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MOTHERHOOD AS A FACTOR SUPPORTING DESISTANCE FROM CRIME AMONG INCARCERATED MOTHERS RESIDING WITH THEIR CHILDREN IN MOTHER AND CHILD UNITS WITHIN POLISH PRISONS

*No soul is so evil that it cannot become
better through education and love.*

Plato (c. 360 BC)

ABSTRACT

Motherhood may play a significant role in the process of desistance from crime among women serving prison sentences. This article examines this phenomenon through the experiences of incarcerated mothers residing with their children in Mother and Child Units operating within the Polish penitentiary system. These units enable women to care for their children during the early years of life while simultaneously serving their custodial sentences. The article argues that the experience of motherhood in conditions of imprisonment often becomes a turning point, encouraging reflection on previous life choices and criminal behaviour. Maintaining a close relationship with a child may strengthen women's motivation to change, facilitate the redefinition of personal identity, and foster a greater sense of responsibility. For many incarcerated mothers, their child becomes the primary source of motivation to abandon a criminal lifestyle and to plan a law-abiding future after release. At the same time, the article emphasises that motherhood alone does not guarantee lasting desistance from crime. The desistance process also depends on institutional support, the quality of the mother-child relationship, effective preparation for social reintegration, and the availability of post-release assistance. Nevertheless, Mother and Child Units may fulfil an important rehabilitative function by promoting family bonds and strengthening women's motivation to pursue a lawful and socially responsible life after imprisonment.

KEYWORDS: *desistance from crime; motherhood in prison; incarcerated mothers; rehabilitation; mother-child bond in prison; factors of social reintegration; the Polish penitentiary system*

INTRODUCTION

Motherhood constitutes one of the most significant experiences in a woman's life, influencing both her personal identity and social functioning. In the criminological literature, the phenomenon of moving away from crime is referred to as desistance from crime and is analysed in the context of biographical, social, and institutional factors. One such factor may be parenthood, which fosters the redefinition of an individual's identity, increases responsibility, and strengthens motivation to lead a life in accordance with social norms (Michalsen, 2019; Bachman et al., 2016, pp. 212-231; Schinkel, 2019, pp. 366-386).

These events, sometimes referred to as *turning points* in an individual's life course (Karkowska, 2024, pp. 213-230), may lead to changes in previously established patterns of behaviour and encourage actions consistent with social norms. One such potential turning point is the experience of motherhood. Research indicates that motherhood may function as a *hook for change*, that is, a life event that facilitates change and desistance from crime (Schinkel, 2019, pp. 366-386).

Women serving prison sentences, particularly mothers, experience multi-dimensional social exclusion, both as a consequence of their criminal offence and of imprisonment. In Poland, however, Mother and Child Units operate within prisons in Grudziądz and Krzywaniec, administered by the Prison Service. These units enable women to care for their children, maintain family bonds, and fulfil their parental role even under conditions of imprisonment (Kaczmarczyk, Drąg, 202, pp. 567-590; Sawicka, 2025).

The presence of a child in the life of an incarcerated woman may motivate her to change her previous lifestyle. Motherhood fosters the redefinition of identity, strengthens the sense of responsibility, and supports the process of desistance from crime. Under conditions of imprisonment, however, it assumes a specific character, shaped by institutional regulations, spatial constraints, and the penitentiary environment (Matysiak-Błaszczuk, Włodarczyk, 2004, pp. 51-65; Thompson, Newell, 2021).

Despite the growing interest in the situation of women in prison, the role of motherhood in desistance from crime remains insufficiently explored, particularly in the Polish context. An analysis of the functioning of mothers residing in Mother and Child Units within Polish prisons makes it possible to better understand how parental relationships influence the process of life change and the effectiveness of rehabilitation.

