

Enhancing the well-being of children of incarcerated parents through life coaching

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Abstract— The text shows how the departure of a parent to prison affects the life situation of children and their well-being. When a parent is incarcerated, the child has to deal with a number of changes and risks that they face as a result of their parent's imprisonment. The child's life situation is fundamentally altered by this event. The specificity of the situation for this group of children creates new challenges for helping professionals to work with these children to achieve their thriving [1]. In assessing the impact of incarceration on a child's well-being, I rely on a capability approach to help identify the areas with the most severe impacts of incarceration on the child. This paper discusses the use of life coaching methods in enhancing the well-being of children of incarcerated parents. The thesis is based on the first research data mapping the situation of children of incarcerated parents in the Czech Republic.

Keywords—well-being, incarcerated parents, coaching, identity

I. Introduction

In the Czech Republic, ensuring children's well-being is a central motive of government measures related to the protection of children and ensuring their rights. The International Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which the Czech Republic acceded on 6 February 1991, guarantees all children under the age of 18 their rights and the application of their best interests. In spite of this legal protection, there is a group of children in the Czech Republic who have not received the attention of legislators, nor have they found a foothold in the activities of the state bodies ensuring their protection and care. This is the group of 'children of imprisoned parents', i.e., children whose parents are in detention or serving prison sentences.

A number of foreign authors refer to children of convicted parents as "Nonexistent", "Orphans of justice", "Invisible", "Forgotten victims", or "unseen victims of the prison boom" [2]. In the Czech Republic, this group of children has been almost completely silent. A break from this state of affairs is the first research investigation "Parenting Behind Bars" dealing with the effects of imprisonment on child well-being among Czech children of incarcerated parents.

The disinterest of professionals in this group of children has naturally led to the fact that children of incarcerated parents have not been and still are not allowed to participate in the process of criminal proceedings with their parent.

Children remain voiceless in this process, despite the fact that they lose one of the most important relationships in their lives in the process. The number of children involved can be inferred from a study by Drahy et al. [3], who, in their analysis of the prison system, found that in Czech prisons one in two convicts is a parent (52.2%), with an average of two children per convict. Similar results are also supported by the International Prison Fellowship of the Czech Republic, which states that 30-40 thousand children in the Czech Republic currently have a parent in prison. It is surprising that, although this is a relatively large group of children and young people, they are not given systematic attention and care. We believe that the absence of this systematic care has a number of negative consequences for the life functioning of this group of children. In this context, some authors also talk about structural oppression of this specific group of children [4].

II. Threats associated with the conviction of a parent

Within child and young people's safeguarding, there are groups for whom monitoring wellbeing requires specific attention [5]. These are children whose wellbeing is threatened by serious risks such as poverty, parental neglect, violence, bullying, abuse... Children who need special attention include those of disengaged parents. As many international studies have shown, the risks to children of parental incarceration and their consequences are so severe that special attention needs to be paid to this group of children [6] [7].

One of the risks that impacts children of incarcerated parents, and which has the potential to be seen as a source of structural oppression, is defining this risk of incarceration only in the context of the family without considering the specificity of this major life event for the child. The imprisonment of a parent, understood as a risk for the family and not also associated with a risk for the child, in itself creates the conditions for reinforcing the 'invisibility' of a group of children. As noted by Flaquer [8], there is a strong tendency to assess the life situation of these children through the established procedures of child protection authorities. In the Czech context, this is mainly focused on the provision of care, protection and housing. Applying this approach to child protection makes it impossible to understand what children of convicted parents experience and what risks they face in their lives and what they need to thrive as children whose life situation is not marked by such severe circumstances.

The "invisibility" of this group of children for Czech legislators and child protection authorities leads to a lack of systematic attention and care for the children of convicted

parents. Only those children come under the care of social protection authorities where social workers intervene to support the family according to the existing legislative framework. Where the child welfare authorities do not have to deal with parental custody in the context of a parent's imprisonment, these children do not become the subject of protection and support in coping with the risks associated with the parent's imprisonment. However, this assumption also applies to children from families of convicted prisoners where the child protection authority is active. The specific needs of children based on the risks associated with the imprisonment of a parent are not the focus of the social workers intervening in these families.

