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DIRECTIONS OF RESEARCH ON THE FATHERHOOD OF INCARCERATED INDIVIDUALS IN LIGHT OF SYSTEMATIC REVIEW*

Introduction: By the late twentieth century, research on parenthood had increasingly focused on fatherhood, a shift initiated largely by Lamb (1987). His work explored biological, social, and individual aspects of the paternal role. Despite this growing interest, studies on fathers serving prison sentences remain scarce compared with extensive research on motherhood in isolation and rehabilitation programs for mothers. At the same time, attachment theory, desistance concepts and the Risk, Need and Responsivity, as well as Good Lives Models emphasize the role of family bonds, particularly parent-child relationships, in promoting change, responsibility, and social reintegration.

Research Aim: This study aimed to synthesize existing research on fatherhood in prison contexts and to identify key directions, gaps, and future perspectives. A systematic review based on PRISMA standards was used to ensure transparency, reliability, and replicability.

Evidence-based Facts: Searches in Google Scholar, Scopus, and ScienceDirect confirmed the lack of earlier systematic reviews on this topic. The final analysis included 27 studies, revealing three central areas: fathers' functioning in isolation (identity and relationships with children), family and social reintegration after release, and parenting attitudes and practices, which remain least explored. Most works were qualitative and descriptive, with limited assessment of program effectiveness. Nevertheless, they offered valuable theoretical and practical insights, enabling a critical overview of the field.

Summary: Findings show the ongoing marginalization of fatherhood compared with motherhood studies, while highlighting the growing importance of engaged fatherhood. Further biographical and applied research is needed to strengthen and evaluate rehabilitation initiatives. The evident gap and the proven impact of father-child bonds on resocialization justify systematic development of this area in theory and practice.

Keywords: fatherhood, prison, rehabilitation, family bonds, systematic review

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INTRODUCTION

The subject of fatherhood research is an intriguing topic for scientific exploration, allowing for multidimensional analysis from cultural, psychological, and political perspectives. Its interdisciplinary and universal nature should guarantee its constant and frequent presence in scientific analyses. Despite the existence of earlier studies on fatherhood, it was not until the end of the 20th century that the issue began to occupy a more prominent place in scientific discourse, which was associated with an increase in social awareness and cultural changes redefining the role of the father.

At that time, interest focused not only on the biological aspect determining the phenomenon, but also on the social and individual factors that together shaped both the image and practice of fatherhood (Wróblewska-Skrzek, 2017). This gap in knowledge can be explained, in a way, by the multidimensional nature of the phenomenon in question. It can pose serious difficulties both on a conceptual and methodological levels. Despite these difficulties, Lamb (1987), one of the pioneers of fatherhood studies, rose to the challenge. His research on fathers' involvement in the process of raising children and his development of a model of paternal involvement laid the foundations for contemporary studies on this issue.

When analyzing contemporary scientific literature devoted to fatherhood, several dominant research trends can be identified, which reveal the diverse theoretical and empirical approaches of researchers working in this field. One of the most prominent approaches is the study of the culture of fatherhood. It focuses on the position and role of the father in the family, as well as the norms and values associated with fatherhood. At the same time, empirical studies are being developed on fathering practices (i.e., the actual actions that fathers take in the family). A particularly interesting area of research, developing at the intersection of both categories, is the analysis of the dissonance between the theoretical social image of fatherhood and its actual implementation in family life (Wróblewska-Skrzek, 2017). Another important area of research on fatherhood is the analysis of the phenomenon of a father's absence and its consequences for psychosocial development of a child. This trend is particularly noticeable in Polish-language literature, which was largely determined by the specific socio-cultural conditions characteristic of the Polish context (Włodarczyk, 2014). Particularly noteworthy is the dynamically developing trend of analyses that place the issue of fatherhood within the broader framework of masculinity studies. This research orientation closely corresponds with fundamental social changes aimed at equal rights for men in family life (Sosnowski & Konaszewski, 2020).

