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## **Pains of imprisonment in the narratives of prisoners sentenced for the first time**

### **Dolegliwości uwięzienia w narracjach więźniów skazanych po raz pierwszy**

#### **Abstract**

The aim of this article is to analyse the pains of imprisonment experienced by first-time offenders serving custodial sentences in Poland. The study adopts a qualitative research design based on 23 semi-structured interviews conducted with inmates in the final phase of their sentence in a semi-open prison in southern Poland. This methodological approach enabled the reconstruction of subjective meanings attributed to imprisonment and the identification of the most significant dimensions of suffering. Three main pains of imprisonment were identified: pain of the first contact with the criminal justice system, pain of isolation and loneliness, and pain of self-forgiveness. The findings indicate that imprisonment triggers complex emotional and identity-related processes that may both hinder and potentially support desistance from crime. Particular attention should be paid to self-forgiveness as an important, yet underexplored, component of rehabilitation and identity transformation among first-time prisoners.

**Key words:** prison, pains of imprisonment, correctional resocialisation, barriers to resocialisation, prisoners' narratives, first-time offenders

#### **Streszczenie**

Celem artykułu jest analiza dolegliwości uwięzienia doświadczanych przez osoby skazane po raz pierwszy, odbywające karę pozbawienia

wolności w Polsce. Badanie ma charakter jakościowy i opiera się na analizie 23 wywiadów półustrukturyzowanych przeprowadzonych z osadzonymi w końcowej fazie odbywania kary w zakładzie karnym typu półotwartego w południowej Polsce. Zastosowana metoda umożliwiła rekonstrukcję subiektywnych znaczeń nadawanych doświadczeniu izolacji penitencjarnej oraz identyfikację najistotniejszych obszarów cierpienia. Zidentyfikowano trzy główne dolegliwości związane z pozbawieniem wolności: udręka pierwszego kontaktu z systemem wymiaru sprawiedliwości, udręka izolacji i samotności oraz udręka samo-wybaczenia. Wyniki wskazują, że doświadczenie uwięzienia uruchamia złożone procesy emocjonalne i tożsamościowe, które mogą zarówno utrudniać, jak i potencjalnie wspierać proces resocjalizacji. Szczególnej uwagi wymaga praca nad samowybaczeniem jako istotnym, choć niedostatecznie eksponowanym w literaturze, elementem wspierającym proces odstąpienia od przestępczości.

**Słowa kluczowe:** więzienie, dolegliwości uwięzienia, resocjalizacja penitencjarna, bariery resocjalizacji, narracje więźniów, skazani po raz pierwszy

## Introduction

Prison as a penal institution is still the most common way of punishing offenders. The institution of the modern prison is subject to constant transformations and is being refined so that it is able to fulfil its basic goals: to protect society and reform criminals.

Imprisonment leads to specific effects that can be both positive and negative. On the one hand, the literature raises claims about the dysfunctionality and totality of the institution of imprisonment<sup>1</sup>, which, rather than preventing recidivism, causes pains of imprisonment<sup>2</sup>, may rather have a “criminogenic effect”<sup>3</sup> and may block the process of desistance

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<sup>1</sup> E. Goffman, *On the characteristics of total institutions: The inmate world*, [w:] D. Cressey (ed.), *The prison: Studies in institutional organization and change*, New York 1961, p. 15–67.

<sup>2</sup> G.M. Sykes, *The society of captives: A study of a maximum security prison*, New Jersey 1958; J. Warr, *The prisoner: inside and out*, [w:] Y. Jewkes, J. Bennett, B. Crewe (ed.), *Handbook on Prisons*, London – New York 2016, p. 586-604.

<sup>3</sup> F.T. Cullen, C.L. Jonson, D.S. Nagin, *Prisons do not reduce recidivism: The high cost of ignoring science*, „The Prison Journal” 2011, vol. 91(3 suppl), p. 58S.

from crime causing rather pains of desistance<sup>4</sup>. On the other hand, however, the possible positive effects of incarceration are pointed out. Prison can be perceived as a place that provides opportunities for work and education, provides addiction therapy and equips prisoners with new competences through participation in programmes offered within the institution, meaning that the initiative of going straight is on the side of the institution and can have positive effects<sup>5</sup>.

Bearing in mind the dual image of prison as an institution causing pains of imprisonment and a place where personal reflection is possible, which has a traumatising potential and may contribute to initiating the process of resocialisation, the aim of this article is to analyse both pains of imprisonment and accounts of resocialisation in the narratives of Polish prisoners sentenced for the first time. The main research question is: What pains of imprisonment do experience the inmates sentenced for the first time?

