

## **Two sides of the same coin: maternal imprisonment, trauma and attachment in a prison child**

*The aim of this paper is to show how early traumatic experiences and problems in the life of mothers can change the quality of mother-child attachment and affect later growth and development. Maternal imprisonment represents a significant problem that affects not only women who are in prison, but also, above all, their children. Traumatic experiences that precede the deprivation of freedom are passed down from generation to generation, so problems in the mother's life can disrupt the early mother-child relationship and negatively affect the quality of attachment. This can represent a significant source of trauma for children and has a negative impact on their upbringing and future socio-emotional and psychological development. Certainly, we must not ignore the fact that mothers also suffer if they are separated from their children, because motherhood is an essential element of a mother's emotional life and well-being, both in prison and in freedom. Therefore, these mothers need support, both in prison and after release, so that they can be good enough mothers and provide the child with conditions for optimal growth and development.*

*Keywords: maternal imprisonment, trauma, attachment, child*

### **Introduction**

Trauma has the capacity to shape physical, emotional, and intellectual development, especially when experienced in early childhood (Harris, 2018). Women who are in prison have had various traumatic experiences that, consequently, shape their lives and the lives of their children. Research has shown that women who are in prison have a history of various forms of abuse and neglect most often in relation to the primary caregiver, substance abuse, homelessness, mental health problems and the like (Harris, 2018; Nuytiens & Jehaes, 2022). In addition to these experiences potentially contributing to the increased rate of women's incarceration, they influence the subsequent separation from children, which further intensifies already experienced traumatic experiences. Separation carries numerous risks for the psychosocial development of children, as well as for the well-being of the mothers. Motherhood is a key aspect of the emotional life of women in prisons (Nuytiens & Jehaes, 2022), so denial of the right to care for and coexistence with the child is assessed as the most difficult aspect of imprisonment for mothers and a source of suffering, anxiety, guilt and suicidal thoughts (Jbara, 2012); Shamai & Kochal, 2008; Martin & Powell, 2005).

On the other hand, maternal incarceration disrupts early attachment and increases the likelihood of poor developmental outcomes in childhood and adulthood (Goshin, Byrne, &

---

\* This work is the result of the engagement of the authors in accordance with the Plan and Program of work of the Institute for Criminological and Sociological Research for 2024 (on the basis of contract no. 451-03-66/2024-03/200039) with the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia.

Blanchard-Lewis, 2014; O'Malley & Devaney, 2015). Thus, early attachment between mother and child appears to be a risk and/or protective factor concerning adverse traumatic experiences associated with the mother-child relationship. For example, research has shown that incarcerated mothers who have experienced various traumatic experiences are negative and less sensitive to their children (Hans, Bernstein, & Henson, 1999), and that poor care can lead to severe attachment disorders in children (Rincón- Cortés & Sullivan, 2014), that is, to the development of insecure and disorganized/disoriented attachment (Harris, 2018; Poehlmann, 2005; Cassidy et al., 2010). Insecure attachment in early childhood is a predictor of numerous internalizing and externalizing behaviour problems, both during childhood and in adulthood (Erzokan, 2016; Goshin, Byrne, & Blanchard-Lewis, 2014; Hamper, 2023; Pojman, 2001; Cassidy et al., 2010). Early separation from the mother is another factor contributing to insecure attachment in children. The longer the separation lasts, the more far-reaching its negative effects become, and the less likely it is that the attachment relationship will be re-established.

In addition, in this paper we aim to show the repercussions maternal imprisonment can have on the mother and the child. In other words, we are trying to better understand how this early traumatic experience and problems in the mother's life can change the quality of mother-child attachment and affect later growth and development.

### **Maternal imprisonment**

The number of women in the world's prisons is a significant issue that affects a large number of families and children (Harris, 2018; Nuytiens & Jehaes, 2022). The percentage of imprisoned mothers among the world's female prison population ranges (Nuytiens & Jehaes, 2022): 57.7% in Denmark (Kestermann, 2005); approximately 81% in Belgium (Flanders) (Van Haegendoren, Lenaers, & Valgaeren, 2001); and up to 90% in Argentina (Krabbe & Van Kempen, 2017). According to official statistics, in England and Wales in 2021 there were 3,116 women in prison, while around 17,500 children were affected by maternal imprisonment (Kincaid, Roberts & Kane, 2019; Ministry of Justice, 2021; for a review: Martin & Powell, 2021). There were 54 mother and baby units – (MBUs) for mothers and infants under 18 months of age (Martin & Powell, 2021). Approximately 8-10% are pregnant when they enter prison (Cassidy et al., 2010), while 80% of female inmates are the primary caregivers (Harris, 2018). The largest percentage of women were convicted of nonviolent crimes, most often drug-related crimes (Celinska & Siegel, 2010).

Women in prison have experienced multiple traumas throughout their lives. Thus, women's lives before prison, not only compared to those of the general female population, but also compared to those of the male prison population (Nuytiens & Jehaes, 2022), are marked by various forms of victimization and violence, substance abuse, homelessness and other traumatic experiences (Batchelor, 2005; Morgan & Liebling, 2007). Studies show that women in prisons were most often abused and/or neglected by their primary attachment figure – parents (Harris, 2018). One study revealed that 60% of pregnant imprisoned women interviewed had experienced domestic violence (Fogel & Belyea, 2001), while another study revealed that the majority of pregnant women in prison characterized their primary caregiver as cold, intrusive, dismissive, or excessively controlling (Hutchinson et al., 2008). Many

unresolved early traumas and attachment issues (i.e., separation, loss and grief, history of abuse and/or neglect, etc.) lead incarcerated mothers to use drugs as a way to alleviate the pain caused by the trauma (Harris, 2018).