The social insensitivity of the topic of children of convicted parents is manifested by the absence of discussion about the fact that children of convicted parents "lose" their parent [9] However, this loss represents significant emotional pain and stress for the child. This experience, known from foreign research studies, is also familiar to Czech children, as evidenced by research data [4]. The pain of loss is especially evident in young children who do not know that their parent has gone to prison, they only experience the anxiety of separation from their parent. Their pain is not infrequently associated with feelings of guilt, where they believe they are to blame for mum or dad leaving them.

The economic impact that families of convicts often face is a very common reason why social workers intervene with these families. Authors on economic impacts point out that when a parent goes to prison, there is a decrease in family income, an increase in the financial cost of child care, and also an increase in the likelihood of poverty [10]. As the Czech research data indicate, families with an incarcerated member most often turn to the authorities for help precisely because of the reduction in family income due to the incarceration of a family member who contributed to the family budget, whether through legal or illegal activities.

The departure of a parent to prison also represents a significant change in family relationships, ties and the overall character of family life. As noted by [11], the transformation of family cohabitation as a result of a parent's departure to prison presents significant implications for family functioning and for the well-being of the child. The Czech study noted a great plurality in the forms of family cohabitation in families with an incarcerated parent. Often this plurality is conditioned by efforts to cope economically with the difficult financial situation after one parent has gone to prison.

The imprisonment of a parent means stigmatization not only for those imprisoned, but also for their families, and especially for their children. It makes a big difference whether a child loses a parent through divorce or incarceration. One of the dangerous consequences of the stigmatization of incarcerated parents is that the child is seen as someone who does not deserve help and protection because their parent has committed a crime. This stigmatization has a number of consequences that accompany the child not only in the present but also extend into the future. McGinley and Jones [12] point to discrimination against children and their exclusion from social relationships and connections. As Czech children of

convicted parents have testified, this stigmatization is particularly hard for them to experience when its source is classmates and teachers. According to Ayre [13], family and child stigma, combined with reduced family income, can exacerbate the risk of transmission of antisocial behavior.

The traumatization of children is considered among the very serious consequences of parental incarceration. As noted in Comfort [14], parental incarceration increases child traumatization. A Czech study [4] showed that up to 83% of children of incarcerated parents were identified as having trauma. Wildeman [6] points to the increased behavioral disturbances that occur in children of incarcerated parents. Dallaire and Wilson (2010) found that children who experienced parental arrest exhibited more behavioral problems. As shown in the study by Poehlman-Tynan et al. [15], there is still a large number of children who have witnessed a parent's arrest (22%) or a parent's offense 27%. Both are difficult for the child to cope with and leave traces of trauma, as a result of which more aggression and anxiety is observed in children. These children may thus be more vulnerable to risky behaviors such as drug use and delinquency.

But imprisoning a parent can also bring feelings of relief and liberation to children. As some authors have noted Jaffee et al. [16], some children benefit from a parent's imprisonment. Especially in cases where the child has witnessed or been a victim of domestic violence. These results were also found in the Czech study, which also points to the fact that for some children, a parent going to prison is a great liberation. In these cases, children of convicted parents have no interest in being in contact with their parent. Although this is a perfectly understandable wish on the part of the children, it may not be of a permanent nature. When the children of incarcerated parents are observed over a longer period of time, it is evident that some children change their attitude towards their incarcerated parent over time [4].

The impacts of the risks associated with parental incarceration have long-term consequences on children's lives and cause a number of inequities in children's lives caused by parental incarceration. Wildeman [6] points out that these inequalities are not only economic or social in nature, but these children also have to cope with inequalities in physical and mental health.

Although the Czech Republic has an incomplete picture of the impact of a parent's incarceration on a child and more questions are emerging, it is evident that some children cope better with this life circumstance than others. While for some children it enhances their resilience [17], for others it increases the likelihood of aggressive behavior and leads to criminal behavior [18].