## Pains of imprisonment

Incarceration is a difficult time in a person's life and is associated with a number of negative experiences, which are referred to in the scientific literature as the "pains of imprisonment". This expression comes from Gresham Sykes' book *The Society of Captives*<sup>6</sup>, to denote the ailments, deprivations associated with incarceration. Sykes distinguishes five pains which, in his view, are a feature of prison life: (1) deprivation of liberty, (2) deprivation of goods and services, (3) deprivation of heterosexual relationships, (4) deprivation of autonomy, and (5) deprivation of security. While defining the psychological ailments of prison life, Sykes also notes that they replace the corporal punishment that has been used for centuries, but that they can be just as severe in themselves and "the destruction of the psyche is no less fearful than bodily affliction"<sup>7</sup>. Sykes does not give a hierarchy of the importance of the various deprivations, but for Warr the deprivations of freedom, security and autonomy seem

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<sup>4</sup> B. Nugent, M. Schinkel, *The pains of desistance*, „Criminology & Criminal Justice” 2016, vol. 16, nr 5, p. 568-584.

<sup>5</sup> R. Szczepanik; *Stawanie się recydywistą: Kariery instytucjonalne osób powracających do przestępczości*, Łódź 2015, p. 284; 376.

<sup>6</sup> G. M. Sykes, *The society of captives...*, p. 63-83.

<sup>7</sup> G. M. Sykes, *The society of captives...*, p. 64.

the most important, so he stops over them by showing their specificity observed almost 60 years later. Thus, according to Warr, the „pains are not experienced in any linear or conjunctive fashion; they are a perpetual aspect of prison life. They do not affect certain aspects of a prisoner’s self or identity in isolation but as a whole and all the time”<sup>8</sup>. He argues that micro interventions in the daily lives of prisoners, more than control measures, amplify the pains of prison existence. According to Warr, the most obvious type of deprivation is the loss of security, and a profound pain can be a state of insecurity and “consumptive wariness”<sup>9</sup> manifested in the individual’s constant monitoring of his behaviour to avoid aggression from omnipresent fellow inmates. Finally, deprivation of autonomy is potentially „the most destructive of the pains of imprisonment as it confers a direct assault on one’s sense of self and erodes any positive notion of the self”<sup>10</sup>. It involves the removal of responsibility and infantilisation of behaviour.

In recent years, in addition to the deprivations formulated by Sykes, scholars have also identified new pains of imprisonment. The new pains of imprisonment stem from the evolution of prison policing practices more oriented towards rehabilitation or risk-based programming. Here, Crewe includes the „pain of psychological assessment” associated with widespread testing and psychological assessments that dehumanise and are a tool for forcing prisoners into a uniformising framework without taking into account their world of values and need to be themselves. In addition, Crewe also identifies the „pain of self-governance” that arises when prisoners are given more responsibility for their own reformation through participation in various rehabilitation projects and are subjected to constant evaluation<sup>11</sup>.

The typology of pains of imprisonment formulated by Sykes did not, like most studies at the time, take into account the diversity of the prison population in terms of their background or gender. Sykes therefore adopts a universal division that is appropriate for the majority of prisoners who form a homogeneous whole. In recent years, however, studies of prisoner biographies have increasingly come to the fore, pointing to enormous

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<sup>8</sup> J. Warr, *The prisoner: inside and out*, [w:] Y. Jewkes, J. Bennett, B. Crewe (ed.), *Handbook on Prisons*, London – New York 2016, p. 590.

<sup>9</sup> J. Warr, *The prisoner: inside and out...*, p. 590.

<sup>10</sup> J. Warr, *The prisoner: inside and out...*, p. 593.

<sup>11</sup> B. Crewe, *Depth, weight, tightness: revisiting the pains of imprisonment*, „Punishment & Society” 2011, vol. 13, nr 5, p. 509–529.

diversity, particularly in terms of age, intersectionality, gender and even transgender<sup>12</sup>. Sensitivity to the different fates of different groups, before and during sentencing, has led to unpacking the pains of imprisonment and opened up new research horizons. The experiences of prisoners after release also become a challenge, which are also treated as the pains of imprisonment, as „coming out” can often be as painful as being „in”<sup>13</sup>.

Given the plethora of examples present in the academic literature, Haggerty and Bucerius<sup>14</sup> list 4 different orientations that occur when describing the pains of imprisonment: (1) a logic of addition, which involves extending the list proposed by Sykes, (2) a logic of division and distinction, which allows for the identification of pains specific to different prison populations, (3) a logic of extension focusing on pains whose effects last beyond the prison walls, and (4) a logic focused on contemporary pains, based on the belief that the dynamics of change currently taking place in the prison system are contributing to the emergence of entirely new pains of imprisonment. However, Haggerty and Bucerius caution against multiplying further pains (*pain spotting*) and confusing pains and nuisances, and call for a more restrictive and precise analysis in identifying them and presenting pragmatic implications aimed at alleviating them<sup>15</sup>.