For these women, prisons can be re-traumatizing, because in addition to the trauma they have already experienced, in prison they can face attachment issues anew, including separation and the loss of their children. Mothers can be separated from their children at various points throughout the criminal justice system (Martin & Powell, 2021): upon arrest; when being sentenced; at birth; or after a stay in prison Mother and Baby Units (MBUs). Family members or the state can take care of children by placing them in foster families or giving them up for adoption, which for mothers in many cases means permanent separation. Mother-child separation has been presented as a gendered “pain of imprisonment,” which, for mothers who are not reunited with their children, leaves further trauma upon release (Martin & Powell, 2021). Therefore, the maternal role in women's identities and relationships with children plays a central role in adjustment within prisons and after release (Greene et al., 2000, for a review: Celinska & Siegel, 2010). However, the experience of motherhood in prison remains relatively under-researched (Nuytiens & Jehaes, 2022).

First, there is a small amount of research on the impact of separation from the child on the mother. In addition, research is uneven and incomplete, with a particular focus on the mother-child dyad, thereby excluding the mother's experience and the influence of the wider environment (Powell, 2018). Nonetheless, available research suggests that for incarcerated mothers, separation from children of any age is the most traumatic aspect of incarceration (Douglas, Plugge, & Fitzpatrick, 2009; Martin & Powell, 2021; Powell, 2018). Studies show that the complete separation of mothers from their children or reduced contact due to incarceration can lead to increased levels of depression and anxiety (Jbara, 2012). In American prisons, according to available data from the past twenty years, most mothers are assessed as being clinically depressed (Poehlmann, 2005; Powell, 2018). Compared with women who are not mothers and whose rates of depression decline, mothers remain depressed after six months in prison (Powell, 2018). The separation and loss from children due to incarceration are the most common factors associated with the risk of suicide, feelings of guilt and concern for one's child, and other mental health problems (Jbara, 2012; Martin & Powell, 2021; Powell, 2018).

For incarcerated mothers, constant care for their children is a dominant aspect of their prison life (Nuytiens & Jehaes, 2022), whether it is focused on the effects of separation and incarceration on their children's lives and well-being, the place of residence or psychological development (Kazura, 2001; Celinska & Siegel, 2010). The feeling of guilt in mothers is most often associated with the feeling that they have failed as mothers (Powell, 2018). Corston (2007, for a review: Nuytiens & Jehaes, 2022) emphasized that when a woman becomes a prisoner, it automatically means that she is considered a bad mother. Denying the right to motherhood and thus encouraging the feeling that a woman has failed as a mother is described as a significant source of suffering in prison (Belknap, 2007; Nuytiens & Jehaes, 2022; Shamai & Kochal, 2008).

In addition, research indicates a link between separation from the child and substance abuse. For mothers who are addicted to substance use, support in prison, but also after

release, is of key importance in reducing the risk of separation from the child (Powell, 2018). The authors describe the return to substance abuse as a dissociative practice for managing the pain of separation from the child, but also suggest that overcoming addiction is not simply matter of choice between motherhood and substance abuse (Powell, 2018). Although mothers often see their children as a motivation for change and their primary purpose in life (Celinska & Siegel, 2010; Enos, 2001; Ferraro & Moe, 2000), these mothers also need support in dealing with other challenges, such as trauma, mental disorders and social issues (Arditti & Few, 2006; Celinska & Siegel, 2010) to fully reintegrate into the community and take care of their children. Otherwise, separated mothers who lack any form of support remain socially vulnerable after release with increased rates of unemployment, unoccupied housing, homelessness and drug use (Dolan et al., 2013).

Some authors have considered the issue of mother-child separation within the context of attachment theory (Borelli et al., 2010; Schen, 2005). Schen (2005) suggested that separation can alter the mother's experience of the child. Bortner (2002, for a review: Powell, 2018) noted that mothers in prisons are more likely to be insecurely attached than mothers in the community and this is related to their ability to cope with separation and depression. Chambers (2009) interviewed a small group of mothers who had given birth in prison about their experiences of bonding with their babies. The findings revealed that mothers reported not only feelings of deep love for their infants, but also emotional pain and shock at impending separation (Powell, 2018; Siegel, Luther, & Napolitano, 2021) In a sample of 25 women in a state prison (Hutchinson et al., 2008) mothers commonly expressed fear of separation from their infants (Siegel, Luther, & Napolitano, 2021). Women were concerned about the initial separation immediately after birth and then the possible lack of attachment when reunited with their children after release (Powell, 2018). The sense of motherhood gives meaning to a woman's life while incarcerated, and maintaining the mother-child relationship is considered beneficial for mothers while incarcerated (Shamai & Kochal, 2008; O'Malley & Devaney, 2015). It is important to emphasize that family relationships play a significant role in helping mothers overcome separation. Mothers who have family support in taking care of children are better positioned to overcome separation, unlike mothers who suffer more because of family refusal to take care for the child (Martin & Powell, 2021).