Given the relatively short history of research on fatherhood, many important aspects of this phenomenon remain insufficiently explored in scientific discourse. One such under-analyzed aspect of this topic is research on fatherhood in the context of men in penitentiary institutions. This issue takes on particular significance in the context of the ongoing search for effective methods of penitentiary rehabil-

itation. The importance of family life for the rehabilitation process has been emphasized in the two most popular models of working with offenders, namely Risk–Need–Responsivity (hereinafter: RNR) and the Good Lives Model (hereinafter: GLM). RNR places the family at the center of our needs, which each of us strives to satisfy (Andrews & Bonta, 2010). In turn, in the GLM approach, family life is seen as an instrumental good that supports realization of higher goods (Ward et al., 2012). Against this background, a lasting and committed father-child relationship takes on particular importance. It appears to be a particularly important element of the process of rehabilitation and readaptation, which can strengthen the sense of responsibility, social roots, and motivation to change.

This position is confirmed by Laub and Sampson's (2003) theory of desistance from crime, which points out that strong family ties can significantly contribute to change in the offender. However, it should be emphasized that, according to the authors, the change itself does not occur solely from the fact of having a family, but from the quality of the relationships within it. It is thanks to these relationships that a maladjusted person develops commitment and obligation towards their child and/or spouse, which in turn translates into a lower likelihood of committing a prohibited act that could result in the loss of valued resources (family). These conclusions are confirmed by the research of Muskała (2016).

RESEARCH PROBLEM AND AIM

Due to the important role that family life plays in the process of penitentiary rehabilitation and the perceived gap in research on the functioning of convicts in the role of fathers, it is reasonable to undertake further research in this area. Such research may contribute to a better understanding of the mechanisms of social readaptation and to the development of more effective forms of rehabilitation support. The aim of this article is to attempt to answer the question of what directions of research on fatherhood among prisoners can currently be identified.

METHODOLOGY

A systematic review is the most appropriate method for achieving the research objective. By analyzing available research on the subject, it will be possible to identify and synthesize dominant research trends. A systematic review, unlike other methods of literature analysis (e.g., a narrative review), is characterized by strictly defined criteria for the selection of sources and a pre-planned, structured research procedure, which significantly reduces the risk of systemic errors or bias. A key element of this method is its transparency and repeatability, which allows the pro-

cess and results to be verified by other researchers (Mazur & Orłowska, 2018). This method is particularly useful in cases of scattered, heterogeneous scientific literature, as well as when the issue in question remains poorly recognized and insufficiently researched (Makowska, 2013). The choice of this form of review is justified by its ability to reliably and objectively determine the current state of knowledge and identify areas requiring further research.

The study used PRISMA standards, which are a minimum set of evidence-based guidelines for presenting results in systematic reviews. The target area of application for PRISMA standards is the documentation of systematic reviews of interventions, but as in the presented article, they can also be used as a basis for presenting systematic reviews with different characteristics. The PRISMA standards were taken from <https://www.prisma-statement.org>.

EVIDENCE-BASED FACTS

The first stage of the study involved conducting an analysis of existing systematic reviews on the subject and a preliminary study to verify the thematic framework of the issue. The Google Scholar database was used for this purpose as it allows for the analysis of a wide range of scientific resources. The following keywords were used in Polish: ojciec, ojcostwo, zakład karny. The following were keywords in English: father, fatherhood, prison. The search for existing systematic reviews yielded limited results, which further highlighted the research gap and confirmed the validity of conducting this study. The pilot search was conducted on January 20–21, 2025, using the same keywords and the same database. On this basis, inclusion and exclusion criteria were identified, which were applied in both the preliminary study and the main analysis (Table 1). The pilot search identified 33 articles. On this basis, the research question was refined in accordance with the requirements of a systematic review: what directions of research on fatherhood among persons deprived of liberty are present in the contemporary literature on the subject?

