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RESEARCH REPORT

Women with lived experience imprisonment and their specific

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Foto: Canva



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mgr. Jiří Mertl, Ph.D. His research interests include criminology, social justice, critical social work, social deviance and marginalization. Currently, he is particularly interested in social work and counseling with incarcerated and released persons in the ideological framework of critical social work, i.e. how structural and cultural problems in the Czech Republic contribute to the creation and perpetration of crime and how it can be prevented with the help of social and institutional changes.

ANNOTATION

The research is based on 31 interviews with released women, combining semi-structured and narrative approaches, and 12 exploratory interviews with working with this target group. The aim was to show the human side of women who have experienced imprisonment, to shed light on the factors behind their criminal activity, as well as the factors that promote their desistance.

The report contains findings that are still largely unique to the Czech environment, research and analysis on imprisoned and released persons - and especially women - are still rare. Our research shows that women face marginalisation, debt and foreclosures, drug use and addiction, poor mental health and unstable housing before and after incarceration. After incarceration, these factors are compounded by prionisation, the desire to obtain stable employment and custody of children, and the desire to avoid toxic social networks and ties, particularly in relationships. Prior to incarceration, released women often struggled with poor mental health and trauma that originated from various types of violence (partner, domestic or family), which informants began to address at some point in their lives by using drugs as a coping or compensatory strategy. It is therefore clear that reducing women in prison and on release to the category of 'perpetrator' is undignified and also counterproductive, as it ignores the context and hides the real problems these women face, which must be addressed in order not to end up (repeatedly) in prison.

Released women often emphasized that they had benefited from receiving therapeutic treatment in the Special Treatment Unit (STU), or a standardized or other program to address their trauma and subsequent drug use, and entering this unit, and generally taking advantage of all therapeutic and counseling programs, was one of the recurring recommendations for other women in similar situations who should enter prison.

At the same time, the research found that there is a need to build sufficient structural capacity in the Czech Republic to address the needs of both incarcerated and released persons, which includes accessible decent

housing, adequate social and other services, sufficient capacity and accessibility of prison programmes and adequate care for prison staff.

RECOMMENDED FORM OF THE REFERENCE TO BE INCLUDED

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RESEARCH IMPLEMENTATION

The research was carried out as an independent activity of the project "**Fulfilling the Bangkok Rules in the Czech Republic: the path to fulfilling the human rights of women sentenced and released**". The project is supported by a grant from Norway through the Norwegian Funds. The project was implemented by the non-profit organization RUBIKON Centrum, z. ú. in cooperation with the Norwegian partner *Culture Break Borders*.

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The present final report is the result of a year-long research within the project "Fulfilling the Bangkok Rules in the Czech Republic: a path to promoting the human rights of women prisoners and released persons" and it summarizes and interprets findings that are still largely unique for the Czech environment, as research and analysis on imprisoned and released persons - and especially women - are still unique. In , the only publication devoted to the issue of women in the Czech prison system is Kateřina Nedbálková's ethnography (2006), which presents the lived reality of one of the Czech women's prisons (the prison is formally anonymised, it is clear which prison it). However, not much is known about the lived experience of the women prisoners and released women themselves, or rather, the findings have until now been essentially non-public, as only public institutions belonging to the criminal system and non-governmental non-profit organisations (NGOs) carrying out social work with these target groups have had access to them in their practice. The general public therefore has no idea about the stories of women with experience of the criminal justice system, for example, why they were , how they were affected and what they had to deal with after prison. To some , these narratives are consistent with those of men, as well as with the general narratives of incarcerated and released individuals about whom we already have some knowledge (see Bareš, Mertl 2016, 2021; Mertl 2020, 2022c; Mertl, Bareš 2018, 2020). However, unlike the male and general narratives, there are various specificities associated with women that we will introduce in the course of the report, which often make the transition from incarceration to everyday life even more difficult than it for male released persons.

The topic of incarcerated and released women may seem peripheral, as between 2017 and 2021, women made up eight percent of the prison population, this ratio is rising (by about one percent in the five years mentioned; Marešová 2018; VS ČR 2021, 2022). And women are, precisely because the execution of sentences of imprisonment (VTOS) is stereotypically culturally perceived as the domain of men, more stigmatized and often in a more difficult position than their male counterparts. At the same time, unlike men, women are much more likely to be caring for children, or to have their children left in the care of grandparents on the female side (Grace et al. 2016; Guastaferro, Lutgen 2018; Leverentz 2010; Mahoney, Daniel 2006). Thus, the use of punishment affects not only the women in question who experience it, but also wider families who also have to deal with the impacts. A seemingly marginal issue affecting only a few hundred people at first glance thus becomes an issue that affects the lives of hundreds more adults and children. If we take a secondary look at the economic hardship that the VTOS imposes on women, the average cost per incarcerated person per day was CZK 1,841 VS CR 2022a), resulting in a cost in excess of CZK 948 million per year in 2021. However, this is only the prison system. If we look at the issue in of social costs, then a very illustrative, and in his words conservative, estimate was offered by Vladimír Kváča (Kváča, Gottwaldová 2021). According to him, the average cost of incarcerating one person in 2020 was at least over

three million crowns. If we multiply this cost by the number of women who entered the VTOS in the in question, which was 1,014¹, then the cost for 2020 alone is over CZK 3 billion. It be stressed that this calculation does not include all social aspects, as there is simply no data on them in the Czech Republic, and some of them cannot be economized. It also does not include the aforementioned specifics of women's , i.e. the harm caused to children, family breakdown, etc.

However, the primary aim of this report is to show the human side of women who have experienced VTOS and their stories, which cannot in any way be simply summarised or categorised as 'perpetrator', as these women have often themselves been victims of violations and oppression at some stage in their lives, which have contributed to them ending up in VTOS. As we will see below, these women very often came marginalised backgrounds and were themselves victims of violent crime, including sexual crime, which to a large extent negatively affected their life chances and impacted on their mental health. As numerous studies point out (Anderson, Javdani 2018; Broidy et al. 2018; Burch 2017; Efodi, Adamchuk 2017; Grace et al. 2016;

Guastafarro, Lutgen 2018; Leverentz 2010, 2014; Nedbalkova 2006; Ward, Evans 2018), this is unfortunately not a surprising finding, as a large percentage of incarcerated women have experienced some traumatic event prior to incarceration, including physical, psychological, symbolic, and sexual violence, childhood abuse, and toxic partner relationships. Importantly, incarcerated and released women experience violence in any form at a much higher rate than incarcerated and released men, and women are more profoundly by this experience than are men (Broidy et al. 2018; Guastafarro, Lutgen 2018; Martin et al. 2015; Taylor 2015). Paradoxically, then, in some cases, incarceration can serve as a release and rescue from a toxic and violent environment, and incarcerated women (and not only women) may perceive it as a kind of liberation (Brown, Toyoki 2013; Crewe, Levins 2020; Fróis 2017), which is consistent with the fact that incarcerated women were more likely to experience violence before incarceration and men were more likely to experience violence during incarceration (Wallace et al. 2011). Moreover, this is in line with the crimes for which women are proportionally more likely to be incarcerated in Czech prisons, with theft, unauthorized possession of a credit card, fraud, credit fraud, murder, child neglect, and embezzlement between 2017 and 2021 (SCC 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022). As can be seen from the list, are predominantly property crimes, which are related to material deprivation and overall marginalization (similar to that of men), which is the case for child support neglect, where it is interesting to note that proportionally women have only started to be imprisoned more than men since 2019. Of course, it is questionable how the coronavirus pandemic has played into this situation, but this trend can also be interpreted as a progressive and increasing rate of poverty and marginalisation, which is becoming feminised and affecting women to a greater extent, who then unable to adequately care for their children and end up in VTOS. After all, the feminization

¹ This figure had to be calculated by adding up the number of women admitted in each month of 2020 from the individual statistical sheets published by the Prison Service of the Czech Republic (VS CR) and available here: <https://old.vscr.cz/informacni-servis/statistiky/mesicni-statisticke-hlaseni/> The statistical yearbook of the VS CR does offer the total number of persons admitted to prison for a given year, but no longer a breakdown of this data into women and men.

Poverty in the Czech environment was already written by Kateřina Nedbálková (2006), who thus followed up on studies abroad (Fróis 2017; Leverentz 2014; Richmond 2018; Vigessaa 2018) pointing out that Western societies are still set up in a very traditional way, which is reflected a lower level of remuneration for women, worse prospects finding adequate and decently paid employment, the absence of part-time work, combining work with childcare, etc. Thus, overall, in a time of increasing poverty and marginalisation, women have fewer (legal) material security options than men, which in turn is reflected in crime and . Higher rates of women's incarceration for murder are associated with the aforementioned domestic violence and violence against women in general, where victimized women are fearful and violent retaliation against their partner is their last and only means of , or where violence against their partner is the result of long-term stressful strain caused by their partner and their behavior (Burch 2017; Guastafarro, Lutgen 2018; Lane 2020; Lorenz, Hayes 2020). Moreover, in socially excluded localities and marginalised circumstances in general, the situation can be even more bleak for women due to a more strict division of gender roles and a greater normalisation of domestic violence, which is sometimes seen as an 'understandable' expression of male frustration, a tool reproduce the masculine position of men, but also as an expression of love and affection men (Kupka et al. 2019). However, as recent research shows (Nyklova and Moree 2021), far from being a matter of marginalised and socially excluded households, it a wider problem that is also present in households that are not marginalised, but in a latent form rather than not existing at all.

However, before we look at the specific stories and experiences of the released women and engaged professionals, and analyse and interpret them further, it is necessary present the basic research propositions of the project and this in terms of the theoretical background and research methodology.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF THE REPORT

Several theoretical approaches from criminology and social work were combined in research and in writing of this final report. In the field of criminology, this was mainly feminist criminology, is part of critical criminology in a broader sense and is also very closely related to cultural criminology, and from social work, a critical social work perspective was used, combining both structural and actor-based approaches.

CRITICAL CRIMINOLOGY

Critical criminology as a movement is not homogeneous or unitary, but there are many other movements it that specifically address different issues, which is why, for example, Walter DeKeseredy (2011, 2015) suggests using the plural "critical criminology" to represent this diversity. Thus, within critical criminology we can encounter strands that analyse so-called white collar crime, i.e. influential individuals and actors within societies, green criminology that examines environmental crimes, feminist criminology, which we will discuss in more detail below, and other strands.

The single unifying principle of critical criminology, as opposed to "classical" criminology, is a view of crime perpetration and transgression against social norms in general not as a rational choice (more for example Akers 1999), but as a phenomenon by social inequalities, marginalization, and power disparities (DeKeseredy 2011, 2015; Young 2011). In this respect, criminal activity is strongly associated with structural problems and social exclusion, where, according to Deborah Carr and Debra Umberson (2013), living and functioning in socially excluded conditions can itself act as a powerful stressor that affects the quality of life, but also the actions and behaviours of the concerned, and can lead to the adoption of specific coping strategies to deal with the situation, and among these strategies may be the commission of crime. Consequently, the biggest general stressors are chronic stress and traumatic events (which also events that the person expects and anticipates to but which do not happen, such as a proposal, the birth of a child or social assistance paid on a certain date, etc.). Importantly, these two stressors can and often do complement and condition each other, so that, for example, the loss of a long-standing job as a traumatic event can lead to chronic stress from material deprivation and existential insecurity due to the loss of a rote structuring of leisure time (Carr and Umberson 2013). In our case, material deprivation causing chronic stress can lead to traumatic events in the form of physical, psychological or symbolic violence against close persons, for example in the form of domestic violence or violence against children, but also against other persons. As Gábor Maté (2018) points out, a traumatic event combined with chronic stress can then lead for example to the use of drugs as a coping strategy, which

is to compensate for anxious feelings, the case can disrupt mental health, and drugs then serve as a self-medication tool to mitigate the negative effects of poor mental health.

Marginalisation and the associated stressors and traumatisation are often the reasons why people end up in , and as a number of analyses and research studies have shown (e.g. Fassin 2017; Fróis 2017; Houser, McCord 2018; Schliehe 2014; Wacquant 2009a, 2009b), prison becomes an institution where marginalised people are literally 'warehoused'. The criminalization of marginalization has also been fairly well documented in the Czech Republic (Mertl 2022c; Nedbálková 2006; Toušek et al. 2018; Walach 2018). As Loïc Wacquant (2009a, 2009b) and David Garland (2001) point out, this situation is the result of the promotion of a neoliberal discourse that is built on the reduction of helping social institutions, the promotion of repressive social institutions (especially police and prisons), the individualization of social risks, and responsabilization. The individualization of social risks is linked to the promotion of an ethos of personal responsibility, which all members of society are held accountable for everything that happens in lives, including events over which they have little or no control (Ewald 1991). For example, if a person is born into a marginalised situation and lives in social exclusion and poverty, within which they become over-indebted because they do not have the means to meet basic living costs, this is entirely the fault of the person, not of the (social) system that enables usurious non-bank loans and the predatory targeting of these loans to marginalised people (see Habel et al. 2021). Responsibilisation then builds on the ethos of personal responsibility and introduces the idea that once persons get into trouble, they should help themselves out of it, or use a minimum level of assistance in doing so, and before that they should find a strong intrinsic motivation within themselves to solve the problem (Haney 2010; King 2014; Mertl 2020, 2023b).

In regard, it is important to mention that marginalized people are often victimized symbolically in societies in the form stigmatization as incompetent, lazy and spoiled (Janebová 2021; Mertl 2017), but also practically by law enforcement authorities (Fassin 2017; Kupka et al. 2022; Toušek et al. 2018). This means that marginalized individuals receive more , making them much more likely to be prosecuted for norm transgression and end up in prison. This is due, as Mike Presdee (2000) points out, to the fact that legal norms and legislation are often created by privileged individuals who purposely criminalize and decriminalize certain acts and situations. A notorious example is the criminalization of drug possession in the United States, where the possession of five grams of crack (crystal cocaine), a drug used by marginalized people, carries a five-year prison sentence, while the same penalty is applied to possession of half a kilogram of pure cocaine, a drug often used by wealthy people (Hattery and Smith 2010). Indeed, the division between drugs used by the rich and those used by the marginalised has been confirmed in the Czech context, with Petr Kupka, Benjamin Petruželka and Václav Walach (2022) pointing out that there is no significant difference in the prevalence of drug use in excluded and non-excluded localities, but there is a difference in the typology of drugs that are used. In excluded localities

is the increased use of methamphetamine, which is readily available and, unlike other drugs, relatively easy to produce in private or domestic settings.

According to Jock Young (1999), the whole issue needs to be thought of not only in the static and absolute sense that lack of opportunity and poor socialisation automatically leads to increased risk of crime. According to him, there is a need to see things in a more dynamic and relative way, in a particular social and cultural context. He refers to the classic work of Robert Merton (1938), who emphasised that social deviance, transgression and crime are not due to material deprivation or lack of opportunity per se, but to deprivation in the context of the myth of the American Dream, which is based on the principle of merit and a culture of diligence based on the assumption that if one tries hard and puts in a lot of effort, one will do . This brings us to cultural criminology, where crime is produced by a particular cultural setting in a given society. In Young's case, the cultural setting of Western societies produces crime through an internal contradiction between merit, diligence and the achievement of well-being on the one hand and the apparent deep social inequalities, precarization and marginalization on the other. Some marginalised people have a cultural vision of a normal or 'normal' life, but cannot achieve it through legal or conventional means, therefore resort to . These persons do not necessarily have subsistence problems, but they want, for example, a television, as it is common to have and watch a . Generally, therefore, these persons want to attain a standard of living that is common in the society, but they do not have the legal means to do so, so they resort to illegal means.

CULTURAL CRIMINOLOGY

Cultural criminology is an approach which is multilayered, and criminality is said to be produced by a specific culture, its values, norms, mythology, rules, (shared) interactions, ideas, distribution of power, etc. In this respect, Western cultures are very closely related to contemporary capitalist (hyper-)consumerist societies. As well described by Zygmunt Bauman (2005), the "orderly" citizen in contemporary Western societies is conceived according to whether he or she is able to develop economic activity and consume, and if not, he or she is considered a social deviant who needs to be disciplined in order to integrate. Thus, consumerism has become not only a driving economic force, but a segregating social tool, an all-pervasive political principle, and a cultural norm. In the first sequence, then, crime is created by consumer capitalism and its culture based on hyper-consumerism as the main meaning of human life, the accumulation of wealth, the individualisation of social risks and the understanding of society as an environment not based on cooperation and solidarity but on competition and the market principle, which creates great social inequalities and power disparities. As Jeff Ferrel, Keith Hayward and Jock Young (2008) point out, this creates a paradox where petty crime committed by marginalised people can coexist in their daily struggle for subsistence survival

and a dignified existence, as well as so-called white collar crime or corporate crime, where crimes are committed by secured persons or entities based on the desire to gain influence, as a fun and exciting activity or out of boredom. In the second dimension, crime is also a product or commodity that is produced by the culture of consumer capitalism for consumption (Ferrell et al. 2008; Presdee 2000). Crime thus becomes a commodity needs to be produced, sold to consumers and monetized. Indeed, this is one of the reasons why the number of programmes and television channels that portray the commission of crime in 'live' form as money-making entertainment has multiplied in recent years (the *Bait Car* programme being an iconic example). A third dimension in understanding criminality is that transgression and criminality itself can be conceptualised as an activity that brings consumer satisfaction to the perpetrator, particularly in terms of thrill of acting in ways that transgress rules and boundaries (Ferrell et al. 2008; Taylor 2017). Then, at a fourth level, crime is also a means used in the media either to sell other products or services or to control and stigmatize certain groups. Media production and the representation of social reality in the media is consequently one of the great themes of cultural criminology, as the media routinely show and reinforce what is 'normal' and deviant, and are used to (de)criminalize and control crime, which in turn can have far-reaching political consequences (Ferrell et al. 2008).

Crime from the of cultural criminology is therefore a very complex phenomenon that be understood as a lived experience and interaction that takes place within a particular cultural environment and the values set by it. Crime is therefore constantly (re)produced by a given cultural setting and can only be understood if we analyse this cultural setting (Ferrell et al. 2008).

CRITICAL SOCIAL WORK

Critical social work fits very well on both critical and cultural criminology, given the emphasis placed on structural factors and the context of the (potential) client's situation or Client. Ever since its inception critical social work has been focused on the dysfunctionality of the social system which, instead of supporting marginalized persons and improving their life situation, on the contrary creates and reproduces marginalization. At the same time, according to critical social workersthe system has been and is being used by social work to legitimize its dysfunctionality, or functionality in the that it is beneficial for certain groups and disadvantageous for others, whereby clients' and women's social problems are individualized and their situations decontextualized (see Bailey and Brake 1977; more recently, for example, Baldwin 2011; Cannan 1977; Ferguson and Woodward 2009; Mendes 2009). The attempt to view social work more structurally as a first guiding principle has subsequently been joined by a more participatory principle of working more equally and openly clients. This consists in trying to involve male and female clients in the search for solutions to their life situation as persons equal to social , and with the help of

empowerment, confidence building, mutual learning, as well as mobilization and cooperation in various collective actions aimed at solving structural problems (Baldwin 2011; Beresford 2011; McLaughlin 2008; from the Czech environment see Gojová et al. 2021, 2019). Then, in recent years, a third principle has begun to be promoted and developed, pointing out that social workers are committed experts and committed practitioners in social issues and social policy and should have a strong voice in setting the social system (Ferguson and Woodward 2009; Gal and Weiss-Gal 2014). This point is also important in of working conditions, as the social system and its settings constitute the working environment for social work practice and social workers should have a stake in influencing the conditions in which they can do their work (see Gojová, Glumbíková 2015).

June Allan (2009) then offers a general summary of the values and beliefs associated with critical social work: striving for a fairer society for marginalized and oppressed persons and groups; defending and representing the position and perspectives of marginalized persons and groups; being critical and challenging stereotypes and other knowledge taken as fact; analyzing the power relations and structures that result in structural problems; focusing on helping specific clients as well as social change.

In the context of (critical) social work, then, prisoners (and to some extent released persons, if they are, for example, released on parole) may be seen as involuntary clients, as they are serving a prison sentence where they are given a treatment programme or have to comply with the obligations set out in the . In both cases, these are obligations that were not chosen by the persons themselves and have been on them. Radka Janebová (2018) then points out that it is to know the context of involuntary clients, i.e. their individual stories and the structural obstacles they have faced and are facing in their lives, in order to establish and optimum human cooperation. In this , it is then important to know their life story and to perceive them as persons with a certain lived experience in order to be able to work with them in a rehabilitative way and thus increase the likelihood of their successful return to society.

FEMINIST CRIMINOLOGY

In the last part of the theoretical chapter, we will look at how the defined approaches correspond to the issue of laid-off women. Feminist criminology is linked to critical and cultural criminology as well as critical social work. Indeed, integral to feminist criminology is (1) a critique of the structural inequalities through which women are disadvantaged within Western societies, often leading to the commission of crime (Gilmour 2022); (2) a critique of the cultural and gender stereotypes that underpin the setting of the legal system and the victimization of women (Fitz-Gibbon 2022; Jordan 2022); (3) the feminist principle that the private is political, personal stories and experiences are embedded in social

and political contexts, which is very closely aligned with the guiding principle of critical social work (Janebová 2014; Mendes 2009). More , then, feminist criminology is also, of course, primarily associated with women and their experiences of criminalization and victimization, which are often specific and different from what is postulated in mainstream criminology, which is largely constructed by men based on analysis of male criminality and victimization. This has been due in some measure to the relatively small percentage of women who have been tried and imprisoned, but to the cultural marginalisation of women. This has resulted in the emergence of "universal" theory on data that included only men and women (Gilmour 2022).

If we look at the first point, we can see in the broader context that there is a so called. The feminisation of poverty stems from a cultural setting that, among other things, legitimises women being paid less than men for the same work, divides activities into "female" and male" and does not consider some "female" activities as work, and reinforces a strict social division of roles into male and female, where economic activity belongs primarily to men and women are therefore economically and subsistently dependent on men. Women are thus less able to secure an adequate and dignified subsistence and are much more likely to be at risk of economic marginalisation. In contrast to men, women then have far fewer options to address economic marginalisation, as they are much more likely to use the sex business as a solution to the situation (Gilmour 2022). The sex business itself is then viewed feminism and feminist criminology from two perspectives. The first perspective is based on the conception of sex work as a normal job, which women perform voluntarily (or should be allowed to do so legislatively and socially) in order to secure themselves. The second perspective identifies the sex business as a symbol of female oppression, as it represents most of the negative cultural stereotyping, and moreover, according to this perspective, doing sex is a traumatic experience that has a negative impact on the women who it. At the same time, the second perspective is also linked to critical criminology, as it argues that women practice the sex business not because they freely chose the profession, but rather because they have no other options due to their marginalization (Armstrong 2022). Thus, women may be in marginalized positions through different trajectories and for different reasons than men, and they also have different options to address subsistence issues.