The aim of this article is to present motherhood as a factor facilitating desistance from crime among women serving prison sentences with their children. The analysis focuses on how the experience of parenthood shapes attitudes, motivations, and declarations regarding lifestyle change, and how family bonds support the rehabilitation process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature emphasises that motherhood may function as a rehabilitative mechanism, encouraging incarcerated women to reflect on their behaviour and reduce criminal activity. Residing with their children in Mother and Child Units within Polish prisons fosters the restoration of family bonds and strengthens the sense of responsibility, thereby supporting the process of desistance from crime (Sawicka, 2025; Kleymann, 2011).

THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO DESISTANCE FROM CRIME

Desistance from crime, understood as the cessation of criminal activity by an individual, constitutes a key area of criminological, sociological, and pedagogical research. Understanding this process helps explain the mechanisms underlying the abandonment of antisocial behaviour and the factors facilitating social reintegration. The literature distinguishes various theoretical approaches, both individual and structural, that explain how and why desistance from crime occurs.

The pedagogical approach focuses on education and personal development, assuming that criminal behaviour may result from deficiencies in social, emotional, and moral competencies. Rehabilitation programmes, preventive education, and mentoring foster responsibility, interpersonal skills, and the development of a value system. They encourage reflection on the consequences of one's actions and support sustained desistance from crime. Within this perspective, desistance is understood as an active process of learning social norms (Ward, Maruna, 2007; Wysocki, 2003; Polak, 2018, pp. 45-62; Maruna, 2001).

According to Travis Hirschi's social bond theory, strong relationships with family, school, or work reduce the propensity to engage in criminal behaviour. In the context of desistance from crime, the cessation of criminal activity is often associated with establishing new, stable social bonds that strengthen the sense of responsibility, reinforce the sense of social belonging, and influence an individual's identity (Hirschi, 1969; Sampson, Laub, 1993; Krajewski, 2018; Pater, 2019, pp. 45-62; Szlendak, 2011; Maruna, 2001; Farrall, 2002).

From a psychological perspective, researchers focus on internal processes, such as changes in identity and mechanisms of self-regulation. The theory of desistance identity assumes that the cessation of criminal behaviour requires a transition from perceiving oneself as an *offender* to adopting a prosocial identity. A key role is played by *turning points*, significant life events such as entering into a stable relationship, obtaining stable employment, or the birth of a child, which motivate reflection and change. This perspective is consistent with the narrative approach in criminology, according to which an individual's life history explains antisocial behaviour (Błachut, 2010).

From a psychological perspective, researchers focus on internal processes, such as changes in identity and self-regulation. The theory of desistance identity indicates that the cessation of criminal behaviour requires a transition from perceiving oneself as an *offender* to adopting a prosocial identity. *Turning points*, significant life events such as a stable relationship, stable employment, or the birth of a child, play a key role in motivating change. The narrative approach in criminology demonstrates that an individual's life history explains antisocial behaviour (Becker, 1968, pp. 169-217; Wortley, Smallbone, 2006, pp. 11-38; Cornish, Clarke, 1986; Clarke, Cornish, 1985, pp. 147-185; Kuształ, Muskała, 2021).

The structural approach emphasises that social and economic factors influence desistance from crime. Researchers such as Robert Sampson and John Laub argue that stable employment, access to education, housing conditions, and quality of life within the community increase the likelihood of sustained desistance from crime. The absence of such forms of support hinders social reintegration and increases the risk of reoffending. Desistance therefore depends on the interaction between the individual and the broader social context (Sampson, Laub, 1993; Rygiel, 2018, pp. 45-68).

Contemporary research emphasises that desistance from crime is a complex and gradual process, dependent both on individual motivation and on social support. It involves reducing or completely abandoning criminal behaviour and often requires long-term support, education, therapy, and rehabilitative interventions that consider individual, social, and structural factors (Maruna, 2001; Farrall, 2002; Krajewski, 2015, pp. 45-62; Siemaszko, 2018, pp. 89-107).

