected families were also in different social position. This allowed me to distinguish and characterize the three types of social situation in which are the families of prisoners, including children: (1) The social situation of the family focused on supporting the resocialization of the prisoners, (2) The social situation of the prisonized, which is in opposite to the process of resocialization, (3) social situation of the family focused on the reconstruction of their own social environment.

Key words: social situation of prisoners children, imprisonment

In the literature, children of prisoners are given a variety of names which are intended to reflect their social situation in the clearest possible way. From *forgotten*

victims of crime (Matthews 1983), *orphans of justice* (Shaw 1992), through *victims of imprisonment* – (Cunningham, Baker 2003), ending with *cinderella of penology* – (Shaw 1987), or *unseen victims of prison boom* – (Petersilla 2005). However, the concept of *invisible children*, proposed by Lisbon Gordon in 2008, which relates both to the stage of arresting a parent, conviction, periods of serving of sentence or readaptation, seems to best characterize this group (Gordon 2009). At each of these stages, children of the convicted are ignored and their needs are marginalized. They are invisible to both theorists and practitioners of social rehabilitation. One evidence for this is the fact that there is still a large number of countries not being able to specify the number of children who have at least one parent in prison. One of these countries is Poland (Simmons 2000).

Liz Gordon, a New Zealand researcher, started a project in 2009, one of the results of which was identification of three areas of invisibility of children of persons serving sentences in prisons (Gordon 2009). The first of these areas is *institutional invisibility*. Children of prisoners are ignored by state institutions and practitioners working in them (Dzierżyńska-Breś 2016). There are still serious shortcomings in the arrest procedures of the Polish police. They do not take absolutely or only little account of the protection of a child during the procedure of arresting of his/her parent. Prisons, despite their willingness and efforts, are also unable to provide children with adequate conditions during visits. After all, these are institutions, the primary goal of which is to protect citizens. This is related to the architecture of prison buildings, protections and numerous security procedures applied, and even the appearance of the prison staff itself. Aid institutions such as MOPR (Municipal Family Support Center) and MOPS (Social Welfare Center) do not approach the problems of these children differently from other cases, thus they do not respond adequately to their needs and do not take into account the necessity of diagnosing families left at large, including children.

The second area concerns *lost contact*, often against the child's will. Children of prisoners become "invisible" when their parent is arrested. At the time when, in fact, there are the best and greatest chances for the justice system to develop good relations with the family. As many studies have shown, it is the family who, during the period of conviction and incarceration, becomes a factor protecting the prisoner from returning to crime (Szymanowska 2003; Barczykowska 2008, p. 347; Duff 2001; Farrington et al. 1996, p. 47–63; Machel 2014, p. 45–57). Lack of information intended for the youngest, similarly in the case of adults, lack of possibility to use the help of a specialist: a psychologist, a pedagogue, and finally the lack of opportunity for direct contact with the father until conviction and first family vision, increase the children's fear and contributes to numerous disturbances in the functioning of these children. Their attitude not only towards their family but also towards the whole justice system changes. By denying families, and in particular the children of prisoners, information, contact and support in their readiness to cooperate, the justice system causes the formation of their

opposition and rebellious attitude towards all institutions related to social rehabilitation (Ambrozik 2016, p. 118).

The last area related to *unmet* and unrecognized *needs* is the result of the state and social institutions’ ignoring the children of prisoners. Since their social situation is not diagnosed, the identification of their needs is still a big question mark. Without identifying the needs, we are unable to take effective action to help these children overcome the hardships of parental incarceration and the fear of the incarcerated parent’s future return home. Contrary to the optimistic penitentiary forecasts, families, opposite to the convicted persons, are afraid of their incarcerated relatives’ return home (Dzierżyńska-Breś 2016). The biggest problem resulting from the lack of specific and reliable knowledge on this subject is related to the fact that most judges, prosecutors, curators, social workers, when making decisions concerning the children of incarcerated parents, cannot predict what consequences they will have.

The social situation of children of prisoners in Poland is “invisible”. There is still a lack of a native model of working with the families of prisoners, especially with children. There are no theoretical bases and diagnostic support in prisons’ impact programmes. It is completely odd when the programme concerning relations between convicted persons and children does not provide for their participation at all. The problem of children of prisoners is not noticed by non-governmental organizations or state institutions. I think that this is firstly because there is still insufficient knowledge and research on the children of prisoners, secondly because there is a lack of an individual approach to the families of prisoners, thirdly because the penitentiary system is too concentrated on the sentenced person, and fourthly because there is a lack of ability to base and strengthen the practice on the results of scientific research (Barczykowska, Dzierżyńska-Breś 2013, p. 131–152; Murray 2008, p. 133–206). To sum up, in a word, diagnosing of social situation of children of prisoners makes them “visible”, points to their needs and adequate working methods and allows them to understand their actions against their social situation. It is not without a reason that one of the objectives of my qualitative study conducted in 2013-2014 was to diagnose the social situation of the family, including children of prisoners.

