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FATHERS' IMPRISONMENT AS PERCEIVED BY THEIR CHILDREN

UWIĘZIENIE OJCÓW W PERCEPCJI ICH DZIECI

Streszczenie: Autorka prezentuje wyniki badań na temat wybranych aspektów odbywania kary pozbawienia wolności przez ojców z perspektywy ich dzieci. Przebadano 72 dzieci, w wieku od 12 do 18 roku życia, których ojcowie odbywają karę pozbawienia wolności w jednostce penitencjarnej. Analiza wyników badań ujawniła, że wszystkie badane dzieci wiedziały, że ojciec odbywa karę pozbawienia wolności. Większości dzieci towarzyszą nieprzyjemne emocje w związku z faktem odbywania kary pozbawienia wolności przez ojca, takie jak: żal, smutek, złość, wstyd. Z drugiej strony zdecydowana większość badanych dzieci rozumie, że rodzic popełnił błąd i ponosi konsekwencje swojego czynu. Zdecydowana większość badanych respondentów utrzymuje kontakt z ojcem (m.in. widzenia, rozmowy telefoniczne, listy), ale częstotliwość tych kontaktów jest dość niska. Badane dzieci twierdzą, że w trakcie kontaktu z ojcami towarzyszą im różne emocje: od zdenerwowania, smutku, wstydu z powodu miejsca, w którym rodzic przebywa, do zadowolenia i radości z powodu możliwości spotkania się z ojcem. Zdecydowana większość dzieci twierdzi, że częstotliwość i jakość kontaktu z ojcem nie są odpowiednie i zgłosili propozycje zmian. Przeprowadzone badania zachęcają do podejmowania kolejnych projektów badawczych związanych z tą problematyką.

Słowa kluczowe: dzieci skazanych, inkarceracja ojców, rodzina, więzienie.

Abstract: The author presents the results of a study on selected aspects of fathers' imprisonment from the perspective of their children. The study included 72 children, aged 12 to 18 years, whose fathers were imprisoned in penal institutions in Poland. The analysis of results revealed that all of the children knew that their fathers were serving a prison sentence. Most children report unpleasant emotions related to this fact, such as regret, sadness, anger, and shame. On the other hand, the vast majority of the children understood that their parent had made a mistake and that they were bearing the consequences of their act. The vast majority of respondents maintained contact with their fathers (e.g., visitations, telephone calls, letters), but the frequency of these contacts was quite low. The children claimed that during contact with their fathers they experienced various emotions: from nervousness, sadness, and shame at where their parent

was, to satisfaction with and joy at the possibility of meeting the father. The vast majority of prisoners' children reported that the frequency and quality of their contact with the father was inadequate and suggested changes. Taking account of prisoners' children's perspective, the study encourages further local research addressing this issue.

Keywords: prisoners' children, fathers' imprisonment, family, prison.

Introduction

Despite researchers' huge interest in prisoners' family issues and considerable research in the US and other English-speaking countries, there are few studies devoted exclusively to those families – where at least one of the parents is serving a prison sentence – in the Polish literature. The analyses performed by the European Network for Children of Imprisoned Parents (EUROCHIPS) show that in the European Union alone the number of prisoners' children is approximately 800,000; 117,000 of them (about 15 pct.) live in Poland. Their number may actually be much higher, however (Martynowicz 2011). Both in Poland and in other countries of the European Union, no records are kept of children whose parents are imprisoned; extensive quantitative studies into these issues and exact data on the number of prisoners' children are lacking, too (Chojecka 2013; Kacprzak 2012). Prisoners' children are a particularly vulnerable population (Johnson et al. 2018), referred to in the literature as the “invisible victims of the justice system” (Martynowicz 2011), “forgotten victims” (Matthews 1983), “orphans of justice” (Shaw 1992) and the “unseen victims of the prison boom” (Petersilla 2005).

Regardless of the sex of the arrested family member, the arrest is a difficult time for every family. Many families are unprepared for the moment of sentence, hence the frequent shock (Dzierżyńska-Breś 2017; Martynowicz 2011). However, where the arrested person is a parent, the very fact that they suddenly disappear from the child's life may cause a sense of uncertainty, fear, or even threat (Chojecka 2013; Condry, Smith 2019; Martynowicz 2011). The child's needs may recede into the background, as the other parent is engaged in organizing legal assistance or other practical help for the arrested parent. The child may also be forced to live with more distant members of the family or taken into the care of social services (Chojecka 2013; Dzierżyńska-Breś 2017; Martynowicz 2011; Tasca et al. 2011).