### **Trauma and attachment: A brief review**

Issues of trauma and attachment are particularly important when discussing children whose mothers are in prison, whether they are children born and living with their mothers in prison or children who are separated from their mothers. Young children are a more sensitive group regarding to the prevalence and effects of early traumatic experiences. Research has shown that the trauma experienced by the mother can be transmitted to the baby *in utero*, and that trauma symptoms and neuroendocrine responses to trauma appear in children as early as three months of age (Cordon et al., 2004; Melville, 2017). Additionally, research on a sample of babies raised in war zones showed that the mother's proximity to a traumatic event affects the manifestation of traumatic symptoms in babies (Feldman & Vengrober, 2011; Melville, 2017). In general, young children can be affected by various types of trauma, such as family dysfunction, parental separation/divorce, maternal or paternal incarceration,

substance abuse and domestic violence (Dye, 2018; Melville, 2017). In regard to children who remain in prison or are separated from their mothers, it is likely that these children, in addition to the mother's imprisonment, will experience other forms of trauma in the parent-child relationship or in relation to the environment in which they live. These children most often experience chronic and complex trauma that occurs in response to a long-term, repetitive event, and has an emotional and physical impact (Harris, 2018). Such events primarily affect a child's self-regulatory abilities, well-being, and perception of the world as an unsafe place and/or include stressors that exceed available coping resources (Cordon et al., 2004; Van Horn & Lieberman, 2008; Melville, 2017). In general, overcoming traumatic and stressful events represents a permanent, changing cognitive and behavioral effort to cope with specific external and/or internal demands that are assessed as burdensome or so difficult that they exceed the resources the person has at their disposal (Lazarus & Folkman, 2004, for a review: Tadić & Kordić, 2022). Specifically, exposure to complex trauma in childhood is associated with (see: Dye, 2018): greater impairment in cognitions (Najjar et al., 2008); physical awareness and dissociation (Courtois, 2008); and affect regulation, interpersonal attachment, and behaviour control (Cohen et al., 2012). Trauma thus has the capacity to shape physical, emotional, and intellectual development, especially when experienced in early childhood (Harris, 2018).

One example of early trauma in the mother-child relationship is maltreatment, which affects numerous domains, including cognitive, behavioural, socio-emotional, and health domains. According to Howe (2005), children who are exposed to abuse do not have available caregivers or have caregivers whose behaviour leads to anxiety, fear, and anger (Erozkan, 2016). Compared with older maltreated children, trauma-exposed children between the ages of zero and two are at greater risk for developing internalizing behaviour problems (Kaplow & Widom, 2007; Melville, 2017). In a study examining the prevalence and effects of early traumatic experiences, it was found that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) (Melville, 2017) are associated with impaired socio-emotional development, increased risk of polyvictimization during childhood, below-average academic literacy, and increased rates of PTSD and internalizing symptoms in adulthood (Grasso et al., 2015; Jimenez et al., 2016; McKelvey et al., 2016; Melville, 2017). Taken together, these findings suggest that early mother-child attachment appears to be a risk and/or protective factor, depending on attachment style.

Problems in a mother's life are known to affect the baby's life and can alter the quality of the mother-infant attachment (Myers et al., 1999; Thompson, Lamb, & Estes, 1982). With this in mind, addressing issues of attachment and trauma is a complex issue for children of incarcerated mothers. In this case, if, on the one hand, we look at the fact that imprisoned women have experienced various traumatic experiences during their lives (being depressed, prone to substance use, etc.) and, on the other hand, the prison environment, which is unnatural in its own environment for the lives of small children, it is a significant question whether and to what extent mothers are able to achieve attachment with their children and protect them from potential trauma. As an additional factor, the issue of the subsequent separation of mother and child also arises. Previous research has suggested that children develop insecure attachment as a result of their mother's incarceration (Sleed, Baradon, & Fonagy, 2013), and because of specific parental characteristics associated with incarceration

(Hutchinson et al., 2008; Powell, 2018). Therefore, the questions are whether a mother in prison is harmful to the child, whether it is a potential source of trauma and whether attachment can moderate the negative traumatic effects in this category of children. First, it is important to start by considering the importance and role that attachment plays in early childhood, and then to understand the reciprocal relationship of trauma-attachment-trauma.

Attachment theory provides a framework for understanding the parent-child relationship and the impact that the nature of the relationship has on the child's further development. Research into early childhood and the way in which a child seeks safe support in an unfamiliar, foreign situation indicates two basic types of attachment (or affective attachment): secure and insecure (Tadić, 2022). The attachment between parents and children occurs during the first year of the child's life (Hamper, 2023), and if the child has not formed an attachment relationship, most often with the mother, during the first two years of life, studies show that the attachment during growing up will most often not be established (Hamper, 2023). Babies are born with an innate need to bond with their mother or some other primary attachment figure who provides them with a sense of security in stressful circumstances (Bowlby, 1973). Through early relationships with primary caregivers, infants receive a model for managing future stress and coping, i.e., they learn self-regulation skills (Melville, 2017; Slead, 2013). Safe and nurturing care protects the baby from over-arousal and disorganization, and babies begin to develop a sense of self, thus shaping how they interpret and respond to future experiences (Feldman & Vengrober, 2011; Melville, 2013; Slead, 2013). Thus, the experiences that children have as babies have an impact on the psychological, social, and emotional development of the child's personality and determine behavior later in life (Bowlby, 1973; Bretherton & Munholland, 2008; Slead, 2013). According to Bowlby (1969), the quality of early attachment relationships affects relationships throughout the lifespan (Harris, 2018). Sroufe, Egeland, and Carlson (2004) cite possible positive effects of healthy early attachment to caregivers later in life such as the capacity for emotional connection, the ability to build secure relationships, and the establishment of positive self-esteem (Slead, 2013).