Under the second point above, structural violence, physical, sexual, psychological or symbolic, perpetrated against women men is a major problem. According to Per Isdal (2017a), sexual violence is arguably the most destructive form, as it not has physical consequences, but its purpose is often to exert power and establish dominance over the person, affecting the intimate sphere. It is important to note that most sexual violence is not perpetrated by unknown perpetrators or perpetrators, but is known to the victims (Jordan 2022; Lutze, Lau 2018; Roubalová et al. 2019). Unfortunately, this is neglected and trivialised by media representation, which is built on sensation-seeking and shock value, so that it often selectively and tendentiously transmits only cases that are perpetrated by persons unknown (Hakova 2021). This seemingly unimportant distinction is very significant, as the perpetration of

Sexual violence intimate partners refers to the deeply entrenched gender roles, where the man is in a privileged position in the household and the woman is to him, and the cyclical and systematic violence (sexual or otherwise) aims reinforce this division and domination. The cultural embeddedness of gender-based violence is then directly embodied in domestic violence, which was until recently legalised in some countries, as Isdal (2017b) points out in the case of Norway, where, as recently as the second half of

In the 19th century, it was legal for a man to physically punish a woman if she did not behave to his liking because she was his property. Similarly, Jan Jordan (2022) points to the New Zealand case of how historically domestic violence and sexual violence between spouses was not seen as a violation of the law because the woman was the "property" of the man who also had the unqualified right to her sexual services. Rape was then defined as an act performed by another man because he had "appropriated" a woman who was not his. This is compounded by poorly functioning enforcement agencies (especially the police and courts), downplay and minimise domestic violence against women, treat victims very inappropriately and expect victims to play a role

"ideal victim" (Jordan 2022; Nyklová, Moree 2021). Gender-based violence is therefore a cultural-structural problem and needs to be addressed as such.

The specific interface with critical social work in the third point above is the strand of feminist criminology that seeks to abolish prison as a repressive and retributive institution (*anti-carceral feminism*) and replace it with a more community-based institution based on restorative principles (Kim 2020).² Within this trend, Beth Richie and Kyla Martensen (2020) then point out that its translation into social work should not only consist of monitoring and helping clients with their individual problems and life situations, but also reflecting on structural conditions and problems and appealing for solutions. Prison is therefore not a solution, as it is, as some studies point out (Mooney, Bommaraju 2018; Vigessaa 2018), constructed around the male prison population and gender differences are not taken much into account, rather it worsens the prospects of women prisoners, where their marginalisation is further exacerbated by their prisonisation, their entry on Criminal Records Bureau and further traumatises them.

In practice, we can observe that there are some differences between men and women who are incarcerated and released, based on the findings of feminist criminology and other disciplines. First of all, the number of incarcerated women has been increasing much more than men in recent decades, both globally (Broidy et al. 2018; Efodi and Adamchuk 2017; Schliehe 2014) and in the Czech Republic (Marešová 2018). Incarcerated and consequently released women have very often (and more often than men) been victimized by serious criminal activity in the form of physical violence, childhood abuse or sexual violence. This creates traumatic experiences and undermines their mental health, which women often address by using drugs (including alcohol) as a coping to overcome these traumas, which in many cases is associated with criminal activity that can ultimately lead to their incarceration (Anderson, Javdani 2018; Broidy et al. 2018; Burch 2017; Schliehe 2014; Stensrud et al. 2019; Ward, Evans 2018). Regarding the Czech context and (domestic) violence,

² Currently, the RESCALED project and initiative corresponds to this idea - <https://www.rescaled.org/>

of sexual violence, victimization and gender stereotyping, women in the Czech Republic are unfortunately no different than elsewhere, as shown in a study by Blanka Nyklova and Dana Moree (2021). Moreover, as both researchers point out, during the coronavirus pandemic, all the cultural and institutional problems were amplified, revealing significant dysfunction in the system of assistance to women at risk of domestic and sexual violence. At the same time, the high latency within the system, i.e. the widespread hiddenness of the whole problem due to its sensitivity and the reluctance of victims to report domestic and sexual violence due to distrust in social institutions, especially the Police has been exposed, as has been highlighted elsewhere (Roubalová et al. 2019). In addition to the Police of the Czech Republic, the analysis does not bode well for the courts, which expect women to play the role of "ideal victims", i.e. to distractedly and incoherently attempt to narrate their traumatic experiences. When women do not fulfill this role, they are automatically considered untrustworthy (Nyklová, Moree 2021). An analysis by ProFem then showed that courts (and forensic experts) in the Czech Republic downplay domestic violence and violence against women and children and in some cases justify this downplaying in a scandalous and undignified manner (Havlíková, Šmídová 2023).³ However, this is not only a problem of Czech society and institutions, as other studies have shown (Fitz-Gibbon 2022; Jordan 2022). In the context greater victimisation of women with regard to serious crime, some analyses (Guastaferro, Lutgen 2018; Houser, McCord 2018; Lane 2020; Ward, Evans 2018) suggest that women are more likely to develop mental health problems than men as a result of more frequent victimisation, while others (Begun et al. 2016; Wallace et al. 2011) do not support significant differences, although they do find that women are more likely to experience traumatic situations than the general female population. In addition to mental health, physical health is also an issue for incarcerated and released women. The prison and release population generally has poorer health in many respects (teeth, asthma, diabetes, tuberculosis, high blood pressure, etc.) than the comparable general population (Hammett et al. 2001; Williams 2007). Some research (Guastaferro, Lutgen 2018; Mooney, Bommaraju 2018) then reports that women with criminal experience are worse off than men in this regard. At the same time, of course, women have other needs related to, for example, gynaecological problems and difficulties related to previous experiences of (sexual) violence (Anderson, Javdani 2018).

More frequent victimization and traumatization of incarcerated and released women then results in a higher prevalence of drug use as a coping strategy and self-medication (Griffin et al. 2020; Mahoney, Daniel 2006; Richmond 2018; Vigessaa 2018). This has resulted women being more at risk of addiction and addictive behaviours according to some research (Griffin et al. 2020; Guastaferro, Lutgen 2018; Taylor 2015), however again some research does not support the increased risk (Begun et al. 2016; Martin et al. 2015). Some research (Guastaferro and Lutgen 2018; Lane 2020; Lutze and Lau 2018; Taylor 2015) suggests that women are more likely to be incarcerated for offenses and, conversely, less likely to be incarcerated for

³ For example, courts have labeled long-term sexual offenses against minor children as "deviant

the defendant from an otherwise orderly life" or that it "makes the defendant's prior orderly life easier." Of one victim, the court stated, "certainly not tainted by that fact," although the victim had been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, etc.

with violent crime than men. In the Czech Republic, this finding is largely untrue, as women are sentenced directly to prison for drug-related crime proportionally as often or less often than men. In the last five years, the only exceptions were 2017 and 2021, where the difference was nevertheless minimal (own calculation; see Czech SS 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022). However, as noted above, women are more likely than men to be incarcerated for trivial property , which tends to be associated with procuring the means to satisfy drug addiction, but it is not clear how many cases can be linked in this way, as there is no (public) statistical breakdown. At the same time, it is not the case that men are more likely to be arrested for certain types of violent crime in the country. This is true for abuse of ward and, in years, also for neglect of maintenance, which is related to the fact that women are more likely to care for children than men, but especially for homicide, where women are proportionally imprisoned as much as men, and murder, where women are imprisoned even more often than men. The equal or greater prevalence of these violent crimes is linked to the aforementioned greater level of traumatisation and more frequent experience domestic violence, which causes women to feel threatened and sometimes to take extreme measures to deal with the situation. It should be emphasised that even though statistics show that women are not more likely to be imprisoned for drug , this does not necessarily mean (and if we take our data into account, it certainly does not mean) that Czech women who are imprisoned or released have fewer problems with drug use or traumatic experiences. It should be borne in mind that most research and studies come from the Anglo-Saxon environment, where the "fight against drugs" is much more concentrated on by repressive institutions and much more focused, which logically also results in more detected violations of the law and a higher percentage of sentences given.

The traumatic experiences, poor mental health and drug use are compounded by the fact that incarcerated and released women typically come from marginalized (or socially excluded) backgrounds that largely determine and catalyze their incarceration. In this respect, the situation of women is not dissimilar to that of men, who also face marginalization to a large extent, which is the reason for their incarceration (e.g., Fassin 2017; Madoc-Jones et al. 2018; Maruna 2001; Mertl 2022c; Wacquant 2001). Economic marginalization and the lack of decent housing are particularly problematic (Efodi and Adamchuk 2017; Houser and McCord 2018; Johnson 2014; Leverentz 2014; Mahoney and Daniel 2006; Nedbalkova 2006; Schliehe 2014). However, men are much less likely to have to deal with as a result of traditional gender roles, making situation somewhat easier. Separating from a child and seeking to regain custody is itself a psychologically and practically very challenging process, entails a number of difficulties, ranging from settling family relationships if the child is placed with a family member to starting the legal process of regaining custody (Lopez and Pasko 2018). Much greater demands are then placed on women to provide materially, as they must not only provide for themselves, but also ensure adequate conditions for their children to be returned to them or to stay with them (Efodi, Adamchuk 2017; Grace et al. 2016; Johnson 2014; Leverentz 2014; Mahoney, Daniel 2006). This places specific demands on housing, where it can be difficult to find adequate decent housing for a woman who has been released, and even for her

child or children (Leverentz 2010, 2014; Lutze, Lau 2018). can then complicate finding employment, as employers may prefer people who do not have to care for children and are more flexible in their hours (for example, they may work shifts and from early morning hours) (Leverentz 2010, 2014; Richmond 2018). Combined with the requirement of employers to provide a criminal record (CR) statement, this can only create a very difficult in some cases. Increasingly, then, the feminisation of poverty is starting to be discussed in this context, with poverty starting to fall more heavily on women due to unfair pay and the factors mentioned above, which men often do not have to address. This is related to one major specificity of female crime, which tends to be much more often linked to a partner relationship (most often with a man), whereas men commit crime more independently of relationships (Burch 2017; Lane 2020). Marginalised women may thus seek out a partner relationship that, among other things, provides material subsistence, but these are often toxic relationships in which women are complicit in men's offending or are directly coerced into committing crime.

Taking responsibility and (post)care children can make the transition from prison to society very difficult and potentially disrupt the process altogether. Women face more social stigma than men in this respect. Indeed, women are still gender-stereotyped as primarily expected to function in the home, take care of children, and be supportive to a male partner, while women with a criminal history are stigmatized not only for breaking the law but also for their failure as mothers and caregivers (Leverentz 2014; Lopez, Pasko 2018; Lutze, Lau 2018). In contrast, for men with criminal histories who have families, the maintenance obligation, i.e. the practical (non-)fulfilment of the role of 'breadwinner', is addressed, and the moral condemnation that they have failed as fathers is absent. Similarly, alcoholism, for example, or drug use in general, is more culturally acceptable and tolerated among men than is among women, who are exposed to gender-specific stigmatizing stereotypes (Griffin et al. 2020; Lutze, Lau 2018).

Gender stereotypes may then be associated with ethno-racial stigma, which has been the subject of more research abroad, particularly in the United States (Leverentz 2014; Mahoney, Daniel 2006). This research suggests that women (as well as men) are also affected by ethno-racial stigma and are much more likely to end up in prison if they do not visually and ethnically conform to the "ideal" of white, well-adjusted citizen(s). In the Czech Republic, these statistics are not officially kept, however, ethno-racial stigma and the greater prevalence of the Roma population in prison has been pointed out Nedbálková (2006) and also prison staff, when asked to assess the prison population in their prison, often thematised and accentuated the Roma population (Mertl 2023b). In addition, staff also pointed to the fact that extended Roma families end up in prisons, or that VTOS is a generational rather than an individual issue, which furthermore refers to the long-standing structural inequalities in the country that are down within families. Ethno-racial stigma then extends to the lives of women who have been released, who on situational testing, may have problems obtaining housing (European Commission 2019; Toušek et al. 2018) or health care (European Commission 2019; Šabatová et al. 2019),

while discrimination in health care can also affect the children entrusted to them, which further complicate a successful reintegration into society.

All of these factors then need to be viewed in an interconnected and holistic way through the concept of intersectionality (see, for example, Cho et al. 2013), which, in with criminology (Bunn 2018; Mertl 2022c; Potter 2013), offers the perspective that to be incarcerated/released is to have a specific social identity consisting of a conglomeration of different specific needs and structural disadvantages that do not operate in isolation and sequentially, but instead support, condition and operate simultaneously. Rebecca Bunn (2018) then specifically points out that in order to understand this situation and its resolution, it is necessary to analyse the lived experience of individual prisoners and released persons, so that the presence and dynamics of specific factors become evident.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In particular, we focused on the narratives and lived experiences of women who have experienced VTOS in order to analyse the reasons and circumstances of incarceration and the situation after release from prison based on their experiences. For this reason, the research was designed as purely qualitative, with the interviews with released women being narrative semi-structured interviews. The interviews always contained three major themes, namely why the informants in question had been sent to the VTOS, what their situation was and is after their release from the VTOS, and what their experiences and assessments of the VTOS and, where appropriate, the prisons in which they served their sentences were. The pilot focus group prior to the actual start of the interviews with the six released women also helped us to identify specific themes, which pointed us to certain themes, confirmed some themes and showed us that for some themes we still needed to think about including them in the interviews. In total, 31 interviews were conducted, producing a very diverse sample, which adds to the credibility and relevance of the research, as recurring themes in differently contextualised narratives always form the knowledge core of a given issue (see Creswell 2007; Gray 2004; Larsson 2009). The interviews with women with lived experience were conducted by three methodologically guided researchers - Alžběta Majerová, Lenka Prokopová and Alena Vyhnaňlová, to whom huge thanks are due for their very good work.

The informants were geographically and life-wise located in small, medium and large cities, with the majority (22 informants) located in large cities. The informants ranged in age from 29 to 67 years, with a mean and median age of 42.5, indicating that we had an even distribution of informants in this age range and the informants were mostly . The interval of time that informants had been at liberty at the time of interview ranged from one month to 13 years, with mean of 2.4 years and a median of 1.5 years, indicating that we had more women in the sample who had been out longer

...released for a period of time. The sample then included a majority of women who were using various social and other services (only four women were not using any services at the time of the interview). Co-operation with social services was the means by which we approached informants to ask if they would like to participate in the research, which of course creates a certain bias as it is to be expected that non-cooperating women would have different insights and narratives on some topics. However, released women are typically a so-called hard-to-reach population, so there are not many other options for approaching potential participants. 16 informants were on parole and fulfilling the requirements of probation supervision at the time of the interview, while 15 informants were released on so-called fixed exit. Five women in the sample had no children. The informants had experience with the two main women's prisons (Světlá nad Sázavou and Opava), as well as with prisons that have specialised wards for women or are detached workplaces of men's prisons (Velké Přílepy, Řepy, Hradec Králové, Drahonice). 18 informants had completed a specialised ward designed for therapeutic treatment, primarily for drug use or a standardised therapeutic or counselling prison programme.

In addition, we conducted interviews with 12 people who have (co-)worked with released women in different contexts and areas (social work and social services, prisons, social business). The age of the informants ranged from 28 to 66 years, with a mean age of 43.5 years and a median age of 45 years, that the age composition was fairly well distributed across the interval, with a predominance of people 40 years and over. The length of experience those with lived experience ranged between five and 23 years, with a mean of 12.5 years and a median of 11 years, again indicating a fairly even distribution of length of experience in the interval, with those with longer experience predominating. The most frequently stated reason for working with the target group of imprisoned and released women was the interest in the target group itself (six cases), four informants stated that their motivation was the interest in helping the target group, in three cases working with the target group resulted from the situation, for two informants the experience from abroad where they saw that it was possible to work successfully with the target group was decisive, and for one informant it was a pragmatic choice. The interviews were semi-structured and were exploratory in nature, where we tried to explore whether the findings from previous *desk* research can be applied to the Czech environment and how to better interpret the ongoing findings from the interviews with the dismissed women and make a more complex picture of the narratives. In general, interviews then discussed themes related to the situation of women before, during and after their release from prison. The interviews were conducted by the author of this report.

The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using MAXQDA computer software, which allows for efficient processing of larger amounts of qualitative data. The coding process used a procedure associated with qualitative content analysis as described by Philipp Mayring (2000), a combination of deductive and inductive approaches, whereby in the first round the interviews were coded deductively taking into account the major themes that were in the interview script,

and in subsequent cycles, inductive coding was used and the major themes were "broken down" into smaller themes and categories corresponding to the narratives of informants. Then, in subsequent cycles, axial coding, i.e., combining different categories into themes and further optimization (following the model of Charmaz 2006; Saldaña 2009), was mainly used to result in codes representing specific and supportive themes that were heard in the interviews. In addition, MAXQDA allows for other analytical options and features, such as cluster analysis of the codes used or crosstabulation of document variables and associated codes, which can make data analysis easier or bring new perspectives to the data, so where it was useful and productive with respect to data analysis, these features were used.

FINDINGS AND INSIGHTS

At the outset, we need to say that our sample included a large majority of women (27 in total) had struggled with drug use and addiction in the past or after release (we include women who were alcohol dependent in this number because alcohol is also a drug, it is culturally marginalized, which emerged in the interviews). This in itself indicates that drugs were a kind of coping strategy to deal with personal problems, such as traumatisation or negative feelings of marginalisation, a case where they played a role in 'self-medication', where women 'prescribed' drugs to themselves to deal with mental illness. In this regard, 22 informants confirmed that they had or were experiencing mental health problems (19 of them also reported having problems with drug use and addiction). 23 informants were then struggling with marginalisation, particularly of a subsistence or economic nature. In this sense, the informants also dealt with precarious housing, with 10 informants living with family, seven using a social residential service, three living in a hostel, one with a friend and one even in a tent. In total, 22 informants had insecure housing.

THE SITUATION BEFORE THE VTOS - WHY WOMEN GO TO PRISON

All of the above factors played a significant role in the individual narratives and life trajectories of offending and imprisonment. Informants' narratives in relation to their time in included the following categories (number of informants mentioning them in brackets): drugs (20), theft (16), partner (15), marginalisation (15), fraud (8), violent crime (8), mental health (7), daughter (1). One informant did not want to talk directly about her criminal history, and the interview then revealed that she had been convicted of fraud. All of these categories were specifically interwoven in the narratives.

In the next section of the text, we will present all the significant factors that played a role in the informants' incarceration and that they continued to face after their release (problems with substance use

drugs and addictions, mental health and marginalisation) as well as individual representative narratives and lived experiences associated with the reasons why informants were incarcerated.

DRUG USE AND ADDICTION

In general or mainstream discourse, drug use is presented as an individual problem and , however this is often not the case and drug use and addiction has a specific cause, while the whole issue is more dynamic and complex. This was evident in the interviews where informants gave a range of reasons why they had started using drugs and also abusing prescription drugs.

The most common reason, which appeared in 15 cases, was the use of drugs as a coping strategy to deal with a stressful or traumatic situation. Vojslava offers an illustrative narrative:

[...] I have lost my home, [...] my children, my partner, the roof over my head, everything, a steady job [...] I lived in a sublet, I stayed on maternity leave, I had two children actually, so I fell into the that they did not contribute to my housing, so I got into debt because I borrowed where I could, I wanted to keep it somehow and I did not keep it and I lost my housing, so I lost my children because I had nowhere to put them, so I put them in the care of my mother. And as I couldn't handle it all mentally and I was prone to the drugs, I fell into it faster than I expected [...] the partners [...] just disturbed my psyche, there was psychological pressure, it affected me a lot too [...].

Vojslava then refers to the second most frequent reason for drug use, namely in with a partner or because of partner life (five cases), which is well documented by Myslava:

And mainly I was an alcoholic, and then my boyfriend got arrested and I said I don't want to live like that anymore, I stopped drinking from one day to the next [...] I if he kept me going, that when he got arrested I said:
"That's enough." And one day I decided [...] I was going to stop drinking.

Drug use was then associated with mental illness and self-medication, which functioned as a specific coping strategy to bring the illness under control (four cases):

[...] with the drugs and after the death of my daughter, I developed bipolar disorder, which was pretty bad, because I had a mania for a year [...] So I started to deal with it, and it took some time before a psychiatrist said it was bipolar disorder, so there was depression, there was some suicide attempt, and then the drugs. I also wasn't able to take medication that supposed to help me or go anywhere long term. So now I'm under the care of a psychiatrist and I'm on medication, I'm better, but the phases of depression and mania keep alternating (Raba).

[...] I went to detention, I was there for half a year, I sobered up, I found out that even with schizophrenia, sobriety can be managed and that I don't want to do drugs anymore (Zrnata).

In Raba's case the reason for the coping is again intertwined with the death of her daughter in the past, and she reproduced this strategy when her father died.

In three cases, drugs were part of the working life of the informants, as Vava illustrates:

[...] then I started doing topless dancing [...] So that's when I started flirting with the alcohol and I was really drinking a lot, it was rough. I had a period where I was on three 0.7 bottles of vodka a day, it was awful. I even had delirium in my twenties. I [...] started [to] like it, I knew rather than go out and dance that round, I knew I'd make twice as much for drinks if I talked to these guys. [...] so was getting paid quite a lot of money for it, and if you take it from the beginning, I didn't admit it all the time either. But I guess the first moment was when I noticed my hands were shaking. That's when I knew it was bad.

In two cases, the informants started using drugs to increase their self-esteem:

I've always had self-esteem issues, I've always dealt with what people think of me, I solved that with drugs. And now I'm at the where I don't anybody thinks of me, I've made my peace with how I look (Budata).

This reason tends to be relatively underestimated, but it may be relevant to the initiation of meth use, particularly for adolescents or young women, as meth causes an aversion to food and, of course, acts as a stimulant. Thus, there is no need to ingest food for energy, thus causing the person to lose, for adolescents and young women represents the fulfilment of the cultural ideal of an attractive woman.

In one case, the informant started using meth to give herself courage to shoplift:

I was addicted to drugs for like 17 years at first. I only needed the meth to give me the courage to steal.

SPIRITUAL HEALTH

Mental health problems were most often intertwined with marginalisation (in eight cases), was mainly subsistence in nature and acted as a significant stressor, causing learned helplessness, as shown, for example, by Zrénata:

Because I had been on the streets for four years and I was at such a stage, such a state of resignation, that I didn't believe in myself anymore and I was just, I can't do this, I can't do this." So I didn't even try to get off the street. I was just living like an animal, slowly, sleeping in barracks, basements, attics, stealing from the store to buy a hundred subacas day to food or to a shower sometimes. [...] And then I got this schizophrenia, I started to hear voices and I was so tired of it, exhausted, and I was functioning in such a way that one day I could stay on my feet and for three days I passed out and . And I was scared for my life that I was going to die of sheer exhaustion because there were so many voices and I had to answer them all and still concentrate on what I was doing, so I couldn't do it anymore.

Paradoxically, Zrata then stated that it was the schizophrenia she developed that her to become more fearful for herself and seek help to steer her life in a more positive direction.

In seven cases, victimisation in the form of partner violence played a role in poor mental health:

I was depressed when I was married. My husband abused me psychologically [...] He didn't like anything, he was always dissatisfied and then I suffered from insomnia, I fell into anxiety, I swallowed pills just to avoid having to deal with him. And I still have these anxieties, I get epilepsy, tetany. I've had that for 15 years.

Abuse by one of the parents:

My aunt is like my mom because my mom didn't like me and abused me. My aunt actually raised me. [...] and because I couldn't stand it anymore, my mom was always after me, when I asked something I was stupid, and my aunt was always talking to me, so I got angry and I left the house (Kunata).

Or psychological violence by people in the extended family:

[...] we live with my boyfriend's parents and they're starting to emotionally blackmail me a little bit, so it's been a lot. I [...] started going to [the service] and I was on antidepressants (Mnata).

In four cases there was a deterioration in mental health due to anxiety about the imprisonment and remorse about the crime committed:

The women who have been there a few times, it's like nothing for them, like they're home, but for me it was such a fear, I still felt so depressed about it. Because I wasn't in a good place mentally, I looked good on the outside but on the inside it was nothingness, nothingness, fear, I don't know how to describe it. There was just a constant fear of being turned away. I wouldn't want to experience that again in my life. [...] I had a bad conscience for that person and also what I had done, that didn't really have to do it (Luna).