Children's reactions to parental arrest and imprisonment vary. In many families, problem behaviors and family dysfunctions are present even before parental arrest (Kjellstrand, Eddy 2011; Poehlmann 2005). Some children may therefore feel relief at the parent's arrest and prolonged absence. In others, the experience of parental incarceration may lead to serious emotional and social problems (Johnston 1995; Miller 2006). It also sometimes happens that the child is forced to be silent about the fact of parental incarceration for fear of negative consequences, such as stigmatization and rejection (Chojecka 2013; Nesmith, Ruhland 2008). Children

should be allowed to express the feelings they experience, and if they have no opportunities to verbalize their fears they struggle with their trauma longer, which intensifies their emotional and social problems (Arditti 2012; Johnston 1995). However, parental incarceration is not the only determinant of emotional and behavioral problems in children (Kjellstrand et al. 2020). These problems depend on the interaction of numerous factors, including risk and protective factors (Gutman et al. 2003).

Another issue is the problem of whether to inform the child about parental incarceration that is, whether to explain to the child what is really going on with the arrested parent (Parke, Clarke-Stewart 2002). Unawareness of parental imprisonment causes the child's frustrations and anxieties, much stronger than they would be if the child was well informed about everything (Murray 2005; Shaw 1987). Not all parents, however, decide to tell the truth to their children, especially to young ones, due to their emotional and psychological immaturity (Martynowicz 2011). But it also happens that the child and his or her family hide the fact of parental imprisonment because of a sense of shame or stigmatization (Conway, Jones 2015; Murray et al. 2009).

What serves the purpose of ensuring the child's contact with the parent and maintaining the bond between them is appropriate regulations and various programs run by the prison service and non-governmental organizations. In Polish prisons, parents' contacts with children are ensured in the form of passes, visitations, telephone conversations, and correspondence. Additionally, penal institutions in cooperation with NGOs organize meetings for parents and children in penitentiary facilities, particularly around Christmas and Easter and on Children's Day or Mother's Day. These meetings are full of attractions for children and their caregivers; children take part in a variety of activities and games—on their own or with their parents. The activities are held in friendly conditions, in a decorated colorful room in which there is a play area for children (Chojecka 2013). The interventions targeted at parents include counseling and educational programs aimed at the development of parenting skills (Chojecka 2013). They also include programs aimed at maintaining family ties that involve the imprisoned parent reading fairy tales to the child and recording them on a CD.

Many families limit their visits to their relative in prison due to the long distance from their place of residence and due to high travel costs (Condry, Smith 2019). Another reason for giving up visits may be the coincidence of visitation hours with the child's school classes (Murray 2005). Moreover, parents may not want their child to visit the parent in prison, fearing the negative consequences this might have for their socioemotional development (Condry, Smith 2019; Nesmith, Ruhland 2008).

The relationship between the child and the imprisoned parent is almost entirely regulated by the reality of incarceration. Legal regulations, prison regime, and frequently the approach taken by the prison staff determine when and how parent-child contacts take place (Arditti 2016; Condry, Smith 2019; Martynowicz 2011).

Although children have different kinds of experience regarding visits to their parents in prison, the most frequent problems they experience are the lack of proper conditions in visitation rooms and waiting rooms, the long waiting time, and unfriendly atmosphere (Condry, Smith 2019; Dzierżyńska-Breś 2017; Mowen, Visher 2016).

In this article I present the results of research on how prisoners' children perceive the situation of their fathers' imprisonment. The analysis presents children's opinions regarding the emotions they experience about their fathers' imprisonment, the feelings experienced by the child during and after contact with the father, children's evaluation of the quality and frequency of contacts with the father, and their evaluation of relations with the father during imprisonment.

Method

The aim of the presented research was to investigate children's experience of and opinions on selected aspects of their fathers' imprisonment. I formulated the following **research problems**:

- Q1: What emotions do children experience about the fact that their fathers are serving a prison sentence?
- Q2: What is the frequency of father-child contacts?
- Q3: How do children evaluate the quality and frequency of their contacts with their imprisoned fathers?
- Q4: What emotions do children experience during contact with their imprisoned fathers?
- Q5: Have father-child relations changed during fathers' imprisonment?

