

# ATTITUDES OF PRESCHOOL TEACHERS, PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS, SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS, AND ASSOCIATES TOWARDS CHILDREN OF (EX) PRISONERS AND THEIR NEEDS

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Source / Izvornik: **Život i škola : časopis za teoriju i praksu odgoja i obrazovanja, 2021, LXVII, 33 - 44**

Journal article, Published version

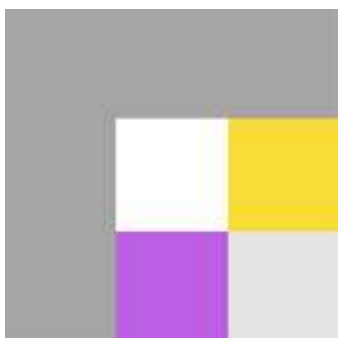
Rad u časopisu, Objavljena verzija rada (izdavačev PDF)

<https://doi.org/10.32903/zs.67.1.2>

Permanent link / Trajna poveznica: <https://um.nsk.hr/um:nbn:hr:141:807504>

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Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2024-09-01**



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Preliminary communication  
<https://doi.org/10.32903/zs.67.1.2>  
UDK 343.261-052:342.7-053.2  
347.261-055.3:37.014

# ATTITUDES OF PRESCHOOL TEACHERS, PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS, SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS, AND ASSOCIATES TOWARDS CHILDREN OF (EX) PRISONERS AND THEIR NEEDS

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Sveučilište Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku

L. M. (8 years): When my dad comes out of jail,  
he'll take me to a football match.  
We are cheering for the same team.  
He will buy me popcorn and we'll be having a good time.

## **Abstract**

It is estimated that in Croatia 12 000 - 15 000 children aged 0 to 18 have one or both parents in prison. When taking ex-prisoners into account, that number is even higher. While the prison system, in cooperation with NGOs, has made big steps towards supporting family ties through children friendly visiting areas, adjusted protocols of child's entrance in the prison, and programs for strengthening parental competencies of prisoners, the education system has not made significant steps in recognizing the needs of children of (ex) prisoners. The results of this research showed that educational professionals assess peer support as a major need of children of (ex) prisoners, alongside successful school graduation. Structurally, the attitudes of educational professionals are characterized with disparity and confusion. Educational professionals emphasize a child's close monitoring and observation for timely recognition of misconduct. Close monitoring, the expectation of misconduct, and high demands regarding a child's academic achievement are congruent with the biological determinism paradigm. The obtained results can be used for further research on this issue, and for designing lifelong learning programs for educational professionals about adequate strategies for supporting children of (ex) prisoners, and for (ex) prisoners, as parents.

**Keywords:** children of (ex) prisoners, pedagogical experts, children's needs, attitudes

## Sažetak

Procjenjuje se kako u Republici Hrvatskoj godišnje 12 000 – 15 000 djece u dobi do 18 godina ima jednog ili oba roditelja na služenju zatvorske kazne. Kada se dodaju i djeca čiji su roditelji bili u zatvoru, brojka je i veća. I dok je zatvorski sustav, kroz suradnju s nevladinim sektorom, načinio velike korake naprijed u smisli podržavanja obiteljskih veza i jačanja roditeljskih kapaciteta zatvorenika uređivanjem prostora za posjete koji su primjereni djeci, mijenjanje protokola ulaska djeteta u prostor za posjete, kao i uvođenje programa jačanja roditeljskih kompetencija, odgojno-obrazovni sustav nije načinio značajnije pomake u prepoznavanju potreba djece čiji su roditelji (bili) u zatvoru. Rezultati provedenog istraživanja pokazuju kako odgojno-obrazovni stručnjaci kao najvažniju potrebu djece (bivših) zatvorenika vide vršnjačku podršku, uz završetak formalnog obrazovanja. Strukturalno, u stavovima prevladava neujednačenost i konfuzija te odgojno-obrazovni stručnjaci naglasak stavljaju na monitoring i praćenje djece i učenika radi pravovremenog uočavanja nepoželjnih ponašanja. Blisko nadziranje ponašanja, očekivanje problema u radu s djecom (bivših) zatvorenika te visoki zahtjevi u pogledu akademskih postignuća u skladu su s paradigmom biološkog determinizma. Dobiveni rezultati mogu se koristiti za daljnje istraživanje ove teme kao i za osmišljavanje programa edukacije za odgojitelje, učitelje, nastavnike i stručne suradnike na temu pružanja primjerene podrške djeci i obiteljima (bivših) zatvorenika, ali i zatvorenicima kao roditeljima.