All of these approaches agree that the cessation of criminal activity results from multiple factors, including changes in identity, the establishment of

new social bonds, the assessment of costs and benefits, and socio-economic conditions. Analysing these mechanisms facilitates a better understanding of rehabilitation and the development of more effective preventive strategies that support sustained desistance from crime.

MOTHERHOOD AND THE REHABILITATION PROCESS: INTERNATIONAL AND POLISH PERSPECTIVES

Motherhood in prisons supports the rehabilitation of women. Experiences from Sweden and Norway demonstrate that mothers residing with their children in specialised units strengthen the emotional bond, facilitate social reintegration, and reduce the risk of recidivism. In Poland, prison programmes enabling contact with children produce similar outcomes, developing parenting competencies, increasing responsibility, and strengthening motivation for reintegration. International reports emphasise the need to adapt prison conditions to the needs of mothers and children, including through education, healthcare, and psychological support. Combining motherhood with rehabilitation humanises imprisonment and increases the prospects for a successful return to full participation in society (Pierzchała, 2022a, pp. 33-48; Pierzchała, 2022b; Pierzchała, 2023; Dębski, 2015; Janicka, 2018; Małachowska, 2020; Ziółkowska, 2017; Harden, 2010; Bernstein, Hartmann, 2003, pp. 79-99; Comfort, 2008 et al.).

THE SPECIFICITY OF THE PRISON ENVIRONMENT AND ITS IMPACT ON THE MOTHER-CHILD BOND

The prison environment, characterised by a high level of control, significantly affects family relationships, particularly the mother-child bond. Women often experience isolation and limited contact with their children. Even in Mother and Child Units, the time mothers spend with their children is strictly regulated, and everyday life is governed by prison procedures. Children have limited freedom, and their emotional and social development is exposed to stress and the constant presence of other prisoners (Pierzchała, 2023; Gucwa-Porębska, 2017; Kaczmarczyk, 2025).

The emotional bond between mother and child in prison is particularly vulnerable to disruption. Limited contact, frequent inspections, and the lack of privacy may weaken the child's sense of security. Mothers often experience feelings of guilt, anxiety, and stress, which affect the quality of their interactions with their children. Nevertheless, research demonstrates that a strong mother-child bond is possible when the institution supports mothers in their daily caregiving responsibilities and enables close contact, for example through co-sleeping, play, and educational activities (Poehlmann-Tynan, Dallaire, 2021; Martínez-Usarralde et al., 2025; Belsky, Rovine, 1988).

Although the prison environment is restrictive, it may also support the restoration of family relationships. Rehabilitation programmes, family therapy, and educational activities for mothers and children contribute to the development of parenting competencies and strengthen mothers' self-confidence. The principal challenge is to minimise the effects of isolation and stress so that children do not experience lasting emotional deficits and the mother-child bond remains a source of security and stability (Pierzchała, 2021, pp. 273-289; Toron-Fórmanek, 2019).

THE LEGAL AND ORGANISATIONAL FRAMEWORK OF MOTHER AND CHILD UNITS IN POLISH PRISONS

Mother and Child Units within Polish prisons enable incarcerated women to provide direct care for their children while serving their prison sentences. The legal basis for their operation is the Executive Penal Code (1997, Art. 87), which provides for the establishment of such units within selected prisons. A child may remain with the mother until the age of three, unless health or educational considerations require earlier separation or the family court authorises an extension of the child's stay.

The Regulation of the Minister of Justice of 17 September 2003 (Regulation, 2003) sets out the rules governing the admission of the children of incarcerated mothers to Mother and Child Units and the operation of these facilities. It regulates the procedure for admitting a child, the responsibilities of the prison administration, and the organisation of care provided to both the mother and the child. Admission is based on a written application submitted by the mother to the prison governor, and the competent family court is notified accordingly.