Table 1

Exclusion and inclusion criteria

| Inclusion criteria | Exclusion criteria |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scientific articles on fatherhood in conditions of penitentiary isolation • Empirical, qualitative, quantitative, or mixed research • Texts in Polish and English • Works published between 2000 and 2024 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-scientific publications (e.g., journalism) • Texts lacking original empirical research • Publications in other languages • Works published before 2000 |

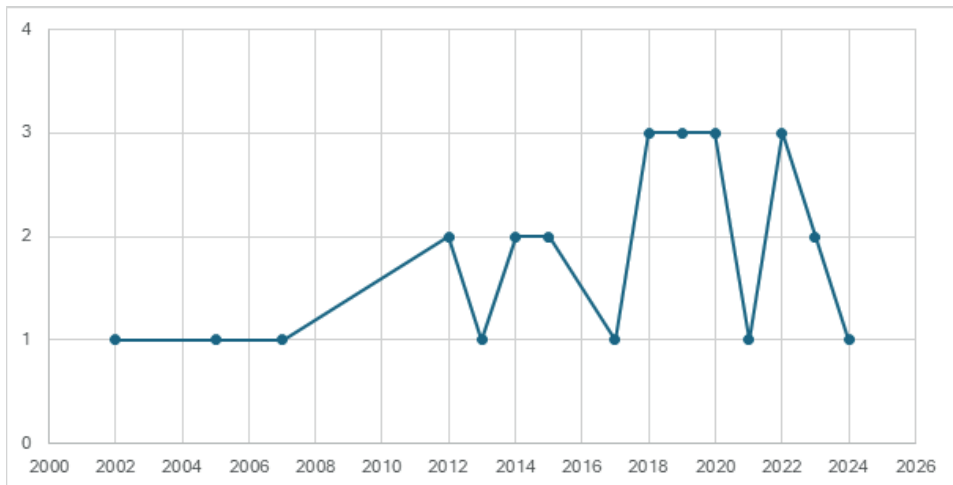
Note. Author's own elaboration.

Once the selection criteria had been established, a full search was conducted between February 3 and 6, 2025. During the pilot stage, it was observed that the Google Scholar database generates overly broad, often interdisciplinary results that lack clear empirical character. Therefore, it was decided to expand the search to include the Scopus and ScienceDirect databases. The same keywords and previously adopted selection criteria were used. As a result, 122 records were obtained.

During the analysis, a significant variation in the quality of the reports included in the review was noted. There is a clear predominance of studies focused on describing the current functioning of fathers in conditions of isolation over studies of a practical or applied nature. The studies included both texts with a sound methodological structure, based on a clearly justified paradigm, and studies in which the methodology raised significant concerns, particularly in terms of sample selection, operationalization of variables, and transparency of the description of procedures and data analysis. Although many of these works did not meet rigorous scientific standards, their inclusion in the review was justified by their conceptual value. They showed what ideas and directions of thinking appear in the scientific approach to fatherhood. Thus, in accordance with the idea of a systematic review, even texts with a weaker methodological basis can serve for a critical reconstruction of the research field, not through elimination, but through an in-depth diagnosis. Figure 1 below presents the 27 records included in the analysis, comprising publications from the years 2000 to 2024 that met the established inclusion criteria.