**Ključne riječi:** djeca (bivših) zatvorenika, pedagoški stručnjaci, potrebe djece, stavovi

## INTRODUCTION

Children of (ex) prisoners are often addressed as a truly invisible population because of their unfavorable family situation, which is rarely known, or which is covered with silence, as well as hidden from others due to social stigma related to parental imprisonment. It is less known about the needs of children of (ex) prisoners because researchers are more oriented towards the identification of risk factors for misconduct and delinquency within this population of children, and there is a scientific gap regarding the environmental factors which could contribute to raising their quality of life. An incarcerated parent is *a priori* a parent with low parental skills, or at least potentially low parental skills, devoid of love for their children and families. Societal expectations are also present, so society exerts pressure resulting in families giving up their incarcerated members. Children of (ex) prisoners suffer from the stigmatization of felonies they have not committed <sup>1</sup>, and are often rejected by their immediate surroundings (peers, other family members, neighborhoods) due to parental offense. Therefore, it is necessary to scrutinize this approach, especially in cases when offenses are not against a child, and when adequate parent-child relations were present before incarceration. While the prison system in Croatia has made significant steps in raising the quality of relations between children and incarcerated parents (e.g., equipping children-friendly visiting rooms, programs for raising prisoners' parental skills, etc.), the education system, as always, falls behind societal

<sup>1</sup> International network Children of Prisoners Europe (COPE) every year in June conducts a campaign „Not my crime, still my sentence“, to raise awareness on the rights and needs of children of incarcerated parents.

changes. One reason is a lack of information about parental incarceration and discontinuity in cooperation between the education system and other systems such as the social and welfare system, the prison system, jurisdiction, ombudsman's office, counseling services, NGOs, etc.), so teachers are often not informed that a parent was/is incarcerated. Another reason for inadequate support is the lack of scientific research in pedagogy and rehabilitation, but not for the purpose of identification of risk factors for misconduct, but rather for identifying the factors of life quality, including peer relations. Fortunately, teachers are one of the few professions who always express the need for additional training, enabling enough space for future work on this issue.

## PREVIOUS RESEARCH

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In the literature about children of (ex) prisoners, the paradigm of biological determinism is strongly present. The scientific literature on this issue emphasizes the fact of parental incarceration as a direct risk factor for misconduct in childhood and adolescence. Prominent scientists from the field of criminology (Farrington, Coid and Murray, 2009; Murray and Murray, 2010; Farrington et al., 2015) claim that parental incarceration is a significant risk factor for developing later antisocial and offending behaviors in adulthood. Besides the risk for offenses, some authors (Van der Rakt, Murray and Nieuwebeerta, 2011; Wakesfield and Wildreman, 2014) suggest that prisoners' children are at higher risk of school drop-out and are at greater risk of poverty due to lack of formal competencies. The question of parental incarceration is one of the issues in criminology, however, educational sciences and pedagogy rarely address this issue. Nevertheless, in the last 5 to 10 years, a significant number of authors who have scrutinized the influence of immediate surroundings on children's behavior have emerged, sometimes propelled by their own experiences. In that contextual perspective, the major mechanism for misconduct is the child's adverse experiences with proximal surroundings (families, neighborhoods, peers, teachers, etc.), and not parental incarceration *per se*. A prominent advocate of children of incarcerated parents, Alain Bourgeba (2017) says that teachers during their professional working career averagely meet 25 children of incarcerated parents, the number being even larger when an educational institution is in a certain social *milieu*. In his opinion, children of incarcerated parents stumble upon many obstacles, the majority emerging from the lack of understanding and support from immediate surroundings. Therefore, teachers should become aware of their influences and potential effects on the life of a child of an incarcerated parent (ibid.). A child of (ex) prisoner could manifest risk of misconduct due to social stigma (Schlafer and Poehlmann, 2010), lower parental support, or incarcerated parent's lower parental skills (Kjellstrand and Eddy, 2011), which should be an input for teachers in the process of providing adequate support oriented towards the strengthening the quality relations with surroundings and not towards the corrective-penological procedures. The education system has a significant role in the child's quality of life, which is shown in the fact that children of (ex)

offenders are more likely to drop out from school than their peers living with both parents. The reason is not their wish to leave the education system, yet the need to make income for their families (Miller and Barnes, 2015). They often live in poverty and thus enter the labor market quite early, to provide the income needed for everyday needs. Unfortunately, under-skilled workers are underpaid, doing heavy physical jobs, and entering the vicious circle of poverty. Therefore, adequate support in educational institutions could provide positive long-term effects. Although teachers have limited access to the socio-economic status of families, they can have a quite big influence on peer support. Contemporary research has revealed that children of (ex) prisoners are at great risk of peer exclusion and peer rejection (Cochran, Siennick and Mears, 2018) and that peer exclusion leads to misconduct, including peer violence (Foster and Hagan, 2015; Johnston and Sullivan, 2017). In the contextual influence paradigm, which emphasizes providing adequate support and destigmatization, teachers are considered to have a great influence on processes contributing to the quality of life of families as well as making the educational institutions places of well-being for children of (ex) prisoners.