For the purposes of this text, I will present only a part of the results relating to the children of prisoners, as illustrated by their own statements¹. Children aged between 10 and 18 years were qualified for the study.

The diverse sample was selected in order to capture the variability of the social situation of families of prisoners. Detailed analysis of own study, as well as of the studies presented so far in Polish and foreign literature, allowed me to distinguish three types of social situation of families of prisoners.

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¹ The entire study published in: Dzierżyńska-Breś 2016.

- 1) social situation of the family focused on supporting the sentenced person's social rehabilitation process;
- 2) social situation of the prisonized family being in opposition to the sentenced person's social rehabilitation process;
- 3) social situation of a family focused on the reconstruction of its own social environment.

In families representing the social situation of type I, focused on supporting the sentenced person's social rehabilitation process, the incarcerated husbands/partners and fathers stay in prison for less than 5 years. Most often, they are serving their sentence in prisons for persons incarcerated for the first time, and less frequently in prisons for recidivists. However, if this happens, it is due to the short duration of the relationship (no longer than 2–3 years) and because it is the first punishment they receive throughout the relationship. The incarceration of the husband/partner and father is a shock for the family, causing chaos in fulfilling their family roles. Relations between family members become labile and the fulfillment of family functions is undermined. Family members left at large do not know how to act in such a situation, so they are open to the support and assistance they seek intensively during the initial period of incarceration. These families define their situation as crisis one. Depending on the family history, the social reaction to the convicted person's deed and social situation throughout the sentence, these families may turn into prisonized families or renounce the convicted person and change their social situation. This type of family is a type that all families pass through at the beginning of a criminal "career" of a husband/partner and father (Dzierżyńska-Breś 2016, p. 75–78).

In the incarceration-marked families with social situation of type II, family roles are also prisonized and concentrated around the prisoner and his or her criminal "career". Interactions, both inside and outside the family system, are characterized by aggression, claimancy and internal desertion. These families most often live in an environment characterized by poverty, numerous social problems and persistent, often multi-generational dysfunctionality. An interesting social group also representing this type of social situation are assimilated families, e. g. Roma families, who in the face of incarceration of their husband/partner and father also accept this way of defining their social situation and acting in harmony with it. In these families, crime is a way of life, treated as a manifestation of cunning and the ability to find themselves, in their perception, in the "unjust" world.

Husbands/partners and fathers serve long sentences or are often in prison. Incarceration is not a shock for this type of family, it is only an accident included in the risk. The presented type of family functions very well in the area of aid institutions, knows where to go for help and how to receive it (Dzierżyńska-Breś 2016, p. 75–78).

The last, III type of social situation of families is characterized by a reorganized system of roles and conflicting relations not only with the convicted per-

son, but also between the remaining family members. Fulfillment of functions in these families is correct or impaired. The whole family system in interactions is distinguished by its reluctance to the past and its internal desertion. These families break the bond with the prisoner and their aim is to reconstruct the existing system of roles and relationships. This is often manifested, for example, with occurrence of a mother's new partner in the family, which exacerbates the conflicts within the family. The period of imprisonment of husbands/partners and fathers in this case ranges from five years to long-term. The deed for which the convicted person is responsible, his or her behavior towards his/her family and social reaction to the situation are the factors that determine the break-up of the family. Families reconstructing their own social situation change the living environment, break off contacts with their extended family and friends only to forget about the past (Dzierżyńska-Breś 2016, p. 75–78).

Children exist in each of these three types of social situations of families of prisoners. They interpret the world on the basis of their own daily observations. The family and, above all, parents, become the reference by which they model their future social roles (Kieszkowska 2011/2012). The situation of deprivation of liberty is perceived as sudden and uncontrollable (Kulesza, Trzópek 2003, p. 121–145). In such circumstances, children have different attitudes depending on the defensive mechanisms they have adopted, the stage of development they represent and the defined social situation of the family.