Mother and Child Units operate within selected prisons, including those in Grudziądz and Krzywaniec, and are adapted to meet the needs of young children. They provide conditions resembling a home environment, including residential accommodation, childcare rooms, and areas designated for play and outdoor activities. The care and educational staff support mothers in caring for their children and conduct rehabilitation activities. The operation of these units benefits both the child's welfare and the rehabilitation process of incarcerated women. Maintaining the mother-child bond supports the child's development and increases the mother's chances of successful social reintegration after release.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE PRESENT STUDY

This chapter presents the methodological foundations of the original research, including the selection of research methods, data collection techniques, and procedures for data analysis, with the aim of ensuring the reliability and validity of the findings.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aim of the study is to analyse the significance of motherhood as a potential factor facilitating the process of desistance from crime among women serving prison sentences and raising their children in Mother and Child Units within Polish prisons.

Main research question:

Can motherhood, and if so, in what way, constitute a factor facilitating the process of desistance from crime among women serving prison sentences and raising their children in Mother and Child Units within Polish prisons?

Specific research questions:

1. What life and social experiences characterize women residing in Mother and Child Units?
2. How does the opportunity to care for their child influence the attitudes and motivations of incarcerated mothers?

3. Does motherhood encourage reflection on one's previous life and the decision to change criminal behaviour?
4. What role do the rehabilitation programmes implemented in Mother and Child Units play in the process of change?
5. What barriers hinder the process of desistance from crime among incarcerated mothers?

RESEARCH METHODS, TECHNIQUES, AND INSTRUMENTS

The study was grounded in the qualitative research paradigm, which enables an in-depth exploration of the experiences, meanings, and interpretations that incarcerated women attribute to motherhood.

Research method: A qualitative research method was employed.

Research techniques: In-depth interviews (individual narrative interviews) (Babbie, 2019, pp. 19, 20, 49, 50; Łobocki, 2009, p. 272 et al.; Krajewski, 2006; Maison, 2022, p. 268 et al.; Jabłońska, 2011, pp. 123-140).

The in-depth interviews included questions corresponding to the specific research questions formulated earlier in the study. This made it possible both to deepen the structural data and to collect participants' individual narrative accounts.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE STUDY SAMPLE (INCARCERATED MOTHERS) AND THE STUDY PERIOD

The study sample consisted of 10 mothers residing in Mother and Child Units within the prisons in Krzywaniec and Grudziądz, with five participants from each unit. The study, conducted in November 2025, included women serving prison sentences in units that enabled them to care for their children, making it possible to observe the performance of the maternal role under conditions of imprisonment. Purposive sampling was employed, with participant selection dependent on the availability of incarcerated women. Although the participants differed in their life experiences, they were united by the necessity of combining motherhood with life in a total institution, revealing both the rehabilitative potential and the systemic barriers associated with this experience.

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Before presenting the research findings, it is worth noting that motherhood under conditions of imprisonment constitutes an important area of analysis in the context of the rehabilitation of women. Of particular importance is understanding whether, and in what way, the experience of motherhood may influence changes in attitudes and facilitate the process of desistance from crime.

BIOGRAPHICAL AND SOCIAL EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN IN MOTHER AND CHILD UNITS

The respondents were asked the following question: *1. What life and social experiences characterise women residing in Mother and Child Units?* The responses can be grouped into the following categories:

1. Difficult childhood experiences and a dysfunctional family environment
I grew up in a family where violence and addiction problems were common, which had a profound impact on my childhood. I did not experience emotional stability or support from those close to me, and as a result, I had to make many important life decisions on my own. [...]. The lack of proper care and parental neglect in my family [...] shaped my later choices and my approach to life.
2. Early assumption of adult roles and early motherhood
I assumed adult roles at a relatively early age. I became a partner and a mother, which forced me to discontinue my education and made it difficult to pursue a career.
At a young age, I became overwhelmed by the responsibilities of adult life. [...] I started a family, and as a result, my educational and professional opportunities were significantly limited.
3. Experiences of social marginalisation and economic hardship
I often lacked stable employment and a regular income, which made life very difficult [...].
We did not have a permanent place to live, and this made me feel excluded from normal life.