According to the American Psychological Association, babies who are securely attached to their mothers have higher self-esteem and confidence as children (Jbara, 2012). Later in life, this translates into successful peer relationships and the ability to better cope with life's stressors (Jbara, 2012). Other authors also point out that early secure attachment is significantly related to (Slead, 2013): emotional well-being, self-esteem, positive affect, and social competence in childhood and adolescence (Bosquet & Egeland, 2006; Sroufe, 2005), as well as developmental awareness, self-confidence, and positive social relations (Thompson, 2008). A secure attachment style in childhood is a protective factor against later psychopathology (Slead, 2013). Although many individuals with a history of insecure attachment do not develop serious behavioral problems or psychiatric disorders later in life, insecure attachment in infants has been shown to be a risk factor for the development of such issues (Slead, 2013; Sroufe, 2005). Children who have achieved secure attachment have better emotional regulation (Thompson & Meyer, 2007). Accordingly, the effects of positive or negative experiences that occur in childhood are strong and long-lasting, even in regard to drastic changes later in life (Hamper, 2023).

## **Prison Child: Trauma and Attachment in Early Childhood**

The sense of security that the primary caregiver provides to the child is a protective factor against the negative effects of trauma for children at an early age and in adulthood; conversely, the absence of a sense of security that the mother primarily denies to the child can be a source of trauma or intensify an already existing trauma (Erozkan, 2016). The relationship between early childhood trauma and attachment can be viewed from several angles (Melville, 2017): whether the attachment figure perpetrated the trauma, whether the child's emotional needs were met after the traumatic experience, and to what extent the parent was affected by the child's traumatic experience (Pynoos, Steinberg, & Piacentini, 1999). In circumstances where a caregiver withholds arousal modulation and basic care from young children, either unwilling or unable to provide it, the child is at risk of exposure to extreme levels and durations of arousal (Melville, 2017). This lack of regulation risks imprinting in the child's developmental processes that emotions and excitement in general are dangerous/frightening, leading to potential avoidance of excitement in the form of numbing/dissociation or responses in the other direction, such as excitement in the form of aggressive behaviour (Streeck-Fischer & Van der Kolk, 2000, for a review: Melville, 2017). Infants and young children perceive danger by relying on the primary attachment figure in their assessment, which, depending on the established relationship can be a source of trauma through this figure (Melville, 2017; Pynoos, Steinberg, & Piacentini, 1999). A more telling factor in the attachment relationship is trauma (Erozkan, 2016; Fonagy, 2010).

For infants and young children whose development and growth are marked by "imprisonment", life in an inadequate or inappropriately stimulating environment, early disturbances in the parent-child relationship and the adequacy of parental care can have a detrimental effect on the early socio-emotional and psychological development of the infant and attachment to themselves and can be a source of trauma (Sleed, 2013). Thus, these children are at high-risk for the development of psychological, social and emotional problems not only in childhood but also later in life. Therefore, it seems that the increased risk for less adaptive attachment relationships is another relational effect of trauma, as shown by numerous studies (Erozkan, 2016).

Current research shows that various psychosocial problems are present in pregnant women in prisons (substance abuse, psychopathology, depression and others) associated with poor parenting (Cassidy et al., 2010). These problems affect the quality of childcare, such that mothers are generally negative and less responsive to infants and young children (Hans, Bernstein, & Henson, 1999). The authors indicate that poor care can lead to severe attachment disorders in children (Rincón-Cortés & Sullivan, 2014). Careless, unpredictable or unsafe behaviour of caregivers can traumatize children and reduce the child's potential to cope with long-term traumatizing effects, whereby the child lacks an appropriate safe base when feeling threatened (Ezokan, 2016). The quality of care and attachment relationships during the early stages of development are also influenced by the parents' past early experiences with their caregivers (Harris, 2018; Sleed, 2013). It is believed that parents' early traumatic experiences and behavior patterns are passed down through generations to children, grandchildren, etc. (Rutter & Liddle, 1983). For example, mothers who were neglected, abused and denied adequate care in early childhood due to unresolved traumatic

experiences transfer the experienced patterns of behaviour to their children (Harris, 2018); by denying them care and attachment through maltreatment and neglect, they create trauma.

The effects of early maltreatment by the mother and lack of care are factors that increase the risk for the development of insecure (i.e., disorganized-disoriented) attachment in the child (Harris, 2018; Cassidy et al., 2010). This is confirmed by research results showing that more than half of a sample consisting of children whose mothers were in prison developed insecure attachment (Poehlmann, 2005). Furthermore, studies indicate an association between poor developmental outcomes and insecure/disorganized attachment (Cassidy et al., 2010), as a consequence of early maltreatment. As a result of maltreatment, neglect or institutional care, young children may show very abnormal behaviours in future relationships (i.e., emotionally withdrawn/inhibited or socially indiscriminate/disinhibited behaviours) (Erzokan, 2016). Several studies have confirmed that childhood disorganization predicts later aggressive and externalizing problem behaviour (Lyons-Ruth & Jacobvitz, 2008; Cassidy et al., 2010); as well as internalizing problems, dissociation, and general psychopathology throughout children's development up to age 19 (Sleed, 2013). Specifically, insecure attachment leads to aggressive preschool behaviour, lack of empathy, and poor peer relationships (Elicker, Englund, & Sroufe, 1992; Cassidy et al., 2010). Moreover, these children tend to distance themselves and display oppositional behaviour toward parents, guardians, and authorities, have difficulties developing trust, intimacy and affection, and apart from empathy, lack emotions such as compassion and remorse; and tend to abuse substances and imitate the same maltreatment and attachment disorder in their own children when they become adults (Erzokan, 2016). In addition, insecure attachment is a risk factor for the development of psychopathology in childhood and adulthood (DeKlyen & Greenberg, 2008; Cassidy et al., 2010).