The paradigm shift, from biological determinism toward contextual influences paradigm, has slowly emerged in Croatia and slowly emphasizes the importance of education and teachers. Previous research in Croatia has revealed that preschool teachers and primary school teachers express a high level of conformism directed at declarative protection of children's rights, with an emphasis on preventive actions and monitoring the child's behavior (Romstein and Gabelica Šupljika, 2018), and inconsistency during the work with children, alongside with social conformism built between biological determinism and pedagogical optimism (Gabelca Šupljika, Romstein, and Gabelica Šupljika, 2018). As main challenges, when talking about children of prisoners, teachers articulate a lack of information about parental incarceration, i.e., information regarding the situation in the family, lack of professional competencies to address the child's needs, and absence of support outside the educational system (Romstein and Gabelica Šupljika, 2018). In that sense, this paper and research within the project<sup>2</sup> aimed at raising the awareness of the needs of children of (ex) prisoners and advocating the quality of their lives through social stigma reduction and strengthening the network of support, emphasizing the influence the education system has on the lives of those children and families.

## METHODOLOGY

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The research was conducted online in November and December 2020, with the main purpose of getting an insight into attitudes of educational experts, i.e., preschool teachers, primary school teachers, secondary school teachers, and associates towards the children of (ex) prisoners.

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<sup>2</sup> The research was conducted within the project UP.04.2.1.05.0006 INCLUDED COMMUNITIES. The research was co-funded by the European Social Fund. The main host was the Association of Parents Step by Step, and partners were the Association of Parents in Action RODA and Public Open University Step by Step.

The main research question was: What is the structure of educational experts towards the children of (ex) prisoners?

For that purpose, the questionnaire was prepared, and the results are presented below.

### Participants

In total, 162 educational experts from all parts of Croatia have participated in the research, 5.6% males and 94.4% females. Most of the participants hold a graduate degree (MA studies) N=124 (76.5%), followed by an undergraduate degree (BA studies) N=35 (21.6%), one participant holds a secondary school diploma (0.6%), one has a Master of Science degree (0.6%), while one participant holds a PhD degree (0.6%). Almost every third participant (precisely, 28.40%) has had more than 25 years of working experience in education. Furthermore, 17.5% have worked in the education system from 1 to 5 years, 16.05% have had from 6 to 10 years of working experience, 14.20% from 11 to 14 years of working experience, 13.58% from 15 to 20 years of working experience, and the least number of participants (5.56%) have had between 21 and 25 years of working experience. Also, there was a quite small number of pre-service/in-training teachers (4.94%).

Most participants work as associates N=78 (48.15%), mostly (68.42%) in primary school. From the total number, 21% (N=34) of participants work as primary school teachers, 13.6% (N=22) as preschool teachers, 7.4% (N=12) as secondary school teachers, and 6.8% (N=11) were principals. Also, some other professionals participated, e.g. special education teachers.

Almost half of the participants (49.07%) said that they have had some previous working experiences with children of (ex) prisoners, while 10.56% did not know whether they had previously worked with this population of children.

### The Questionnaire

Since there is no questionnaire regarding the attitudes of teachers towards the children of (ex) prisoners, the presented one has been designed. In accordance with epidemiological issues, the questionnaire was installed online via Google docs, and the link was shared via social networks. The questionnaire consisted of three parts: the first part included socio-demographic questions, such as gender, a formal level of education, current working place, years of working experience, and previous experience with children of (ex) prisoners. The second part had three subscales: affects (11 items), behavior (11 items), and cognition (11 items), which participants assessed in accordance with their level of agreement with the offered statement (i.e., items). The third part included the needs of children of (ex) prisoners based on the myths and facts, which participants could assess as true or false.