My difficult financial and housing situation made it hard for me to function in accordance with what society expects of us [...].

4. Relationships with criminal environments and partners involved in criminal activity

My partner was involved in various criminal activities and, perhaps without realising it, drew me into that world. I felt that his social environment influenced my decisions.

I cannot say that I would have become involved in such situations on my own. Rather, it was the people around me, [...] especially my boyfriend, who introduced me to that world.

Sometimes it was difficult to distinguish [...] what I was doing of my own free will from what I was doing under the influence of the person with whom I was closely involved. His contacts and acquaintances had a considerable influence on my actions.

5. The experience of imprisonment as a moment of reflection on one's previous life

Being here, especially together with my child in the Mother and Child Unit, has given me time to stop and reflect on [...] what I have done with my life so far. Motherhood under these conditions has made me think about my previous choices and about what I can change in the future.

This experience made me realise that I can plan my life differently and try to do better things for myself and for my child.

The narratives of women residing in Mother and Child Units demonstrate that their lives are often marked by difficult family and social experiences. Early socialisation in dysfunctional environments, limited access to education and resources, and relationships with individuals involved in criminal activity have shaped their life trajectories. Motherhood under conditions of imprisonment may, however, become a turning point, fostering reflection and attempts to change the future.

THE IMPACT OF CARING FOR A CHILD ON THE ATTITUDES AND MOTIVATIONS OF INCARCERATED MOTHERS

The respondents were asked the following question: 2. *How does the opportunity to care for their child influence the attitudes and motivations of incarcerated mothers?* The responses were grouped, and the most relevant statements were selected.

1. Increased sense of responsibility

Being with my child has truly made me realise how important my role as a mother is. My child's presence motivates me [...] to change my previous lifestyle. [...]

I want to provide my child with a safe and stable environment, which is why I am trying to think differently about the future.

2. Motivation to abandon criminal behaviour

Since becoming a mother, I have really started thinking about what my life will be like after I leave prison [...]. I want to avoid the same people and situations that used to get me into trouble [...].

The thought of raising my child has made me see life differently [...]. I try to stay away from old acquaintances and bad habits because I know they could cost me dearly [...].

When I look at my child, I can no longer think only about myself [...]. I want to do everything I cannot return to my past mistakes and to be able to raise my child in peace [...].

3. Strengthening of the emotional bond and reflection on one's own life

I try to spend some time with my child every day [...]. I feel that these moments really help us understand each other better and build a strong emotional bond. Recently, I have been thinking a great deal about the decisions I made in the past [...]. I want to change certain things in my life so that I can be a positive role model for my child.

Daily contact with my child makes me realise how important my presence is [...]. I want to be more aware and set an example that my child will be able to look up to with pride.

4. Increased motivation to work on oneself

Because I am able to care for my child, [...] I have started participating in various rehabilitation programmes. I want to learn new things

so that I can become a better mother [...] and prepare myself for life after release.

Caring for my child has encouraged me to become more involved in educational and therapeutic programmes [...]. I want to improve my parenting competencies and learn how to become independent after I leave prison.

Having the opportunity to spend time with my child [...] motivates me to participate in courses and activities that help me develop [...] and prepare me for life outside prison as a responsible mother.

5. Sense of purpose and hope for the future

For me, my child's presence [...] gives my life meaning. It is like having hope for a new beginning.

Caring for my little one helps me get through each day in prison [...]. I feel that I can change my life, even though everything around me is difficult.

I try to find meaning in my role as a mother. My child gives me the strength to change myself and my life.

When I am with my child, I remind myself that I am capable of doing something right and that there is still a chance for a better future.

Sometimes I feel that my life has come to a standstill, and it is difficult to see any meaning in what I do.

I do not know what my child's future will look like, and that frightens me.

It is difficult to have hope when everyday life in prison is so restrictive and stressful.