For four informants, the source of poor mental health was the death of a loved :

It wasn't until my sister died. After I was released, I didn't need that much help [therapy] until my sister. [...] I can't even sleep, for me, within two years that mother and then my sister, I always grow up somehow (Merkla).

In one case (Raba - see excerpt above), the death of a child even played a role, and Raba was probably the most complex informant in terms of life story in our sample, having become, in her own , a heavy user from the age of 14, She subsequently experienced the aforementioned death of her child, then her father, struggled with bipolar disorder and epilepsy, experienced sexual violence, was in the sex business for a time in the form of prostitution, and was incarcerated.

Then childhood traumas (see Kunata excerpt above) also appeared in the interviews in three cases, low self-esteem (two cases), family problems (one case), neighborhood expectations (one case), and unwanted abortion (one case).

Poor mental health also had its manifestations, with the most common being anxious feelings, in some cases also associated with panic attacks or stichoma (11 cases):

I thought that after that long time, [...] 8 years [I] hadn't done any drugs, that the brain was . It's not, and the brain will never be okay again [...] Because when there's some

a huge onslaught of worry, stress, all sorts of things, your brain goes into a gingerbread man state. And now he hears voices and he's in a state where he suspects everyone around him, especially my husband [...] so I have to get some help to cope (Oskora).

In addition to anxious feelings, 11 informants also reported having problems with depressive states, which in some cases they deal with with antidepressants:

[...] [When] the problems started around me, I started taking antidepressants, and I still take them. I think I'll start to come off it somehow, but I didn't feel to it and it's such a crutch when you can't sleep and there's a lot in your head (Sovata).

Sovata also alludes to sleep disturbances, which came up in other interviews. Four of the informants then reported that they also struggle with expressions of aggression, of a physical nature, which was reported by Oskora:

I know I've been very aggressive lately, [...] because when I know [my daughter] is not telling me the truth, it can piss me off to the . [...] And that's what I'm afraid of. [...] if I hit her once, that I won't stop, that I can't control myself. [...] That's a terrible problem I've done time for actually maiming someone just because they slapped me. [...] Because then I can't see, I'm just in the dark and I can't see.

But also psychological forms:

[...] sometimes I hurt him [my current boyfriend] because I'm an asshole, not physically or materially, but [mentally]. [...] I [had] this boyfriend [...] and he beat me up a lot now I'm trying to get into another relationship, but it's so complicated. [...] I just need a little bit and I get blood in my head (Vleta).

Two informants then also said that they had attempted suicide in the (recent) past and one informant mentioned schizophrenia (Oskora would be the second informant as she suggests some symptoms above but did not mention schizophrenia herself). Two informants then also reported direct impacts on their physical health, particularly weight loss.

MARGINALIZATION

Social exclusion took subsistence and economic forms in the narratives:

I live with my mom and [...] my brother, but he's actually my nephew, my sister's son, and my mom has had him in foster since he was a kid. [...] they have been my support all the time even there [in prison]. And now I'm living with them, I don't think I could manage to pay for somewhere to live when I'm in that insolvency, and it helps my mum too if I give her a rent increase (Hajma).

Hajma illustrates the dynamics of marginalisation, which in the interviews was typically associated with insecure and low incomes, precarious housing, over-indebtedness and foreclosures, as well as the fact that in many cases the informants were already marginalised before serving their sentences and came from socially excluded backgrounds or had been through various institutions, as Posopa illustrated:

I have a brother who I met later, around 20, and we talk on the phone sometimes. I don't have anyone else, my father died I was in power, my mother died when was little, I didn't even know her, so I've been a loner since I was a kid. I grew up after the pimps, after [...]

Prison thus often substitutes for the institutions of the social system and becomes the last 'stop' in the institutional care that prisoners experience, in some cases from childhood or adolescence, as some prison staff confirm (Mertl 2023b).

Alongside this, however, a number of informants (16) also experienced some form of stigmatisation because of their past, as Bohuta and Yevina illustrate:

It was about three months ago at a bus stop. "Hey, here comes the one with the knife in her hand." I said: "Calm down and be quick, I was in a fit, I was drunk, he was abusing me and anyway, if I hadn't done it, I was dead" (Bohuta).

And honestly, now that I have to go do something, I'm completely disillusioned. I don't believe anymore. I really felt like such a waste. And some of the officials even let me know, What do you want, you came from prison." So this was really hard (Jevina).

Bohuta's case is typical of the fact that she was stigmatised for her criminal activity, which was nevertheless linked to abuse by her partner, but which was not taken into account in the stereotyping and stigmatisation. In addition to public condemnation, the case of Yevina presents a second typical situation, stigmatisation public institutions, which often continue to punish released persons even though they have already completed their sentence.

NARRATIVES RELATED TO CRIMINAL ACTIVITY

The most frequent reason given by the informants for serving their sentences was the connection with drugs, where the commission of crime is simplistically explained in terms of the combination of drug use and theft as a means of obtaining drugs. Although this was also the case for the informants in our research, for many of them the situation was not simple (although they first declared it themselves, but then elaborated their story more). This was also the case for Kunata:

[...] my mom was abusing me, [...] so I got mad and left house. My friend [...] told me: "Come on, let's go to [town]." [...] there she introduced me to a bunch who were stealing from the shops [...] And one day they told me to wait at the station. And there was a shop on the corner, and I said, "Hey, I'll try it." So I went, I three chocolates and I went to the station to sell them. [...] then, as I was still doing well, started drinking, then I found [...] [a partner] and was on. Criminal activity, and then I actually got to know him and the drugs and everything.

Kunata had linked theft and drug use to childhood trauma and running away from home. Vojslava offered another trajectory that was superficially linked to theft and drug use but was closely related to marginalization:

[...] I had bad housing, [...] I was young and I didn't know my way around it and I didn't realize that when you're on maternity leave and on welfare, the state gives you the bare minimum that you can't pay the rent with. I had a notice

to evict me, I wasn't doing drugs yet, I wasn't stealing, nobody was able to lend me such a large amount, so I solved it by going to the shopping centre and stealing 14 000 CZK worth of clothes without a few coins, but unfortunately I was caught [...] and the court decided it was a crime and I got benefits, which I didn't work for because I didn't get the money and I lost my housing. That's the reason why the kids ended up in my parents' care [...] it brought me to my knees that the family broke up, that I lost the kids, and I slipped into drugs.

A similar narrative was offered by Mlada, who was also convicted of theft related to drug use, but in her case her partner and his non-payment of alimony played a crucial role, which put Mlada in existential problems:

When I actually started drinking, I started committing, that's when my ex-boyfriend stopped paying me alimony, I was actually bonding with loans, so I was bonding one loan with another loan. I started drinking, so I was actually drinking 2 litres of a day, it actually took a toll the household, I started hitting the boys, they were hitting back, rightfully so. [...] I went to the OSPOD, saying that I couldn't keep up with their upbringing, so the older two went to the Klokánk, I couldn't take that back, because I got court ordered, I got probation, I ended up on the street, I learned to steal and I switched to the drugs.

The influence of the partner on the commission of crime was the second most frequently mentioned factor, partner influence appearing in various in the narratives. Hornusa pointed out that her husband's addictions became a great burden on the family:

I had that husband for 8 years, I hated him already [...] he was doing drugs and he lost everything. He was running a business, like making 150,000 a month, and he lost everything. And I didn't have, like, 4 months to pay the rent [...] I was taking my money too, but I didn't cover that. The kids went to school, so I [...] I used to steal. In the supermarkets, food, clothes too, a lot to have money.

In several cases, the reason for imprisonment was violence perpetrated by the partner and subsequent violent crime by the informant, as recounted, for example, by Koruta:

[...] my ex used to hit me so hard I turned the knife on him about three times. [...] he survived [...] He attacked me in the kitchen when I started to make lunch, it was obvious at that , I had a knife in my hand and it was on. It was very fast, there was blood everywhere.

In Mnata's case, the reason was psychological violence by her partner:

When my boyfriend was abusing me, my self-esteem was very low. So I lied, only out of fear. And I kidnapped a kid that time. But only because couldn't tell my boyfriend I wasn't pregnant. So I pretended to be pregnant to keep the peace at home. So I just kidnapped the baby.

A total of eight informants reported that they had been convicted of violent crime, five of were in to a partner or a close person they knew. In respect, then, the influence of drugs and mental health on criminal activity is well documented in Pilata's narrative:

For battery. I should have stabbed my boyfriend. Because I told him I was gonna leave him, and he told me I'd regret it. [...] And then there was some sort of argument [...] I know absolutely nothing. I don't know how the cops pulled me out, how they took me to the liquor store, I woke up in the morning and I was in the hospital because I was wearing the same nightgown as I was in the hospital, asked if

and they 't, if I'm even aware that I've done anything. I was so confused when they told me I'd hurt someone.

Mental health was closely related to the commission of violent , with five of the eight informants reporting that they had committed or in violent crime in a state of affect, uncontrollable aggression, or as a result of other mental health problems.

The final category we will at is deception, which was closely linked to marginalization, where in six of the eight cases, the informants reported in their narratives that they were either in a marginalized position and the deception was part of a strategy to deal with subsistence issues or they had other economic problems and the deception was meant to solve them. Libla offers an example of the first case:

[...] I was stealing on the , I was doing meth [...] And now [I was in jail] for fraud, for giving something away and knowing it someone's. [...] I didn't have a complete childhood, I know I can't make excuses for it, I was born under the table, I never had anything. Not even my mum (Libla).

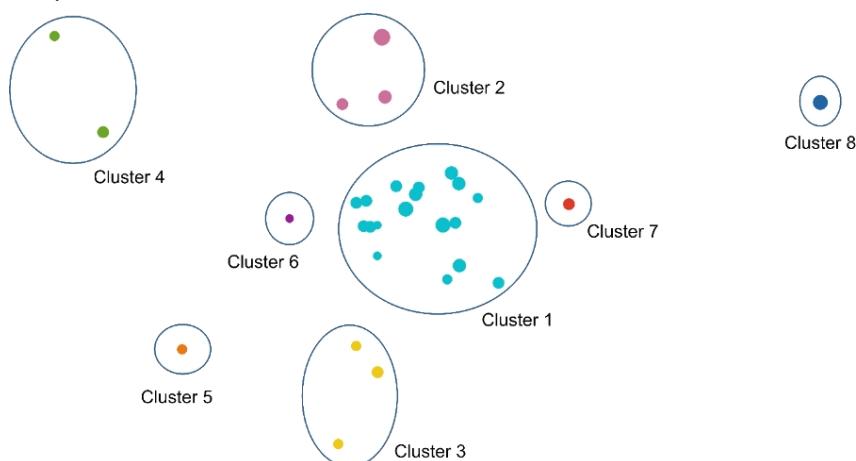
And Jevina is talking about the second case:

[...] I wanted to do something else and I just went freelance. And I shouldn't have done that, because then the debts piled up [...] and then it was one step. I committed fraud. [...] I can't run a business at all, I need to have some kind of supervision, like an employee-employer. I committed fraud, embezzlement, I used other people's money.

Interestingly and tellingly, in the remaining two cases the deception was again linked to the partner lives of the informants in question.

Within coded data, we still performed a cluster analysis, both of individual (female informant) cases, and assigned codes. In the graph number 1, we can see how the individual cases of female informants were distributed into specific clusters that had specific reasons for committing crime.

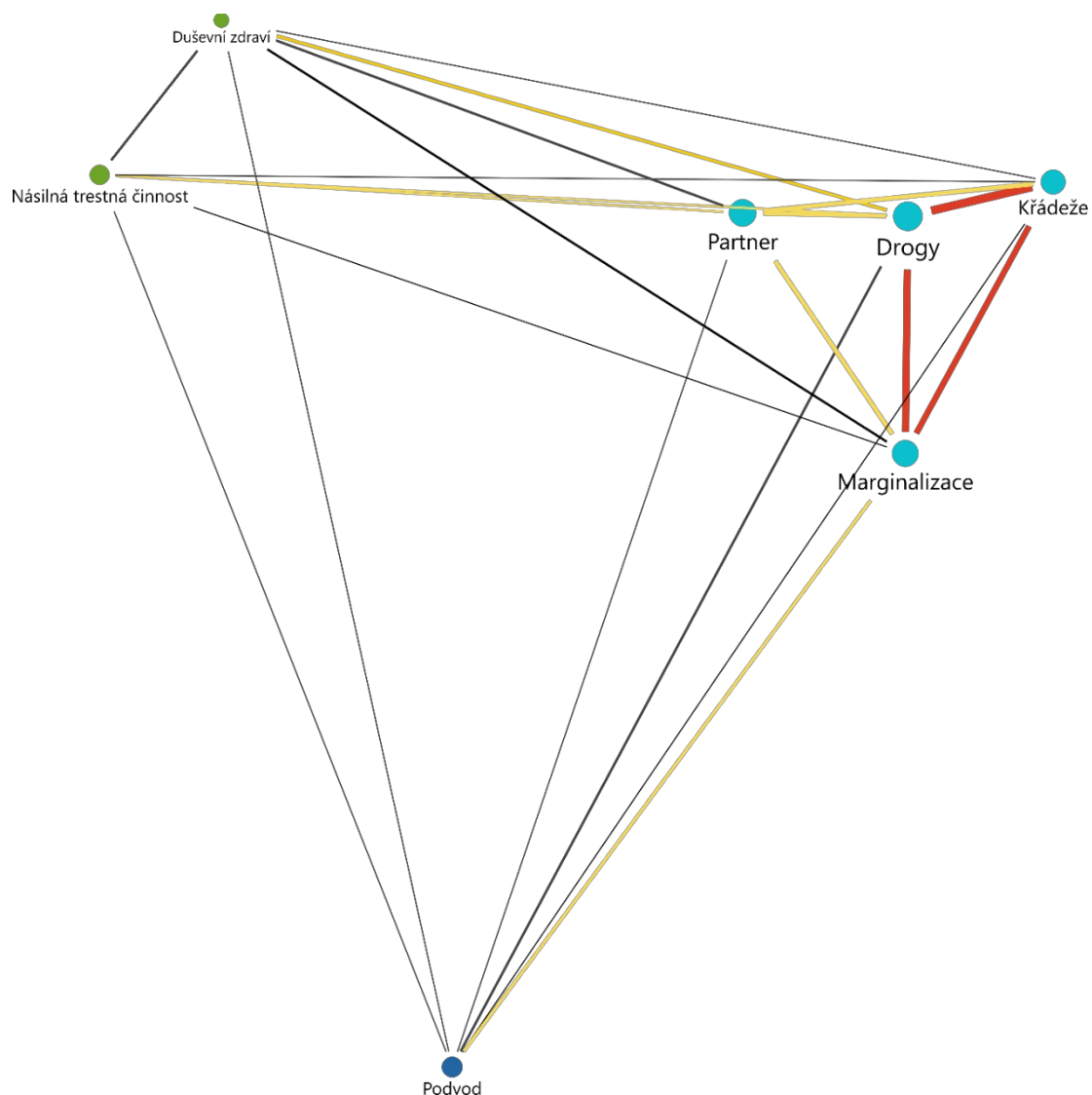
Graph 1



Source: own production from data

From the graph, we can see that analysis resulted in eight clusters that represented a specific combination of causes of committing criminal activity. The clusters are ranked from most to least numerous, with the first cluster containing female informants (19 in total) who struggled mainly with use, theft and marginalisation, and the partner also played a more significant role. The second cluster contained three female informants, with the main factors here being: violent crime, mental health, drug use and partner. In the third cluster (three female informants), deception played a significant role in relation to marginalisation. The fourth cluster consisted of two female informants and dominant factors were violent crime and partner. The following clusters were then one informant each. In the fifth cluster, the factors of deception and partner played a dominant role. In the sixth, the partner was the dominant factor. The seventh cluster was similar to the first, with drug use and theft being significant factors there, as well as

Graph 2



Source: own production from data

marginalisation to a lesser extent, unlike the first cluster, the partner played no role. In the final eighth cluster, there was a significant combination of theft, drug use, marginalisation and mental health. The analysis confirmed that marginalisation and drug use were the dominant factors, with theft and mental health linked to them. At the same time, the analysis that partner appears as a in most clusters, it can be seen as a 'subtle' but very important reason why women commit crime.

Indeed, this link is confirmed in Figure 2, where a cluster analysis of the individual codes identified as causes of is performed. This analysis shows that three clusters were present within codes, representing how the codes (reasons) appeared together in interview (cases). Within the first cluster, the factors of use, partner, marginalisation and theft appeared together very frequently. Then in the second cluster, violent crime and mental health and in the third cluster, fraud as a specific factor. At the same time, the association that each factor had with each other can be seen in the graph. Marginalisation, drugs and theft had a very strong association with each other, which is not surprising given that they often appeared together in the cases. Marginalisation then had a strong association with fraud and partner; then theft and partner; drugs with mental health, partner and violent ; and then partner with violent .

INSIGHTS IN EXPLORATORY INTERVIEWS WITH EXPERTS

We asked about the reasons why women commit in exploratory interviews, which yielded very similar reasons to the narratives of released women. The reasons listed, including their frequency for each , can be seen in Figure 3.

Graph 3



Source: own production from data

The perspectives of practitioners largely replicated the narratives of the dismissed women and the findings of the analysis. The only differences were the mention of child support, obstruction of and neglect, that did not appear in the interviews with the released women. One informant then also mentioned ethno-racial stigma and put it in the context of marginalization and in particular generationally transmitted poverty among the Roma population, factor that also appeared in another analysis (see Mertl 2023b).

asked why women have been imprisoned more often than men in recent years, two informants had no idea why this might be the case and did not want to speculate. The remaining 10 male and female informants then offered various possible reasons. The most common (seven cases in total) was the feminization of poverty, which a number of male and female informants characterized in terms of

the "emancipation" of women from men, by which she the loosening of traditional cultural roles in the sense of the man as breadwinner and the woman as caretaker of the household. However, the term emancipation does not fully capture this situation, as the informants were referring more the economic marginalisation that has been transferred to women through social change and the perpetuation of various stereotypes and inequalities. This situation is perhaps most accurately described by one expert:

In general, I think has to do with the that there are a lot more demands on women. It used to be that women stayed at home and the man earned money, they didn't have nearly the same opportunities to do business, to go out into the world, the opportunities are really huge. And the world is more open, and that there's a lot more pressure on women to earn, to take care themselves, because men don't really care about them very often. A lot of times I see these women being abandoned by these partners or maybe they have someone but you hear that that's the problem, that it's not working, that they don't have that support, so they just really often resort to because it's suddenly some easy money and it would solve a problem. And I hear that a too, There was this opportunity to take the money, so why wouldn't I take it, it didn't occur to me." One year it went, two years it went, and then suddenly it didn't. They try it, they have the options, they have the opportunities, and even though somewhere that it's wrong, they don't realize consequences that await them, they don't know how to connect the dots. So I think that's what makes it a challenging time. It's all connected to that, they're taking risks (Expert, eight years experience).

Thus, emancipation has occurred only symbolically, since women do not have the same status as men, for example, they are not paid equally for the same work, but duties, especially taking care of children and household chores, have remained to a large extent. This may result in a certain anxiety and marginalisation, which women then address through property crime to provide for themselves and their children, or to compensate for a dysfunctional or toxic partner, which was also revealed in the interviews with the released women (and mentioned the expert above). In three cases, it was mentioned that there is an increase in the number of women who risk using drugs and are addicted to them, which can be explained by the mentioned traumatising and marginalisation, where drugs serve as a coping tool to compensate for a situation they cannot cope with. In two cases, coronavirus was then mentioned as a reason why women started to be more incarcerated, however, this does not correspond to the trend that was already in place before coronavirus (see Marešová 2018). However, it is a factor that may have catalysed the two reasons mentioned above. And one informant then cited the reason as being due to too much value looseness in society, which she saw

in the lack of respect for authority and other people, while the younger generations, according to this informant, are "more brazen, more violent, they do not take the interference in the intimate world of the other as something fundamental, the danger is increasing".

The six experts also addressed the question of what they saw as the differences in the reasons why women and men commit crime. In five cases, experts talked about partner and other relationships as a key differentiating factor, with women being more attached to partners or other close people or groups with their criminal activities:

Not many women decide to make a brewery and start distributing, but most of the time they fall in love with one of these elements and then they fall into it and work their way up the same level their partner, but most of the time they are in of the guy. Just in this area and often other areas (Expert, 15 years experience).

This corresponds with research (Burch 2017; Lane 2020) that shows that women are more likely to commit crime in conjunction with partners than men with female partners. Two informants then pointed out that women are more likely to be incarcerated in relation to domestic violence (i.e., in to a partner, but in a different sense), which was also the case for many of the women in our sample of released women. In one case, then, the higher latency of use among women, who then get into more trouble and end up in prison, was mentioned as a differentiating factor, and in one case, violence against children was mentioned as a specific offence that is more often associated with women than men, which is of course due to the fact that women are more likely to care for children.

SITUATION IN PRISON

In the context this issue, we asked how the informants evaluated their stay in , whether this experience helps them in the present, how they prepared for their release and what they would say to other women in a similar situation.

EVALUATION OF THE EXECUTION OF THE SENTENCE

In VTOS evaluation, our assumption (and we had it confirmed from the pilot focus group with incarcerated women) was that completing a program in a specialized section (SPO), standardized, or other therapeutic/counseling program would positively influence one's outlook on serving time and contribution to later life. This assumption was to some extent fulfilled when women who had undergone some type of such programme evaluated it positively. However, it was also confirmed that serving a sentence is a complex and multifaceted experience, so when we crosstabulated the codes with the variable of having completed a program, it became clear that the two groups (the group that had completed a program and the group that had not) rated VTOS similarly in some categories and differently in others. The group that had completed a specialized program rated prison staff more positively (which corresponds

with other research, see Mertl 2023b), were more likely to see VTOS as a kind of 'recovery stay' (this has also been found elsewhere, see Brown, Toyoki 2013; Crewe, Levins 2020; Fróis 2017), talked about the induction of quality social networks in prisons, but were also more likely to talk about the fact that VTOS was useless, to point to the impact of prisionisation, and to declare that VTOS was somehow trying to 'survive'. The greater emphasis on prisionisation may have been a result of the learning of the skill of (self-)reflection that the specialised prison programmes brought to women prisoners. Indeed, the majority (ten) of the women rated the programme at the SPO very positively, with only three having a negative view and two ambivalent.

The positive view of the SOP and other programmes outside these sections had a number of levels, firstly a number of informants pointed out that completing the programme had given them some self-confidence and they had learned to work with themselves:

I learned a lot there. How to work with addiction, that addiction is for life. That I can be surprised by a little thing. And I might want to want to give myself something. And it prepared me a lot for the risky situations out there. It made me realise what my behaviour patterns were.

Like I was scared at first, I didn't want to communicate with them, it was for me, I never went to a psychiatrist, to a psychologist in my life, and I found out that they taught me... I kept telling myself, it's my fault what I did, but they taught me that could pick up behavior patterns from my family. So actually, we figured out at that early age that there was already a problem, it's just, we didn't communicate at home. My dad was an alcoholic, my sister was an alcoholic, so I lived in an alcoholic family, it was just stable in our family, except my mom didn't drink (Mlada).

But they teach you to work with the addiction, how the triggers work, because the addiction, you can't get rid of it, I'll be addicted for the rest of my life. Except that I learned to work with it, I don't need it, it doesn't do anything to me [...] (Takla).