I used a measure in the form of a survey questionnaire for children and fathers. The questions in the survey concerned the following information:

1. children's sex and age and fathers' age;
2. selected aspects of father's imprisonment, as reported by the fathers: type of penal institution (prison regime), system of prison sentence execution, length of imprisonment, number of times the father has been imprisoned, type of offense committed by the father;
3. selected aspects of father's imprisonment, as perceived by children: child's awareness of father's imprisonment, frequency and type of father-child contact, child's emotions about father's imprisonment, emotions experienced by the child during contact with the father, evaluation of the quality and frequency of father-child contact, evaluation of father-child relations during incarceration.

The questions concerning selected aspects of the father's imprisonment (point 2 above) were answered by fathers, whereas those concerning children's perceptions of father's imprisonment (point 3) were answered by the children of these fathers.

Research organization and procedure

The research was conducted in Poland: (1) in penal institutions; (2) through professional probation officers executing judgments in criminal and family cases; (3) through Social Assistance Centers and the Family Assistance Center; (4) through non-governmental organizations working with people at risk of social exclusion, and (5) in schools. This required, in the first place, obtaining approval for the research from the persons managing the penal facilities and institutions. Then the parents (the prisoner and the child's mother or legal guardian) were asked for consent to take part in the study and, later, for consent to their child's participation in the study. Incarcerated fathers completed the questionnaire in prison and then provided only the other parent's or legal guardian's telephone number for the researcher to obtain consent to their child's participation. The researcher contacted each child's other parent and, after obtaining her consent, passed the questionnaires to the children. Participation in the study was anonymous.

Sample

Number, sex, and age of the respondents

The study included 72 prisoners' children, 37 boys (51.4 pct.) and 35 girls (48.6 pct.), aged 12 to 18 years. The largest group among them were 12-year-olds (19 children, 26.4 pct.) and the smallest group were 13-year-olds (3 children, 4.2 pct.).

The other group of participants in the study was composed of 72 fathers serving a prison sentence. Thirty-three of these men (45.8 pct.) were in the 31–40 age group, 29 fathers (40.4 pct.) were in the 41–50 age group, 9 (12.5 pct.) reported that they were 56–60 years old, and only one father (1.4 pct.) was in the 61–70 age range.

Selected aspects of fathers' imprisonment as reported by the fathers

The collected research material provided information about the circumstances in which the fathers were serving their prison sentences, namely: type of penal institution (prison regime), type of prison sentence execution system, time of prisoner's incarceration, and type of offense committed.

Polish penitentiary law – more specifically, article 69 of the Executive Penal Code – lists four types of penal institutions: for juveniles, for convicts serving a sentence for the first time, for penitentiary recidivists, and for inmates under military arrest. These types of prisons can be organized as closed-type, semi-open-type, and open-type penal facilities, which differ in the degree of security, the degree of prisoner isolation, and the related obligations and rights to move inside and outside the institution. Moreover, the penalty of imprisonment is executed under the following systems: programmed, therapeutic, and regular, which differ in the measures and methods applied.

Data about the number of times an inmate had been imprisoned are not only important from the point of view of family functioning but also constitute valuable information about the type of penal institution the father was in. Information concerning this issue is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Number of sentences served in penal institutions

Number of times imprisoned	<i>N</i>	pct.
First time	17	23.6
Second or further time	55	76.4
Total	72	100

Source: author's research.

The survey results show that 17 of the inmates (23.6 pct.) were incarcerated for the first time, while 55 (76.4 pct.) had been in prison previously. From the point of view of prisoners' families this result is alarming, because it means that most of them were probably re-experiencing the incarceration of their family member.

Fathers were asked to indicate which type of penal institution they were serving their sentence in. Data concerning the type of penal institution are important because the scope and manner of prisoners' contact with the family depend not only on their own and their family's willingness but also on the type of prison regime (art. 105 § 3 of the Polish Executive Penal Code).

Information concerning this issue is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Type of penal institution in which fathers were imprisoned

Type of penal institution (prison regime)	<i>N</i>	pct.
Closed	42	58.3
Semi-open	24	33.3
Open	6	8.3
Total	72	100

Source: author's research.