III. Using the capability approach in assessing the well-being of children of convicted parents

Although in the Czech Republic the child's right to experience his or her well-being is legally guaranteed, in practice it may not be easy to ensure this right [19] [20]. For the very reason that it is a concept that is ambiguous and within which we can observe variability in approaches to assessing and measuring this well-being. The Czech practice of interpreting the concept of well-being is characterized by a fragmented understanding of the concept [21], which has a number of important implications in terms of child protection. These negative consequences are exacerbated for children with an incarcerated parent. For example, the previously mentioned lack of defining the risks of parental incarceration in relation to the child creates the conditions for structural oppression. The absence of institutionalization of the topic of child protection and support for children of incarcerated parents during the process of criminal proceedings with the parent, combined with a narrow view of the assessment of their well-being, creates a dangerous combination that makes professionals blind and indifferent to the needs of children and young people. I believe that the way out of this dangerous combination of professional and legislative blindness is through finding a tool that provides a comprehensive view of children's well-being that can be applied in the context of protecting children of sentenced parents.

I believe that one of the appropriate tools is the capability approach, through which we can identify areas of need where children of convicted parents need support and protection. The sensitivity to the diversity of perspectives that the capability approach can work with [22] allows us to include the variability of life situations that are present in the lives of children and families with an incarcerated parent. I also choose this approach because one of its essential features is freedom. The imprisonment of a parent also, to some extent, throws the child into a "prison". Although he or she remains free, the effects of the parent's imprisonment on his or her life are so disabling that, although free, his or her life slowly becomes a prison'. Capability is a set of vectors of functioning, reflecting personal freedom to lead a particular way of life to choose among possible lives [22]. Capabilities are thus the essential (substantive) freedoms that a person uses to lead a way of life that he or she has reason to value [23]. As the notion of capability is essentially a "notion of freedom" reflecting the range of options that a person has in deciding what kind of life they want to lead [24].

Given that children of convicted parents face structural oppression in the Czech Republic, it is particularly important to monitor the relationship between the space of their social opportunities and the space of their individual needs. Interpreting this interaction gives us crucial information about the thriving of children of incarcerated parents. This interpretation also helps us to better construct children's well-being in its general sense, but allows us to define the space of children's well-being that is specific to children of incarcerated parents. For children facing serious threats, the central

question may seem to be: do they have the opportunity to live a good life at all? However, this question presupposes that we know what the content of a good life is for a child. The ambiguity of defining a 'good life' and taking only a narrow view of a child's well-being can lead to further threats in a child's life, resulting from neglecting important areas where a child needs our support and care to thrive.

In order to avoid this narrow view when assessing the well-being of children of convicted parents, I have chosen Nussbaum's list of 10 capabilities, which are understood as a set of basic human claims that form the preconditions for different ways of living; claims that are embodied in the idea of human dignity [25]. In contrast to Sen's emphasis on the individual's ability to participate in the assertion of his or her own rights, Nussbaum pointed out that not all people in society are able to articulate and assert their rights [25]. This claim is particularly resonant for the group of children of incarcerated parents whose voice is still almost invisible in the Czech Republic. The application of the capability approach in the measurement of child well-being has been primarily driven by Trani et al. [26], Robeyns [27], Biggeri et al. (2004), Biggery et al. [28], who invited children and young people to help define child well-being.

IV. Life coaching as a method of working with children of convicted parents

Based on the application of the capability approach in the Czech study, it was found that Czech children of incarcerated parents need specific and, above all, timely help. Children need both short-term and long-term care. This naturally places great demands on social workers whose task is to protect and support children in maintaining their well-being. However, as Flaquer [8] has noted, the entrenched practices of the protection authorities do not create the conditions for the implementation of the kind of help and protection that the group of children we have studied needs. Therefore, there is a need to consider new methods for social workers to use when working with children of incarcerated parents. The results of the Czech study have shown that children of convicted parents are not prepared for, and cannot even imagine, that they should be taken into account in the process of criminal proceedings with the parent. It appears that these children will need support and assistance to be able to have a voice in the process in which they lose their parent. It is evident that in order for a child's voice to be heard in the criminal justice process, it will be necessary to create a safe space for children and also to work with them in a way that is age appropriate to support them in their ability to express their needs in the criminal justice process with their parent.

