

## THE IMPACT OF PARENTAL INCARCERATION ON CHILDREN IN RESIDENTIAL CHILD CARE: CHALLENGES AND INTERDISCIPLINARY SOLUTIONS

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**Abstract:** Parental incarceration represents a significant challenge for children living in residential child care, exacerbating their psychosocial vulnerabilities and negatively affecting their development. This study, initiated by FICE Czech Republic, examines the prevalence and impact of parental incarceration on children and young adults in Czech residential child care facilities. The research combines data collected through a mixed-methods design with insights gained from the practical operation of a children's home. The issue is approached not only from an academic perspective but also from the viewpoint of an everyday educator. The quantitative part of the study covered 67 Czech residential child care facilities with a population of over 2,000 children. These findings were contextualized using qualitative data, leveraging my close connection to the researched environment. Among the target group, I identified severe disruptions in social competencies, emotional deprivation, and challenges in trust-building, all linked to parental incarceration. My contribution highlights systemic shortcomings and insufficient interdisciplinary cooperation, among numerous additional challenges. Based on the research findings, I propose necessary modifications, particularly in fostering cross-sector collaboration, implementing targeted prevention strategies, and significantly strengthening support measures. These recommendations aim to support this highly vulnerable group of children and enable them to better cope with the burdens associated with parental incarceration.

**Keywords:** parental incarceration, residential child care, social competencies, emotional deprivation, interdisciplinary cooperation, prevention, special educational needs, resocialization

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Residential child care environments are difficult for many of our fellow citizens to comprehend, often evoking a range of conflicting emotions. While some professionals advocate for a comprehensive transformation from institutionalized residential child care to foster care, others support maintaining the institutional approach. To complicate matters further, approaches to providing alternative family environments vary significantly from continent to continent, state to state, region to region, and even facility to facility: I therefore refrain from making generalizations.

However, I believe there is one area where consensus can be found, regardless of geographical location: parental incarceration negatively impacts children. This applies to all children, including those living in residential child care facilities. This article aims to provide insight into residential child care in the Czech Republic. Its primary objective is to present the results of my research, which was initiated at the request of FICE Czech Republic. FICE Czech Republic has long recognized that children with an incarcerated parent belong to one of the most vulnerable groups within the population. Therefore, FICE Czech Republic requested a pilot study to estimate the approximate number of children affected not only by the trauma of pathological family environments that led to their placement in residential child care facilities and the trauma of living in them, but also by the trauma resulting from the incarceration of a parent.

I will first present a brief theoretical framework and describe our mixed-methods research design. In the following section, I will discuss my findings. Based on these results, I will propose recommendations for improving the current residential child care system in the Czech Republic, hoping that other residential child care systems will find them useful.

### ***Theoretical Background***

In modern democratic societies, the impact of parental incarceration on children is frequently discussed (see Dadić et al., 2023; Davis et al., 2011). Recently, this issue has also begun to attract the attention of Czech experts. In this regard, I would like to mention an excellent study that identified the needs of children with an incarcerated parent (Navrátilová et al., 2023).

The impact of parental incarceration on children is a highly complex issue (Cui et al., 2023; Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008). Parental incarceration is a traumatic experience for children, negatively affecting their physical and psychosocial health. Children with incarcerated parents have higher rates of asthma, migraines, depression, and anxiety and are at risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder (Murray & Farrington, 2008). They also face increased behavioral problems, such as conduct disorders and social difficulties. These health issues are exacerbated by the loss of parental support and stability, which in turn leads to a higher risk of academic failure and social exclusion (Lee et al., 2013; Turney & Wildeman, 2013). Younger children are particularly vulnerable, but older children and young adults also suffer when parents are incarcerated.

Support from family members, teachers, and peers plays a key role in helping these children cope with their situation (Murray & Farrington, 2008; Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008). The situation of the person who cares for the children of incarcerated parents — the primary caregiver — is also crucial. This person may be the incarcerated parent's partner or the child's grandparent. A strong, supportive relationship with the caregiver can mitigate some of the negative consequences of parental incarceration (Murray et al., 2009; Shlafer & Poehlmann, 2010). However, it is important to recognize that the stability of the primary caregiver is also negatively affected by the fact that a member of their family is incarcerated.