Numerous authors also consider the effects of separation due to maternal deception in relation to the issue of attachment. Early separation of mother and child who are still in the bonding process is a risk factor for the development of trauma and insecure attachment (Hamper, 2023; Goshin, Byrne, Blanchard-Lewis 2014). Therefore, confinement disrupts the bond between the child and the mother, and the longer the separation lasts, the greater the damage (Hamper, 2023). There is increasing evidence that loss or separation from a parent during the first two years of life and insecure attachment can permanently alter parts of the brain that affect responses to stress and potentially play a major role in the development of various psychopathological disorders in childhood and adulthood (Goshin, Byrne, & Blanchard-Lewis, 2014; Pojman, 2021). These children are more likely to develop depression and anxiety, learning difficulties, relationship problems, difficulties in adulthood and disorders in personality development (Pojman, 2021). In addition, due to insecure attachment, children are prone to fear and mistrust, delinquency, drug and alcohol use, and other criminal behaviours (Hamper, 2023). These children represent a special problem for the educational system because, due to family circumstances, they develop or introduce the aforementioned forms of behaviour into the school environment, and the school faces the challenge of finding ways to shape the behaviour of students who resist the demands placed on them (Tadić, 2024).



Once the mother-child attachment relationship is disrupted, it is nearly impossible to re-establish (O'Malley & Devaney, 2015). Although some mothers may be reunited with their children at the age of two or three when the child has no memory of the mother's absence, the child may still develop long-term psychological trauma because the attachment bond is formed when the child is between six months and two years old (Jbara, 2012). Several mechanisms influence the development of insecure attachment and child psychopathology, including unstable care outside of prison (Bretherton, & Munholland, 2008; Powell, 2018). For example, children may sometimes form secondary bonds with other family members or a caregiver, but frequent changes in caregivers may eliminate the benefits of these bonds (Jbara, 2012). The negative effects of these unstable relationships generally lead to the development of psychopathology because in fear of abandonment, instead of seeking support in relationships, the child withdraws emotionally, maintains low self-esteem and a sense of guilt, and is prone to antisocial behaviour (Jbara, 2012). On the other hand, Shlafer and Poehlmann (2010) noted that there is a high likelihood that a child will be safe with stable care outside of prison, suggesting that separation from mothers is not necessarily the primary factor (Powell, 2018).

## **Discussion**

Imprisonment is a form of punishment for crimes committed. The prison sentence should rehabilitate the inmate so that they no longer behave in a way that endangers society (Tadić, 2024). Although behaviourist research that punishment is a form of learning that does not change behaviour but only suppresses it, society has not found a more suitable response for criminals than to deprive them of their freedom and thus, for a certain period, remove them from the daily life of the social community. The assumption is that undesirable behaviour will be suppressed after individuals leave prison. The question of the mothers of prisoners and the effects that their imprisonment has on them as mothers and on their children calls into question the prison itself as a form of punishment, pointing to the complexity of the issues related to the deprivation of one's freedom. In regard to imprisoned mothers, they are punished as criminals, but also their children. A previous review of the literature and research shows the extremely negative consequences of separation, so we can assume that prison, instead of reducing the number of criminals, will increase possibility for the exact opposite - an increased number of incarcerated individuals.

This harsh initial comment is not mitigated by the fact that decision-makers and policymakers are working on the humanization of prisons and various programs that should contribute to the resocialization of prisoners. Regarding incarcerated mothers, such programs must also include their children. The question arises as to what the best way is to mitigate the effects of incarceration and open up the possibility of positive outcomes for the psychosocial development of incarcerated mothers and their children.

Consideration of the psychological lives of imprisoned mothers and their children greatly complicates the perception of the entire situation. The basic term used to explain the negative outcomes of psychosocial development is trauma, regardless of whether it is bullying, abuse, or deprivation. The assumption is that imprisoned mothers were traumatized during their upbringing and that imprisonment acts as a retraumatizing factor. The question

arises as to what they are like as mothers regardless of the fact that they have been sentenced to prison. That is a question we should not be dealing with because it further complicates the problem. Therefore, it is preferable to assume that if the mother was not deprived of custody before imprisonment, regardless of the offense committed, then such situations should not be included in the discussion. If a child is being taken away from a mother because she is going to prison, then that is a problem that needs to be addressed here. It also includes mothers who give birth in prison. Given that the law usually requires that, after a certain period, the child be taken from the mother and given to the guardian at liberty, this has direct consequences on the mother-child relationship even during the prison pregnancy and the nursing of the baby in prison.

A series of studies on the mother-child relationship (Bowlby, 1969; Bowlby, 1973) indicated the severe consequences of separation for the child. The effects of these studies included changes to the law on the length of maternity leave and the hospitalization of babies together with mothers in cases of child illness. If the given research found application in the social life of free people, why should the same not be applied to imprisoned mothers? Discussing the length of time a mother can spend with her child in prison is necessary to avoid answering key questions. If we wanted to maintain punishment by imprisonment without separating mothers from their children, then this would mean that we should create prison units in which the enclosed space would resemble life in freedom, with dormitories, kindergartens, playgrounds, etc., where children and mothers could socialize with each other in their free time, while life would be governed by the temporal rules of behavior in prison. Then the effects of trauma on imprisoned mothers could be mitigated, preventing them from being passed on to their children's generation.