I feel that my mistakes from the past have destroyed my chance of living a normal life.

Caring for a child in Mother and Child Units within prisons influences the attitudes and motivations of incarcerated mothers. The presence of a child increases the sense of responsibility, encourages reflection on one's life, and motivates behavioural change. It strengthens the emotional bond between mother and child and supports efforts towards social reintegration, making motherhood a key factor in the process of desistance from crime.

THE ROLE OF MOTHERHOOD IN FOSTERING REFLECTION ON PAST LIFE AND DESISTANCE FROM CRIME

The respondents were asked the following question: 3. *Does motherhood encourage reflection on one's previous life and the decision to change criminal behaviour?* This time, the five most relevant responses were selected.

[...] When I gave birth to my child, it was the first time I started thinking about what to do with my life [...]. Before that, I never thought about the consequences of my actions. Now I know that I do not want my child to ever be ashamed [...] of their mother.

Motherhood made me see myself differently. I realised that my previous decisions had been wrong and that I had to change my life if I wanted to raise my child in a normal environment [...].

Living with my child in the Mother and Child Unit gave me time to reflect. I now feel a sense of responsibility that I had never experienced before [...]. I would like to start everything anew after leaving prison.

My child is my motivation to change. I used to live from one day to the next without thinking about the future. Now I know that I have to do everything [...] not to return to the same environment [...].

Motherhood made me realise that my decisions affect not only me but also my child. This made me begin to analyse my previous behaviour [...] and plan a different life after my release.

The narrative interviews demonstrate that motherhood encourages reflection on one's life and changes in criminal behaviour. The birth of a child and residence in a Mother and Child Unit prompt women to reassess their previous choices, strengthen their sense of responsibility, and distance themselves from criminal environments. The child becomes a powerful source of motivation for building a stable future, although the respondents emphasised that institutional and social support are essential for change to be sustained.

SUPPORTING THE DESISTANCE PROCESS THROUGH REHABILITATION PROGRAMMES IN MOTHER AND CHILD UNITS

The respondents were asked the following question: 4. *What role do the rehabilitation programmes implemented in Mother and Child Units play in the process of change?* The responses were grouped into the following categories:

1. Strengthening parenting competencies and parental skills

Thanks to these activities [...] I have learned how to take better care of my child. This has made me feel more responsible and more confident as a mother. As I learned different approaches to raising children, I began to look at my life differently [...] and now I am much more determined not to return to my past mistakes.

The knowledge I have gained here has truly changed my attitude [...]. It motivates me to avoid everything that could lead me back into conflict with the law.

2. Building self-esteem and identity

These activities have truly opened up new opportunities for me [...]. They helped me see myself differently and realise that I can have goals beyond simply being a prisoner. Through these programmes, I started thinking about who I want to become [...]. It was a turning point for me and a way of rediscovering my identity.

I never realised that I was capable of doing so many things and having goals of my own [...]. These activities allowed me to see myself in a different light.

3. Developing a social support network

Here in the unit [...] I can talk to other mothers who are going through similar experiences. It really helps because I feel that I am not alone in all of this [...]. What I value most, however, are my conversations with the staff [...]. I can always count on their support and advice. This makes it easier for me to maintain my motivation to change [...].

Sharing experiences with other mothers [...] gives me the feeling that I can change my life. Even small conversations give me strength and encourage me to keep moving forward [...].

4. Reducing the risk of reoffending

Taking care of my child, every day has really brought structure to my daily routine [...]. Because of this, I think less about my past problems and no longer feel the urge to return to my old, destructive behaviours.

Participating in rehabilitation activities gives me a sense that I have some control over my life [...]. I can see that my decisions affect my child, and this stops me from doing things that I would later regret.

I feel responsible for my little one [...]. When I am involved in the programmes and maintain a regular daily routine, criminal temptations simply become less important.