In addition, in Mlada's case, the context of why she committed the crime was identified, which consisted of growing up in a toxic family and learning a certain normality socially. Jevina built on this by pointing out that staying in and completing SPO can also improve family relationships, thus increasing the success rate of reentry into society:

What helped me was to change the mindset or to start, those therapists always said, we are just guides, we will just show you around, but you have to walk the path yourself. It's helped me a lot, to sort out my feelings of inferiority, it's hard with me, but everyone has their price. It helped me to sort out my family relationships, because it was only after two years that I relented and allowed any visitors at all. I was terribly ashamed and closed in on myself that I had committed a terrible crime and was worth nothing. So to change that mindset, it helped me tremendously (Jevina).

However, beyond improving skills, relationships and mental health, SPO also provided practical help:

We have [...] discussed a lot how to talk to them in the authorities to get our way and not: "You're an asshole, so bye." That also helped me a lot, knowing that if I wanted to achieve something with the social services, I had to talk to them politely and stand my ground, I knew what I wanted (Raba).

[...] in specialised section they guided us to work out the debts the first year when the foreclosures came used to throw it in the trash because I thought, I can't do it because it was piling up, when I was in the specialised section I requested it from the court and I mapped out the debts (Takla).

As part of the practical assistance and training, the SPO and other programmes helped women prepare for situations and circumstances that may arise after release and, where appropriate, provided options for dealing with these situations:

So the toxicologist [SPO] will give you some technological procedure, she will prepare you for it technically. And sometimes, of course, it can be completely different out there. Some craving, you have a chocolate and goes away, that's nonsense. But like globally transferring those thoughts to something else, so I had emergency phone numbers ready if I needed to call my dad, my daughter, or a couple of times I even called my therapist's toxic [...] (Oskora).

In this respect, Chrasta also appreciated the preparation for the possibility of stigmatization after VTOS:

[...] I was quite prepared for it [the bad reactions of the environment], thanks to the toxin [SPO]. They prepared us there that we couldn't expect everyone to sit on their asses, so had to be ready for it.

Alternatively, SPO and other programs also motivated further treatment and provided information about this post-sentencing option that incarcerated women may not have even known about:

[...] after that I was convinced that I had to go to that community, there was no other option for because I had been doing drugs since I was 14 and hard drugs, so I knew that I didn't know how to do anything else or I didn't do anything else, I didn't anything as much as drugs (Raba).

Raba subsequently pointed out that the SPO environment also mitigates prionisation and consequences, which can increase the chances of successful reintegration into society:

[...] I didn't even perceive the social phobia, the shock of being locked up and released, that much. You can cook, bake, do normal things, so there's less of a difference. [...] you're not so completely removed from that normal environment, like when you have to go to the canteen, you're not allowed to take anything, you're not allowed to talk to anybody, so 's all like dehumanised in that prison, that it's actually just like isolating those people, but it doesn't help those people.

The SOPs and other therapeutic/counselling programmes were thus also a turning point in the life of some informants and the aforementioned "recovery stay":

But on the other hand, I'm thinking, thank God I got arrested. First of all, because I got rid of it [alcohol], because I wouldn't have got rid of it, and , I was able to reflect a lot on myself there. Especially at SPO, I had a lot of very good time there to reflect on myself and start my life (Pilate).

The metaphorisation of prison as a *healing stay* was subsequently thematised by women who had not undergone any therapeutic programme, and consisted in the fact that prison had removed these women from an environment that was harmful to them and from which they had no power to get out on their own.

The negative view of SOPs were typologically two. The first is offered by Kunata:

But as I sat out those first two sentences [...] I did the tox screen [SPO]. And I thought: "I'm going to follow my dream, live a proper life." But the way I see it, they just put on rose-colored . I just walked , one kick, I was like, I gotta take it, another kick, and I was reaching for the heroin. Because I was actually doing heroin, so I was reaching for heroin and I was getting better. So instead of it [...] giving me something [...] it didn't give me anything. I felt like they just put rose-tinted on me. Because here when you go out you don't get help, here you have to do everything yourself. If you don't have money earned from work, you end up on the street again. Because what else is there for that person, to steal again, to do drugs again, he'll have a place to live.

In her narrative, Kunata directs criticism at the SPOs she attended, but the context of her testimony suggests that the problem was more her marginalisation and structural problems, which no one helped her with after her release. Moreover, Kunata was clearly highly motivated and experienced even more disillusionment after her release when she encountered structural problems that she did not know how to deal with and acted as strong stressors, which she dealt with by adopting a coping strategy, i.e. drug use. This criticism of the SPO was therefore more a criticism of a poorly set up social and support system.

The second line of criticism was emphasized by Vava and Sovata:

[...] there [at the SPO] everyone was probably treading on own. I'll give you an example, somebody, and it was done there commonly, secretly, they were doing drugs. And the girls were just snitching on themselves. [...] I just blew it off (Vava).

There was a governess who used to hide drugs and everything for her wards, that was in the toxic [SPO]. And she was a trained educator. She's not there , and she was fine, but she let those girls fuck her over. Like a tox screen is actually a spa, I that's where the ladies should be working their asses first of all. And there the ladies had the rug, the chairs, the little movies, the VIP treatment, they were living on all fours [...] and I don't think that's the solution. [...] they were there happily doing their first league and nobody minded (Sovata).

This criticism was based on the fact that the SPO is only a kind of tinsel that does not bring anything rehabilitative to the real prisoners. It is, of course, possible that drugs are present at the SPO, or at some of the runs of individual sections, since drugs are generally present in prisons. However, as can be seen from the fact that only two informants highlighted this problem, it is probably not a phenomenon that occurs frequently.

The ambivalent view of the two informants was that they both considered the SPO to be a good tool and a way to work with , did not like certain specific settings of the SPO that they had been through, and they both mentioned the behaviour of the staff.

In general, the informants evaluated the execution of the sentence through both positive and negative categories. Among the positive categories, the most frequently mentioned (by a total of 15 informants) was a positive experience with prison staff. This was illustrated by Chrasta and Benata:

It gave me a chance to get to know people. Just because it's a crime scene doesn't mean it's all bad people. It made me realise that the staff care about the inmates too.

Probably the governess. The social worker and the special education teacher. Those three were the ones that kept me there the most, they were just people I could talk to, that were just normal and I needed it there badly (Benata).

Informants most appreciated the fair approach, interest and clear and predictable behaviour of staff, which is consistent with other research (Crewe et al. 2022; Mertl 2023b). At the same time, it should be added that adequate staff and a well-adjusted rehabilitation culture in working with prisoners constitute one of the key factors that largely influence the establishment of trust and also the success of prison programmes (e.g. Blagden et al. 2016; Meško and Hacin 2019).

The second, frequently mentioned category was discouragement, under which informants (13 in total) expressed the feeling that VTOS and its requirements had discouraged them from committing further crimes, or declared that they did not want to return to prison and were afraid of doing so. The following excerpts may serve as an example:

But I would never want to go back there again and I would do everything in the world for it [...] for example, the loss of loved ones, it's terrible, you suffer there. But I've learned my lesson, very learned, and I never want to go back there (Jara).

He gave me that I never want to go back there again in my life. It's just that I don't want to experience the people I there anymore, and even outside avoid them. [...] clearly there are people and people, they weren't all bad, but I don't see why I should continue to talk to them outside. I don't want to. For me it's in the past and it's supposed to stay in the past and I want to look ahead. I dealt with the past at one time too, but going back to the past all the time is wrong. The past is the past and you either learn to live with it or you're fucked.

[...] I don't want to go back to prison, it didn't do me any good. But it's really about coming out and you don't want to go back to that environment, you don't want to wear flannel shirts buttoned up to your neck, you don't want to listen to someone all the time, yes, no, yes, no. Just generally, you can't get out, all that stuff. But mostly a lot of people you sit with, you get to know, everybody's pulling something on you, trying something on you. It doesn't give you anything to keep you from committing (Merkla).

From the individual narratives, it can be seen that the reasons why the prison discouraged informants from returning to it were varied. In Jara's case, severed ties with loved ones played a role, for which she struggled and which are often linked to the detachment and unavailability of prisons for visits (Fassin 2017; Fróis 2017; Godbolt 2018). Koruta then did not want to repeat VTOS because she had had a bad experience with her fellow inmates, and upon release she adopted a relatively common coping strategy to with prison stigma, repressing the past and creating a strong impermeable boundary (Jones 2003; LeBel 2008; Murphy et al. 2011). Merkla then complemented the bad experience with female inmates with a negative

perceptions of the prison environment, the reproduced hierarchy and the loss of autonomy. Merkle's observation that prison did not give her much and does not in itself guarantee that a person will not continue to commit crime that constructing prison as an institution that primarily designed to deter the commission of other criminal activity by its conditions is problematic. First of all, the persons in question have to interpret the punishment in this way, and it should be added here that of the 13 informants mentioned, eight were first-time offenders and five were convicted, so it can be said that the road to such an interpretation for incarcerated persons, if are not worked with in any way, can be long in many cases. Indeed, completion of a specialised programme in prison (SPO or standardised) may play a significant role in this reflection, as three of the five multi-sentenced women mentioned had completed such a programme.

Some informants (nine in total) pointed out that they were able to create social networks in VTOS that helped them cope with their sentences and in some cases even persisted after their release:

There were women there for the first time in performance too, same as me, mostly for fraud, they weren't alcoholics or addicts, no. I just made a circle of women there, and everybody would sniff it out, because you could tell that we didn't belong there, that somebody was coming, and you could just tell. And when I promised the women that I would send them postcards afterwards, I bought 12 postcards and I didn't have the energy to finish them. But I did send them, and I quickly ran of the post office. There was still that fear (Luna).

I've got a lot of friends, we're more bonded with these girls, what we've been through together, that we look at each other and we know and we're actually like, we know what we've been through and we're cool [...] We have FB groups, [...] We are friends on FB, we talk, we know each other, when we meet, we hug, it's for, you know each other and like the biggest secrets because you tell each other there, so it connects you (Kyta).

Significantly, Luna was so traumatised by VTOS that even the positive social networks she had formed in were unable to be maintained due to her anxiety, as they were linked to negative memories of the period which, like Koruta above, she wanted to erase from her life. On the other hand, Kyta had no problem maintaining her positive social networks after her release, as she considered them as part of her lived past and these social ties gave her some security her life after her release. Specifically, the social networks induced in prison were perceived by Zrnata:

Maybe 's weird, but I was relatively happy in prison, and getting out was a big change because I have schizophrenia and I have a hard time with change. So it was a big change, and I think the hardest part was that I suddenly like I didn't belong. Because there I felt like I belonged with the girls, I was going to, so I belonged with the work team, with the girls on the floor, and now I came out and I like I didn't belong anywhere at all. [...] that feeling of being uprooted. That lasted for quite a long time, that I even missed those girls from the prison, I missed them a lot, I missed them a lot at the beginning. And I still text some of the girls to this day.

Because of her marginalization, Zrnata basically belonged nowhere before her sentence, she had no group which she could identify and which would give her some personal security in life. Ironically, she only gained such a group in the VTOS, so her release was difficult for her.

also in terms of loss of this group, and like Kyta, Zrnata tried to maintain some contact.

The last positive category was the acquisition of certain social skills during the VTOS (six informants mentioned this category), where informants often spoke about the patience they had to learn due to the prison regime, where they had to wait for something all the time (for example, to be taken to the showers, to lunch, to have their application form processed, etc.). In addition, informants also reported that they had improved in various interpersonal skills.

NEGATIVE CATEGORIES

Most informants (16 in total) talked about the strain on their mental health in relation to VTOS, which was caused by a variety of . Boredom and lack of outlets were stressful for Luna and Zrnata:

[...] then they put me in [prison]. And I was there from May to September. And because there was no work for me there, you don't have anything there, there if you have five years you don't get any work, only four years, and there I felt like I was in a psychiatric ward. That's when I was just walking down that corridor because the walk is only an hour and I'm used to [doing something], I can't stand just lying or sitting (Luna).

And I think the biggest problem with convicts is boredom, just long periods of time with nothing to do. That's why there are so many people who want to work, but there's nowhere to go.

In some cases, informants negatively resented cohabitation with fellow inmates:

I was happy to be home and to have it over . Because it was so mentally challenging with those there. Because there are people who are on the , they were doing drugs a lot, so overall I was happy that it was over and that I could be in my own place (Benata).

Prison just gave me view that there were 60 people on a floor, we were each different, I was tired of prison, especially mentally, was exhausting. Then when I came home from work, I'd take a bath and I still didn't have my space to hide. That's enough (Mlada).

Moreover, for Mlada, the fact that she did not have "her" space where she take a break from the other inmates was problematic. Sometimes the specific prison hierarchy was a stressor in this regard, which could also result in bullying and violence:

[...] the girls hide from them [fellow inmates], [...] they rule there, there is bullying, normal bullying. I didn't give in, I said right from the to leave me alone, that I didn't want anything from them and they didn't want anything from me. I was calm throughout the whole punishment, like, but it was disturbing how they were humiliating the others, like, Go clean up for me." They like, Go mop for me." [...] it was taking away my psyche. I wondered what they were better at, hurting those girls like that, horrible (Myslava).

For Hornus, the very act of joining and the procedures for joining the VTOS were stressful:

The boarding was horrible, horrible feelings when you board, I boarded alone [...] horrible, completely anxious, heartbroken, I thought the end, the end. [...] detention is the worst thing there is, we were locked in there, you get a tracksuit and you go out for half an hour. I've only been there over the summer, horrible, you cry, depression, horrible.

Takla then recounted that prison was a very challenging experience overall, because of the inability to see her children:

And destroyed me, both physically and mentally, it's just not a prison for me, so the experience is very big. And in terms of psychological, I ended up in prison on anti-depressants, but that was just because of the length of the sentence, I I wouldn't survive, [...] the first six I couldn't sleep, I cried myself to sleep, so the girls had to wake me up, it was a lot. [...] There it , the thought that you have 66 months to , 66 months without children. And then there was the covid, there were no visitors, it was terrible for me.

Disrupted family relationships are also due to visitation opportunities that are specifically limited for women, as most prisons in the system tend to be set aside for men, that women's prisons are geographically more difficult to access, which of course makes it difficult or impossible to visit loved ones (Godbolt 2018). This is also the to some extent in the Czech Republic, where the two main women's prisons are located in Vysočina and Moravian-Silesian regions, destinations that can be difficult to reach from, for example, the Karlovy Vary region.

As can be seen, prison, if conceived in a purely repressive way, has a great potential to destroy prisoners rather than help them in their rehabilitation. A specific issue is then prisonisation, will be discussed below, and to entrench marginalised persons in position and to make marginalised persons out of persons who do not come from social exclusion.

The second category mentioned by 15 informants was VTOS as a wasted time that did not help them in any way and did not move them forward in their lives, as mentioned by Mnata, for example:

Like I'm gonna fix myself there? No, no one there is thinking about changing. [...] Wasted time. And I'm not the only one with lost time. There were so many people , those people are just bored, they have nothing to do.

Merkel also expressed frustration with the execution of the sentence:

It took everything. Everything got away from me, what happened to my mom happened, my kids are somewhere else, I knew couldn't just come out of jail and come get them. Relationships. It took everything away from me. [...] it didn't give me anything in the sense their circles, it didn't give me anything in the sense of their depressing colouring books and all that, it just cuts you up even more, then you sit on that cimera and you question because someone's poking around and picking at shit and it's completely useless in the end.

Although Merkla mentions activities that have some form of therapy, in her own words she has not been through any program, so her assessment is directed towards the regular treatment program and content, which found traumatic rather than helpful. This reflection was further elaborated in a different way by Sezema through her own experience:

In [prison] nobody talks to you, nobody works with you, nothing happens, you just go to work and then you do what you want. That someone would talk to you about what could be changed how you improve. When you signed up for an activity there, it's called 3Z - stop, , - and they told me that I was on my fifth performance and that it was pointless, so that knocked me down and I didn't even try to do anything.

Sezema did not consider her employment in prison to be a sufficient activity that rehabilitative potential, and in her case the disillusionment stemmed from the attitude of the staff, she said, did not want to work with her therapeutically because she had multiple convictions. This corresponds with the findings in other research (Mertl 2023b) where some staff expressed the that it was not worth working with multi-sentenced people in a rehabilitative way. This contradicts the principle of *risk-need-responsivity* (RNR) introduced by Donald Andrews and James Bonta (2010) and on which treatment programmes in the Czech prison system are based, as they suggest that multi-sentenced people generally have more complex interrelated needs and can make the greatest progress if the programme is chosen appropriately. However, it should be stressed that Sezema's experience may also have been caused by the conditions that staff in prisons have to work with, namely understaffing, overcrowding, limited capacity of rehabilitation programmes and cultural discrepancies between rehabilitation and repression (Mertl 2023b).

The fact that the execution of the sentence built on specialized therapeutic/counseling programs made more sense to the informants is confirmed by the and the breakdown of the 15 informants mentioned above. Indeed, six of them had not undergone any specialised programme in prison, and thus evaluated the standard execution of their sentences. Of the remaining nine informants who had undergone some kind of programme, only five of them evaluated the execution of the sentence in this negative way, while the remaining four informants distinguished between the execution of the sentence in the standard section and in the SOP, which, on the contrary, they perceived as meaningful. This means that the opportunity to undergo a specialised programme, especially SPO, significantly influenced the view of the usefulness of the stay. This was vividly highlighted by Grain:

It was really cool there [at the SPO] you got motivation, you could do something for yourself, it wasn't just such a glorified time, because in prison it's vanity upon vanity. Or at least it felt like that to me at the time, that was the first time I did time. And addiction treatment, you can do something for yourself, and that made to me. The groups and the therapy, and went by, you didn't get bored, and it had the added bonus that could maybe work on yourself so you wouldn't go back to that prison again. I believed it at the time too, that I would stop doing drugs, that I would never go back to prison. It was good there, there was a great staff there, therapist and educator, the commanders were top notch for us because we , so they didn't have any problems with us, so it was like really good.

And from the other side, Orasa built on this:

Apart from the fact that it helped me stop taking the drugs, 's a complete waste of time because it just doesn't work as it should there. [...] activities and here it, I don't know that it educates you, it doesn't, it certainly doesn't. I don't know if maybe on the SPO] toxics, if they have it differently, but when you're on a normal floor, it just seems like a completely wasted time.

Four informants then stated that VTOS had taken away everything in their lives that they placed value on, including autonomy, family and partner relationships, children, material security, and mental and physical health. Three informants declared the deterioration of their family situation, especially regard to their children and close family.

The third negative category associated serving time was prionization and its effect on the informants during and after release. The impact of prizonisation is described vividly by Oskora:

And my feelings, terrible. I didn't want to go home, get acclimatized there, you get used to it, when you've been there for three, four years and up, you just don't want to go home. [...] when they lock you up, your brain closes up like a nutshell. If you have a short sentence, like two years, it's fine. You deal with what's out there, you call the family, you have contact with the family, you look forward to going out. If you have a longer sentence than five years, the brain just shuts down and you're running on inertia. You do what they want, you walk around with your head down, yes, yes. That's, I think, a defence to keep the brain, to keep the person from going mad.

Oskora captures very well the principle of loss of autonomy, which is often emphasized in the of prionization, and learning a certain prison habitus that is necessary for survival in prison (Haney 2012; Martin 2018). The problem then arises after release, as Koruta reflects very well:

[...] I do what I need, when I need, with whom I need, I basically do what I want. I'm in the mood for a beer, I'm gonna have a beer. But you can't transfer what was going on there to real life at all, you just can't. Like you have to follow some rules, you have to do that anyway, you have to get up in the morning, you go to work, you have to go home, you have to do laundry, you have to cook, these are things that are normal. But there's no way.

The incompatibility of the prison habitus and the habitus of mainstream society was highlighted by Liam Martin (2018) in his research, who pointed out that the transition and re-learning of a different habitus is very challenging for released persons, and they may therefore have problems with very ordinary tasks, especially when they involve normal interpersonal interaction. This was confirmed by Sovata:

[...] the first time I went to that ward, I said something to a convict there and she said: "I don't know what you're saying. I don't understand you at all." Well, that was a to me. And actually afterwards, when I had some visitors, they looked at me to see what happened because I started expressing myself in simple sentences, completely stupid, you just can't express yourself. Even in letters I wrote from , and suddenly I'm talking like a Neanderthal. So that expression actually made it difficult for me to jump into normal communication. So I had a bit of a problem with that there [...]

Prizonization then included the temporal dimension of waiting within the prison , as Kunata suggests above:

[...] I hate waiting, it's like in prison, you wait for everything, for breakfast, for the doctor, I hate waiting.

In line with the above categories, 11 informants then declared that they had tried to somehow bridge the VTOS and "survive" until their release, and this was vividly captured by Koruta:

I did it myself. You need three basic things there, something to smoke, coffee and something to wash in. Those are the three basic things you need in prison, otherwise you'll go without anything.

11 informants also had negative experiences with staff, which ranged on a spectrum from dysfunction and unpleasantness to denial of rehabilitation access and various forms of violence. Some staff dysfunction, possibly due to overload, is described by Budata:

[...] if a person wants or needs something, he can ask for a social worker or a psychologist, he needs. At the same time, the way it works there is that one asks, there are slips of paper written, in the evening they are handed in, maybe even to the doctor, and you write the slips every day. And maybe in a month or two they'll remember you, because they've got a lot of papers, so they'll come and see you. But it's just you need something, they don't do much for you. [...] Maybe it's the fact that there are too many people and not enough staff, I don't know, but I think the prison is not doing it should be doing anyway.

Budata's narrative should be understood not literally in the sense nothing happened for one or two months, but in the sense of the substance of the message, namely that there is a delay between the submission of the request and its processing, during which time the problem may "fizzle out" or

"vaporize". On the surface, this appears to "solve" the problem, but in reality the problem is latent and the whole situation is very disruptive to trust and dynamic security. Overcrowding and the difficulty of managing the processing of applications, as well as the timely and optimal processing of applications, have also emerged in other research (Mertl 2023; Mertl, Bareš 2018). In addition to understaffing, overcrowding is often also related to the size of prisons, where large-capacity facilities severely limit rehabilitation work with prisoners (see Johnsen et al. 2011). Alongside this, Budata also highlighted experiences where staff did not, in her opinion, uphold rehabilitation values and principles, which could be due to the aforementioned overload, repressive attitudes or simply personal antipathies. A lack of a built or absent rehabilitation culture was experienced by several informants, and Ula was also sympathetic when she expressed the feeling that she staff were burnt out:

In [the prison] there were very nice escorts, otherwise it was the same everywhere, the . Such a professional distance, you understand that they're going to burn out after a while, so then they're not nice either, it depends on the character.

In addition to dysfunctional or unpleasant staff, Sovata also encountered staff who promoted prionisation and were not very rehabilitative:

[...] I [came] home from work and I saw the governess and I saw that they were ready for the exercise and I didn't because I thought they had left and she suddenly appeared on that floor and I said I thought they had left and she said, "You have nothing to think about." So said I'd change and she said, "No." And she wrote me a negative note saying I wasn't at the activity.

This behaviour of the staff is not very happy, as it discourages autonomous decision-making in prisoners, which is then a problem after release, as a certain degree of autonomy is expected of released persons. Manta then also encountered humiliation and symbolic violence:

Probably the feeling that was the worst, I'll never forget, when [I was being released], what the guard at the gatehouse said to me, How much are you giving her?" "She'll be back in a month." So it was such a humiliation. [...] that feeling of coming out of that gate, being taunted, I'll never forget it.

Such interactions are very demotivating and do not help in successful reintegration into mainstream society, and on the contrary, they can promote so-called secondary social deviance (see Lemert 1967), a person who is labelled with a particular stigmatising category

internalizes the label and begins to behave as expected by the environment that awards and reproduces the category (in this case as a "recidivist"). In addition to symbolic violence, Kunata also encountered physical violence among prison staff as the other pole of the aforementioned spectrum.