In our review of this research, we have shown that for incarcerated mothers, separation from children of any age is the most traumatic aspect of incarceration (Douglas, Plugge, & Fitzpatrick, 2009; Martin & Powell, 2021; Powell, 2018). In other words, the denial of the right to motherhood is a significant source of suffering in prison (Belknap, 2007; Nuytiens & Jehaes, 2022; Shamai & Kochal, 2008). On the other hand, a mother's role plays a central role in adjustment within prison and after release (Greene et al., 2000, for a review: Celinska & Siegel, 2010). The feeling of motherhood gives meaning to a woman's life while in prison, and maintaining the mother-child relationship is considered beneficial for mothers while incarcerated (Shamai & Kochal, 2008; O'Malley & Devaney, 2015).

Early mother-child separation is a risk factor for the development of trauma and insecure attachment (Hamper, 2023; Goshin, Byrne, & Blanchard-Lewis 2014). Once the mother-child attachment relationship is disrupted, it is nearly impossible to reestablish it (O'Malley & Devaney, 2015). Loss or separation from a parent during the first two years of life and insecure attachment can permanently alter parts of the brain that influence responses to stress and potentially play a major role in the development of various psychopathological disorders in childhood and adulthood (Goshin, Byrne, & Blanchard-Lewis, 2014; Pojman, 2001). On the other hand, there is a high likelihood that a child will be safe with stable care outside of prison, suggesting that separation from their mothers is not necessarily the primary factor (Powell, 2018). In other words, being taken away from imprisoned women maternally multiplies the negative effects of imprisonment on themselves, and consequently

opens up the possibility of a negative impact on their children as well. It is precisely the problems that arise with the return of the mother from prison and the difficult re-establishment of relationships with the children that indicate that the problem with the prison has not been solved because the expected and desired resocialization was canceled by the very act of separating the mother from her children.

## Conclusion

Accordingly, we see that the fact that imprisoned mothers are punished as criminals, also affects their children. Certainly, mothers in prison cannot be perfect mothers according to Winnicott's definition, but the question remains whether they are denied the right to be a "good enough mother". On the other hand, the question is whether these mothers are detrimental to the proper development and growth of their children. These questions are difficult to answer, and therefore providing any answer would raise further questions, for example, whether any mother (even a deficient one) is better than none at all. Indeed, sometimes it is healthier for a child to grow up in a favourable environment without a mother, with a substitute figure, but the fact that the child will have adequate care and upbringing does not necessarily mean the prevention of socio-emotional problems later in life due to the absence of a mother. All in all, what is indisputable is the fact that nature has made it so that the child needs a mother, but the mother also needs the child, no matter how many potential risks and consequences it entails. For this reason, incarcerating a mother, a future mother or one who already has children outside of prison, requires many more far-reaching considerations than just punishing the mother for her actions and reducing the rate of criminals at large. Because this course of action can only create a boomerang effect, except that the mother will likely return to criminal behaviour if she does not establish an adequate relationship with her child after discharge, and does not receive the support of the family and the community in terms of resocialization, her children will become potential criminals during their lives. Therefore, a mother in prison but also after release, should be given the opportunity and support to be and remain a mother. This can be done by first receiving support in solving the problems for which she was punished by imprisonment, and then granting her the right to take care of her child, either by keeping the child or through constant contact. This can consequently affect the well-being of both mothers and children.

## References

- Arditti, J. A., & Few, A. L. (2006). Mothers' reentry into family life following incarceration. *Criminal Justice Policy Review*, 17(1), 103-123. <https://doi.org/10.1177/088740340528245>
- Batchelor, S. (2005). 'Prove me the bam!' Victimization and agency in the lives of young women who commit violent offenses. *Probation Journal*, 52(4), 358-375. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0264550505058034>
- Belknap, J. (2007). *The Invisible Woman: Gender, Crime, and Justice*. Thomson Wadsworth.
- Borelli, J. L., Goshin, L., Joestl, S., Clark, J., & Byrne, M. W. (2010). Attachment organization in a sample of incarcerated mothers: Distribution of classifications and associations with substance abuse history, depressive symptoms, perceptions of parenting competency and social support. *Attachment and Human Development*, 12(4), 355-374.
- Bosquet, M., & Egeland, B. (2006). The development and maintenance of anxiety symptoms from infancy through adolescence in a longitudinal sample. *Developmental Psychopathology*, 18(2), 517-550.

- Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and loss: Attachment* (Vol. 1). Basic.
- Bowlby, J. (1973). *Attachment and loss: Separation, anxiety and anger* (Vol. 2). Basic.
- Bretherton, I., & Munholland, K. A. (2008). Internal working models in attachment relationships: Elaborating a central construct in attachment theory. In Cassidy, J., & Shaver, P. R. (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications* (2nd ed., pp. 102-127). The Guilford Press.
- Carlson, E. A., Sroufe, L. A., & Egeland, B. (2004). The construction of experience: a longitudinal study of representation and behavior. *Child Development*, 75(1), 66-83.
- Cassidy, J., Ziv, Y., Stupica, B., Sherman, L. J., Butler, H., Karfgin, A., Cooper, G., Hoffman, K. T., Powell, B. (2010). Enhancing attachment security in the infants of women in a jail-diversion program. *Attach Hum Dev*, 12(4), 333-353.
- Celinska, K., & Siegel, J. A. (2010). Mothers in Trouble: Coping With Actual or Pending Separation From Children due to Incarceration. *The Prison Journal*, 90(4), 447-474. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032885510382218>
- Chambers, A. N. (2009). 'Impact of forced separation policy on incarcerated postpartum mothers.' *Policy, Politics and Nursing Practice*, 10(3), 207-11.
- Cohen, J. A., Mannarino, A. P., Kliethermes, M., & Murray, L. A. (2012). Trauma-focused CBT for youth with complex trauma. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 36(6), 528-541.
- Cordón, I., Pipe, M., Sayfan, L., Melinder, A., & Goodman, G. (2004). Memory for traumatic experiences in early childhood. *Developmental Review*, 24(1), 101-132. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dr.2003.09.003>
- Courtois, C. A. (2008). Complex trauma, complex reactions: Assessment and treatment. *Psychological Trauma Theory, Research, Practice and Policy*, 5(1), 86-100. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1942-9681.S.1.86>
- DeKlyen, M., & Greenberg, M.T. (2008). Attachment and psychopathology in childhood. In Cassidy, J., & Shaver, P. R. (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications* (2nd ed., pp. 637-665). Guilford Press.
- Dolan, R. M., Birmingham, L., Mullee, M., & Gregoire, A. (2013). 'The mental health of imprisoned mothers of young children: A follow-up study.' *Journal of Forensic Psychiatry and Psychology*, 24, 421-439.
- Douglas, N., Plugge, E., & Fitzpatrick, R. (2009) 'The impact of imprisonment on health: What do women prisoners say?' *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 63(9), 749-754.
- Dye, H. (2018). The impact and long-term effects of childhood trauma. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 28(3), 381-392. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2018.1435328>
- Elicker, J., Englund, M., & Sroufe, L.A. (1992). Predicting peer competence and peer relationships in childhood from early parent-child relationships. In Parke, R. D., & Ladd, G. (Eds.), *Family-peer relationships: Models of linkage* (pp. 77-106). Erlbaum.
- Enos, S. (2001). *Mothering from the inside. Parenting in a women's prison*. State University of New York Press.
- Erozkan, A. (2016). The Link between Types of Attachment and Childhood Trauma. *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, 45(5), 1071-1079.
- Feldman, R., & Vengrober, A. (2011). Posttraumatic stress disorder in infants and young children exposed to war-related trauma. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 50(7), 645-658. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2011.03.001>
- Feldman, R., & Vengrober, A. (2011). Posttraumatic stress disorder in infants and young children exposed to war-related trauma. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 50(7), 645-658. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2011.03.001>
- Ferraro, K. J., & Moe, A. M. (2003). Mothering, crime, and incarceration. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 23(1), 9-40. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241602238937>
- Fogel, C. I., & Belyea, M. (2001). Psychological risk factors in pregnant inmates: A challenge for nursing. *American Journal of Maternal Child Nursing*, 26(1), 10-16.

- Fonagy, P. (2010). Attachment, trauma and psychoanalysis: Where psychoanalysis meets neuroscience. Karnac Books
- Goshin, L. S., Byrne, M. W., & Blanchard-Lewis, B. (2014). Preschool Outcomes of Children Who Lived as Infants in a Prison Nursery. *Prison J.*, *94*(2), 139-158.
- Grasso, D., Ford, J., Dierkhising, C., Branson, C., & Lee, R. (2015). Developmental patterns of adverse childhood experiences and current symptoms and impairment in youth referred for trauma-specific services. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, *44*(5), 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10802-015-0086-8>
- Hamper, C. (2023). "Can Life in Prison be in the Best Interests of the Child?." *Ohio Northern University Law Review*, *41*(1), 201-225.
- Hans, S., Bernstein, V., & Henson, L. (1999). The role of psychopathology in the parenting of drug-dependent women. *Development and Psychopathology*, *11*(4), 957-977.
- Harris, M. (2018) Incarcerated Mothers: Trauma and Attachment Issues. *Smith College Studies in Social Work*, *87*(1), 26-42.
- Howe, D. (2005). Child abuse and neglect: Attachment, development and intervention. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hutchinson, K. C., Moore, G. A., Propper, C. A., & Mariaskin, A. R. (2008). Incarcerated women's functioning during pregnancy. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *32*(4), 440-453.
- Jbara, A. E. (2012). "The Price They Pay: Protecting the Mother-Child Relationship Through the Use of Prison Nurseries and Residential Parenting Programs," *Indiana Law Journal*, *87*(4), 1825-1845.
- Jimenez, M., Wade, R., Lin, Y., Morrow, L., & Reichman, N. (2016). Adverse experiences in early childhood and adult health outcomes. *Pediatrics*, *137*(2), 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2015-1839>
- Kazura, K. (2001). Family programming for incarcerated parents: A needs assessment among inmates. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, *32*(4), 67-83. [https://doi.org/10.1300/J076v32n04\\_05](https://doi.org/10.1300/J076v32n04_05)
- Kestermann, C. (2005). Training curriculum for women's prisons: Health aspects. In Dünkel, F., Kestermann, C., & J., Zolondek (Eds.), *Reader International Study on Women's Imprisonment* (pp. 19-40). University of Greifswald.
- Krabbe, M., & Van Kempen, P. H. (2017). Women in prison: A transnational perspective. In Van Kempen, P. H., & Krabbe, M. (Eds.), *Women in Prison. The Bangkok Rules and Beyond* (pp. 3-34). Intersentia.
- Lyons-Ruth, K., & Jacobvitz, D. (2008). Attachment disorganization: Unresolved loss, relational violence, and lapses in behavioral and attentional strategies. In Cassidy, J., & Shaver, P. R. (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications* (2nd ed., pp. 666-697). Guilford Press.
- Martin, K., & Powell, C. (2021, June 15). *Mother-infant separations in prison: Why does context matter?*. <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/a49nz>
- McKelvey, L. M., Whiteside-Mansell, L., Connors-Burrow, N. A., Swindle, T., & Fitzgerald, S. (2016). Assessing adverse experiences from infancy through early childhood in home visiting programs. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *51*, 295-302. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2015.09.008>
- Melville, A. (2017). Trauma-Exposed Infants and Toddlers: A Review of Impacts and Evidence-Based Interventions. *Advances in Social Work*, *18*(1), 53-65. <https://doi.org/10.18060/21287>
- Morgan, R., & Liebling, A. (2007) Imprisonment: An expanding scene. In Maguire, M., Morgan, R. & Reiner, R. (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Criminology* (pp. 1100-1138). Oxford University Press.
- Myers, B.J., Smarsh, T.M., Amlund-Hagen, K. et al. (199). Children of Incarcerated Mothers. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, *8*, 11-25. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1022990410036>
- Najjar, F., Weller, R. A., Weisbrot, J., & Weller, E. B. (2008). Posttraumatic stress disorder and its treatment in children and adolescents. *Current Psychiatry Reports*, *10*(2), 104-108.
- Nuytiens, A., & Jehaes, E. (2022). When your child is your cellmate: The 'maternal pains of imprisonment' in a Belgian prison nursery. *Criminology & Criminal Justice: An International Journal*, *22*(1), 132-149. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1748895820958452>
- O'Malley, S., & Devaney, C. (2015). Maintaining the mother-child relationship within the Irish prison system: the practitioner perspective. *Child Care in Practice*, *22*(1), 20-34.
- Poehlmann, J. (2005) 'Representations of attachment relationships in children of incarcerated mothers.' *Child Development*, *76*(3), 679-696. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2005.00871.x>