As shown by the data provided in Table 2, 42 fathers taking part in the study (58.3 pct.) were incarcerated in closed-type penal institutions, 24 (33.3 pct.) were imprisoned in semi-open ones, and 6 (8.3 pct.) were serving their sentences in penitentiary facilities with an open regime. The opportunities of contact with the child are the greatest in the case of fathers incarcerated in open-type penal institutions (though they have to accept certain restrictions, too). Parents serving

their sentences in regular prisons have the right to two child visitations a month¹, and obtaining a pass is almost impossible². Most fathers in the study were serving their sentence in closed-type penal institutions (58.3 pct.) or in semi-open-type ones (33.3 pct.). This means they were allowed to have two (closed-type prisons) or three (open-type prisons) child visitations a month and an additional visitation if they were guardians of a child aged 15 or younger and/or when the director of the institution granted them an extra visitation as a reward. It can be assumed that contact with children, which is indispensable for maintaining proper family relations, was limited in the case of most fathers taking part in the study.

The manner in which the prisoner serves his sentence is defined by the system. Information concerning this issue is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Father's prison sentence execution system

System of sentence execution	<i>N</i>	pct.
Regular	44	61.1
Program-based	22	30.6
Therapeutic	6	8.3
Total	72	100

Source: author's research.

The data presented in Table 3 show that 44 fathers (61.1 pct.) were serving their sentence under the regular system, 22 fathers (30.6 pct.) were serving theirs under a program-based system, and 6 (8.3 pct.) were imprisoned under a therapeutic system. The sentence execution systems differ in the scope and manner of interventions targeted at the prisoner. The individual program-based intervention system is aimed particularly at rehabilitation. Programs specify the types of employment and education available to prisoners, their contact, above all, with the family and significant others, their use of free time, and other issues (art. 95 § 2 of the Executive Penal Code). Out of the fathers who took part in the study, only one-third were serving their sentence in under system while at the same time being subjected to intensive penitentiary rehabilitation by the prison staff.

From the perspective of my research explorations, it is important to reveal information concerning the length of fathers' incarceration. The relevant data are presented in Table 4.

1 A visitation takes 60 minutes, and prisoners whose child is below the age of 15 have the right to an additional child visitation.

2 Except when a prisoner incarcerated in this kind of penal institution is granted a reward in the form of permission for a visitation outside the institution.

Table 4. Length of father's incarceration

Length of incarceration	N	pct.
Up to half a year	1	1.4
7 months to 1 year	10	13.9
13 months to 2 years	8	11.1
2 years and 1 month to 4 years	22	30.6
4 to 7 years	21	29.2
7 to 10 years	4	5.6
10 to 15 years	3	4.2
15 to 20 years	1	1.4
20 to 25 years	2	2.8
25 years	0	0
Life sentence	0	0
Total	72	100

Source: author's research.

The data presented in Table 4 show that just 1 prisoner (1.4 pct.) had spent less than half a year in the penal institution, 10 prisoners (13.9 pct.) had been incarcerated for 7 months to 1 year, and 8 (11.1 pct.) had been imprisoned for 13 months to 2 years. The largest groups of prisoners (22 inmates, 30.6 pct.) had been in prison for 25 months to 4 years, and slightly fewer (21 inmates, 29.2 pct.) had been there for 4 to 7 years; 7 prisoners (9.8 pct.) had been incarcerated for 7 to 15 years; 3 inmates (4.2 pct.) had been imprisoned for 15 to 25 years. None of the inmates taking part in the study was serving a sentence of 25 years or a life sentence.

Almost 60 pct. of the inmates had been in prison for between 2 and 7 years. Nearly 1 father in 3 had been incarcerated for up to 2 years, and 1 in 14 reported having been incarcerated for 7 to 25 years. The Polish legislator does not use the term "long-term punishment" (Miszewski 2018). The Council of Europe decided that a five-year period of incarceration was sufficient to refer to a prisoner as a long-term inmate (Miszewski 2016). In the light of the definition adopted by the Council of Europe, it can be said that more than one-third of the fathers who took part in my study were serving a long-term prison sentence, which may be of significance in the weakening of family relations. Table 5 presents data concerning the type of crime committed.