Children of incarcerated parents use various coping strategies to deal with psychological and social challenges. These strategies include distancing themselves from the incarcerated parent, rationalizing the situation, and seeking distraction through multiple activities, whether socially acceptable or socially undesirable (Daněk, 2023). Maintaining contact with the incarcerated parent, when appropriate, can also help preserve the parent–child bond and provide emotional reassurance, although the quality of the relationship prior to incarceration is a key determinant of the benefits of such contact (Arditti, 2012; Poehlmann, 2005).

Children of incarcerated parents often face social stigma and exclusion, which can lead to bullying and isolation in school settings. This stigma intensifies the emotional and psychological stress that these children experience, potentially contributing to a cycle of social exclusion and mental health problems. Addressing this stigma through a supportive school environment is essential to mitigating its harmful effects (Murray, 2005; Turney, 2014). The economic impact of losing a parent due to incarceration, which can result in a significant loss of income and resources, often leads to financial instability and an increased risk of poverty. Activities aimed at providing financial support and stability to families of incarcerated individuals can help alleviate some of these economic pressures (Johnson & Easterling, 2015; Wildeman & Western, 2010).

So far, I have discussed children from the general population. Now, I will focus on the area of my scientific interest — children living in residential child care facilities. The topic of institutional substitute care is currently one of the most controversial in professional debates in the Czech Republic. There is no dispute that a safe family environment is the most suitable setting for a child. However, it has not yet been possible in the Czech Republic to fully replace institutional environments with alternative forms of care, such as foster families. As a result, the number of children in institutional settings has not been declining as rapidly as desired (Public Defender of Rights, 2024).

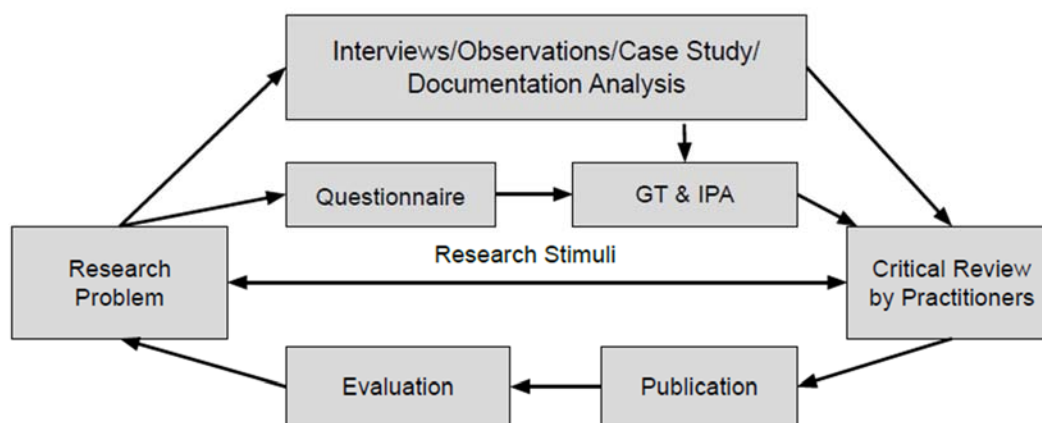
There is no reason to believe that children in institutional environments are affected by parental incarceration to a lesser extent than children from the general population. On the contrary, my previous research has demonstrated the devastating impact of parental incarceration on a child's personality, affecting a wide range of social, health, and personal areas (Daněk, 2023; Daněk et al., 2023; Daněk et al., 2024). The author has been conducting long-term research in Czech children's homes, combining an academic perspective (as a university teacher) with a practical

perspective (as an educator in a children’s home) and a professional perspective (as a member of the board of FICE Czech Republic). My research is conducted in response to requests from FICE Czech Republic, and one of their requested research areas concerns the impact of parental incarceration on children in residential child care institutions.