Violence is, of course, a very serious matter that is not only unacceptable from an individual point of view because of the harm it causes but is also very problematic from a societal point of view, as it can reinforce in prisoners a negative view of the world and further increase their social dangerousness (see Mertl 2023b).

In addition to deteriorating mental health, nine informants also spoke of deteriorating physical health, as documented by Sovata:

I tried to endure everything. Of course you go through everything there, like you don't have a chance to get the meds, when you get them you don't need them anymore. Like, I remember going through x nights of pain that I couldn't do it at all. Like, you get sick, so you have to write a request for medication, which, if it goes well, you get in 5 . And if someone gives you some medicine, that's they get in trouble. [...] My gall bladder got really bad there, and now it's been exacerbated by the . A couple of attacks, then there was covid, so there was no surgery, and now in the summer it's been really bad, I've just been throwing up and they found out was stupid and they wanted to me in hospital straight away [...].

This corresponds with numerous research studies (Anderson, Javdani 2018; Guastaferro, Lutgen 2018; Hammett et al. 2001; Mooney, Bommaraju 2018; Williams 2007) that point to similar problems in VTOS, i.e., waiting for appointments, medical assistance, medications, or unavailability of medications due to the need to pay for them. They also point out that, in general, incarcerated people are worse off health-wise than the comparable general population.

Six of the informants then emphasized that more rehabilitation work should be done with women prisoners, and it is significant that all six had undergone some sort of specialized prison program, so they had an idea of what rehabilitation entails in practice. Sezema's perspective was illustrative, as she had been in the VTOS several times and it was only in her last sentence that she had the opportunity to get to the SPO, which helped her:

I would just like to say that more work should be done with the prisoners that there is some kind of correction, because it doesn't work that way, you're going to make it wetter. [...] [make] some groups, who is with what, for what , but also some activities, just to work with these people so that it doesn't happen anymore, so that it doesn't happen.

However, this was also complicated by a factor has been discussed elsewhere (see Mertl 2023a), the conflict between employment in prison and the availability of therapeutic and counselling programmes, which is vividly captured by Koruta:

And I, when I said I really wanted to [work with the NGO], because I was a worker, I was going to the outdoor workplace, so there was a problem. Because out here we're all replaceable, but that's where it works, at the outdoor workplace, that there has to be a certain number to go. So you want to [want to work with NGOs], the problem.

This issue was mentioned by four informants, with Myslava pointing out that she was faced with the choice of whether to choose employment or to participate in a therapeutic/counselling programme. In her own words, she ultimately chose employment because of the earnings, which offered immediate benefits and also made longer-term sense for her in terms of getting her daughter back into care.

One informant felt that the VTOS was a male affair and that it was tailored more to men than to women:

For example, when you are in the SPO, you are automatically in the first DS (differentiation group - author's note), where you often went on trips, for walks and so on. And there was one major event that I was supposed to go to, but it was dealt with because I had a longer sentence. But they didn't deal with the fact that I was in the first DS, that I was approved by everybody. [...] I think the women's prisons are not yet adapted to that, I think they are more prepared for men than for women, you ask for hygiene products for example and a man comes in and throws you 3 pads, I don't know (Benata).

This is a topic that has been more emphasised by experts and practitioners - see below in the chapter "Differences between female and male".

STATE OF MIND IN PRISON

Some informants also mentioned their mental state of mind while serving their VTOS. Most of them (14 in total) reported that serving the sentence gave them space to think, which corresponded to a large extent with the category and metaphor of prison as a *recovery stay*. Space to think was then characterized by Vojslava:

There's a lot of time there, thinking about myself, thinking about how to do it better so I don't end up on the again. And there's a lot of time there, thinking about where we went wrong, how we want to do it, planning it out and getting to know ourselves, so to speak.

The self-knowledge mentioned by Vojslava then divorced Pilata:

Maybe it's that I've had a lot of time to think about myself. I'm a person who's not afraid of work. I just realized that I'm not some loser who needs to be led around like a dummy. And that I never took advantage of it. I spent a lot of years being led around. And now I know that I can do it on my own, that I don't need to be ordered around.

Pilata thus gained a certain confidence through VTOS, which she began to apply in her life and gave her confidence. For some of the informants, time for reflection meant undergoing a lot of challenging experiences, as Raba points out:

I've got my own opinion, so I've like been there in basically every punishment that I've been on that hole [...] in that second punishment [...] alternating almost half a year in that isolation, so first of all I read the Bible a lot, because that's the only thing you can read there, but how you're actually alone and you're cut off from everything and you don't have anything and you can't even wash much, it's terrible, you don't even want to believe it. It's cold there, the bed is made, you can take a bath once a week and you can study the Bible, and 's it. So I was actually learning to sort of get along myself there, and that gave me a lot. Like I think that's the kind of experience that

a person doesn't have a lot of options to go through these days. You don't lock yourself in a room and say, 'I'm gonna be here for six months. So that gave me a lot.

In this regard, seven informants then reported that VTOS was a source of distress for them, which corresponded with their assessment of VTOS as an event that resulted in a deterioration in mental health. And four informants then reported that they felt demotivated to do anything in VTOS, with Zrata recounting how she was discouraged in prison from entering aftercare:

[...] it was hard to fight for it [entering aftercare] in , because if I had any weaker motivation or if other people's opinion was more important to me than my own, they didn't really understand, they were all their foreheads, why am I going to treatment when I'm just sober for two and a half years, abstinent, so nobody really understood. The only ones who supported me were two girls who went to treatment [...].

This example represents a fundamental misunderstanding of how addiction works, where abstinence alone, i.e. getting rid of the physical addiction, does not mean that the prisoner also gets rid of the psychological addiction that needs to be worked on. On the contrary, abstinence in prison can be dangerous in the sense that both staff and prisoners get the impression that the problem of addiction is solved, but often it is not and further treatment is still needed. The inmates understood this situation and wanted to enter treatment, which can be seen as a positive thing, and this motivation should be encouraged among prisoners in general.

PRISON ENVIRONMENT

Some informants mentioned various experiences with the prison environment, which they evaluated mostly negatively, with regard to overcrowding, lack of hygiene, food, staff and fellow inmates. Hygiene was mentioned most often:

I mean, it was all good there, the shower, four minutes. So I was still washing up in the cell afterwards because I didn't make it (Bohuta).

[...] the woman needs to have that hygiene, to have that background. I can't imagine not for a day, which is normally practiced in detention [...]. There they take you for a bath once every 3 days, and what if you have your period? There's no hot water in the sink, there's cold water. And some women menstruate more, and now what do you do? You don't have a bath day and they don't talk to you anymore. They don't give a shit. She'll take a bath at home or anytime during duty. And the prison doesn't do anything about it.

One toilet paper roll, that's really not enough. Anything you ask, they say you shouldn't have committed (Sovata).

Koruta mentions detention, which was also frequently criticized, and informants felt that conditions there were worse than in regular detention, as documented by Benata:

Terrible, it was terrible in there. It was horrible in there. There was no way to communicate with those people. In the detention room, there were six of us in one room, where all the women were smokers, I'm a non-smoker, it was still cold because it was March, there was no ventilation, it was terrible.

it stank. The filling of the day was lying on the bed, waiting for someone to come, nothing, I find it horrible to be locked in that one room all the time. It was awful.

Logistical problems, problems with accommodation and inertia and, like Kunata above, violence by staff in the normal course of detention were then mentioned by Sovata:

For example, the fact that the prisons are absolutely not fulfilling or are not able to fulfill what the law prescribes. Whether it's about the number of people who can live together, whether it's that there are rules that apply and are, not that one tolerates absolutely everything and then the other tolerates absolutely nothing. [...] That is smoking, nobody respects it. I'm a non-smoker, for example, and it bothered me terribly. Everybody knows that they smoke, nobody takes care of it. Or that the prices in the canteen are like in Tuzex [...] It bothered me that some of the rebellious individuals, that they were getting beaten up somewhere, that was an open secret. The fact that it's being addressed somewhere now, suddenly it's a surprise, everybody knew.

The inadequate architecture (and the fact that Czech prisons are often converted buildings originally served other purposes) and the associated logistical problems are a major and now unfortunately notorious problem that affects the practical functioning of many prisons (see Mertl 2023b). It is often problematic to separate certain groups within a given prison population, for example, persons who (don't) smoke, and first-time offenders from with multiple convictions. Sovata then goes on to mention prices in the prison canteen, a specific and little addressed problem in the Czech Republic, where prices in individual prison canteens should be set based prices customary in the locality, however, prisoners are rewarded equally in all regions based government regulations, which that prisoners can buy more goods in some prisons than in others with the money they earn. The topic of food and food sufficiency was then thematized by Kyta:

Well, they're surprised that these people are in there making up. These people are desperate, when you're hungry, you make shit up. And that's where they're hustling, that's where they're trading food. You're on a diet, you've got some food, you're hustling. I got cottage cheese, you give me two patties. It's forbidden, but you do because you're hungry. They give you portions like a kindergartener. I to work on a construction site, throwing iron all, 12 hours, and you know what they give you for breakfast? Two rolls and a yoghurt. For a 12-hour shift, they give you two rolls and a yogurt? That's ridiculous. And we came home from work in the evening and the guards couldn't even get us a hot dinner. We got some pâté again and had 10 to bathe, 15 girls. And again at four in the morning. And then the guards made a fuss, when you sleep past 12 o'clock, you're really tired, so a female guard came in and started screaming. Then, "Oh, sorry, you're actually off shift."

Eating and food in prison is still a relatively neglected topic in the social sciences, especially in the Czech Republic, the available analyses (Smoyer and Lopes 2017) show that it is a more general problem, and (in)sufficiency of food then forces prisoners to engage in various strategies to survive, such as bartering as mentioned by Kyta, but also stealing food from the kitchen and hiding it. Kyta then in this context also accentuates the negative experience with the staff, which of course could have been mistaken, but equally could have been one way of reproducing and reinforcing the power disparity within the prison regime, which a number of studies suggest would not be unusual, although in recent years there have been more findings that uniformed staff try have fair relations with prisoners because

this enhances safety (Crewe et al. 2015, 2022; Fassin 2017; Tait 2011). However, there were informants who rated the execution of their sentences relatively unproblematic, for example Budata:

[...] I had a good time there, in the sense that I'm a person who arranges things to make myself happy. I'm kind of a general, so these people do things I want without realizing it, I'm a pisser. [...] I like peace and quiet and I always tell people what I think of them, but why go straight into a fight over it. And I wasn't afraid, I said, "Come on," and they backed off. So I had a good time there. I'm not judging anybody.

It is thus evident from Budata's narrative that the reception of imprisonment also depends to a large extent on the social skills and acquisition of the prison habitus of the concerned, who can thus function better or worse in prison.

In this respect, 13 informants mentioned the prison hierarchy, which they reflected mostly negatively, either towards themselves (often in the of the pressure on mental health mentioned above) or towards other persons. Lesbian relationships were also mentioned, which Nedbálková (2006) thematises in her publication, as well as targeted violence against women prisoners convicted of crimes committed against children, where these women were often the last the hierarchy. Some informants mentioned that violence is often perpetrated by Roma groups that are close-knit and stick . The Roma prison population was also mentioned more frequently by staff in other research (Mertl 2023b). This situation, however, needs to be understood not in a stereotypical and stigmatising sense, but as an expression of the widespread marginalisation of the individuals concerned, who, as Wacquant (2001) points out, often carry the 'laws' of marginalisation and the street into prison. In prison, then, they can either function in a strongly individualistic way or form a community of similarly marginalised persons, colonising the prison environment and understanding it as a space is finally symbolically and practically 'theirs' and which they never had outside prison precisely because of their marginalisation. Indeed, the three informants in our research directly thematized the marginalization they encountered in prison, which surprised them to some , as it was a world they had not encountered before.

In contrast, four informants described their positive experience with their fellow inmates and did not perceive the prison hierarchy as a problem, with Zrnata and Kyta as examples:

[...] I met girls there with whom I got along tremendously, and I have to say that the convicts were surprisingly nice to me. Even though I was taking so many drugs, a lot of them every night, asked what I was taking it for, so I said, I have schizophrenia." And they're like, "Whats that?" And I said, "I hear these voices in my head." And I have to say that nobody laughed at me or insulted me, and I just found an awfully warm welcome. Both the convicts and the prison staff, it was absolutely great (Grains).

Just don't listen to that kind of crap - they'll take everything from you, they'll rape you. It's not . I've been three times, I'm not the violent type, I don't fight, Ive never been touched in my life. If you treat these people decently, they'll treat you decently. As you treat them, they treat you. [...] On the contrary, they will still help those people, the normal ones will help (Kyta).

It is therefore an abbot to see that VTOS, the prisons in question and their populations are a very multifaceted phenomenon that can depend on many factors and that experiences can vary widely.

PREPARATION FOR RELEASE

As part of the interviews, we also asked the informants how they prepared release in prison and what they focused on, if any. Most informants did not feel that they had made any preparations for release or that the prison in question had prepared them for release. However, there were specific cases, such as Lunin, who stated that she did not need to make any extra preparations as she was returning to a certain background and did not have drug problems, whereas she felt that preparation for release should be directed towards those who are marginalised. The breakdown into categories in this theme can be seen in Chart 4.

Kunata commented on her experience quite simply:

No, they don't care. There, social comes 14 days before the exit: "Do you have somewhere to go back to?" You don't, you get so and so much money, and that's it.

Koruta then elaborated on the whole situation more and criticized the system of preparing for release in prisons:

There it is divided into, as say, moonbats and long sentences. The moonbats, they come out in six months, a year, and not changes in that. But then there are people who are in there for five years or more, and then you just kick them out and nothing. That's where the preparation be focused at least a year before the release, so that those people start preparing for at least a year that they're going out. Because those people don't know what they're getting into. I didn't know either, I was scared too. And that fear kills the people who are going and holds them back. Because you don't know, you're not going to be directed, they're not going to tell you anything there, they're going to give you release papers like this, they're going to give the money you've earned there, they're going to put you between the doors at the gate and kick you out. And go. And now these people don't know where to go, they don't have housing, and this be dealt with at least 3 months before they're released. So that these people get some that asylum or that hostel etc. Just material hardship allowance, they have up to 90 days to pay it, up to 3 months and 3 like these people will be without money? This be addressed, where will these people go to live, where will they get the money and where will they work. And those 3 things really be addressed six months before the layoff.

Graph 4



Source: own production from data

According to Koruta, the system is therefore not sufficiently targeted at persons who are about to be released, as it does not address their needs in advance of their release, even though the relevant legislation (Law 169/1999, § 41) stipulates that "conditions for a self-sufficient life in accordance with the law shall be created at least 3 months before release for convicts not assigned to the exit section and the treatment programme shall be updated for this purpose". In this, it is of course necessary to distinguish between what is *de jure*, i.e. what exists formally on paper, and what is *de facto*, i.e. what is lived practice, in which it turns that compliance with this provision is problematic for many prisons because they do not have the capacity to do so (Bareš, Mertl 2021; Mertl 2020, 2023a, 2023b). It should be added that, of course, it also depends on the willingness and motivation of prisoners to cooperate and participate in the programmes. At the same time, it is important to note that the above-mentioned problems may affect all persons, not only those who have been in prison for five years or more, as prisonisation is beginning to manifest itself to some extent even with relatively short sentences, for example one year (Mertl 2020), and even a few months of serving a sentence may be enough to cause the persons in question to lose their material background. It is understandable that the incarcerated persons themselves may establish cooperation with non-profit organizations coming into the prison, but this cooperation still works relatively well in some prisons and not in others (Mertl 2022b). In addition, as Sovata and other informants pointed out in the interview, there also still seems to be an information gap, and not all prisoners know about the possibility to cooperate with NGOs, and if they do know about this possibility, they cannot do anything concrete under it, limits their interest.

The lack of information is then quite clearly documented by Myslava, which was interested, but according to its words, no one it approached wanted to cooperate with it:

No way, I knew I was going to the street. I was just sad that in years, no one had helped me get back to somewhere with a roof. No one was for years and I wrote everywhere. I wrote to the parole officer, I wrote to probation and nothing. I was just mentally preparing myself not to start drinking. But deep down, I knew I would have no way out. And didn't know where to turn anymore.

Myslava approached the Social Probation Service and the Probation and Mediation Service (PMS), which public organizations that are supposed to help prisoners and released persons, but, like prison staff, they face overcrowding and other problems (in the case the Probation Service, for example, low staffing levels - see Tomášek et al. 2017). Regionally, therefore, branches in both cases operate differently and sometimes have the capacity and effort to help persons and in some cases do not have the capacity and effort (Bareš, Mertl 2021; Mertl, Bareš 2020). Indeed, this was also the experience of the informant in her interviews with professionals:

[...] unfortunately, I perceive the work of social curators badly. These people are in all the offices and I know they help people out and deal with things, but I've only met individuals who are and really help these people. And how many times have I approached the probation officers these people want to meet them, they want advice so they know who to go to on the outside, and unfortunately, I often come across that let them come in after they've served their sentence. Absolutely no effort to come here, to help them, as I say, there are a couple of individuals who come here who are interested in these people and have the effort, but unfortunately that's where I think we bump into as well. Let him come when he's out there, but who amongst those people will come? (Expert, eight years experience)

However, Myslava did not know that she could also contact NGOs that could help her with her release and direct her, which she then used.

Then, according to Kyta, some preparation is going on, but it's , so basically it's not:

How to fill out a deposit slip, how to buy a ticket, how to go to kindergarten, everybody knows that, everybody knows that. But they don't talk to you about the important stuff. That you have to go to a hostel, but what are the girls who have 1200 CZK supposed to do. Okay, they buy a hostel, but that's 700 CZK for one night and then what. And they can't employ all the girls there, some of them don't earn [...] they had that pre-exit up there, I didn't get there, as far as I know, so the girls went there to cook, they went out to exercise. But that doesn't help you in life, the girls need to acclimatise. [...] There [in prison] you're like in school, you're always being told, "Now you're going over there." And then you're out on your own and nobody says anything to you.

From Kyta's point of view, prizonisation is again problematic, depriving prisoners of autonomy, the ability to make their own decisions, and self-care, suggesting that at least extramural activities that can contribute to the acclimatisation he talks about should be increased. Kyta also mentions the exit ward, which some prisons have set up and which should be used for such acclimatisation, but its availability is limited (Kyta points out), not in terms of capacity, but also in terms of legislation, since the aforementioned law (169/1999, § 74) stipulates that as a rule, persons with a sentence of more than three are assigned to this ward. However, as has already been said, even for persons with a lesser sentence, prizonisation can be very pronounced and make it difficult for them to return to mainstream society.

Orasa spoke in a similar vein:

I guess you're ready for that. They they are, but they usually don't prepare the person for anything. But they do have these activities in that prison and they tell you some model situations, but it's all just from books and when you come , situation is always kind of specific, so you can't really do it completely. Again, I can't totally the prison system, like don't try, they tell you you can't go , you can't do this, but if you don't experience it and you don't know. They may mean well, but these are the kind of things you can't prepare for.

According to Orasa, the training is therefore not very practical and very "theoretical" in the sense of talking about certain model situations, which may not be detrimental, but in the of recommending certain actions or behaviours without practice, such training is . Of course, it makes sense, for example, to plan what to do when a certain situation arises (e.g. who to contact, where to go, etc.). However, only seven informants mentioned planning as a form of preparation.

If we look more closely at the table above, it is surprising that only ten informants were preparing to deal with debt issues, while in the interviews a total of 29 of them stated that they have debts and foreclosures (and thanks to their cooperation with NGOs, many of them are dealing with them after their release). A similar situation applies to the issue of drug use and addictions, which only 12 informants had addressed prior to their release, although 27 of them stated that they have or had problems in this area. Under-dimensionality can also be seen in addressing or preparing for housing, which was addressed by 14 informants, although 22 of had insecure housing (where we also count housing with close persons, which in contrast is a sufficient guarantee and secure housing for prisons).

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN FEMALE AND MALE SENTENCING

Conflict resolution was the factor most frequently mentioned by most experts and practitioners (five in total) as being different in women's and men's imprisonment. According to the male informants, while men resolve conflicts more immediate violence to resolve the situation quickly, women choose more of an interactive form of resolution, which the male and female experts and practitioners referred to as "scheming". An explanation for why this so is offered by Nedbálková (2006), who points out that sexuality is conceptualised differently in women's and men's prisons, with men taking sexual interaction between themselves as a tool to establish a certain power disparity, while women see sexual interaction as an expression of cooperation (which was, incidentally, also emphasised by three experts). Prison tends to reinforce certain cultural stereotypes and expectations and make them more visible in a relatively clearly defined space. Indeed, culturally and socially, masculine behaviour is still the preferred and expected quality for men, with physical as a basic feature, which is supposed to be a problem-solving tool. Women, on the other hand, are expected to nurture and solve problems through interaction. Thus, in prison, they merely reproduce socially learned roles.

The second most mentioned difference was the fact that the prison system, its processes and regulations are set up for men and women have to adapt them. This fact

in various forms was emphasized by several experts. The first pointed to material and hygienic security:

But overall, I would really say that prison is for men. [...] In terms of, for example, the hygiene care, the setup of the packages, it's the same for men and women. That's absolute nonsense because a woman needs far more toilet paper, far more of everything. It's absolute nonsense not to adjust those needs, women don't need to work out so much, but they should have that space, that basal security, so that they don't have to worry that when the period comes, the pads won't be there and they really aren't. One toilet paper roll is just not enough for a woman because she uses it much more often. That's just terrible nonsense (Expert, 16 years experience).

The second one focused on security processes:

[...] women are classified and the same security rules are applied to them as to men, there has never been a case of someone assaulting 3 officers, beating them up and running away, because it's not even physically possible most of the time, but still there is a pattern, it's go, cuff, tie up in a goat, take away, so that always struck me as unnecessary, the use of force on the woman. Not every woman is weak and fragile, but that's what we have experts for again, to judge whether they need to be treated as a dangerous person, but that's another story. There are extremely few of these women who need this treatment (Expert, 15 years experience).

A third saw a problem in visits that don't count too much with children, who visit women more often:

[...] it's badly set up that the prisoners in the Czech Republic have few of these visits. When I in Holland, Norway, it's quite common there that these people have visitors every week. They don't deal with it at all. Here it seems to me to be so absurdly limited and they are still clinging to the fact that they should only have three hours once a month, and if some mother wants to split it into two for an hour and a half because the child can't sit here for three hours, that's a problem, I also see as a bad solution. [...] I don't know why this is not mitigated here, why they don't make some open system, that the woman, if she can come, she comes. Once a week I think the children should be entitled to it (Expert, eight years of experience).

Visits are related to the topic of , which is more common among women and thus affects the execution of the sentence, as more contact with the family is needed. In this , two informants mentioned another difference and problem, namely that women are often removed from their region by the execution of their sentence and do not have the possibility to request to be transferred to a prison closer their region, unlike men, for whom the prison system is more flexible in this respect. This in limits the possibility of family or loved visiting, they simply cannot get to where the prisons are.

It is also worth mentioning the stereotyping of one expert, which Nedbálková (2006) points out again in her book:

Of course, some use of free time, men are just looking forward to go for a fuck with a mermaid, women are more sitting, they also have sports activities, they also need to get energy out of themselves, but it is necessary to focus a lot on such handicraft activities (Expert, 22 years of experience).