Based on the survey results presented in Table 5, it can be said that the largest number of prisoners (20 inmates, 27.8 pct.) had been sentenced under article 279 of the Penal Code (burglary), and slightly fewer (19, 26.4 pct.) were imprisoned under article 280 (armed robbery). Further 11 prisoners (15.3 pct.) had committed an offense under article 148 of the Penal Code (murder), and 8 inmates (11.1 pct.) were in prison for offenses under article 286 (fraud, ransom extortion). In the case of 5 inmates (6.9 pct.) the crime had been committed under article 207 (mistreatment) and 2 inmates (2.8 pct.) were incarcerated under articles 209

(evading alimony or maintenance payments) and 177 (road accident). Crimes other than those listed above had been committed by 5 prisoners (6.9 pct.). The analysis of the collected data yields a picture showing that most respondents committed common criminal offenses, predominantly property crimes. It is possible that the respondents had financial or material problems and tried to solve them by mindlessly breaking the law. It should be added that some of the fathers taking part in my study committed crimes against health and life, which may indicate various kinds of mental problems.

Table 5. Type of crime committed

Article of the Penal Code	<i>N</i>	pct.
279 – burglary	20	27.8
280 – armed robbery	19	26.4
148 – murder	11	15.3
286 – fraud, ransom extortion	8	11.1
207 – mistreatment	5	6.9
177 – road accident	2	2.8
209 – evading alimony or maintenance payments	2	2.8
Other	5	6.9
Total	72	100

Source: author's research.

Results

Selected aspects of father's imprisonment from the perspective of children.

Child's awareness of father's incarceration

An important issue was child's awareness of father's incarceration. The surveyed children were asked to indicate if they knew that their fathers were in prison or remand center. The children's parents were asked the same question earlier. Only if the parents reported that their child was aware of what was happening to his or her father did the researcher ask the child the same question. All the children participating in the study knew that their father was in a penal institution. The children taking part in the study were 12 to 18 years old – the age when individuals show a greater degree of emotional maturity than they do in early childhood and when it would therefore have been difficult to hide such information from them.

Child's emotions about father's incarceration

I asked prisoners' children about the feelings they experienced due to the fact that their fathers were in prison. The relevant data are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Child's emotions about father's incarceration as reported by the child

Emotions	Definitely not		Generally not		Generally yes		Definitely yes	
	N	pct.	N	pct.	N	pct.	N	pct.
I feel sad that my father is absent	11	15.3	9	12.5	18	25.0	34	47.1
I feel angry with my father about committing a crime.	13	18.1	20	27.8	14	19.4	25	34.7
I feel angry with the court about sentencing my father to prison	17	23.6	21	29.2	17	23.6	17	23.6
I feel ashamed that my father is in prison	18	25.0	18	25.0	9	12.5	27	37.5
I understand that my father made a mistake and is bearing the consequences of what he did	3	4.2	8	11.1	32	44.4	29	40.3
I feel sorry for my father having to be in prison	11	15.3	10	13.9	21	29.2	30	41.7
It makes no difference to me that my father is in prison	41	56.9	17	23.6	8	11.1	6	8.3
I feel pleased that my father is in prison	41	56.9	19	26.4	3	4.2	9	12.5

Source: author's research.

The data in Table 6 show that 52 children (72.1 pct.) reported sadness about the father's absence; 39 children (54.1 pct.) felt angry at the father about committing a crime; 34 children (47.2 pct.) were angry with the court for sentencing their father to prison. Half of the children (36; 50 pct.) were ashamed about their father's imprisonment, and 61 respondents (84.7 pct.) understood that their father had made a mistake and was bearing the consequences of what he had done. More than 70 pct. of the children (51 respondents; 70.9 pct.) reported that they felt sorry for the father who had to be in prison, 14 children (19.4 pct.) reported indifference about their father's imprisonment, and 12 (16.7 pct.) were pleased that their father was in prison.

During the study, numerous parents informed the researcher that the father's incarceration was a difficult experience for the child and evoked many unpleasant emotions. Therefore, some of the parents refused to consent for their children to participate in the study (even though they took part in the study themselves).

Type and frequency of father-child contact

The next issue is the child's contact with the father serving a prison sentence. Children were asked if they maintained contact with their fathers. Information concerning this issue is presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Maintenance of father-child contact

Contact	N	pct.
I maintain contact	67	93.0
I do not maintain contact	5	7.0
Total	72	100

Source: author's research.

The above results show that 67 children (93 pct.) maintained contact with their imprisoned fathers, whereas 5 children (7.0 pct.) were not in contact with theirs. This means that the vast majority of children taking part in the study maintained contact with their fathers serving a prison sentence.

As far as the maintenance of father-child contact is concerned, it was essential to collect data about the type and frequency of that contact. The relevant information is presented in the table below.