When reviewing literature and sources, I was surprised to find that the topic of children in institutional settings with incarcerated parents is underresearched: the primary focus has been on children outside institutions. Regarding the number of children in the general population with an incarcerated parent, only estimates are available. As for the number of children in institutional settings with an incarcerated parent, no data is available in the Czech context. It was necessary, therefore, to take up this research challenge and investigate the current situation in Czech children’s homes and similar institutions.

## Methodology

Figure 1. *Scheme of Methodological Design*



Note. GT = grounded theory; IPA = interpretative phenomenological analysis.

## Approach and Design

This study is based on a mixed-methods research design. Using qualitative methods, I explored how children in children’s homes are affected by parental incarceration. Using quantitative methods, I investigated the incidence of children with an incarcerated parent in Czech child care institutions.

## Target Group

The study was conducted in the Czech Republic, a small country, but one with a relatively large prison population. The general population count used in this study is based on the most recent

census (Czech Statistical Office, 2024; National Register of Research on Children and Youth, 2024), and the prison population data is from 2024 (Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research, 2024). The estimated number of children with a parent in prison was calculated using a formula referenced in numerous studies (Scharff-Smith & Gampell, 2011). The calculation is performed as follows:

$$\text{Number of children} = (\text{Male offenders} \times 0.56 \times 2) + (\text{Female offenders} \times 0.67 \times 2.4)$$

Using this formula, I calculated that the estimated number of children with a parent in prison is 22,587, which represents 1.05% of the total population of children in the Czech Republic.

Table 1. *Czech Republic Population Overview*

Category	Number	Share (%)
Total population of the Czech Republic	11,010,000	100.00
Total number of children in the Czech Republic	2,160,451	19.63
Total prison population	19,430	0.18

*Note.* Figures taken from the Czech Statistical Office (2024) and the Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research (2024).

In the Czech Republic, the issue of substitute care is managed by two government ministries. The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs is primarily responsible for stabilizing and supporting families to prevent their break-up, including providing short-term stays in alternative family care of children whose families are experiencing difficulties. If family rehabilitation proves unsuccessful and the child cannot be placed in alternative family care, the court orders the child's placement in a residential child care facility for institutional protective care. These facilities fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports. This article focuses exclusively on the population of children living in residential child care facilities that provide institutional and protective care in the Czech Republic. Czech residential child care includes four main types of facility: children's homes, children's homes with schools, youth detention centers, and diagnostic institutions.

Table 2. *Children in Residential Child Care Facilities in the Czech Republic*

Institution type	Number of institutions	Number of children
Children's home (for children without challenging behavior)	137	4,298
Children's home with school (children with challenging behavior during compulsory school attendance)	28	744
Youth detention center (children with challenging behavior after completing compulsory school attendance)	25	991
Diagnostic institution	12	363
Total	202	6,396

*Note.* The figures are from the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic (2024).

As Table 2 shows, I examined a population of 6,396 children in four types of facility. By applying the general population's percentage ratio of 1.05% to this group, I obtained the following initial research estimate: approximately 67 of the 6,396 children in residential child care facilities have a parent in prison.

### ***Data Collection***

The data collection for this article was conducted on two levels. Quantitative data was collected using a questionnaire designed by the author, which was distributed online to all residential child care institutions' directors. The key question of the questionnaire focused on the current number of children in the facility who have a parent in prison. Another question ascertained the total number of children in the facility. Several open-ended questions were also included, allowing respondents to express their views freely.

The survey was contextualized within my long-term qualitative research, which has been ongoing since 2022 at the author's institution. This research involves continuous observations and in-depth interviews with children and young adults whose parents are incarcerated. I was able to document the multiyear journey of two young girls whose lives were impacted by their fathers' imprisonment (Daněk, 2023). This narrative was incorporated into a case study.