Social situation of the family focused on supporting the sentenced person's social rehabilitation process

In families of this type of social situation, children, both before and after the father's incarceration, consider the mother as the head of the family in most cases. When the father was considered to be the head of the family, his arrest led to a collapse of the family. The situation of deprivation of liberty of a husband/partner and father in both the first and second cases led to chaos in the fulfilling of roles (Dzierżyńska-Breś 2016, p. 144–167):

Case D

Dad always took care of everything. My mom and I didn't worry about anything. He went to prison so suddenly. It's as if a bomb suddenly exploded in our house. My mom broke down... I am helping my mother as much as I can (Michał, 12).

By caring for their younger siblings, helping with everyday duties, or even taking up a job (conflicting with the schooling obligation), children tried to control the situation at home:

Case C

Although I don't like Iza, I am eager to take care of my brother. [...] Sometimes, when the weather is good, we wash car windscreens at traffic lights or collect scrap. It's always some money [...] What about the school at this time? Well, I don't go to school... (Sebastian, 15).

Families of this type of social situation either received help and support from their relatives or encountered loneliness, abuse and social ostracism. In the first case, the more the family was helped, the less the involvement of children in attempts to stabilize the family situation. In the second case, the social reaction encountered by family members most often led to their renunciation of the incarcerated husband/partner and father and to the family break-up (Dzierżyńska-Breś 2016, p. 144–167):

Case E

Nobody helps my mother, she's been left alone. [...] Sometimes she cries and says she is sick and tired. When my dad calls her, she sometimes hangs up on him (Martyna, 14).

In families focused on supporting the process of rehabilitation of the convicted, the children share emotions of their mothers. Even if they do not know about their father's stay in prison:

Case D

My mother and I cry for the whole time. During the visits, we always sit furthest from others, we hug and cry. We want to be together! (tears) (Michał, 12).

Good relations between the father and his children, which had been positive before his incarceration, were not destroyed by a short-term prison isolation (Hairstone 2002, p. 48). Poor past relations caused the child's rapid indifference to the home situation and negative attitudes towards the incarcerated. In families with social situation of type I, despite problems in the family, father's bond with his children was still strong:

Case C

Without my dad, it makes no sense. I count the days till the next visit. I want him to come back (Sebastian, 15).

Apart from the father-child relation, it was the mother's relationship with the incarcerated father that determined the frequency and quality of contacts. Mothers in the families of prisoners, regardless of the type of the social situation, served as *gatekeepers* (Dzierżyńska-Breś 2016, p. 46). Therefore, in families supporting the process of social rehabilitation, characterized by good relations between women

and men convicted, children had frequent contact with their father wherever possible and were encouraged to do so. In families where incarceration was associated with negative social reception and rejective reaction of relatives, the studied children were ashamed of their father (Dzierżyńska-Breś 2016, p. 144–167):

Case E

I don't see it. If it was my decision, I would not allow my father to come back home. It would be best if he didn't come back. They would point fingers at us again (Martyna, 14).

The discrepancies in families with social situation of type I were mainly caused by different social situations. In families where at least one of the parents had a university degree or was successful at work, the rules at home were clear and their compliance was consistent:

Case E

My mother punishes me for everything. She constantly controls me. Most often she shouts at me because of my bad grades. She says that 4 is not a grade! Prizes, I wished... [...] My father never punished me, he rather bought me the things I wanted. I always turned to him when she didn't allow me something and I used to get it (Martyna, 14).

Other families representing this type of social situation clearly lack both consequence and rules of conduct. Penalties are imposed on a child regardless of the act committed, often the blameworthy behavior remains ignored and the minor offenses are reprimanded severely, most often depending on the parent's mood and self-feeling at a given moment (Dzierżyńska-Breś 2016, p. 144–167):

Case C

My mom doesn't even notice my existence. I could as well sell all things from the house, she would not even notice. My dad doesn't have a reason to punish me. He has never interfered in what I did, in what grades I had and with whom I was friends. I have been doing what I want since I remember it (Sebastian, 15).

Children in families of this type of social situation are very sensitive to the social perception of their situation. They do not understand the negative reaction of a closer or extended family, scoffing of peers, and rejection by other people important for them. Unfortunately, they often take the responsibility and blame themselves for their father's deed and are unable to deal with it on their own:

Case D

My father's parents are dead. I didn't know my grandfather, I don't remember my grandmother. My step sisters hate me, when we meet on the street, they shout ugly words at me, they even jerked me once. [...] I once heard my grandma screaming at my mother that should have not set to a broke-ass with children (Michał, 12).