Table 8. Type and frequency of father-child contact

Type and frequency of contact	Visitations		Telephone conversations		Letters		Contact through third parties		Passes	
	N	pct.	N	pct.	N	pct.	N	pct.	N	pct.
5 or more times a month*	0	0	23	34.3	1	1.5	1	1.5	3	4.5
4 times a month	1	1.5	20	29.8	4	6.0	2	3.0	2	3.0
2-3 times a month	19	28.3	20	29.8	10	14.9	2	3.0	3	4.5
Once a month	23	34.3	1	1.5	16	23.9	6	8.9	6	8.9
Once in two months	7	10.4	0	0	3	4.5	1	1.5	3	4.5
Once in three months	3	4.5	0	0	6	8.9	0	0	6	8.9
Once in 4-6 months	9	13.4	2	3.0	3	4.5	0	0	0	0
No contact	5	7.5	1	1.5	24	35.8	57	85.1	53	79.1

Source: author's research.

* Once a month means 60 minutes.

Based on the results of the study, it can be concluded that the most frequently chosen form of contact between children and their imprisoned fathers are visitations and telephone calls. Most of the surveyed children (62, 92.5 pct.) visited their fathers in prison at the following rate: once a month - 23 children (34.3 pct.); 2-3 times

a month – 19 children (28.3 pct.); once in 4–6 months – 9 children (13.4 pct.); once in two months – 7 children (10.4 pct.); once in three months – 3 children (4.5 pct.); four times a month – 1 child (1.5 pct.). This means that only one child reported seeing his father every week, while other children had this kind contact from once a month to as rarely as once in 4–6 months.

Twenty-four children (34.3 pct.) had telephone contact with their imprisoned fathers five or more times a month, 20 children (29.8 pct.) had it between two and four times a month (29.8 pct.), and one child (1.5 pct.) reported one telephone contact with the father per month.

The frequency and type of contact is significant for maintaining proper family relations. As the information obtained shows, the frequency of contacts between children and their imprisoned fathers is low. It is difficult to ensure a proper interpersonal relationship with little direct contact at one's disposal.

Evaluation of the quality and frequency of father–child contact

In order to expand knowledge about children's evaluation of the quality and frequency of their contact with the incarcerated father, I asked the children to specify how they evaluated this contact. The relevant data are shown in the table below.

Table 9. Appropriate frequency and quality of father–child contact as reported by children

Appropriate frequency and quality of contact	N	pct.
Yes	27	37.5
No	45	62.5
Total	72	100

Source: author's research.

As shown by the data presented in Table 9, according to 45 children (62.5 pct.) the frequency and quality of father–child contact was not appropriate.

Information about the difficulties regarding the quality and frequency of father–child contact as seen by children is presented in Table 10.

The data provided in Table 10 show that 37 children (82.2 pct.) believed they too seldom had an opportunity for contact with their imprisoned father. The meetings are too short – this was the opinion of 37 respondents (82.2 pct.). According to 38 respondents (84.4 pct.), the conditions of waiting for the meetings were inappropriate. The place of meetings (the visitation room) was also inappropriate – this was the opinion of 36 children (80 pct.). Moreover, 34 respondents (75.6 pct.) believed they did not have a chance to talk to their incarcerated father on the phone often enough, and 35 (77.8 pct.) reported that these telephone conversations were too short. Additional meetings for families take place too seldom – this opinion

was reported by 38 children (84.5 pct.). According to 33 respondents (73.3 pct.), there were too few projects facilitating father–child contact. The number of passes issued is insufficient – 35 children (77.8 pct.) expressed this opinion. Responding to all the suggestions mentioned, the children indicated the answer that confirmed that children's situation should be changed as far as the frequency and quality of contact were concerned.

Table 10. Children's evaluation of the quality and frequency of father–child contact

Evaluation of the quality and frequency of contact	Definitely not		Generally not		Generally yes		Definitely yes	
	N	pct.	N	pct.	N	pct.	N	pct.
We too rarely have an opportunity for contact with the imprisoned father	5	11.1	3	6.7	12	26.7	25	55.5
The meetings are too short	3	6.7	5	11.1	8	17.8	29	64.4
The conditions of waiting for a meeting are inappropriate	1	2.2	7	15.6	10	22.2	28	62.2
The place of meetings (the visitation room) is inappropriate	4	8.9	5	11.1	15	33.3	21	46.7
The child too rarely has a chance to talk to his or her parent on the phone	6	13.3	5	11.1	13	28.9	21	46.7
Telephone conversations are too short	5	11.1	5	11.1	7	15.6	28	62.2
Additional meetings for families are held too seldom	4	8.9	3	6.7	8	17.8	30	66.7
There are too few projects that would facilitate parent–child contact (e.g., recording a fairy-tale on a CD for the child, making an artistic work together with the child)	5	11.1	7	15.6	9	20	24	53.3
An insufficient number of passes are issued	5	11.1	5	11.1	5	11.1	30	66.7

Source: author's research.