5. Support in planning for the future

Thanks to the programme, I discovered that I could complete vocational courses and gain professional qualifications [...]. This really gives me confidence that after I leave here, I will be able to cope on my own and avoid returning to my old habits. When I learned about the educational and employment opportunities available to me, I felt that it was worth making the effort [...]. This motivates me to be more careful about my behaviour [...].

Career guidance has truly opened my eyes [...]. Now I know that I can have my own life and independence if I follow the rules and make use of the opportunities that are available to me here.

The rehabilitation programmes implemented in Mother and Child Units support positive change among incarcerated mothers by developing parenting competencies, strengthening self-esteem, and fostering social support networks. Combined with the opportunity to care for their children, these programmes reduce the risk of reoffending and assist women in planning their future, thereby facilitating sustained desistance from crime.

FACTORS HINDERING DESISTANCE FROM CRIME AMONG INCARCERATED MOTHERS

The respondents were asked the following question: 5. *What barriers hinder the process of desistance from crime among incarcerated mothers?* The responses were grouped into the following categories:

1. Emotional and psychological difficulties

Sometimes I feel so guilty [...] about everything I did in the past that it is difficult even to think about changing my life. [...] At those moments, I return

to my old ways of coping with stress because I simply do not know how else to deal with it.

I am ashamed of who I used to be and of what I did [...], and because of that I feel that I do not deserve a better life. This makes it much more difficult for me to make any decisions about changing.

I often feel that I am not good enough [...], and because of that I easily fall back into my old habits. It is a kind of defence mechanism that helps me survive [...].

2. Lack of social support and support networks

After my release [...] I often feel that I have no one who truly supports me. My family lives far away, and my friends [...] do not always want to stay in contact with me.

The most difficult thing is that [...] when I return to life outside prison, I lack a stable environment. There is no one to help me if I want to start over.

Social isolation [...] makes it easy to return to old acquaintances, who are not always a positive influence. When a person is alone and without support, it is easy to make the same mistakes again.

3. Financial and employment-related problems

The biggest problem [...] is finding legal employment after leaving prison. It is really difficult to support myself and my children because no one wants to give a chance to someone with a criminal record.

A person without qualifications [...] or without any work experience simply has no choice. Sometimes crime seems like the easier way to survive and provide for the family.

I think it is mainly a matter of not having employment opportunities. Even if you try [...], no one will hire you, and you are left with nothing, while the pressure [...] to support yourself is enormous.

4. Difficulties in social integration

I feel that people still see me as someone who has made a mistake. [...] It is difficult then to find a job or function normally in society.

The most discouraging thing is that there is often no acceptance [...], even from those closest to you. It discourages change and makes a person want to withdraw into themselves. After leaving prison [...] I felt that society rejected me. It isolates you and makes it genuinely difficult to rebuild your professional life and relationships with others.

5. Challenges associated with raising a child in prison

Sometimes I feel that [...] caring for my child in these conditions is simply overwhelming. The constant stress and frustration make it difficult for me to focus on myself and on changing my life.

There are times when [...] I feel helpless. Everything around me is restricted, and the daily responsibilities of parenthood can drain all my energy and motivation.

I feel that [...] when so much time and energy is devoted to caring for my child in the Mother and Child Unit, it is difficult to think about my own development or to do anything for others. It can be very stressful [...].

The process of desistance from crime among incarcerated mothers is hindered by emotional difficulties, the lack of social support, financial problems, social stigmatisation, and the challenges of raising a child in prison. Effective assistance requires comprehensive psychological, educational, vocational, and social support.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis conducted in this article makes it possible to identify the mechanisms through which motherhood may function as a factor supporting desistance from crime among incarcerated women residing with their children in Mother and Child Units within Polish prisons. Based on the collected data, it is possible to formulate conclusions and recommendations concerning both penitentiary policy and support programmes for mothers in the rehabilitation process.

CONCLUSIONS

The life trajectories of incarcerated mothers are often the result of the cumulative effects of adverse family, social, and economic experiences. Early upbringing in dysfunctional environments, limited access to education, and relationships with individuals involved in criminal activity hinder subsequent social adaptation.