Children of convicted parents must also deal with the issue of guilt that is associated with the parent's crime and going to prison. In the Czech study, there was a tendency, especially among younger children under the age of 12, to blame the parent for going to prison. The high level of risk phenomena that fall on these children with all the uncertainties and fears

they have to face, confront these children and young people with the need to manage their lives and model their own identity [29] and their own life project [30]. In light of international studies that indicate that children of incarcerated parents are 5 to 8 times more likely to also commit crime one day, there is a need to support these children in ways that eliminate the risk of them taking on identities - life projects that will eventually lead them to prison, as was the case with their parents. It is alarming that the number of young people committing crimes of increasing brutality is growing. Similarly, there is an increasing number of those who suffer from depression and who struggle or flirt with thoughts of death [31]. These are very serious matters that lead to the need for a greater understanding of what happens to children and young people when they have to face parental incarceration with all the consequences that this incarceration represents. In this text, therefore, I propose and consider the method of life coaching as a tool to help children and young people develop life biographies and identities that enable them to realize their potential and experience well-being.

The coaching method generally helps to create a space for people to become aware of what they want to achieve in life, to discover their own identity and to learn to make choices and decisions [32]. In the context of the criminal justice process, where children of adjudicated parents are under a great deal of pressure, they need the helping hand of those who can help them manage these pressures and demands. The coaching method is one of the successful methods to help children manage their emotional and social health and cope with difficult life situations such as a parent's conviction [33] [34] [35]. Luther [36] point to positive outcomes when using this method in terms of their mental health, particularly in dealing with the personal and social problems of children of incarcerated parents. Similarly, Navrátilová [35] sees the importance of using this method in dealing with children's difficult life situations as well as building their identity.

In these studies, it has been shown that with the help of coaches who focus on these children's potential, developing communication, empathy and relationship building, healthy social functioning is developed. Thus, children of incarcerated parents develop identity construction and the adoption of values that enable them to move out of the dangers of social isolation and delinquent behavior. Thus, coaching promotes the resilience of children of incarcerated parents to cope with the difficulties associated with parental incarceration. It is based on the idea that although young people are threatened by a range of risk phenomena, they also possess resilience capacities which, through cultivation and development, will overcome the adverse conditions in which they find themselves [20].

Coaching helps young people develop resilience and the ability to manage stress in situations such as change and uncertainty. In addition, according to these authors, coaching provides a space for reflection and awareness of one's strengths. Navrátilová [35] believes that one of the main benefits of coaching is the positive impact it has on personal and professional development and can be useful for them in finding their direction in life.

Giant [31] summarized the benefits of coaching for children in several areas. This method helps children to:

- Better understand themselves, including what triggers their negative emotions;
- They identified positive and negative influences
- They built relationships with others;
- Develop a positive and healthy self-image;
- They were discovering and building their own identity;
- They set and achieved their goals;
- They improved their own self-esteem and confidence;
- They have built resilience skills and coping mechanisms for their life situation.

By enhancing the well-being of children of convicts through the coaching method, social workers help these children to overcome the shroud of insecurity and fear that enveloped them after their parents' imprisonment. They help them to find their own sources of security and to stand on their own two feet, so that they can break free from the shackles that their parents' offending has bound them in social and personal insecurity and isolation. In addition, it cultivates in them participation skills so that they can express their voice and their needs in the process of criminal proceedings with the parent.

v. Conclusions

The effects of parental incarceration on the child, which have been pointed out by foreign and Czech studies, are so serious that it is necessary to ask questions in a new way how social workers should protect and support children whose life situation is marked by parental incarceration [37].

In my text, I discussed the need to develop Czech children's ability to participate and let their voice be heard in the process of criminal proceedings with their parent in the context of losing that parent. Considering that in the Czech Republic children are not allowed to participate in this process, nor are they specifically considered in the protection system, I consider it essential that in addition to creating the conditions, we also work with children and develop their ability to participate in the process of criminal proceedings with their parent.

I believe that social workers should build on established procedures for the social protection of children and also use methods that develop children's abilities to cope with difficult situations, such as the imprisonment of a parent. Focusing on the potential of these children, helping them to cope with the emotionally and socially challenging situations associated with the imprisonment of a parent, helping them to build a new identity in which they will have their own dignity and self-respect in the face of parental guilt, requires a different perspective on the work of social workers. Along with other authors, I believe that this can be achieved if children are given a helping hand in the form of a collaborative approach in which helping professionals create a space in which children and young people are supported to express their needs and find their own solutions to experience wellbeing [31] [38]

[39] [40]. Such a process is typical of coaching. According to a number of authors, the coaching method seems to have great potential to help young people to create their own life project and identity to live a life in which they experience well-being. And it is a way that can be successfully used in the work of social workers in the context of the protection of children of convicted parents.

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