Social situation of the prizonized family being in opposition to the sentenced person's social rehabilitation process

The second type of social situation of families is characterized by an extreme view of reality, dividing their world into heroic, clever sentenced persons caring for their family on one side and the corrupt police and vindictive, unfair court on the other (Dzierżyńska-Breś 2016, p. 144–167). Husbands/partners and fathers, regardless of whether they are currently in prison or not, are always considered to be heads of families. Disturbed attitudes of children in relation to the role of a man in the family may be diagnosed in the utterances of children from such families. Moreover, they are possessed with hatred towards the administration of justice, particularly the police, as the main representative of this group. Crime in these families is considered to be an income-earning opportunity. According to these families, theft of property, robberies, burglaries and frauds show a life's cunning and resourcefulness. Children are even proud of their fathers' deeds and often declare following their path:

Case B

My father has always been brave. He is in prison because the police are bad. My mom says that they set on him, because they envy him. In our house, my dad was the most important person, because he brought money home, so my mother and I didn't have to worry. Now, he is also the most important person. My mother says he manages everything from the slammer (Nikoła, 10).

Children from families with social situation type II do not usually have domestic duties and their free time is not organized. The absent father is most often replaced by people from a close family who know situation of incarceration (Dzierżyńska-Breś 2016, p. 144–167):

Case A

My mother is now helped by our dad (step father is in prison – S.D.-B.). He can live with us until he finds something... (Agnieszka, 13).

Children in these families are very much in solidarity with their parents. Base on their parents' example, they negate the justice system and refer badly to prison guards, educators, the police:

Case B

My mom sometimes cried at the beginning. I cried as well. My dad was sad and sometimes when we visit him, he says that these bastards could let him go (Nikoła, 10).

In families with social situation of type II, the bond between the father and the children, although disrupted, was strong. The relatives were waiting for the return of the convicted person. However, due to disturbed family roles, relationships and functions, the family was not a protection against repeated committing of offense. Quite the contrary, it was expected that next time the incarcerated person would be more careful and would not let himself/herself to be caught (Dzierżyńska-Breś 2016, p. 144–167).

The statements of the studied children clearly show disturbances in the value system presented by them. The ubiquitous subject of confidants, explanation of a crime or insulting reference to the justice system was something normal, commonly discussed during family conversations.

Case A

Love, to be loved is the most important thing for me. [...] Love is a feeling of being someone's world, just like David's mother is for him. [...] My dad probably didn't love her. Dawid would do anything for his mom, he would even kill. Whom? Well, a fucking cop (policeman – S.D.-B.). When you kill out of love, this is not something wrong (Agnieszka, 13).

There is an upbringing chaos in families with a social situation of this type. Lack of clear rules of conduct, enforcement of liability for one's actions and consequences.

The studied children were also asked about their relations with their family: grandparents, uncles and aunts, cousins. Paradoxically, it was in prizonized families that children were least worried about the negative reactions of others. This was not an exceptional situation, these families live in environments where the stay of one of their neighbors in prison is an ordinary situation.

Case A

I don't know my grandparents – either my mother's or my father's parents. I only saw them a few times. My mom says that my grandmother doesn't want to know us. My uncle (mother's brother – S.D.-B.) sometimes visited us, but now he is also in prison. I have only my sisters, my mom, my dad and Dawid (Agnieszka, 13).

Each of the children, regardless of the type of social situation represented, had to cope with the negative reaction of their schoolmates and sometimes, unfortunately, their teachers. The only difference is the fact that in the prizonized families, children are best able to cope with negative reactions, they are simply accustomed to such reactions and during the years of their fathers' or other family members' stay in prison they have managed to create defensive mechanisms:

Case B

Teachers do not know that my dad is in prison. My mom says that they are stupid and it is better not to tell them, because problems will arise. [...] One of my

classmates found out and sometimes teases me and says that my dad will die in prison (Nikola, 10).

Social situation of a family focused on the reconstruction of its own social environment

The last type of social situation is the social situation of a family focused on the reconstruction of its own social environment.

The studied women from these families declare the breakdown of their relationship with the convicted. The children usually have a negative opinion about their father, except for a few cases, when the eldest sons in the family negated their mother's attitude and reported a desire to live with their father after his leaving the prison. The children sometimes did not remember their father because he started to serve his sentence when they were small (Dzierżyńska-Breś 2016, p. 144–167):

Case F

When my dad went to prison, I was very young. I only remember him a little bit. My parents shouted at each other terribly. It was my mother who ruled at home. Then, when my dad wasn't there, mom met Mietek, and I know him better than my dad (Tomek, 12).