In her ethnography, Nedbálková noted that even prisons and prison and prison staff to insert social stereotypes and expectations into their interactions with incarcerated women ,

which, for example, was manifested in the specific composition of prison programmes for men and women, with, for example, sports programmes for men and handicrafts for women, as suggested by the expert above. At the same time, some programmes focused, for example, on how to be a "proper" woman, where, according to Nedbalkova, prison staff advised female prisoners on how wear make-up, what to wear, etc., in order to fulfil the social ideal of beauty. In addition to this, Nedbálková also noticed that the staff treated the women more paternalistically as children, a factor that was also noticed in a sense by one of the experts:

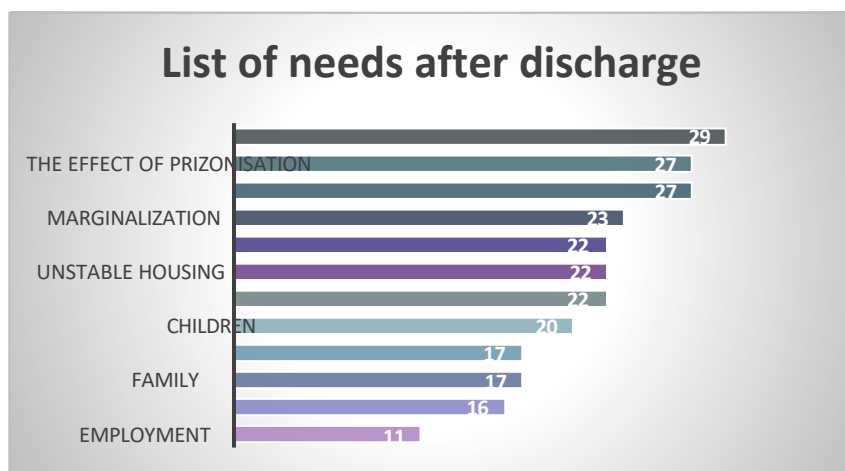
What is striking is the behaviour of the staff, even are educated super people, they treat the women differently than the men. For example, I can see when we come [the prison], it's rough, it's ugly, but the guards treat the men fairly and decently and I think out of fear. Or not out of fear, but out of respect, they know that the man is going to come out one day and they can't to walk down the street and he's going to beat them up. They have respect for men, [there is] less respect for women, and that's visible in the corridors, that's visible in those military marches where a hundred times a day, women, do this, women, go over there (Expert, 16 years of experience).

Again, the difference in behaviour may be related to the specificity of the general stereotyping that men can take care of, whereas women are more vulnerable and need more "guiding by the hand" to avoid harm and to survive in their environment.

THE SITUATION AFTER SERVING A SENTENCE

Once released and reintegrated into, released persons typically face insecure housing, debt and foreclosures, marginalization, inability to find stable employment, toxic or broken close relationships, drug abuse and addiction, and poor physical and mental health, all of which intersect, support and form a complex whole (see Mertl 2020, 2022c; Mertl and Bareš 2020). Specific to released women, then, is the care of children and efforts to legally regain custody, released men address to a much lesser extent. In the following, we will not address the factors we have already discussed, namely drug use and addictions, mental health and marginalisation (see the chapter "The situation before VTOS"). The total list of all identified needs, including the incidence among female informants, can be seen Figure 5.

Graph 5

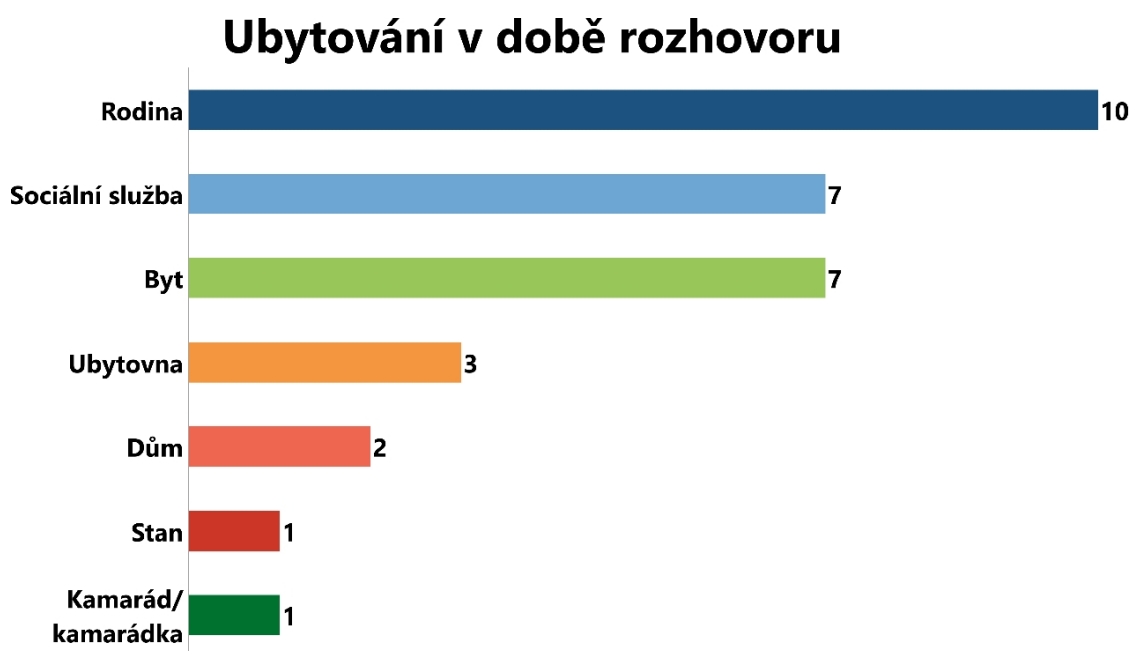


Source: own production from data

HOUSING

Looking at housing, the breakdown of where informants were living at the time of the interview can be seen in Figure 6.

Graph 6



Source: own production from data

At first glance, it is gratifying that our informants have a higher incidence of regular decent housing in the form of an apartment or house than is common, while a number of studies (Mertl 2022a, 2022c; Mertl, Bareš 2020) suggest that this type of housing is rather inaccessible to people. However, despite this, the situation for the 22 informants can be seen as unstable, although ten of them live with their family, which may seem like relatively stable housing, however, in a number of cases this may not be the case, where for example Bohuta was living with her mother, whom she was caring for full time (and receiving care allowance), however, she was not managing anything else outside of care, so the question is what happens next, for example, she cannot manage care. Vojslava offered a different, more typical narrative that illustrates the instability of living with a family:

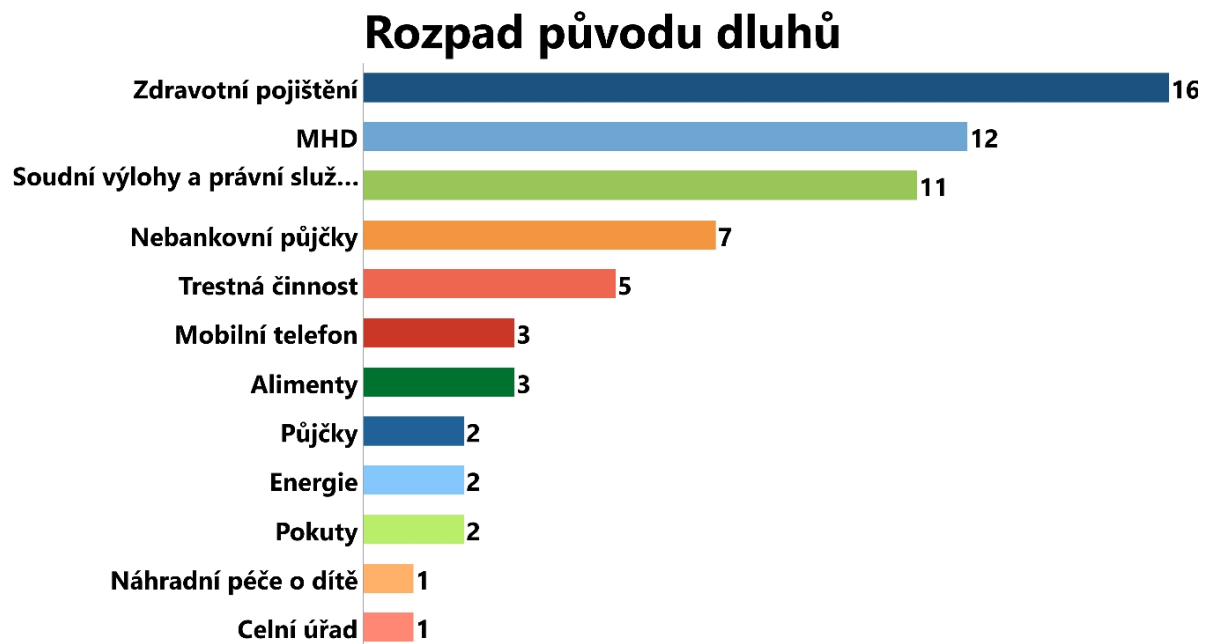
[...] I [had] the to be with my mom, so I took it. And even though I had already saved up the deposit for the apartment, I never got an apartment and then I was also planning to go to a residential facility, I had it almost set up, secured, but my mom talked me into staying with her, to use the money for myself because I didn't have clothes after my sentence, I 't have the basic things [...], I unfortunately listened to her, no unfortunately, don't regret it, I'm glad I could be with my mum, but I didn't make sure I had my facilities, because then I had a fight with my mum, I left her, I was on the street for a week, he helped me [...] a friend [...] and then I turned to [the NGO] here and [the social worker] arranged the shelter for me, so at least I'm at the shelter.

As some research has pointed out (Breese et al. 2000; Davis et al. 2013; Farrall et al. 2010), relationships between released persons and family members can be strained and conflicted, so that all it takes is a misunderstanding or conflict for a released person to lose housing relatively easily. For informants who had stable and decent housing, it should also be added that many of them declared that without the support of close persons they would not have been able to afford housing.

DEBTS AND FORECLOSURES

Twenty-nine informants were struggling with debt and foreclosures at the time of the interview, and the remaining two informants had resolved their debt situation with a loan from their family, which they used to pay the amounts owed and the costs of foreclosures, so their debts had moved into the informal sphere, and without this assistance all informants in our sample would otherwise have formal debt problems. The composition of the origin of the debts can be seen in Figure 7.

Graph 7



Source: own production from data

The most common sources of debt and foreclosures are health insurance, public transportation fines, court costs and legal services and non-bank loans. This corresponds with the fact that a large percentage of our informants were already facing marginalization before the onset of VTOS. As a result, they often worked informally or illegally, which resulted in health insurance debt, did not have the funds for transportation but needed to use it, did not have the funds for legal services (and did not know that it was necessary to apply for free legal services), and often solved their dire financial situation with extremely disadvantageous non-bank loans. From a structural or systemic point of view, the debts caused by legal and debts with non-banks in particular are completely unnecessary. In the first case, it would be better to inform the defendants that they must apply for free legal services, as these persons (and quite logically) assume that the award of legal services *ex officio* means that they will have no expenses. This is well documented by Ula:

I actually didn't even know that [...] you can apply to the court so that I don't have to pay for lawyers and so on, that you have to say it directly to the court, so then I was getting detentions, I still haven't paid that to this day.

The second case is illustrated by Jara and Khrza:

But the biggest debt I have is for a mortgage on a house where I wanted to help my grandmother and my mother, so many, many years ago my mother went into debt with a loan shark, they mortgaged the cottage to pay it off, she took out another loan so she wouldn't have to pay the loan shark just interest, but then she didn't have

to pay off the other loan, so I applied for a loan. The were normal, then it stopped, I didn't know, I was living in Austria, then I was arrested and the loan I had was 2 400 000 CZK, so the house was auctioned for 800 000 CZK and I was left with the rest.

[...] and then there was [non-bank entity], paid them the principal and they made almost 200% interest, so the insolvency trustee challenged that and said I was getting it cancelled too. So I didn't have much left, thanks to the fact that we filed the bankruptcy.

Non-bank entities often predatorily target marginalised people and provide them with very unfavourable loans that go beyond the meaning of the word 'usury', which has traditionally been associated with higher interest rates of tens of percentages, but not hundreds of percentages. Unfortunately, this situation has been and to some extent still is greatly facilitated by the Czech legal environment, which for a long time did not regulate non-bank loans, which could thus be set up in any way, essentially creating a debt business that is part of the poverty trade (Hábl et al. 2021). This led many individuals to fall into a debt trap where, while legally employed, they only paid interest but the principal, which still generated additional debt (this would also be the case for Hornusa in our sample). This situation, together with the low uncollectible amounts in foreclosure deductions, thus pushes the laid-off persons either into undeclared employment, otherwise unable to provide materially for themselves, or into debt counseling and insolvency. Debt counselling and insolvency is the only legal solution to the situation when persons fall into a debt trap, and six informants in our sample had it resolved. Another informant was close to discharge and another 11 informants wanted to discharge their insolvency, but were limited by unstable employment and health problems. The high proportion of people with insolvency or an interest in insolvency can be attributed to the fact that the informants had worked with NGOs in or after release who able to provide them with information and debt counselling and to sort out insolvency with them.

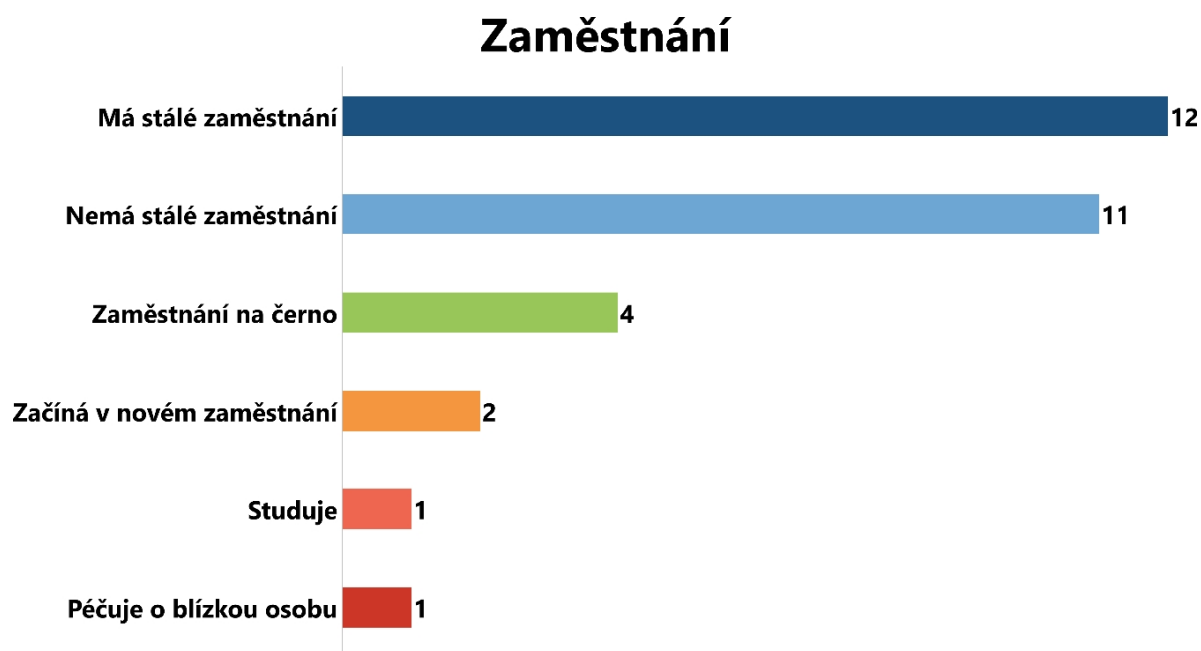
EMPLOYMENT

In terms of employment, the informants were predominantly employed: 12 of them had a permanent job and four were ; the situation in this area can be seen in Figure 8. The most common reasons for not having a permanent job were the informants criminal record, their health and the need to care for a child or children. Poor health status is illustrated by Vava:

My sick leave ended after two years and now I'm looking for a job. I just had my first week of rehearsal at one and I had to quit because I couldn't physically make it. I'm sorting out some sort of pension where I'll have some of that restriction because I've had about five spinal operations, normally in civilian life after that surgery, so I'll have some restrictions. Because there were long hours and lifting [...] Now I'm going to exercise, I've got some more rehab, I've got some medical restrictions [...] I'm on very strong medication. And I'm not sure, so I have this little bag, this little wheelchair, and I don't burden it. I can't sit for a long time, I can't stand for a long time, so wherever I go, I have to endure something. Because they wouldn't have to employ me anywhere either.

Before her health deteriorated, Vava worked for a company for a year and was happy, both she and the company, but then her health caused her to go on sick leave and she had to leave the company.

Graph 8



Source: own production from data

Budata was then caring for her daughter, and finding a job was more difficult for her for this reason:

The only problem is 90% of the time they want time flexibility, there were positions that I would want but they want time flexibility.

A large percentage of companies still require employees to be able to work in shifts and within a specific time frame, which rarely corresponds, for example, to the time a child may be in daycare, etc.

At the same time, it must be said that the informants often mentioned permanent employment as something they were happy about and happy that they had managed to arrange and find it. At the same time, the possibility of having a permanent job is also related to the fact that they had the opportunity to arrange or start arranging insolvency, without which they would hardly be motivated to legally employed in the current legislative set-up.

The topic of close relationships was of course a big theme, with informants talking mainly about relationships with family, whether was the family where they (didn't) grow up or their own family, about partner relationships, and some informants also mentioned help from friends. 14 informants said that they had good relations with the family they grew up in, which included support from , for example in the area of housing, which we have already discussed, but also in the material or psychological area. 12 informants said that they did not have good relations with their family, which was often due to the execution of the sentence, but of course also due to events before the execution of the , both on the part of the informants and on the part of their families. In some cases, however, (unexpected) events contributed to the deterioration of relationships, as Benata illustrates:

[...] overall, my mother that she wanted custody the children, so she threatened my husband and wanted to sue him [...] The petition said that my husband had to take the daughters to their mother, so he started to defend himself, filed a counterclaim, and eventually she withdrew it. [...] she hurt [me] terribly by wanting to take the girls away from me, so I don't think it's going to be good to keep the relationship anymore [...].

Benata said during the interview that her relationship with her mother was never very good, but after this incident she decided to break off the relationship completely. Five informants then said that their relationship with their family was ambivalent, meaning that they had a good relationship with some family members and a worse one with others. The dividing line was mostly in the of mother/father, parents/siblings or closer family/extended family, with different combinations of relationships, for example Vojslava had a good relationship with her mother but a bad one with her father, Mnata had a good relationship with her close family but a problematic one with her extended family.

In terms of relationships with their own family, informants more often reported that they were worse off, also because they were usually no longer with their original partners, with whom they may have had children and formed a family in the . Past toxic relationships were then reported by 15 informants, with Raba offering an illustrative narrative:

I had bad luck with partners, I lived with a man who abused me, he was the father from the first daughter, was glad I survived. Then I had a couple of suicide attempts and I ended up in that prison [...] And the partners are such jerks, unfortunately. After the second sentence, when I found this Patrick, told him straight away when they lock us up, we'll end it because it's not worth it, it's a junkie relationship [...] the robbed me after 6 years, he actually stole a quarter of a million that I had in weed and he completely robbed my flat.

Some informants then stated that they no longer wanted or sought a partner relationship based similar experiences, which Koruta aptly stated:

I' rather not find an asshole man than not find an asshole man. I've made a vow on this [...] I can live with myself. And once you know how to live with yourself, you've got a problem living with somebody else, but I don't even care. I'm it's gonna be another asshole, it's gonna go bad again, I'd rather not, I'll be fine.

Within the context of toxic relationships and in combination with serving a sentence, many women also found it difficult to maintain good relationships with their own children, ten informants reporting good relationships with their children and poor

five informants and an ambivalent relationship, for example, a good relationship with one child and a bad one with another, also with five informants. Some of the informants regretted in retrospect their broken families, while other informants tried to improve their relationships, but as Ula said, "It's a run." It is therefore not entirely surprising that most of the informants (15 in total) did not have minor children in their care, although some of them tried to do so, such as Vleta:

And now I'm fighting for [children] from foster care. [They're] with a stranger, unfortunately, but I'm doing everything I can to get them back.

In some cases, however, after reflection, the informants did not want to interfere with the care and did not want to disrupt the care to which the children were , and they assessed the entire situation in the that even if they had obtained the child or children, they would not have been able to provide them with the kind of background they have in foster care, which was emphasized, for example, by Posopa:

[...] with the children, I try to communicate with them, it's slow, every visit it's better and better, I have a pretty good relationship with their foster mother, she supports me. [...] my foster carer and I [make] calls, we have arranged calls, I always let the boys know in advance if they are home, so we call each other. [...] They're big now and I'm struggling with my life, before I get my act together it's going to be four, five I have anything to offer them and they've got everything now. They're in a great family loves them just the way they are and supports them in everything.

In some cases, the informants did not have the capacity to deal with the return of the children to their care because, in their own words, they were very worried about , as Vojslava explains:

I don't worry about taking care of my children at all right now, because I just , if I don't have my permanent apartment that I can keep, and a permanent job, to have some kind of reserve saved up, in case some sick leave comes, so that I have a reserve there for at least two or three months to cover housing, rent, and then also saved up, in case something , for the children. So I don't worry about the kids, I see them at my mom's every week, I come there on Friday, I leave on Sunday, I'm in touch with them like that, I take them out other times, but I don't have the courage to take them for sure yet.

Ten of the informants then had children (or at least some them) in their care, was a big motivator for many of them not to continue to be in conflict with the law, as Koruta explains:

I wanted to get the boy home, make a life for myself. Which I did. Especially the boy, that was the point I was aiming for, the beacon. Because I knew I needed to get him home from daycare as soon as possible.

Koruta was also the only informant who was able to regain custody of a child who had previously been removed from her care (other informants who had children in their care had the advantage of having a loved to care for them while they were serving their sentences, and thus were not formally removed). As emerged from the exploratory interviews with , getting removed children back into care is not at all easy and it takes a lot of effort (see more in the chapter "Perspectives on post-release needs in exploratory interviews with "). Six informants then stated that they did not have children and five informants had children as adults.

In addition to past toxic partner relationships, however, the informants (14 in total) also reported more positive relationships they had at the time of the interview, which consisted mainly general support after release, whether material or psychological, and for some of the partner relationship was also a life motivating factor. However, not all informants could rely on a similar . 11 informants stated that they did not have a partner at the time of the interview. Four said they had a partner in , with some seeing the relationship as over and some not knowing what would happen next. One informant stated that she and her partner only had an economic relationship, i.e. they shared a household in order to save money and have the means to subsist. And one informant said that she is no longer with her partner but they care for the children together.

In the interviews, 20 informants reported that they relied to varying degrees on the help of friends, where in some cases the help consisted "only" interpersonal interaction and sometimes took on deeper dimensions, as in the case of Jevina:

I had one friend who helped me the most. It's not just that she helped me pay the rent, which is not cheap by any means, but she helped my girlfriend, the person. Walking me around the park, talking to . That she brought me a toothbrush and toothpaste and that she bought me, I still have it to this day, when it was so hot, she bought me a fan. Little things, but mostly a good word and that over time, last week, she said, "Come on, I made you an appointment to see the barber." And maybe she brought me food.

So Jevina had a very good friend who helped her pay the rent and generally helped her with various minor living expenses. However, not too many informants could rely on such help; only Vojslava said that she could turn to her friends in case of any (even economic) problem.

TOXIC NETWORKS AND LINKAGES

In addition to close relationships, 14 informants then reported that they were working in some way through toxic networks and ties from the past that made it difficult for them to find a boyfriend outside of these networks, for example:

I don't really have any family, I don't have anyone to on, Im sort of alone and I only have friends in the bad world, on the bad side [...] (Posopa).

And you, when you get out, you're out for a while, you have no one, you have no program to follow, you have no supervision, you have no therapy, and you have no friends and no . Where are you gonna go? To people you know. And that's just junkies. And I, because I don't have anybody and I don't know anybody, I prefer not to go anywhere (Oskora).