Figure 1

Number of Empirically Analyzed Publications on Incarcerated Fathers, 2000–2024

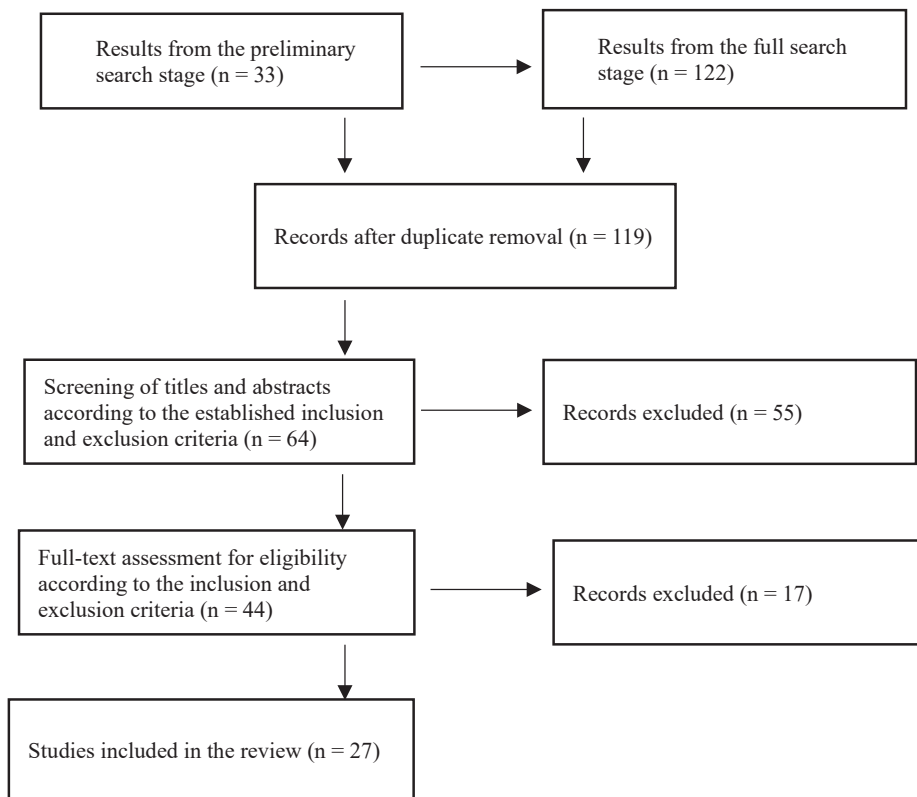


Note. Author's own elaboration.

After eliminating duplicate studies, the total number of records included in the review was 119. In the next stage, a detailed analysis of the abstracts was carried out, taking into account the previously established inclusion and exclusion criteria. This process allowed for the selection of 64 studies. Next, an in-depth analysis of the full text of the materials was conducted. As a result, 17 publications were rejected due to the lack of original research or failure to meet the criteria. Ultimately, 27 records were selected for analysis. Figure 2 below presents the process of selecting records for analysis.

Figure 2

Stages of literature search and selection



Note. Author's own elaboration.

In order to answer the research question, the collected data was synthesized (i.e., the results of many studies were compiled and their common themes were analyzed). In the systematic review methodology, we distinguish between two types

of synthesis: statistical and narrative. The choice between the two depends on the type of data. Considering that the data included in the review comes from quantitative, qualitative, and mixed studies, a narrative synthesis of data was chosen (Makowska, 2020). It is characterized by its complexity and division into three stages:

1. Organization of data into logical categories
2. Analysis of results for each category
3. Synthesis of results

The analysis allowed for the identification of three main categories of research. The largest group consisted of publications on the functioning of fathers in prisons (17), focusing on identity and adaptation to the role of a parent in isolation. The second category consisted of studies on family and social reintegration after serving a sentence (13), covering the process of rebuilding bonds and returning to family roles. The smallest group consisted of studies on the parenting practices and attitudes of inmates (4), describing ways of caring for and maintaining relationships with children in conditions of isolation. Table 2 below synthesizes the reports included in the study.

Table 2

Narrative synthesis of the reports included in the study

| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 | 26 | 27 | Total |
|--|--|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|-------|
| Parenting practices and Parenting attitudes of in prison | Methods of discipline and control used by incarcerated parents | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | x | | | | | x | | x | | | | | | 3 |
| | Challenges in maintaining and rebuilding paternal identity | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | x | | x | | | | | | | | | | | 2 |
| | Relationship between the type of crime and parenting attitudes | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | x | | x | | | | | 2 |

| | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Factors influencing success of social and family readaptation | x | x | | x | x | | x | 5 | | | |
| Family and social reintegration of fathers after serving prison sentence | Challenges in maintaining and rebuilding paternal identity | | | x | x | | | x | x | x | 5 | |
| | Support programs in process of family readaptation | x | x | x | | | x | x | | | x | 6 |
| Role of fathers in prison | Fatherhood identity and ways of coping with role of father in prison | | x | | x | x | x | x | x | | x | 9 |
| | Relationships between fathers and their children and families while serving their sentences | x | | x | | x | | x | x | x | | 7 |

| | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| Role of fathers in prison | Fatherhood and construction of masculinity and cultural norms in prison | x | x | | x | x | | x | | 5 | | |
| | Barriers and challenges in exercising fatherhood in prison | | | x | x | x | | x | x | x | x | 7 |
| | Narratives about fatherhood in prison | x | | | x | x | | | | | 3 | |