### ***Data Analysis***

Qualitative data were analyzed using a combination of grounded theory (GT) and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). For GT, open coding was applied to interview transcripts and observation records, and the most significant codes were grouped into categories. Finally, a dominant code was selected. The advantage of GT is that it is highly flexible (Charmaz, 2014). I simultaneously used IPA methods, in which the researcher attempts to view the problem from the respondents' perspectives (Alase, 2017). The aforementioned case study was contextualized within the dominant code and partial outputs were derived from the IPA process.

Alongside the qualitative segment of the research, questionnaire data collection was conducted. Since my primary objective was to determine the number of children in residential child care settings with an incarcerated parent, I performed a simple descriptive analysis of the findings. Further statistical analysis is planned after additional and more detailed data collections are conducted.

### ***Triangulation, Evaluation***

I recognize that I am working in a particular environment and are aware of the risk that my perspective on the issue could influence the objectivity of the results (Seale, 1999). I therefore adhere to the well-established method of triangulation in my research. I view triangulation not merely as the use of multiple methods but primarily as a humble request for feedback. I benefit from the fact that FICE Czech Republic supports research within its network of affiliated institutions.



My results are presented to the FICE Czech Republic Board and representatives of children's homes and other institutions for critical evaluation. Only after receiving positive feedback do I offer my findings for publication. Through this process, the results of a single study become valid for a significant portion of Czech residential child care institutions. For me, research is a never-ending process. I continually evaluate my results, formulate new research challenges, and engage in new research projects.

### ***Ethics***

Adhering to ethical principles is essential for research conducted in environments involving vulnerable individuals (Bos, 2020). This awareness includes ensuring complete anonymity, obtaining informed consent from all participants, and providing the option to withdraw from the study at any time. In this study, complete anonymity was maintained, and individual consent from minors or guardians was not required, as no personal data were collected. Formal institutional consent was obtained from all participating residential child care facilities. Furthermore, the two case studies that were part of the qualitative segment of the research involved participants who were already of legal age at the time of data collection and who provided informed consent directly. All ethical aspects were compiled into a binding statement submitted to the Ethics Committee of Ambis University. After approval, the ethical statement was provided to FICE Czech Republic and subsequently made publicly available to ensure accessibility for the entire research community (Ambis University, 2025).

### **Findings**

It is important to emphasize that before the commencement of my research no one in the Czech Republic had a clear idea of the number of children in residential child care with a parent in prison. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (2009) calls on states to record the number, ages, and locations of a prisoner's offspring upon arrival at the prison. However, few statistical records regarding the parental status of prisoners have been kept (Scharff-Smith & Gampell, 2011), making it a significant challenge for those concerned with children of prisoners to know just how many children are involved. Generally speaking, authorities can inquire as to whether a prisoner has children, but prisoners cannot be obliged to respond, as that would violate their human rights. Moreover, even when such information is provided it is rarely systematically processed or used. This lack of data made my findings all the more surprising and, in many respects, deeply concerning. Table 3 shows that the proportion of children with an incarcerated parent is, in fact, nearly nine times higher in residential child care (9.10%) than in the general population (1.05%).

Equally disturbing results were obtained from the qualitative part of my research. The primary research was conducted with two young girls living in a section of the children's home where the author works. I worked intensively with these respondents over several years, publishing the results and monitoring the relationship dynamics between the child in the children's home and the

incarcerated parent (Daněk, 2023). Both respondents perceived parental incarceration as a significant social stigma; one, who was under psychiatric care, linked her psychological struggles to her father's absence and recalled traumatic prison visits. Their disrupted parental attachment had a lasting emotional impact. Both girls struggled with trust issues stemming from their fathers' failures that made it challenging to establish functional relationships. Instead, they sought socialization through online networks.