The child's emotions during contact with the father

The father–child contact is accompanied by various emotions. Information concerning the child's emotions experienced during contact with the father is presented in Table 11.

As shown by the data presented in Table 11, 38 children (56.6 pct.) reported that they were upset during contact with their father because prison was not a pleasant place; 56 respondents (83.6 pct.) were pleased to have contact with their imprisoned father; 50 respondents (74.6 pct.) were happy that such a pleasant moment was taking place; 49 children (73.1 pct.) were pleased that they could hug their father; 57 respondents (85 pct.) were pleased that they could talk to their

father; 20 children (29.8 pct.) were displeased to have to meet with their father; 30 children (44.7 pct.) were embarrassed that they had to come to prison; exactly the same number of children (30, 44.7 pct.) were embarrassed by other people's presence; 40 respondents (59.7 pct.) were sad about this type of contact; 15 children (22.4 pct.) were annoyed about contact with their father.

Table 11. Children's emotions during contact with the father as reported by children

Emotions	Definitely not		Generally not		Generally yes		Definitely yes	
	N	pct.	N	pct.	N	pct.	N	pct.
I feel upset, because it is not a pleasant place	11	16.4	18	26.9	19	28.3	19	28.3
I feel pleased to have contact with my father	8	11.9	3	4.5	24	35.8	32	47.8
I feel happy that such a pleasant moment is taking place	9	13.4	8	11.9	20	29.8	30	44.8
I feel pleased that I can hug my father	9	13.4	9	13.4	13	19.4	36	53.7
I feel pleased that I can talk to my father	8	11.9	2	3	21	31.3	36	53.7
I feel displeased that I have to meet with my father	32	47.8	15	22.4	10	14.9	10	14.9
I feel embarrassed about coming to prison	23	34.3	14	20.9	22	32.8	8	11.9
I feel embarrassed by other people's presence	22	32.8	15	22.4	22	32.8	8	11.9
I feel sad because of this kind of contact	9	13.4	18	26.9	13	19.4	27	40.3
I feel annoyed that I had to come for a visitation or make a phone call	31	46.3	21	31.3	4	6.0	11	16.4

Source: author's research.

Almost half of the surveyed children felt ashamed and more than half felt nervous about the place where the meeting took place and about the presence of other people. More than half of the children were saddened by this type of contact and 24% were angry that they had to come for a visit. The possibility of talking to and contacting their imprisoned parent filled over 80 pct. of the children with satisfaction. More than 70 pct. felt joy at the pleasant moment and experienced satisfaction about the opportunity to hug their parent.

Father-child relations

The question about the father-child relations during parental incarceration may identify the causes of the child's current attitude towards the parent. Information concerning this issue is provided in Table 12.

Table 12. Deterioration of father–child relations as reported by children

Deterioration of relations	N	pct.
Yes	31	43.1
No	41	56.9
Total	72	100

Source: author's research.

Father–child relations deteriorated – this was the opinion of 31 children (43.1 pct.). This means that half of the children who took part in the survey did not think that their relations with the imprisoned father had changed. This will be the subject of further research analyses. Interestingly, as many as 76.4 pct. of the surveyed fathers had served at least one other prison sentence before (recidivism). It is therefore worth analyzing whether no deterioration of father–child relations was reported mainly by children of recidivist fathers or by those whose fathers had no prior criminal record.

The way in which children evaluate the deterioration of their relations with the father is shown by the data provided in Table 13.

Table 13. Deterioration of father–child relations as reported by children

Deterioration of relations	Definitely not		Generally not		Generally yes		Definitely yes	
	N	pct.	N	pct.	N	pct.	N	pct.
I have a grudge against my father	4	12.9	3	9.7	11	35.5	13	41.9
I feel ashamed of my father	7	22.6	5	16.1	7	22.6	12	38.7
I feel offended by him	8	25.8	8	25.8	6	19.3	9	29
I don't want to talk to him.	9	29.0	8	25.8	3	9.7	11	35.5
I feel angry at my father	7	22.6	7	22.6	8	25.8	9	29
We have no common topics to talk about	6	19.3	4	12.9	7	22.6	13	41.9

Source: author's research.