Annotation. 1. Venema et al., 2024; 2. Prinsloo, 2007; 3. Badowska-Hodyr, 2020; 4. Perry & Bright, 2012; 5. Ugelvik, 2014; 6. Venema et al., 2024; 7. Earle, 2012; 8. Hairston, 2002; 9. Arditti et al., 2005; 10. Moyao, 2022; 11. Schultz et al., 2021; 12. Sandberg et al., 2020; 13. Visher et al., 2013; 14. Muentner & Charles, 2020; 15. Nawrocka, 2018; 16. Dirkwager & Reef, 2019; 17. Cúnico et al., 2022; 18. Siemionow, 2019; 19. Knapik & Przybyła-Basista, 2015; 20. Bartkovic & Wróbel-Chmiel, 2018; 21. Kipka & Malina, 2018; 22. Wróbel-Chmiel, 2017; 23. Knapik & Przybyła-Basista, 2014; 24. Chui, 2015; 25. Granja, 2022; 26. Finzi-Dottan & Shraybom, 2019); 27. Skinner-Osei & Mercedes, 2023.

Note. Author's own elaboration. Table template taken from Kusztal and Piasecka (2020).

In order to further improve and refine the analysis by noting differences in studied issues, it was decided to assign subcategories to each category. These were created taking into account the detailed questions and results of the collected research. This division is presented in Table 2 above. Analysis of the distribution of subcategories reveals a clear variation in the intensity of research within individual thematic threads. The themes that were most frequently addressed in the analyzed works (9) were those concerning paternal identity and ways of fulfilling the role of a father in the reality of penitentiary isolation, barriers and challenges in fulfilling this role (7), as well as the relationships of fathers with their families and children while serving their sentences (7). The direction of the research indicates the considerable attention paid to the identity and the role of the father in the context of such institutional constraints as prison and the penitentiary system. This topic can be discussed and analyzed even more broadly, taking into account/based on the theory of narrative identity, according to which a personified and developed self-narrative allows one to define and establish one's current image (Tokarska,

2015). In the analyzed subject matter, it can be a mechanism through which the inmate builds or rebuilds his image as a father, despite the isolation and limitations of the prison environment.

The issue of support programs in the process of family readaptation (6) is an equally as common focus of research and analysis. In Polish practice of social rehabilitation in penitentiary institutions, the topic of family relationships is sometimes used in social rehabilitation programs. Examples include programs such as: “Present Fathers – Happy Children,” “Being a Father and Husband,” “Dad – for Me and My Brother,” and “Father – Wall – Child.” (Article by the Central Board of Prison Service “Convicts can also be good parents,” data from the website: <https://sw.gov.pl/aktualnosc/centralny-zarząd-służby-wieziennej-skazani-tez-moga-byc-dobrymi-rodzicami>). Although these initiatives are a valuable element of rehabilitation practice, there is still a lack of systematic, in-depth research assessing their actual effectiveness. In order to increase the effectiveness of the programs, it is necessary to continue empirical research based on an evidence-based approach (i.e., one based on scientific evidence), which assumes that actions are implemented only when their effectiveness has been confirmed by reliable research. This will not only allow for the verification of the effectiveness of the actions taken, but also for their improvement. From a practical perspective, it is clear that many of these initiatives operate intuitively and locally, but without research verification, which significantly limits their potential impact.