Table 3. *Data Collection Results from 202 Residential Child Care Facilities*

Phenomenon under study	Number processed	Share (%)
Total population	6,396	100.00
Questionnaire response rate	67	33.17
Number of children in responding facilities	2,617	40.90
Number of children with an incarcerated parent in returned questionnaires	238	3.72
Qualified estimate of the number of children with an incarcerated parent	582	9.10

Throughout the qualitative study mentioned, the respondents focused on the moment when their fathers would be released from prison. Although they expressed disapproval of their fathers' crimes during the interviews, they maintained regular contact with their fathers through written correspondence and phone calls. They consistently took advantage of prison visitation opportunities and sent their fathers entitlement packages. The important code that emerged was the respondents' anticipation of a shared life that would begin after their fathers' release and the respondents' departure from the children's home.

Crises occurred in the lives of both girls when one father was released from prison, and the other was granted a family visit. After his release, the first father found a girlfriend within a week and completely cut off contact with the respondent. Years of waiting — only to have it end so abruptly! Even more tragic was the visit of the second father to the other respondent. This respondent lived in a transitional apartment provided by the children's home, and her father came directly to her. On the first evening, he became intoxicated, and the respondent had to call the police. The next day, the father returned, again drunk and aggressive, demanding entry into the transitional apartment. The respondent again called the police, and the father did not return to her doorstep after that incident. I can only speculate about the depth of trauma that these two young women will carry into their future lives.



Table 4. *Interview Analysis Results: Partial Findings*

Dominant code	Examples of occurrences in interviews
Shared future	“When dad is released, we’ll start over together.” “He had a tough time, but I’ll help him.”
Relativization of offence	“I don’t even know what he’s in for, probably unpaid child support.” “He got about 10 years, but nothing violent.”
Negative self-evaluation	“How can I find a partner when I’m both from a children’s home and have a father who’s a criminal?”

In contrast to these findings, a significantly more negative view of incarcerated parents was seen in the responses from the directors of the surveyed institutions (see Table 5).

Table 5. *Selected Remarks From Responding Facility Directors*

Dominant code	Examples of occurrences in responses
Selfish attitude of the parent	“The parents’ engagement in communication with their children is low. If it happens at all, the parent (with few exceptions) pursues selfish goals. After being released from prison, most parents stop communicating for years, shifting their attention elsewhere rather than focusing on their children.”  “Parents often contact their children only from prison, mainly to demonstrate good behavior and obtain a reduced sentence.”  “We invest time, energy, and financial resources to enable these contacts, yet everything often ends immediately after the parent’s release or after an unsuccessful attempt to obtain a sentence reduction.”
False information	“Parents lie to their children about where they are, and as a result, the children become targets of ridicule from their peers and experience confusion. Parents’ statements are often highly misleading in other aspects as well, making it difficult to explain to children why they shouldn’t worry about their father when ‘he is in the army, fighting for the country’.”

*Note.* Of the 202 facilities surveyed, 67 responded.

## Discussion

My results were presented to the board of FICE Czech Republic, where we initiated a constructive debate on this issue. The most surprising finding of my research was the significant proportion of children in Czech residential child care facilities who have a parent in prison. Although I did not determine the exact number or distribution across different types of facilities, I highlighted the severity of the situation. If my finding that nearly one-tenth of the total population of children in residential child care facilities has a parent in prison is even approximately correct,

it is surely undeniable that this presents numerous challenges for the facilities. The most significant challenge is ensuring that the staff is adequately trained and prepared. In addition to their role as educators, the staff in residential child care facilities needs to be familiarized with the special considerations that apply when working with children who have an incarcerated parent. Our research could serve as a foundation for developing a series of training sessions and practical workshops, offering staff members access to knowledge and methods suitable for effectively supporting our target group.

Another area that requires strengthening is intersectoral cooperation. This includes collaboration not only between residential child care facilities and prisons where parents are incarcerated but also with other sectors. One potential solution is the creation of multidisciplinary teams. Social services and social prevention professionals would play a crucial role in these teams (Philbrick, 2014; Stárek & Víšek, 2022). It will also be necessary to modernize the training of prison staff to effectively address relevant issues (Jůzl & Vlach, 2022), including parenting. During the FICE board discussion, there was also a recurring demand for cooperation with the non-profit sector. Individual non-governmental organizations could strengthen the efforts of residential child care facilities in supporting children with an incarcerated parent. However, even in this area, future collaboration must be based on a thorough understanding of the impact of parental incarceration on children.