The results of the present study show that, in children's opinion, the deterioration of their relations with the father consisted in the following: 24 children (77.4 pct.) had a grudge against their father; 19 children (61.3 pct.) reported that they were ashamed of their father; 15 children (48.3 pct.) were offended at them; 14 children (45.2 pct.) did not want to talk to them; 17 children (54.8 pct.) were annoyed with their imprisoned father; 20 children (64.5 pct.) reported that they had no common subjects to talk about with the father. The situation of a family member's imprisonment evokes many difficult emotions and negative thoughts in adults. Undoubtedly, in the case of children, who are not yet fully emotionally mature, the situation of a father's absence may evoke even more extreme emotions or rebellious behaviors than it does in adults.

Nevertheless, it is important that the children had a chance to share their opinion about how they perceived this immensely difficult reality – functioning in an incomplete family, with a father in prison.

Discussion

The aim of the article was to assess the situation of fathers' incarceration from the perspective of their children. The analysis of research results revealed that all children taking part in the study knew that their fathers were serving a prison sentence in a penal institution. The results of the study showed that most children experienced unpleasant emotions due to the imprisonment of their fathers, such as regret that the father is in prison and sadness because of the parent's absence. Half of the surveyed children felt ashamed of their father's imprisonment, but also angry that the parent had committed a crime. Half of the surveyed children felt angry not just at their incarcerated father, but also at the court that sentenced him. Most of the children understood that the parent had made a mistake and that they were bearing the consequences of what they had done. The vast majority of the surveyed children maintained contact with their fathers (visitations, phone calls, letters), but the frequency of these contacts was rather low. Only one child reported visiting his father every week, whereas most children had this kind of contact from once a month to as rarely as once in 4–6 months. More than half of the children had telephone contact with their imprisoned fathers four or more times a month. Every third child had this type of contact once in 2–3 months. As is known, the maintenance of contact between family members contributes to the strengthening of family ties (Arditti 2016; Shlafer, Poehlmann 2010).

Almost half of the surveyed children felt ashamed about the place where the meeting with the father took place and about the presence of other people, and more than half of them felt nervous about the fact that the meeting was taking place in a prison. More than half of the children were saddened by this type of contact, and every fourth child was angry that they had to come to the visitation or call their parent. Due to the possibility of talking to and contacting their parent, the vast majority of the children felt satisfied about the contact with their father and about the duration of that pleasant moment; they were also pleased with the opportunity to hug and talk to their parents. An array of various emotions experienced by the children also during contact with the imprisoned parent has also been reported by other authors (Arditt 2003; Arditti 2016; Dallaire et al. 2015).

The vast majority of children claimed that the frequency and quality of contact with their fathers were not appropriate, supporting this opinion as follows:

- the possibility of contact with the imprisoned parent in the form of visitations or telephone calls is too rare and the contacts are too short;
- the conditions of waiting for the meeting and the place of meetings (the visitation room) are inappropriate;

- the number of additional meetings and projects that would facilitate contact between the parent and the child, as well as the number of passes issued, are insufficient.

Similar findings were reported in other studies (Arditti 2016; Condry, Smith 2019; Dzierżyńska-Breś 2017; Mowen, Visher 2016).

For adults, the situation of a family member's imprisonment can be quite a challenge. In the case of children, who are not yet fully emotionally mature, the father's absence can arouse even more difficult emotions and induce more negative thoughts or rebellious behaviors than in adults. An important aspect of the present study was the fact that children of incarcerated fathers had an opportunity to report how they perceived the extremely difficult reality of their parent's imprisonment. Moreover, it seems important that this population is noticed by society and receives appropriate support and help. In Poland activities are targeted mainly at prisoners, while their offspring still remain the "unseen population" (Chojecka 2013). After all, it is not the child's fault that their parent committed a crime and was sent to prison – and research results show that children experience many unpleasant emotions caused by parental imprisonment and by functioning in this difficult situation. Due to the lack of reliable data concerning the number of children whose parents are incarcerated in penal institutions and due to the lack of diagnosis concerning the situation of these children, it is difficult to create a framework for support programs that would respond to the real diverse needs of these children and their families.

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