The direction least represented in the analyzed studies is that of broadly understood practices, attitudes, and educational methods. Modest representation of topics in this group may be the result of multidimensional limitations imposed on researchers by the environment of total institutions, in which the dynamics of family life are largely suspended (Goffman, 1975). During the execution of a prison sentence, the possibilities of maintaining parent-child relationships are significantly limited by the law itself (communication is sporadic and limited) and is based exclusively on/allows for: correspondence, short visits, or telephone contact. In many cases, there is a phenomenon known as the suspension of fatherhood, which consists of a temporary withdrawal from the role of parent – not as an act of will, but in response to the inability to fulfill this role in institutional isolation. A father deprived of daily influence on his child’s upbringing, without access to natural educational contexts, loses the opportunity to actually perform his role, which makes it methodologically extremely difficult to study his attitudes and educational practices. Inadequacy of existing research tools to the specific nature of fathers’ functioning in isolation is an additional difficulty associated with the described problem.

SUMMARY

The analysis of research trends on fatherhood in the context of penitentiary isolation has allowed us to identify three main areas of interest among researchers. Firstly, analysis of the functioning of fathers in prisons, with particular emphasis on their identity, relationships with their children, and institutional barriers is the most frequently explored area of research on fatherhood in conditions of penitentiary isolation. Interest in this area may stem from the need to understand how men in isolation redefine their parental role in the context of contact restrictions, prison norms, and cultural pressure. The second, equally important trend is the issue of family and social reintegration after serving a sentence, which shows how the experience of imprisonment affects continuation or restoration of fatherhood outside prison walls. Both trends reveal a growing interest in the potential of fatherhood as a resource supporting rehabilitation processes, but they still too rarely form the basis of systemic support programs. The topic of parenting practices, on the other hand, remains marginal. This may be due to the nature of our penitentiary system, which brutally disrupts the organic relationship between father and child and/or family.

CONCLUSIONS

Several key conclusions have been formulated based on conducted research. Firstly, the issue of fatherhood in prisons remains marginalized in academic discourse. This gap becomes particularly evident when compared to research on women, both incarcerated mothers and wives or partners outside prison walls, and children whose life situation changes as a result of their father's isolation. Examples of this trend include the work of Gniadek (2011), which focuses on motherhood in prison, Matysiak-Błaszczuk (2016), analyzing the biographical determinants of motherhood among women deprived of their liberty, and Pierzchała (2023), addressing the issue of the rehabilitation of convicted mothers. Baldwin (2018), in turn, focused on the consequences of imprisonment for mothers and children. Meanwhile, the topic of fatherhood in prison remains in the shadows, deprived of a voice, and its subjectivity as a parent is treated in a fragmentary and conditional manner. Based on the findings of the theory of desistance from crime (Laub & Sampson, 2003) and Bowlby's (2007) attachment theory, as well as analyzing contemporary penitentiary practices, in which the role of the mother is an important element of rehabilitation programs, it is possible to formulate a hypothesis about the potential effectiveness of broader inclusion of elements of fatherhood in rehabilitation measures aimed at this group of convicts. Therefore, the apparent research gap and the potential of fatherhood as an element supporting the rehabil-

itation process justify the need for systematic development of this topic in further scientific work.

Another conclusion drawn from the analysis of collected research material is that socio-cultural changes in the perception of fatherhood are also reflected among fathers in penitentiary isolation. The research shows a shift away from the traditional model of the father, which was mainly limited to the role of breadwinner, towards the concept of involved parenting, in which emotional presence, responsibility, and closeness to the child are considered key (Michoń, 2016). This change is part of a broader process of redefining family roles, which is a consequence of social transformations, including the pursuit of gender equality (Wróblewska-Skrzek, 2017). These conclusions point to the need to adapt research programs and rehabilitation practices to current ideas about fatherhood. Moreover, they emphasize the need for in-depth analyses of how the contemporary model of fatherhood is interpreted and implemented by inmates themselves in conditions of isolation.