Oskora then stated that she preferred to move to a different city than where she was originally located precisely because of the toxic networks and attachments that could act as a stressor leading to relapse. Some informants did return to places they were familiar with, however, purposely avoiding places they perceived as risky, as described by Vava:

And now that I live in [city, neighborhood], I don't go through downtown, so I don't even meet those people. And when I do, either I don't recognize them or they don't recognize me or I turn around and walk away. And I can tell you, like the two sentences before, I couldn't imagine doing that. That I was with those

people had some experiences, experiences, of course, all nasty things, but I kept telling myself that just we had some experiences together, I wouldn't do it by cutting them off. But now I did, after that performance, now it was the first thing I did.

As Vava tells us, cutting yourself off from past relationships and networks, even if they are toxic, can be very challenging because it is a history, a past, and a shared leisure time, which obviously are factors that cannot just be erased. However, Orasa, for example, regularly met people she had used in the past but was able to put some distance between herself and them:

[...] I've been doing it for so long that I have so many friends everywhere that you meet all the time, and it doesn't do anything to me, so I've where these people are doing drugs, and I've been scared, like when he started doing drugs, and I'm like disgusted, I'm surprised it's that easy. I could see a pound of it and just not.

There is also a factor associated with toxic networks and ties that is often underestimated but plays a significant role, and is mentioned by Oskora above, leisure time, which can be a big problem for people who have used drugs, as most of their leisure time is tied to friends with whom they have used together.

THE EFFECT OF PRISONISATION

27 informants felt the effects of prisonisation, and the most frequent feeling (in 15 in total) was that they had lost their autonomy, i.e. the ability to make their own decisions and to be active for some purpose. Sovata captures this very well:

And then the hardest part was deciding. Getting that feeling of functioning, I've always been a person could take advice, advise others, I had a problem with that and now suddenly I had a problem. I went shopping and I didn't know what biscuit to choose and I stood there like an idiot. The prison in that way untrains these people to make decisions and makes such sheep, like they're programmed. So that's a terrible thing for me and I wouldn't have believed that I got into that. I couldn't decide if I was going to get a job at eight or nine, I kept waiting to see who was going to tell me what.

Sovata's narrative that the loss of autonomy can manifest itself in trivial matters and actions such as small choices, as well as in matters that are more important, which paralyze and block the person. The loss of autonomy was also very closely related to the loss of self-care, as Raba and Merkle illustrate:

[...] I would wake up at six o'clock as if for a headcount, and I didn't understand that nobody would open the door for me, I wasn't even able to prepare food for a while, because for three years they were shoving food under my nose (Raba).

[...] those three years dragged on and you live there, so a lot of things slipped my mind, then it's just unattainable, but it's not, it just takes time. It dulls your brain. By not addressing, not doing, I went and sat and had little kids and everything. And I came and I was thinking, that's where you completely... some cooking and all that nonsense completely leaves your head (Merkla).

Thus, the informants who struggled with self-care (five in total) needed some time after returning from prison to relearn how to at least take care of themselves. Important

is to mention Mnata's observation that even a very short time in prison is enough for prizonization to start to manifest itself significantly:

[...] even though I was only there for 4 months, it makes you completely numb. You don't go out, you stand up when someone comes, you don't have to cook, you don't have to do anything, you get everything [...].

At the same time, as Mnata points out, the loss of autonomy and self-reliance is related to the specific prison regime that prisoners internalize and carry over outside of prison:

For example, it used to happen to me that someone would come into the room and I would stand up. When I went in for new job, I was waiting for the new boss in the , and he came in and I didn't get up, but my legs kept twitching. [...] I was at the doctor's, he came out of the waiting room, I stood up and now everybody was like looking in the waiting room. So I was always chuckling to myself (Vava).

The transmission of the prison habitus prison, as Liam Martin (2018) points out, is very well captured by Oskora:

But the worst part is that the life in , I brought that life in prison and out. Because I go to work, home, work, home. I don't have any friends, I don't have anybody to talk to, we don't go anywhere because we work all the time. And it seems to me that I'm just working all the time, paying something back to this company that's sucking me dry.

With a similar transmission of the specific prison regime accentuated 12 informants. The second most frequent influence of prionization for loss of autonomy was the fear of interpersonal interactions, whether was with people in public space in general or with people at some purpose (e.g., at the offices, etc.):

I'm still so uncomfortable, it's too much for me. It's , I don't know, I'm scared to go out so many times before I get used to it. And the worst thing was getting a job afterwards, because I'm scared to interact with people still, because I was used to being told in prison, Do this, go there." And that had to be done. For me, when someone says, I have no problem to do it, but to say it by , somehow I can't do it, I'm still learning (Takla).

Takla also puts the fear and anxiety interactions in the context of the prison regime, does not develop social skills in prisoners because it operates on a military principle in which there is no discussion. For Jara, then, the fear of interactions had yet another cause and effect:

Distrust. I knew a lot of people there [in prison] who were just talking, lying, scheming, and that trust in those people, I don't mean the officials, not at all. But if someone at work says to me, for example, would you like to come with us for a weekend here and there, I'll say I don't know these people so I dont get into any trouble. So that distrust of people. Maybe 's over the top, but I'm just scared.

Thusthe influence of the prison regime has weakened trust in others, which may make it difficult to establish non-toxic social networks and ties. Eight informants then mentioned that they felt a strong sense of insecurity after their release due to the loss of the "protected" prison environment, because they did not know what awaited them and could not imagine it. Related to this was the spatiotemporal heterogeneity that lies in the change of space and its requisites during the course of the sentence, which was captured by Koruta:

Actually, the moment you go to jail, your life stops. There you live one day at a time. You wake up in the morning, you have a head count, breakfast, then you have a day off, head count again, lunch, day off, dinner, head count, go to bed. And this goes on and on. And then when you're supposed to come to that reality, and the life out there doesn't stop, it goes on and on, but it doesn't for you, and you just come back after five years and you look and . For me to get on tram, 5 years ago it was going back and forth, does it go the same route? Just these questions about whether you' get home from that prison the way you think you're going to get home, that's a real hoot.

Thus, as Koruta points out, released persons have a certain imprint of a place they were used to but which no longer exists as they remember it, and this can cause anxiety and frustration, as informants in other research have pointed out (Mertl 2020). The last identified manifestation of prionisation, namely new technologies, is also related to spatiotemporal diversity, which eight informants struggled with after release. this was simply the fact that the informants had no contact with new technologies while in prison and were confused about using these new technologies after release. Moreover, in the case of Chrzy, the situation was affected by the icosahedron virus and the prevalence of cashless payments, to which she was not used and did not know that she only needed to put her card to the terminal.

PHYSICAL HEALTH

As with mental health, 22 informants reported having some difficulties with their physical health, and only nine informants therefore reported experiencing no physical difficulties. Of these 22 informants, 13 then reported having two or more physical health problems. A list of all the difficulties and their frequency is given in Table 1. In regard, it is not surprising that dental problems ranked first, a common problem among prisoners in general, and especially among women, whom teeth have an additional symbolic-cultural dimension related to the fulfillment of certain expectations associated female beauty (Moran 2014). In general, then, health problems interfered with the ordinary life of informants, and especially with the possibility of finding permanent employment, as they were limited by health problems in the tasks they could perform, as well as the length of shifts and shift work.

Table 1	
Type of physical difficulty	Number of informants with difficulties
Teeth	5
Sore feet	4
Carpal tunnels	3
Heart	3
Hepatitis C	3

Blood pressure	3
Plateaus	2
Gallbladder	2
Malnutrition	2
Gynaecological difficulties	2
Diabetes	2
Migraine	1
Tuberculosis of the bone	1
Arthrosis	1
Varicose veins	1
Skin disorders	1
Tetany	1
Epilepsy	1
Air	1
Spittle	1
Bladder	1
Consequences after an accident	1
Memory	1

Two of the informants then had problems finding a doctor after serving their sentences, who had previously been turned away by the Czech Security Service:

The hardest thing was actually when I entered prison, to this day it's not explained, I entered for one year and [the prison] de-registered me from my district doctor saying that nobody understood why, because apparently that's done when someone enters for more than year. So then I couldn't find a doctor, and it was mainly the gynaecologist, because everybody, when they saw that I had a pregnancy card issued in , were all over the place. But found a who didn't even know what VTOS was and thought I was a soldier, so I still go to him (Mnata).

In Mnata's case, he says, it was probably due to the zeal or carelessness of the prison she entered.

We asked informants who had served multiple sentences what had caused them to come into conflict with the law again. Nine informants said that marginalisation and the economic situation after release, as illustrated by Kunata, led them to do so:

[...] I was [determined] not to do drugs, to go to work, to take a girl, but it didn't go the way I had planned. It was kick after kick after kick and I just didn't do it because 't have a place to live, my aunt offered me go and live with her but I couldn't, when she was looking my girl all the time, I couldn't move in with her. So I said, "Auntie, you're nice, but you're really not. I'm grateful to you for taking care of my girl, but I'm not." I probably already knew at that, I'd been judged about 15 times, so I knew I wasn't going to find that job easily. So I had no choice but to commit crimes. And dragging a girl down the street?

The alternative is to have a partner to with living costs and subsistence, Kyta points out:

As far as housing is concerned, yes, I got some money, I got CZK 2 000 [...] when I left, plus CZK 1 000, but this is not enough to live on. Even the dormitory each, that's for three, four days and what. And then the people fall back because they are desperate, like the woman. Then the woman finds a, there's always someone who wants to take care of her, and it usually goes bad.

Kyta's words were then confirmed by Chrasta, for example:

I went back to my friend, even though I had the support of my daughter, I went back to my friend and it was on again.

Marginalisation, especially economic marginalisation, therefore forced the informants to re-offend in order to secure their subsistence, which is quite understandable, as otherwise they could not have survived the period after their release.

Three informants then stated that the stressful situations they experienced after their release were the trigger for re-sentencing. Ula explains this clearly:

My partner was a latent gambler and, unfortunately, I was leaving the finances to him, I hate going to the authorities, unfortunately he shouldn't have had access to that at all. Because he really worked, he worked hard, but what he earned at work he went and drank the next day and unfortunately he just lost it. It went on like that for almost seven years, we several times because we didn't pay the rent, then he got injured, almost died, he was in an artificial sleep, I in charge of the kids, I was still finishing school, finishing my health, I was still saving up for Italy, then he came back from the hospital, sort of pulled himself together and admitted for the first time that he was a gambler and that he had a problem with it, after those seven years. And then I went crazy, it was the end of the school year, I was on holiday and, unfortunately, my neighbour had a drug addict staying at her house and she came so high that I got so that didn't do anything about it. Some phone calls to friends, as therapists advise, didn't work and unfortunately I didn't stop until 3 1/2 years later.

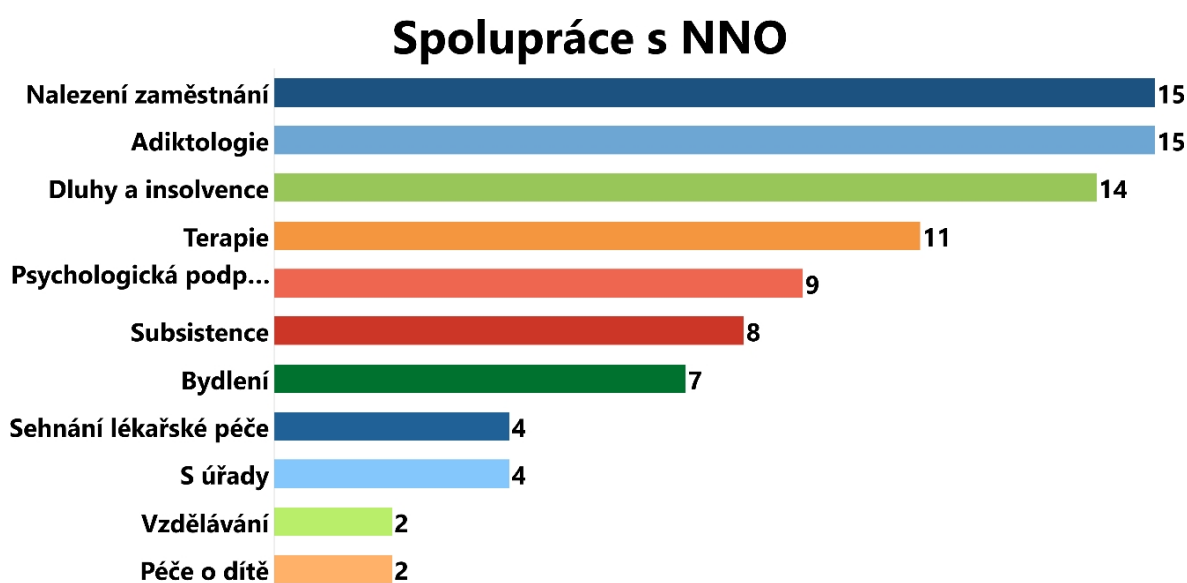
Stressful situations act as stressors, and released persons are more vulnerable to them, as they have not built up resilience to similar due to prisonisation, and they are persons who have used drugs as a coping strategy to deal with the trauma,

so at the slightest problem, they naturally resort to a strategy that in the has offered them immediate solutions and help.

ASSISTANCE FROM NNO AND PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

30 informants used help from NGOs, which is not surprising given the process of reaching participants in the research through NGOs. The informants praised and evaluated the cooperation, with the exceptions of unsatisfactory therapies or therapists, very positively, and Figure 9 in which areas the informants cooperated most often.

Graph 9



Source: own production from data

The different areas are not surprising and correspond to the needs we identified during our research. However, the informants were often positive about being cared for in general and about someone providing psychological support when they needed it.

At the time of the interview, 17 informants had been released on parole, so cooperation with the PMS was also very common among informants. 16 of them rated their cooperation as smooth and one reported problematic cooperation. Three informants said that it was a big burden for them because they had to combine attending the PMS with other activities, employment, childcare, etc. This is, in fact, a fairly well-known problem resulting several studies (Casey et al. 2021; McNeill 2019; Mertl, Bareš 2020). This has also been confirmed by one expert:

[...] when a guy comes in, he has kids, but he takes care himself, he goes to his job and nobody asks him anything. Whereas a woman, if she wants to get custody of the children, she gets them, but now she wants to work, but if she doesn't have a partner, 's very difficult to reconcile. Someone tells her, you should go to work, you should go to treatment, you have to take care of the kids, and you still have to pay rent. So they've got a lot on their plate, a lot of things they've got to deal with, and if the woman's on her own, she's got to deal with childcare, taking the kids to daycare, so I think in that respect it's harder for those women to juggle the demands that we put on them. And if the woman is on parole, it's even more challenging to go to probation, to go to outpatient treatment, to pay for criminal damages, to go to work, so it's a lot (Expert, eight years of experience).

One informant, Benata, then stated that she considered supervision unnecessary because, in her words, she did not know how to deal with it because the court had ordered her to cooperate with the PMS in the addiction field, but she herself had no problems with addiction. The PMS also found this out, so they transferred her to a family programme, where they also subsequently found that she did not need help in this. This left Benata feeling confused and disconnected in regard. This is where the court, which could have identified needs more specifically and set the form and length of supervision accordingly, could have worked better, but also the PMS, which could have used its authority to make a motion to waive the remainder of supervision. Two informants then directly stated that the PMS did not help them much and that supervision was seen as a control rather than as social work (for the difference see Mertl, Bareš 2020). Even the informants who said that cooperation with the PMS was easy for them did not mention specific help (in some cases they mentioned psychological support and interest from a probation officer or clerk), so most of the practical help and social work was provided by NGOs or the social probation office, with which 17 informants cooperated.

Experiences with social welfare were varied, with ten informants stating that they did not have a very good experience with this institution because it was unable to help them or treated them with contempt. While the remaining seven informants stated that they had a very good experience with the social curator and she was able to help them in whatever they needed. The ambivalence there is not surprising, as social curation, like the PMS, varies widely in its functionality regionally (and within each municipality for larger municipalities). In addition, it also faces a heavy workload due to the fact that released persons are not the only target group they work with, and social curators and probation officers often do not have full-time positions, more often less than half-time (see Tomášek et al. 2017). Thus, informants were much more likely to report that NGOs helped them with their needs, even in trivial matters, as Libla pointed out:

I visited them [the social welfare office] once because I needed to make a phone call and I didn't go there again. I needed a [phone] number [...], they were not able to find it for me, for example, on the Internet. So I asked [the social worker at the NGO] and she found it for me, so I didn't go there again.

The informants also had a predominantly negative experience with the Labour Office (OO), with which 15 informants cooperated, of whom nine reported negative experiences, either of a practical nature, when, in their words, the OO did not help them with anything, or of an interactional-symbolic nature, when they complained of stigmatizing treatment. Merkle's narrative is telling:

Especially the social services and the pressure. [...] their attitude, I was out after three years, I didn't know what to do and I came social services. And they show you this attitude that ... to everything. I don't even know why I put up with it. I know now because I knew I didn't want to go back. So that's the only thing, that thought, and that kept me from going again. I was completely blown off at social services, I was gritting my teeth to get her... Nothing, just no help when you've been locked up for 3 years, you don't understand what's going on. I went to register, everything as it was [...] And in a prison nobody prepares you for that [...].

There are no experiences with the ÚP in relation to interaction the dismissed persons in the long term, which has been confirmed in several researches (Mertl 2022c; Mertl, Bareš 2018).

Three informants then mentioned cooperation with the Department of Social and Legal Protection of Children (OSPOD) regarding the return of their children to their care, or dealing with their children not being taken away from them. Two informants then used their social networks and contacts after their release to help them with various needs they had.

POINT OF BREAKDOWN

We were also interested in the topic of desistance in the interview (e.g., Farrall et al. 2010; King 2014; Maruna 2001; in Czech, Bareš, Mertl 2021; Tomášek et al. 2017), i.e., the reasons or factors that motivated informants to avoid conflict with the law and not end up back in the test. A combination of personal and structural factors often appear in the literature as playing a critical role in desistance, and authors have attempted to find factors that somehow facilitate or "predict" desistance. Frequently recurring factors identified include marriage/partnership, children, age, stable employment, self-confidence, non-stigmatizing society, and others. However, all factors can help in some situations and for some people, and can harm some people (for example, in the case of a marriage/partner relationship, it depends on whether it is toxic, etc.). Therefore, it is important rather to follow individual stories, what usual trajectories lead to desistance, and to create a structural environment in which the released persons have as many options and directions take as possible, rather than defining one path in a "one size fits all" sense.

This was also confirmed in our research, where the most frequent turning point was a specific life situation that worked for one informant but might not work at all for another. The specific situation as the turning point due to desistance was then mentioned by a total of 22 informants who were either motivated by this turning point, it helped them in their life in some way or it turned their world view around.

For Myslava, the medical diagnosis was the turning point:

[...] I had a mole on my cheek, and it was festering, so I went to the doctor and they told me it was cancer. So I thought 's cancer, so I thought, Well, I'll try to go to [the NGO] as soon as possible because I have a disabled little girl, so I wanted to take her home. And I want to take her home, so I thought, if I'm going to die, I better do something [...].

Fortunately, the diagnosis was not confirmed in her mind, but it was such a powerful experience that she sought help from the NGO and began to address her life situation. The health condition was also a turning point Zrnat, who above tells how she was marginalised and lived on the , and due to distress and drug use developed schizophrenia, which ironically was a lifesaver for her:

Well, thank God, 'd be that street to this day, I wouldn't get up. It was the schizophrenia that made me do something, some activity. If I hadn't gotten sick, I'd still be there today. I'm running around the jails, the streets, stealing chocolates from the shops.

For Ula, another event related her health was crucial, namely a car accident, after which she ended up in hospital, where she spent a long time, which helped her to work with her addiction:

But that [car accident] ironically started it. I had the car accident early when I started the methadone and after the methadone I was out of mind. And then after I got out of the hospital, I stopped.

Chrasta was motivated by her profession as a social worker and her reflection on the situation after her release, when she almost lost her material background and was at risk of marginalization:

The fact that I lived like this until I 50. Quite decently, I was a social , I have a college degree and I'm 56 years old and I want to live a normal life. I want to have my security. And when I see these people staying on the , and I so slow because my boyfriend and I were staying with friends, it gives me the desire and the energy to deal with it.

Chrasta therefore looks primarily to the past, and reflection on the past is a motivating element for her, but this was not the case, for example, with Posopu:

What helps me the most is that one day I'll pay off those debts and be able to live a normal life. I'll be able to go on vacation. I'm 32, and I've done nothing, experienced almost nothing. So it helps me look to the future. I don't really look at the past.

Posopa looked primarily to the future, and on the contrary, plans in the future were a motivating factor for her, while the past was no longer an issue and was not to her. For Raba and Chrzu, the turning point was coming to terms with the trauma:

Motivation is probably my child, but it's not the biggest motivation, I saw in the prison, it's not the motivation to quit the drugs. It's got to be that you start to yourself, and on those drugs it makes you hate yourself. So for me the motivation was to find that way and to believe that I was good enough to deserve this (Raba).

Well, first of all, I guess I to like myself. You have to learn that because if you take drugs you can't like yourself, you can't (Chrza).

For Oskora, the key factor was a certain comfort, the feeling of old age that she had, and gradually emerging health problems:

I guess I'm just so caught up in this life. I can't imagine getting up in the morning on withdrawal now. I'd have to go somewhere to steal or raise money. I don't even know how it anymore, I'm too old for it. I'm comfortable now, I'd rather get in my car and drive than fly around the streets looking for drugs. My health problems, I can't , somewhere in pain, looking for a fix.

Hajma described her situation in a similar way, but the key for her was fatigue from the distress she was experiencing:

I would never want to go back to [prison], like really ever again. And I don't think I was all that mentally disturbed by the drugs. They've been worse and they've stayed worse, its been horrible on the psyche, the lurking and the drugs, if you get caught, don't get caught, just being stressed and stressed out and scared of something. So I didn't want that anymore. And I didn't want to go back to [prison] either, I wanted to be with my family and function normally.

In a , Hajma was helped by sentence and his time in , which Orasa also emphasized:

I guess now, before I was locked up, I was doing the heroin, so I was in a bad way, but I 't have the strength to quit on my own. And I was literally waiting to get arrested, I was literally waiting for it. And when I got locked up, I just suffered through it there and just jail helped me this time and I knew that that was just the end of it, that I didn't want it anymore. I don't know how to explain it.

However, there is one other observation that is significant about Orasa, that she does not really know what inside her and why this time the execution of the sentence was a turning point and helped her to stop using drugs.

As can be , life situations are very diverse and complex and depend to a large extent on the circumstances, the current opportunities that are to the persons concerned and also on the reflection of these specific situations by the persons concerned. However, beyond these situations there were three factors that were mentioned more frequently by informants and which played a crucial role for them. The first was their children, which was mentioned by a total of 19 informants as a crucial factor that in some way keeps them and motivates them in desistance. The second factor was family, which was mentioned by 15 informants, and the third was the person of a friend, which was crucial for four informants. Overall, therefore, the close to the informants who did not want to disappoint them and wanted to remain free were important to them.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR OTHER WOMEN IN CONFLICT WITH THE LAW

As part of the interview, we what the informants would recommend to other women who are in the same position as they were, i.e. about to enter prison or already in . The categorisation of recommendations can be seen in Chart 10.