In families with social situation of this type, children have different attitudes towards the incarcerated father. Those who were either too small to remember him or have negative memories of him, identify with their mothers and negate the father's figure. They help in the domestic duties and try not to cause problems. The eldest sons, who have a positive relation with their father, identify themselves with him and critically refer to the actions of their mothers (Dzierżyńska-Breś 2016, p. 144–167):

Case H

Pffff, why should I help her? (Marcel, 13).

Case K

My sister and I clean up, go shopping, we even learned how to cook. Our mom doesn't need to do anything at home (Karolina, 14).

Children from families focused on the reconstruction of their own social environment may be divided into three groups. The first group includes children who experience severe stress as a result of their father's incarceration. However, it is not due to his absence, but rather to a worsening material and housing situation or social reception. The second group includes children from families for which

the incarceration of the domestic tyrant has brought relief and joy. The last, third group includes children (the eldest sons – S.D.-B.) who are on the side of the convicted person and negate all actions taken by the mother through their behavior and attitude (Dzierżyńska-Breś 2016, p. 144–167).

Families with social situation of type III are families in which the negative relationship between the mother and the incarcerated father is most reflected in his contact, or rather lack of his contact with children. In other situations, the children themselves were often not willing to communicate with the convicted. Quite the contrary, they wanted to erase him from their memory:

Case H

I write letters to my dad, although my mother cannot bear it. Serves her right! When my dad calls and I pick up, we talk. Once my grandmother unplugged the phone (Marcel, 13).

Case F

My mom doesn't speak to my dad, so I don't speak to him either (Tomek, 12).

In families representing III type of social situation, the adults did not care how their children spend their free time. They did not control what they were doing, because they were busy dealing with their own affairs and saving the family's material situation. Shouting and violence were the only forms of punishment (Dzierżyńska-Breś 2016, p. 144–167):

Case L

When my mother shouts at me, I close the door in front of her, or I go out, she gets mad [hahahaha] (Tomasz, 15).

Children in these families are often involved in family conflicts. They hear insults and mockery from their loved ones and stand up for their mothers. As a result of the frequent, unpleasant experiences associated with the social response to father's incarceration, children have developed various ways of dealing with the situation. In this respect, their situation is the hardest compared to children from other groups (Dzierżyńska-Breś 2016, p. 144–167):

Case G

We've never met my father's parents. My eldest brother (the father's son from previous marriage – S.D.-B.) sometimes calls when his mother asks him to talk to Marcel. Only grandmother Marylka helps us. My grandfather never says anything. He once quarreled with my mother and said that she was no longer his daughter. My mom was crying terribly then (Paulina, 11).

The situation of incarceration of the husband/partner and father is a serious burden on the family. The effects of prizonization are difficult for adults to deal with, often requiring the help of professionals. For children, they are more difficult to deal with (Bloom 1993; Boswell 2002, p. 14–26). Henryk Machel pointed out that corrective treatment should apply equally to the convicted persons and their families (Machel 2014, p. 45–57). Children of prisoners, depending on their social situation, develop different models of adaptation (Dzieryńska-Breś 2016, p. 144–167). Children from families supporting the convicted person's social rehabilitation process complain about numerous emotional and psychological problems. This group most often shows symptoms of post-traumatic stress syndrome. Families representing a type of social situation focused on the reconstruction of their own social environment take one of two mutually exclusive stands. The first one is related to renunciation of the sentenced person and adoption of negative attitudes towards him/her. The second one, most often concerning the eldest sons in the family, involves glorification of the incarcerated father and a declaration of living with him and supporting him within the scope of stabilization. Children in families with a prizonized type of social situation, being in opposition to the convicted person's social rehabilitation process, developed the most interesting strategies of coping with the parent's incarceration. In their black-and-white world of rules, "black" means everything that concerns the justice system: judges, police officers, social workers, curators. In the eyes of children, they are the "bad" ones, contrary to the incarcerated person, who was convicted for the life's cunning and because of envy. Unlike other social situation groups, these children are even proud of their father's deeds and promise to follow in his footsteps.

The presented study results and reflections were to indicate those aspects which in the rehabilitation activity still constitute a field of exploration. Unrecognized, they not only hinder the sentenced person's return to the society, but also contribute to the creation of a crime and punishment cycle. More than 30 years ago, Roger Shaw pointed out that without taking into account the effects of incarceration on children, we ignore a group seriously threatened by crime in our studies and activities (Shaw 1987). By making the children of prisoners "invisible", we punish innocent victims, contributing to the inheritance of crime into future generations. In modern times, this is still alarmingly true, and the children of prisoners are still waiting for help and support.

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