- Pojman, L. M. (2001) "Cuffed Love: Do Prison Babies Ever Smile?." *Buffalo Women's Law Journal*, 10, 46-73.
- Powell, C. (2018). Mother-infant separation in prison: Problematizing attachment theory in policy and practice (PhD thesis). Middlesex University.
- Pynoos, R. S., Steinberg, A. M., & Piacentini, J. C. (1999). A developmental psychopathology model of childhood traumatic stress and intersection with anxiety disorders. *Biological Psychiatry*, 46(11), 1542-1554. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0006-3223\(99\)00262-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0006-3223(99)00262-0)
- Rincón-Cortés, M., & Sullivan, R. M. (2014). "Early life trauma and attachment: Immediate and enduring effects on neurobehavioral and stress axis development," *Frontiers in Endocrinology*, 5(33), 1-15.
- Rutter, Q. D., & Liddle, C. (1983). Parenting in two generations: Looking backwards and looking forward. In Madge, W. (Ed.), *Families at risk* (pp. 60-98). Heinemann.
- Schen, C. R. (2005). When mothers leave their children behind. *Harvard Review of Psychiatry*, 13(4), 233-243. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10673220500243380>
- Shamai, M., & Kochal, R. B. (2008) 'Motherhood starts in prison': The experience of motherhood among women in prison. *Family Process*, 47(3), 323-340.
- Shlafer, R. J., & Poehlmann, J. (2010). Attachment and caregiving relationships in families affected by parental incarceration. *Attachment & Human Development*, 12(4), 395-415. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616730903417052>
- Sleed, M. (2013). The Assessment of Relational Risk in Early Parent-Infant Relationships (PhD thesis). University College London.
- Sleed, M., Baradon, T., & Fonagy, P. (2013). New Beginnings for mothers and babies in prison: A cluster randomized controlled trial. *Attachment & Human Development*, 15(4), 349-367.
- Sroufe, L. A. (2005). Attachment and development: A prospective, longitudinal study from birth to adulthood. *Attachment and Human Development*, 7(4), 349-367.
- Tadić, V. (2024). *Učeničko ponašanje i bezbednost u školi*. Institut za kriminološka i sociološka istraživanja. <https://doi.org/10.47152/upbs2024>
- Tadić, V. (2024). Inmates education as a function of developing socio-emotional competences. *Journal of Criminology and Criminal Law*, 62(1), 63-88. <https://doi.org/10.47152/rkkp.62.1.4>
- Tadić, V. (2022). O pristupima definisanju i operacionalizaciji pojma bezbednosti u školi. *Studies in Teaching and Education*, 71(2), 249-266.
- Tadić, V., & Kordić, B. (2022). Strategije prevladavanja stresa u vanrednim situacijama kod studenata. *Civitas*, 12(1), 74-95.
- Thompson, R. (2008). Early Attachment and later development: Familiar questions, new answers. In Cassidy, J., & Shaver, P. R. (Eds.), *Handbook of Attachment: Theory, Research, and Clinical Applications* (2nd Edition ed., pp. 348-365). The Guilford Press.
- Thompson, R. A., Lamb, M. E., & Estes, D. (1982). Stability of infant mother attachment and its relationship to changing life circumstances in an unselected middle-class sample. *Child Development*, 53(1), 144-148. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1129646>
- Thompson, R., & Meyer, S. (2007). The socialization of emotion regulation in the family. In Gross J. (Ed.), *Handbook of emotion regulation* (pp. 249-268). Guilford Press.
- Van Haegendoren, M., Lenaers, S., & Valgaeren, E. (2001). De Gemeenschap achter de tralies. Onderzoek naar de behoeften van gedetineerden aan maatschappelijke hulp- en dienstverlening. Ministerie van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap.
- Van Horn, P., & Lieberman, A. (2008). Using dyadic therapies to treat traumatized young children. In Brom, D., Pat-Horenczyk, R., & Ford, J. (Eds.), *Treating traumatized children: Risk, resilience, and recovery* (pp. 51-70). Routledge.