## RESULTS

Table 1. Affective aspects of teachers' attitudes towards children/pupils of (ex) prisoners

Item		Levels of agreement (%)			
		I totally disagree	I disagree	I agree	I totally agree
A1	I don't mind having a child of (ex) prisoner in my classroom.	8.6	-	-	91.4
A2	When a child of (ex) prisoner is upset, I am upset too.	28.4	31.5	21.1	16.0
A3	Children of (ex) prisoners are constantly exposed to injustice.	17.3	42.6	34.0	6.2
A4	The child of (ex) prisoners is at risk of becoming a prisoner later in life.	30.9	34.6	28.4	6.2
A5	Children suffer due to parental incarceration.	0.6	8.0	25.9	65.4
A6	As an individual, I can't help a child of an (ex) prisoner.	38.3	37.7	19.1	4.9
A7	Children have their "own ways" of coping with a family situation.	4.9	25.3	42.0	27.8
A8	I can imagine myself in this situation (in which a child of an (ex) prisoner is in).	10.5	24.1	40.1	25.3
A9	I always try to have "my eyes on" a child of (ex) prisoner, i.e., to be near him/her.	32.1	42.0	22.8	3.1
A10	A child is not responsible for the actions of their parents.	-	-	3.1	96.9
A11	Children of (ex) prisoners are difficult to educate and raise.	61.7	28.4	8.0	1.9

Table 2. Behavioral aspects of teachers' attitudes towards children of (ex) prisoners

Item		Levels of agreement (%)			
		I totally disagree	I disagree	I agree	I totally agree
P1	For adequate support of a child's development, it is important to honor its background.	0.6	0.6	20.4	78.4
P2	It is necessary to avoid the open expression of emotions before the child of an (ex) prisoner.	43.2	34.0	16.7	6.2
P3	It is necessary to strengthen peer support for a child of (ex) prisoners.	0.6	1.2	22.2	75.9
P4	It is important to get as much as possible information about the offense (i.e., the ground of parental incarceration).	23.5	34.6	27.2	14.8
P5	It is necessary to maintain distance with a child of an (ex) prisoner (i.e., not to get emotionally attached to a child).	46.3	37.7	11.1	4.9
P6	It is important to support a child's thriving to maintain connections with the (ex) incarcerated parent.	1.2	11.1	35.8	51.9
P7	The pedagogical work with a child of (ex) prisoners should be without high goals.	65.4	24.1	9.9	0.6
P8	The pedagogical work with children of (ex) prisoners is difficult and with uncertain outcomes.	45.7	34.6	17.9	1.9
P9	The fact about parental incarceration is not important when it comes to planning and conducting pedagogical work.	16.7	29.6	27.2	26.5
P10	The (ex) incarcerated parent should not be mentioned in front of other children.	11.1	17.9	30.2	40.7
P11	The questions about parental incarceration should be carefully articulated to a child.	0.6	8.0	38.3	51.1



Table 3. Cognitive aspects of teachers' attitudes towards children of (ex) prisoners

Item		Levels of agreement (%)			
		I totally disagree	I disagree	I agree	I totally agree
K1	Children of (ex) prisoners are prone to stigmatization in immediate surroundings.	1.2	11.1	38.9	48.8
K2	For a child's success, quality cooperation with the (ex) incarcerated parent is necessary.	13.6	32.1	37.0	17.3
K3	Parental imprisonment influences the development of psychopathology in childhood and adolescence.	8.6	31.5	42.0	17.9
K4	Children of (ex) prisoners use drugs more often than their peers.	25.3	48.1	24.1	2.5
K5	Children of (ex) prisoners often end up in correctional institutions (in the so-called juvenile detention centers).	24.7	50.0	22.8	2.5
K6	Children of (ex) prisoners are more often aggressive than their peers.	23.5	51.9	22.2	2.5
K7	Children of (ex) prisoners more often have poor grades and are more often absent from schools than their peers.	24.1	42.6	30.9	2.5
K8	Children of (ex) prisoners are more prone to socially unacceptable behavior than their peers.	19.8	48.8	29.6	1.9
K9	Children of (ex) prisoners often disrespect the authority of teachers.	26.5	43.8	27.2	2.5
K10	Children of (ex) prisoners drop out of school earlier than their peers.	29.6	46.9	19.8	3.7
K11	Children of (ex) prisoners have health issues more often than their peers.	37.7	43.8	16.0	2.5

In the second part of the questionnaire, participants assessed the needs of children of (ex) prisoners. According to their opinion, the most important need of children of (ex) prisoners is a good relationship with peers, followed by learning and school completion, and psychotherapy and a quality relationship with the (ex) incarcerated parent. The least assessed needs were quality relationships with other (non-incarcerated) parents and support from the immediate

surrounding. Other needs, as assessed by participants, were protection from stigmatization, supporting the sense of self-worth, empathy from others, sense of security, etc.

As far as myths of children of (ex) prisoners are concerned, almost all participants (93.21%) think that it is very important to closely observe a child's behavior for timely recognition of misconduct. Also, the participants thought that emphasis in pedagogical work should be on the prevention of misconduct and potential offense in adulthood – 80.86% of participants agreed with this myth.