Motherhood under conditions of imprisonment encourages self-reflection and a reassessment of life priorities. The presence of a child strengthens the sense of responsibility, motivates women to disengage from criminal environments, and encourages efforts towards social reintegration. Rehabilitation programmes implemented in Mother and Child Units develop parenting competencies, strengthen self-confidence, and foster social support networks.

The presence of a child in prison may protect against recidivism, provided that the mother-child bond is strong and adequate institutional support is available. Sustainable change requires the transformation of identity and the adoption of constructive social roles. Rehabilitation programmes should include parenting support, education, and psychological assistance. Equally important are post-release conditions, including access to housing, employment, and social support networks.

Effective assistance must be comprehensive, encompassing psychological, educational, vocational, and social support, in order to ensure that positive change is sustained after release. Barriers to the process of desistance from crime include emotional difficulties, the lack of social support, economic hardship, social stigmatisation, and the challenges associated with raising a child in prison. Combining motherhood with rehabilitation programmes acts as a catalyst for positive change and increases the likelihood of sustained desistance from crime.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PENITENTIARY POLICY AND SUPPORT PROGRAMMES FOR INCARCERATED MOTHERS

Based on the findings of the present study, a number of recommendations can be formulated for penitentiary policy and support programmes for mothers in prisons:

1. Mother and Child Units, the findings indicate the need to ensure safe childcare conditions and opportunities for developing a strong emotional bond between mother and child.

2. Parenting competencies and education, it is recommended that training programmes be provided on parenting, child safety, and support for the personal and vocational development of mothers.
3. Psychological support, the findings emphasise the importance of access to psychologists and therapists to assist women in coping with stress and trauma, and in strengthening their self-esteem.
4. Individualised rehabilitation plans, it is recommended that programmes tailored to the needs of each mother be developed to support behavioural change and encourage reflection on the role of motherhood.
5. Support networks and social reintegration, the findings indicate the need to maintain contact with family members, mentors, and local communities, as well as to provide housing and vocational counselling following release from prison.
6. Reducing social stigmatisation, it is recommended that educational initiatives and public awareness campaigns be implemented to reduce prejudice against women after serving a prison sentence.

In conclusion, the implementation of these evidence-based recommendations may contribute not only to a better understanding of the issues addressed in this study but also to the introduction of practical improvements in penitentiary practice and the rehabilitation of incarcerated mothers.

FINAL REMARKS

Motherhood in Mother and Child Units within Polish prisons fulfils both a social and a rehabilitative function. Raising a child under conditions of restricted liberty creates a unique environment in which the emotional bond becomes a driving force for changes in values and behaviour. Contact with the child strengthens the sense of responsibility and develops caregiving competencies and empathy, all of which are essential in the process of preventing reoffending. Motherhood becomes a rehabilitative mechanism, while daily care and emotional closeness catalyse reflection on one's life and motivate women to make lasting changes. Pedagogical support provided in Mother and Child Units should include the development of parenting competencies and

the formation of maternal identity, in which the mother-child bond becomes a factor protecting against recidivism. The findings confirm that the emotional dimension of motherhood significantly supports the process of desistance from crime among incarcerated women.

The analysis indicates that motherhood in the context of residence in Mother and Child Units within Polish prisons may fulfil an important function in the process of desistance from crime, thereby confirming the main aim of the study, while also highlighting the challenges associated with the limited scale and specific characteristics of the study population.

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LEGISLATION

- Rozporządzenie Ministra Sprawiedliwości z dnia 17 września 2003 r. w sprawie trybu przyjmowania dzieci matek pozbawionych wolności do domów dla matki i dziecka przy wskazanych zakładach karnych oraz szczegółowych zasad organizowania i działania tych placówek (Dz.U. 2003 nr 175 poz. 1709) – Rozporządzenie, 2003.
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