Graph 10



Source: own production from data

Clearly, the most common recommendation was to use all the therapeutic and counselling programmes offered by the prison, with particular mention of SOPs, which some informants rated as an important element that they had been sceptical about in one of their sentences or at the start of the programme, but then found to be worthwhile. This was followed by a recommendation not to be afraid of serving a sentence and not to stress about it unnecessarily. Seven informants then recommended adherence to the prison regime, particularly in terms of refraining from disciplinary problems that may impair the prospects of parole, and the same number recommended using the services of NGOs, in prison or after release. Next in order were recommendations to avoid starting a sentence, which can be stressful and leads nowhere anyway, as the person has to complete the sentence, while, according to one informant, it can add to the punishment for obstruction of justice and can complicate . If , informants also recommended getting a job in prison as this generates pocket money and also passes the time in the VTOS. Five informants emphasized that it is advisable to prepare for serving the sentence in advance, which arranging necessary things before entering the , such as taking care of children, preparing some things for the , etc. Preparation then also meant psychological preparation for the execution of the sentence, which according to some informants can be very challenging for some people. The rest of the recommendations were mentioned by only one informant at a time, where one recommendation was directed at getting rid of the situation outside the prison, which unnecessarily creates distress, anxiety and nervousness and thus complicates the execution of the sentence, but also the possibility of .

The last recommendation focused family and family life, with one pointing to fact that the person should think about his or her family while incarcerated, while others built on this and said that prisoners should also be patient with their families. One informant then mentioned the recommendation that women prisoners and released women should choose well a life partner who will support them materially and psychologically when they need it.

PERSPECTIVES ON POST-RELEASE NEEDS IN EXPLORATORY INTERVIEWS WITH EXPERTS

It was interesting to compare the needs of the women who were laid off from the perspective of the women themselves (to recap, chart number 5, which we have copied again below) and the perspective of experts (chart number 11). Compared to our sample of laid-off women, experts most emphasized employment as the main need that women said they addressed, while the informants among the laid-off women in our sample addressed employment the least. This was, of course, due to the fact that many of had worked with NGOs or, in their own words, were able to find permanent employment on their own. However, may also refer a certain stereotype concerning the preference for employment, which is socially perceived as a kind of guarantee of a 'proper' life, but which be the case in many cases. This is also suggested by the factors of marginalisation and drug use, which are high on the for laid-off women, while they are (perhaps somewhat surprisingly) rather lower for experts. Another factor that was mentioned to a lesser extent by the was the influence of prizonisation, whereas in our sample it was emphasised by the vast majority of women. However, male and female professionals observed that the released persons sometimes approached them with learned helplessness and distrust, which in some cases could also be a manifestation of prizonisation. Learned helplessness and a certain closed-mindedness to this helplessness was described by one expert:

We also try to motivate them that if they have a college degree and haven't committed a serious crime, we tell them they can look for that job in they studied, like HR. And they often say they shouldn't be doing that, that they should stay in the warehouse. And we tell them that there's a possibility of getting fired in a few , and they say no. They like should stay in manual jobs forever, in the warehouse, clerking and stuff. [...] Then there are the women who don't want to do it, they don't want to because they are ashamed, and then there are the women I don't understand. They do very well, they renew the relationships and then they mess it up and we always ask them why they did it, but they usually say they don't know. I don't mean sound pejorative, but it's of self-deprecating that they'd do something like that to confirm that theyre in a really bad place. I don't understand it and I always feel so sorry for them (Expert, seven years experience).

As can be seen from the previous text, many women come marginalized backgrounds, are reinforced by the execution of punishment and prizonization, so they are often taught in their life experiences that their bad situation is simply a given and cannot be changed because have failed several times in the past, so it is not worth trying in the future. Here it has to be said that the social system and the overall set structure of public institutions does not help much to break down the learned helplessness built in this way (Bareš, Mertl 2021; Mertl 2017, 2022c; Mertl, Bareš 2018, 2020).

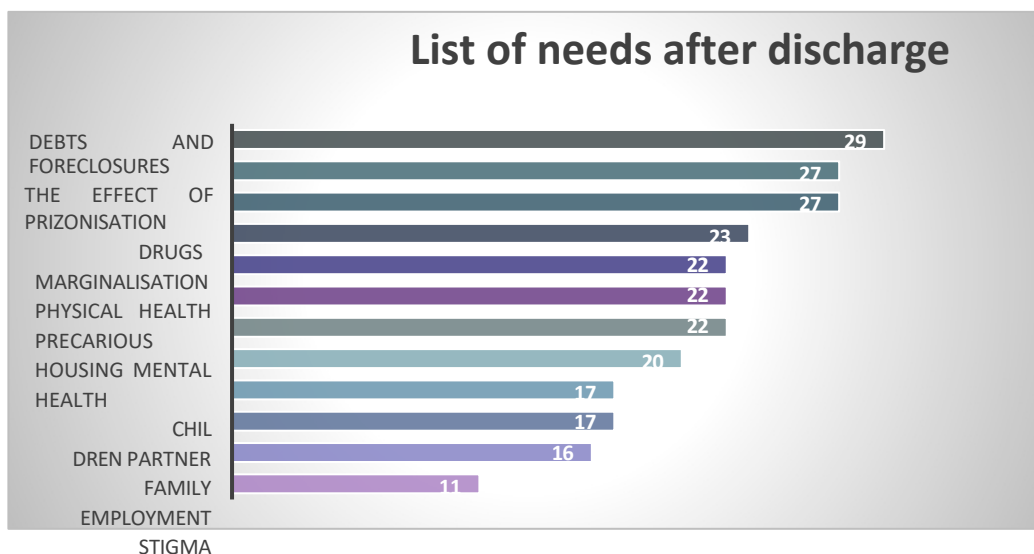
Interestingly, they did not mention physical health, which greatly interferes with the possibility of having a stable job, as we mentioned above. Conversely, the dismissed women did not emphasise leisure time and use at all, which two experts mentioned as a significant factor. The rest of the needs were about the same in terms of importance.

Graph 11



Source: own production from data

Graph 5



Source: own production from data

If we look more closely at the different factors from the perspective of the experts, in the case of employment, some of them emphasized that they perceived agency employment as a problem, where some agencies try to take advantage of the desperate situation of the laid-off persons and reproduce the poverty trade:

They don't pay or no contract or a totally unfavorable contract or they do really crazy things. They're counting on the client not reading it, and then there's like, if he's five minutes late, they're charging him 2,000 CZK, he's earning the 2,000 CZK for 3 days. Or that they have to have clean clothes, but they don't give them money to do their laundry. Some companies, yeah, agencies give like 5 crowns for washing, and they had it in there that she had to be cleanly dressed and the moment the foreman found out that she had a spot in there, they'd take off like 1,500 crowns, she was working somewhere by the machine with oil. So it was just so he wouldn't have to give them the money, and that bothers me (Expert, seven years of experience).

Another expert pointed out the inappropriateness of agency employment with regard to hostels and the jobs they offer, as they are risky for people with addictions:

Otherwise, the factories that offer work and accommodation at the same time are taking over. But a lot of times it's for a short period of time, because the women either can't make it or they get on the drugs, there's a lot of dealers in the factories. And this is one factory here. Because there's just a lot of people there and I feel like the meth is very high, they take a lot of it (Expert, 14 years experience).

However, according to this expert, it may not only be industrial zones, but she has also encountered it in the hospitality industry, where male and female employees take stimulants to cope with the workload.

In general, then, there was often the now 'classic' problem of the Criminal Records Bureau, which some employers require and are subsequently reluctant to recruit people who have a record. At the same time, women have less room for manoeuvre with regard to the possible jobs they can do with a record:

But if I had to break it down into some areas, I would say there is more stigma against women than men in the workplace, and it's what industry women work in. A woman's not going to go digging over there or she's not going to be a garbage man, those are kind of classic jobs that our convicts do, where their paths lead them. They go digging or they go to work as garbage men or they go to a warehouse to unload trucks. [...] The women don't have it that way, because they can't do those jobs, they go somewhere as a cleaner, a cashier, a shop assistant, and unfortunately they want a criminal everywhere. And that's a stumbling block. I have a client whos been on countless interviews, smart, all good, and they've always said they'll take her, and then RT and that's it (Expert, eight years experience).

Of course, the problem is also related again to the cultural division of jobs into "male" and female", but there is a certain social reality which the dismissed women have to function and which makes it difficult for them to function. In addition, another expert mentioned as a factor can make it difficult to find adequate employment:

[...] after all, a woman with children, when she needs to provide school, kindergarten and so on, finds it more difficult to find a job than a man who is not restricted in this [...] So in this

it's even more difficult for them. Not to that it then also affects the amount of earnings, which in turn affects compensation and repayment in general (Expert, 22 years of experience).

In the case of debts and executions, one observation was particularly interesting, which was aimed at the possibility of settling insolvency while already serving a sentence:

Unfortunately, right now we just dealt with debt, that about 18 people wrote to me, who for the first six months maybe not at all, then maybe within a year they woke up and started to deal with it again, but most of them have their insolvency cancelled again because they are not able to continue. [...] if you don't allow people to earn more and pay their debts and save some money, it won't be solved (Expert, eight years of experience).

The expert in question described that formally settling an insolvency in prison is not much of a problem as in the past, but keeping it in force and paying the required amount is already a problem, and in this regard she criticized the fact that prisoners' earnings are regulated through government regulations, not the Labour Code. This then allows for giving lesser earnings to prisoners, which nevertheless also blocks the possibility of successfully addressing the debt issue.

Housing was identified by a number of experts as a basic need of released women, while at the same time it was stated that basically the only available housing for released women is currently asylum houses or hostels, or that it rarely happens that released women are placed in standard and stable housing. This was in some ways a little out of line with our sample, where there were a slightly larger number (nine in total) of informants who had stable housing, for some of these women it was due to the fact that they had somewhere to return to, and some of them also worked with NGOs that were able to provide housing for them on a case-by-case basis.

Under theme of relationships and personal networks, experts mentioned that they perceived the role of past toxic relationships, partner or family, which can negatively affect the situation of women who have been released. A specific theme was child custody and the efforts of released women to regain custody. According to experts, this is a very sensitive topic for many women and needs to be handled very carefully. At the same time, several experts pointed out that it is a very complex issue, which is also linked to the unrealistic expectations of women who have been released:

If someone wants this help from us, we meet them in prison and map out what their options are, where they want to go, where they don't want to go, if they have children, what is realistic, because often those ideas are not realistic, I will home, I will have money and I will take my children from the Klokane. And now it's very hard to work with that because it's a difficult thing to return the children (Expert, 16 years of experience).

The complexity of the process is then elaborated by another informant:

I think it is linked to certain things that are unrealistic. The person can have completely unrealistic ideas, I don't know how to do it, and I think that's not even how housing policy is set up now, that a lot of women think that they're going to get the keys in their hand and go to the apartment. [...] for those women, most of them have those children, so their main goal is to get those children, because most of those women don't have those children, they've either had them taken away from them or they couldn't look after them, so their goal is to get of the children. And of course nobody's going to give them to them until they have some sort of stable background. So they need to go into some independent housing right after they're released, but that's not how it works yet [...] How many times

it's a long road [...] I have a client now, she has two small, nice kids and she's about to be released and she wants those kids. And she asks and her question is, When are you going to give them to ?" [...] and I say to her:

"I think it might be a from now." [...] and I always say to them, This will be your test to see if you can hold on." And not everybody can stand this test of life. Because the one hand, the desire to get the children back is great, but demands that life puts on them are so many that they can't quite cope, and then they start to doubt themselves and say, "I can do this, I can't do , the housing didn't work out, they didn't take me to work." And now they're dealing with health issues and then they think, And if I have kids with me now, what am I going to do?" So they start doubting even more and some of them give up (Expert, eight years of experience).

Returning children to care is therefore a very demanding process, which intersectionally linked to other factors, in particular adequate material support (subsistence and housing), without which the OSPOD will not entrust the child back to the mother, dependencies, etc. However, the child is a crucial factor in desistance, as our research showed, when a total of 19 informants from among the released women mentioned it in this sense. One professional woman then also reported a bad experience with the OSPOD:

I think, and this is not just about the OSPOD, but others as well, they should work more individually. I know it's unrealistic, but they 't lump everybody together and not map whether or the woman is up to it. And when the woman was maybe still in the executive suite, I like the standards are even harder, and I think it's more demotivating. That the woman will then give up trying to get custody of the child just because of what the DSSO is doing. But we've seen that attitude here, what the OSPOD did, it was terrible. [...] [the clerk] normally wrote an email to the lady saying that she would make sure the child was not given to her because she believes that the child should not grow up in the hands of a rapist. But the lady did time for somehow assaulting her partner, she didn't know the story behind the partner was doing to her. And they didn't give her the baby. So I don't have a good with the OSPOD at all, they realize that the woman has served her sentence and that's like the end of it. And certainly no one has the right to punish her further. So we don't like to work with OSPOD and they don't like to work with us.

Such an approach is of course also related to the stigma and prejudice that public institutions and employers sometimes have towards dismissed women.

In the context of mental health and trauma, practitioners reported that they routinely encountered released women who had poor mental health but complained that the care available in this regard was limited, even in larger cities. This is due only to the excess of demand over supply, but also to reluctance therapists to help complex cases, which most discharged and marginalized women are, and the fact that there are few services that are covered by public health insurance.

The final factor on which the experts had additional observations was leisure, which is still undervalued, including by the women prisoners and released women themselves:

This is a thing that is terribly underestimated. And we always say to those convicts: "Okay, you've got a job, you've got everything set up, and what are you going to do when you get off work?" "Well, I'm going to take care of my family."

"Okay, you'll be taking care of the family, that's totally great, and what will you do in your spare time?" "Well, I won't have any free time." And another risk. I'm not going to have time for myself, they can't understand that because they haven't lived that life most of the time. They've seen, for example, in our house or in their parents' house.

to , but they underestimate that free time. That's what we tell them, that it's the thing they need to do to manage the other stuff (Expert, 18 years of experience).

In some cases, there is a risk of relapse or addiction if the free time is not filled:

[...] it happens that these women come out clean, they don't have a problem, we observe that those who have been in prison longer, maybe 10, 15 years, then suddenly start drinking. And we had one client here who was very outspoken and we asked her and she said she didn't know what to do with herself. That she was just used to something and now she doesn't have it. She'd been sitting for maybe 14 years, so she couldn't think of anything else to do but drive that time away by drinking (Expert, seven years experience).

In this case, the lack of fulfilment of leisure time was also linked to the factor of prisonisation and the feeling of insecurity and not belonging to a certain group.

A total of six experts then mentioned that they perceived an intersectional connection of needs, and this connection may be obvious:

It's a little bit more complex and any group, non-government or staff working in the prison system for any length of time, so they see, that 's a multi-problem, that it's not just, that I'm going to sort out drugs, but it's housing, family, debt, financial literacy, so 's kind of challenging (Expert, 15 years experience).

But it also may not be obvious at first glance and may appear latent:

[...] it [happens] to us [...] that these people are cycling. They come in, they start off very nicely, [...] and then they fall into a relapse. Or they start to do stupid things and cut branch under themselves and actually spoil the steps they have already . And we work with them, but we don't really know what it was at that point. If we've overdone start, if we've maybe pushed too much into them, what all need to do, and if it's too goal-oriented and . [...] We've had that happen more than one person. And then some of them make it through and go back up. [...] the person is straddling the middle of the road already living, but they're not cool enough to in that tenancy anymore, and at the same time they don't belong in that old world that they come out of, and they don't belong here in that world where they're always under suspicion of what they want and they have to prove something all the time (Expert, five years' experience).

Thus, some needs may be hidden or may be linked to others which, they are , will reinforce needs that have been neglected. It also implies that all needs should be addressed at once, if possible, and seen as a whole rather than as individual factors. As has been suggested elsewhere (see Mertl 2022c), employment is mentioned and taken as a key factor, which, if secured, is assumed to be sufficient for those made redundant to 'repair' their lives. Fortunately, in recent times, decent housing (which is itself more important than employment) has begun to be added to employment. However, even providing both factors is not enough, as if a redundant person is employed, are subject to enforcement deductions which are very demotivating, so debt counselling needs to be addressed. At the same time, addictions and mental health also need to be addressed, as release from prison is a very stressful issue that can lead to relapse, with these stressors playing out against a background other factors (e.g. failure to find employment or decent housing, feelings of stigma, etc.). Close relationships, which may or may not be toxic, physical health and leisure time are also factored into the process, where each of these factors can destabilise positive shifts in the other factors. And in the case of women

then children and care play a specific role. The first step towards such a comprehensive view and its implementation should be to ensure that adequate structural conditions, i. social services and counselling, are in and widely available when needed. In a second sequence, it is effective to combine adequate structural conditions with a case management approach that allows all areas to be linked and form the complex whole mentioned above. These measures appear to be , but the execution of the sentence is many times more expensive (see Mertl 2023b).

DIFFERENCES IN POST-RELEASE NEEDS BETWEEN WOMEN AND MEN

We also asked the experts how they perceived the differences in the needs of women and men who had been released, and most of the informants (six in total) said that women put more emphasis on relationships, especially with regard to children and their care. Five then stated that they perceived a deeper stigmatisation amongst women who had been dismissed, as they had to fulfil more social roles, which were also more strongly morally coloured. Related to this were the greater demands , according to the five experts, are placed on women, who thus have to fulfil their role as mothers, provide subsistence for themselves and their children, and still fulfil, for example, the conditions of probation supervision and cooperate with certain beyond it. In two cases, it was mentioned that women are more open to therapy and mental health care, which is to some extent due to cultural stereotypes of 'men who don't cry'. In each case, it was then mentioned that women are more motivated to deal with debt, while another informant felt that women are less motivated to deal with debt, that women have more problems with addictions, and that women are more likely to seek economic relationships, i.e. partners who should provide for them materially in times of need.

DISCUSSION CONCLUSION

Our research shows that women released from VTOS face a range of needs and challenges that correspond with existing research, both foreign and domestic. The needs are interrelated and for most women were present prior to incarceration and were the reason for their incarceration, and include marginalization, debt and foreclosures, drug use and addiction, poor mental health, and unstable housing. After incarceration, these factors were compounded by prisonisation, , stable employment, and the desire to avoid toxic social networks and ties, particularly partner ties. Prior to incarceration, released women often struggled with poor mental health and trauma that originated in various types of violence from partner, domestic or family violence, which informants began to address at some point in their lives through drug use as a coping or compensatory strategy. In some cases, drug use was also linked to mental health in the sense a diagnosis of a particular illness, so it served as a self-medication strategy to deal with the illness. Hence

it is evident that reducing women prisoners and released women to the category of "offenders" is undignified and also counterproductive, as it obscures the context and hides the real problems that these women face and that must be addressed in order to avoid (repeatedly) ending up in prison. This is what one expert put it:

[...] with the women who were convicted of murder, when they told their story, don't wonder too much. It was crazy what was happening to them there, and actually it seems to me like such a self-preservation instinct that they couldn't take it anymore and did what they did (Expert, seven years of experience).

Of course, we do not mean to diminish the experience of victims and their harm, but only to emphasise that if prevention and work with prisoners and released persons in general is to be improved, it will be necessary to look at them through their stories and needs, not in a stigmatising and moralising way.

In the of their sentences, released women often emphasized that they had been helped by completing a SOP, standardized or other program to address their trauma and subsequent use, and entering this unit and generally taking advantage of all available therapeutic and counseling programs was one of the recurring recommendations for other women who were in similar situations and should enter prison. However, the Czech prison system faces a number of difficulties and obstacles in this regard: (1) the small capacity of prison programmes; (2) understaffing and overcrowding; (3) the system of large-capacity prisons, continue to expand and provide large dormitory accommodation; (4) as well as reserves in the work and care of male and female prison staff. In terms of preparation for release, most informants reported that they did not that they had adequately prepared for the situation in any way and often did not address their situation until after release, although prison is a good place to work on a variety of needs, such as debt counselling and securing insolvency.

In terms post-release needs, our sample was outliers in terms of the factors that laid-off persons tend to address most, namely stable housing and stable employment, with employment being the need that was emphasized least of all, as many women had secured it, and stable housing in the form of an apartment or house was also more common than usual in our sample. This was due to working with NGOs that were able to meet both these needs and contracts. However, even so, most of the women's housing could be considered unstable, as they were living with family members and affiliates, in shelters, hostels and one informant even in a tent. In contrast, female informants were more likely to address the impact of prizonisation, where the loss of autonomy and self-care due to the internalisation of the prison regime and the fear of interpersonal interactions, which could paralyse them in some situations, were particular obstacles for them. In addition to prizonisation, the informants also placed greater emphasis on physical health, which interfered particularly with their ability to obtain permanent employment, as it entailed restrictions for employers that most of the time no one was willing to accommodate.

A specific theme was children and care, many informants did not have (some of) their children in care and were seeking this care, which they perceived as a long-term goal, which according to the experts

and experts very complicated and demanding. Children were then the main factor of desistance for our informants, besides specific situations, which was easily identifiable. The specific situations mentioned were very diverse and it depended to a large extent on how the women in question reflected the specific situations they were experiencing, as one situation that worked for one woman might not work at all for another. Thus, the research showed that desistance is a very complex and subjective phenomenon that needs to be examined and evaluated using the personal narratives of individuals, and is difficult to find any common points that work universally. It turns out, then, that it is not possible to think of desistance in terms of some universal one-size-fits-all approach, but that structural conditions need to be created to allow everyone to find their own way.

In regard, it seems crucial to think about the needs of women prisoners and released women intersectionally, in the sense of an interconnected web of needs or factors that complement, support and act simultaneously, which also need to be addressed simultaneously. This means, in the first instance, the need to create structural conditions that would act as a preventive measure before serving the sentence, build on the identified needs of the prisoners while serving the sentence, and comprehensively address the needs of the released after release. In practice, this means that if this and other research points to marginalisation, drug use and traumatisation as the main reasons for, then social, housing and other policies need to be implemented to address social exclusion and poverty. Indeed, social exclusion, especially of an economic nature, is itself a powerful stressor that can cause traumatisation (and drug use as an escape) and/or lead to the commission of subsistence economic crime (whether theft or drug production and distribution). Specific to women prisoners is the traumatisation caused by partner or domestic violence, which is more prevalent among women than men and is a structural problem, and this is no different in the Czech Republic. In this respect there is therefore a need to start addressing the prevalence and latency of domestic violence more consistently and to protect victims of domestic and partner violence in a better and more dignified way. In prison, then, the practice should be based on the dissemination and promotion of specialized detachments and standardized programs that have the potential to effectively address the needs of incarcerated persons and can make a difference in the lives of incarcerated persons. However, the problem with the current prison system is also its excessive militarism producing prisonization, which then takes a toll on released persons, who must then be deprioritized and demilitarized for many months after release, which disrupts and impairs the prospects for a normal life. After release, it is then necessary to link all needs and contracts and to create a collaborative network of organisations, ideally on the basis of NGOs, social probation, PMS and the UO, but this now broken and some elements of it work better in some regions and less well in others. In the long term and repeatedly, dismissed persons have not had the best experience with NGOs, which are thus the mainstay of work with dismissed persons at the moment. In principle, then, working with discharged persons could take the form of case management, which would effectively link all needs and meet the demands of intersectionality. At the same time, women who have been dismissed often choose this way of working, which is based on the principle of solution orientation.

with the use of all available means, they praised the NGOs, emphasizing that they are able to help them with any problem, on their own or in terms linking to other organizations that can provide assistance. And it is the linking, the directing, that is an important element, as it reduces shame, embarrassment and stigmatisation of the released persons. Indeed, even professionals we interviewed in our exploratory interviews pointed out in some that in the sense case management, they functioned mainly with regard to the psychological and therapeutic assistance they provided with external organizations, this as a functional model. However, a limitation of this model is the current capacity of social and counselling services and their funding, which does not match the demand for these services and must be increased in order for the whole system to function optimally, as it is not possible within the framework of case management to look for capacity where it simply does not exist.

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