When it comes to the methodological aspects of the analyzed works, the vast majority of them were developed using qualitative analysis. This may be due to the sensitive and complex nature of the subject matter. Fatherhood in conditions of penitentiary isolation is a topic that requires an in-depth understanding of individual experiences, identities, and family relationships, which cannot be captured solely by quantitative data. There is still a lack of research that takes into account not only the moment of isolation, but also earlier and later stages of life, which would allow us to understand the identity trajectories of fathers in the context of their past, family relationships, and social roots. This gap could be addressed by a broader use of the biographical approach, which makes it possible to capture the continuity of fathers' experiences from a lifelong perspective, rather than solely in the context of penitentiary isolation. The biographical method allows for a deeper understanding of how earlier events, family relationships, and individual choices influence formation of paternal identity. The biographical approach can thus make a significant contribution to both the development of theory and the practice of rehabilitation, offering a more comprehensive and realistic understanding of the situation of incarcerated fathers.

LIMITATIONS

The study had several limitations. First, the number of available publications on fatherhood in penitentiary isolation proved to be limited, which narrowed the possibilities for synthesis. Second, the studies included in the review varied considerably in terms of methodological quality, ranging from studies meeting high research standards to reports with less precise procedures and descriptions. This may

affect the level of comparability and the strength of the conclusions. An additional risk was the predominance of qualitative and descriptive studies over quantitative and applied ones, which limited the possibility of formulating generalizations and practical conclusions. It is also worth to point out the difficulties arising from the very nature of a total institution such as a prison, limited access to the subjects, and the specific nature of the father-child relationship in conditions of isolation, which may have resulted in a narrow view of the phenomenon. Insufficient adaptation of existing research tools to the specific nature of prison fatherhood is also significant, as it may have led to omission of important aspects of this experience.

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KIERUNKI BADAŃ NAD OJCOSTWEM OSÓB POZBAWIONYCH WOLNOŚCI W ŚWIATLE PRZEGLĄDU SYSTEMATYCZNEGO

Wprowadzenie: Pod koniec XX wieku w badaniach nad rodzicielstwem nastąpił zwrot ku ojcostwu, zapoczątkowany m.in. przez Michaela Lamba (1987). Analizy obejmowały nie tylko wymiar biologiczny, ale też społeczne i indywidualne aspekty roli ojca. Mimo rozwoju tej tematyki, brakowało badań nad ojcami odbywającymi karę pozbawienia wolności, szczególnie w zestawieniu z licznymi analizami macierzyństwa w izolacji i programami resocjalizacji dla matek. Tymczasem teoria przywiązania, koncepcje desystencji oraz modele Risk–Need–Responsivity i Good Lives Model podkreślają wagę więzi rodzinnych w procesie zmiany, odpowiedzialności i readaptacji.

Cele badań: Celem analizy było zebranie badań nad ojcostwem w izolacji penitencjarnej, wskazanie głównych kierunków i luk oraz możliwych perspektyw. Zastosowano systematyczny przegląd według standardów PRISMA, co zapewniło rzetelność i powtarzalność.

Stan wiedzy: Wyszukiwania w Google Scholar, Scopus i ScienceDirect potwierdziły brak wcześniejszych systematycznych przeglądów tej problematyki. Do analizy zakwalifikowano 27 publikacji, z których wyłoniły się trzy główne nurty: funkcjonowanie ojców w izolacji (tożsamość, relacje z dziećmi), reintegracja rodzinna i społeczna po odbyciu kary oraz postawy i praktyki wychowawcze, najslabiej rozpoznane. Dominowały badania jakościowe i opisowe, rzadko oceniające skuteczność programów wsparcia, jednak dostarczyły one cennych wskazówek teoretycznych i praktycznych.

Podsumowanie: Analiza ukazała marginalizację ojcostwa wobec badań nad macierzyństwem,

a zarazem rosnące znaczenie zaangażowanego rodzicielstwa. Wyniki wskazały na konieczność dalszych badań, w tym biograficznych i aplikacyjnych, które mogłyby wspierać rozwój i ewaluację programów resocjalizacyjnych. Luka badawcza oraz znaczenie więzi ojciec–dziecko jednoznacznie uzasadniają potrzebę pogłębiania tej problematyki w nauce i praktyce.

Słowa kluczowe: ojcostwo, zakład karny, resocjalizacja, więzi rodzinne, przegląd systematyczny