As previously mentioned, the research presented in this paper marks the beginning of more in-depth and sustained investigations. In 2025, I plan to conduct a significantly more comprehensive study focusing on children in residential child care and the impact of parental incarceration on this particularly vulnerable population. Once more robust and representative data are collected, I aim to publish the findings widely and provide them to policymakers as a basis for informed legislative and systemic changes.

While this study is grounded in the Czech system of residential child care, its findings resonate with broader international trends regarding the impact of parental incarceration on children. In particular, the emotional, behavioral, and psychosocial consequences identified here mirror those observed in research conducted in Western Europe, North America, and Australia (e.g., Arditti, 2012; Cui et al., 2023; Murray & Farrington, 2008). What distinguishes the Czech case, however, is the specific structure of residential child care, where a network of specialized institutions continues to play a key role in supporting children. This is a model that differs markedly from the predominantly family-based foster care systems found in countries that have undergone a long-term transformation of residential child care. The data from this study thus offer a valuable contribution to global discourse by highlighting the need for tailored support interventions in institutional environments. Policymakers and practitioners in countries with similar systems can draw on these findings to inform training, policy reform, and cross-sector collaboration.

### ***Research Limitations, Future Research Directions, and Further Research Challenges***

This study has certain limitations. It thus provides only a partial perspective on the issue of children in institutional settings with an incarcerated parent. However, I have reflected on the limitations of my research and identified areas that need to be addressed in future research activities. One major challenge will be improving the response rate for future questionnaire surveys. To address this, I plan to maximize the support of FICE Czech Republic and present my research intensively at federation meetings.

Another explicit limitation of the study lies in the qualitative component, which was based on a small sample of just two case studies. While this approach allowed for rich and detailed insights, the limited number of participants restricts the generalizability of the findings. Therefore, the present qualitative analysis should be understood as exploratory and indicative, serving as a pilot phase for a broader research agenda. I am already planning a follow-up study that will incorporate a significantly larger and more diverse sample to strengthen the validity and applicability of future findings.

Additionally, I have come to realize the importance of clearly distinguishing between different types of Czech residential child care facilities. In future research, I will examine whether there are significant differences between standard children's homes and facilities for children with challenging behavior. A study of this kind has not yet been conducted in the Czech context.

Most importantly, I recognize that I have so far investigated only the number of children who currently have a parent in prison. Future research should focus on children who have any experience with a household member who has ever been, or is currently, incarcerated. We cannot yet predict what proportion of the population this will represent. Through my future research, I aim to highlight the profound traumatic impact of parental incarceration on children. This trauma is the root cause of numerous challenges that affected children must cope with throughout their lives (Anda, 2002; Maté, 2012).

### ***Conclusion***

In this paper, I offer insight into the environment of Czech residential child care facilities, focusing on parental incarceration and its impact on children living in these settings. Our research was conducted on two levels. First, I developed an estimate of the number of children in Czech residential child care facilities who have at least one parent in prison. At the same time, I conducted qualitative research to explore how parental incarceration affects children's lives.

The number of cases where a child in residential child care has at least one incarcerated parent significantly exceeds the proportion of similarly affected children in the general population. The qualitative part of the research highlights contrasting perspectives on parental incarceration between children in residential child care facilities and the staff who work with them. Additionally, I presented an insightful case study describing several children's stories from the studied environment.

Based on the findings, I have not only defined further research objectives but also deepened my own awareness of the severe traumatic impact of parental incarceration on children. I hope that this study will catalyze a much-needed debate on the impact of parental incarceration on children. Furthermore, I hope that this study will emphasize the complexity of traumatic comorbidity caused by the residential child care environment combined with the devastating effects of parental incarceration. Finally, I hope that, through joint efforts, we can help children in our residential child care facilities overcome the challenges and difficulties associated with having an incarcerated parent.

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