## INTERPRETATION

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Structurally, the attitudes of educational professionals (preschool teachers, primary school teachers, secondary school teachers, and associates) are inconsistent and uneven. In the domain of effects, the positivity and orientation towards pedagogical optimism are mostly present. Participants would gladly accept a child of an (ex) prisoner in their classroom, they could picture themselves in this position, and they admit that children are not responsible for the actions of their parents. In the domain of behavior, neutrality is present, which can be noticed in their orientation towards general principles of developmentally appropriate practice with a simplification, e.g., they highly agree on the need to honor a child's background, yet they do not need information on parental incarceration to adjust their work to the child's needs. In the domain of cognition, participants revealed their orientation towards the biological determinism paradigm, i.e., they see parental incarceration as the main contributor to a child's psychopathology.

Briefly, educational professionals are "wandering" and searching for adequate behaviors towards the children of (ex) prisoners. In that sense, most of them strongly agree that children of (ex) prisoners are exposed to injustice, but at the same time, they would closely observe the child so they could timely identify misconduct. Also, they recognize the need for peer support as an important aspect of the quality of a child's life, yet they would not mention incarcerated parents in front of the other children, and they would carefully approach the child with questions about a parent in prison. It looks like educational professionals do recognize the need for support, yet they do not recognize the potential situations within which support can be provided, as well as tools needed for such actions. A major problem emerged in this research – educational professionals do not recognize the myths and facts about children of (ex) prisoners. They misunderstand the myths and facts, which can be seen in a high level of agreement about the necessity for close observation of children of (ex) prisoners, as a potentially problematic population of children and pupils. Educational professionals lack an insight into the connection between their own behavior and peer behavior, i.e., that this necessity is closely connected to the biological determinism paradigm and can directly influence peer rejection.

## DISCUSSION

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Educational professionals recognize the need for destigmatization on a declarative level. However, they would practice certain actions which could further strengthen the stigma. It can mainly be seen in their continuous demand to closely observe those children and seek early signs of misconduct. Structurally, the attitudes of educational professionals are inconsistent and uneven, especially in the domain of cognition where they have shown the orientation towards the biological determinism paradigm, which is influenced by the scientific canon. The possible reason might be the gap in research into contextual influences on children's behaviors and too much focus on statistics, with a lack of understating the reasons which contributed to these numbers. I.e., certain misbehaviors such as aggression, school drop-out, and poor academic achievement are generated due to lack of support, not due to parental incarceration per se, as confirmed by several authors (Schalfer and Poehmann, 2010; Miller and Barnes, 2015). In that context, preventive actions in the education system should include learning to support and build a support network (peer support and adult support to a child), and not solely observe and early identify misconduct. Bourgeba (2017, p.7) calls a declarative expression of understanding without adults' actual involvement in raising the quality of child's life as "emotional make-up", i.e., superficial, and restricted adults' behavior without a deeper connection to a child, where child's perspective is less relevant. Therefore, teachers and educational professionals must become "mentors of resilience" (fr. *tuteurs de résilience*), providing support in coping and resilience building. In Croatia, and around the globe as well, there is a lack of qualitative research on contextual issues and factors, which could be used as pillars for daily pedagogical work with children of (ex) prisoners. Science has the responsibility to provide relevant and adequate information, based on the reality and intersectoral cooperation between practitioners, NGOs, and other stakeholders, including children and families.

## CONCLUSION

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The attitudes of educational experts (preschool teachers, primary school teachers, secondary school teachers, and associates) are neutral and combined with inconsistencies in knowledge about children of (ex) prisoners. The need for building peer network, as key for child's success, which should be the next step was significantly higher assessed. Educational institutions, as places of living, not just merely places of competence acquisition and preparation for adulthood, have an important role in the life quality of children of (ex) prisoners. Overcoming the present myths, complementary with biological determinism which is shown in the high level of teacher agreement with the necessity of early identification of misconduct, is possible with adequate dissemination of scientific facts based on critical scrutiny. In that sense, science must become aware of its ethical and moral responsibility. For that purpose, cooperation between various stakeholders is needed, including families and NGOs, and research based on

qualitative and participative methodologies. Accordingly, recommendations are twofold: ensuring adequate continuous education for educational professionals, and establishing cooperation between academia, NGOs, and other stakeholders with the participation of children and families. In other words, designing and conducting qualitative and participative research congruent with pedagogical optimism, and based on the critical approach, should become the key to empirical papers. These two approaches are complementary, e.g. scientific knowledge obtained through qualitative inquiry and participative research should become a base for life-long learning programs for educational professionals.

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