The aim of this article is to identify the pains of imprisonment experienced by first-time convicts. The qualitative method and analysis based on a concept-driven coding approach were used.

## Own research

### Participants

The research was conducted in a group of prisoners serving their first term of imprisonment in a semi-open penitentiary institution in one of the cities in southern Poland (Trzebinia) in October and December 2024. The selection of the group was purposeful, and the important criterion

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<sup>12</sup> M. Maycock, *The transgender pains of imprisonment*, „European Journal of Criminology” 2020, vol. 19, nr 6, p. 1521–1541.

<sup>13</sup> J. Warr, *The prisoner: inside and out...*, p. 599.

<sup>14</sup> K.D. Haggerty, S. Bucerius, *Proliferating pains of imprisonment*, „Incarceration: An International Journal of Imprisonment, Detention and Coercive Confinement” 2020, vol. 1, nr 1, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> K.D. Haggerty, S. Bucerius, *Proliferating pains of imprisonment...*, p. 12.

for qualifying for the study was serving the sentence in its final phase (up to three months before release). The administration selected 31 individuals who met this criterion. Consent to participate in the study was given by 23 inmates. Detailed data on the study population are presented in Table 1.

Tabela 1. Participants

<b>Nick</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Committed crime</b>	<b>Sentence</b>
Aleksander	34	Basic	Alimony	2 years
Andrzej	32	Secondary	Fraud	4 years
Bogdan	24	Vocational	Burglary	2 years
Grzegorz	49	Vocational	Theft	3 years
Jan	30	Basic	Arson	5 years
Janusz	60	Basic	Drunk driving	2 years
Kamil	28	Vocational	Murder	8 years
Karol	59	Secondary	Fraud	4 years
Konrad	37	Basic	Alimony	2 years
Krzysztof	36	Vocational	Burglary	5 years
Marek	37	Vocational	Theft	4 years
Marek	27	Secondary	Assault	5 years
Mariusz	40	Secondary	Handel narkotykami	2 years
Michał	24	Vocational	Alimony	1 years
Paweł	33	Basic	Murder	14 years
Przemek	26	Vocational	Assault	1.5 years
Robert	41	Basic	Burglary	2 years
Robert	42	Vocational	Theft	3 years
Stanisław	28	Vocational	Alimony	2.5 years
Szymon	46	Secondary	Robbery	13 years
Tomasz	31	Basic	Alimony	1.5 years
Wojciech	48	Vocational	Drunk driving	6 years
Zbyszek	35	Basic	Burglary	3 years

Source: own work

The inmates were housed in a semi-open prison, which is characterised by a lower level of security and isolation for prisoners. In the group studied, some inmates were allowed to work outside the prison, while others, who have not obtained permission to work outside the prison, worked in the prison's premises.

## Method

The study was qualitative in nature and was conducted within an interpretative paradigm, focused on reconstructing the subjective meanings assigned by inmates to the experience of imprisonment. The aim was to understand how first-time prisoners describe and interpret the hardships associated with serving a prison sentence, especially in the final stage of penitentiary isolation.

Empirical data was collected using semi-structured interviews based on a set of open-ended questions. This format allowed respondents to narrate freely and present their experiences in depth. The thematic areas of the interviews included: the course of their biography to date (family environment, education, professional experience, social relations), the circumstances of coming into conflict with the law, experiences related to arrest and imprisonment (including participation in programs, the hardships of isolation), as well as plans and fears related to the desistance process.

## Procedures

The design of the empirical research conducted (purpose and methodology) was presented to the prison authorities with a request of the possibility to interview inmates who are in the final stage of their sentence, i.e., at most three months before release. Once permission was granted, a group of 31 inmates was identified, of whom 23 inmates gave written consent to participate in the interviews. Each inmate was individually briefed on the purpose and scope of the study and assured of anonymity before the interviews began.

The research was conducted in a private room and lasted approximately 1-1.5 hours. With the consent of the prison authorities and the participants themselves, the interviews were recorded. Only one participant did not consent to being recorded. In this case, I took short keyword notes during the interview and tried to record faithfully the whole interview process after the interview. The analytical process involved multiple readings of the transcripts, coding of the empirical material, and extraction of analytical categories relating to the experiences of imprisonment. A concept-driven coding approach was adopted, referring to categories developed in the literature on the subject, while remaining

open to new themes emerging from the narratives of the respondents<sup>16</sup>. In the presentation of the research results, the names of the participants have been changed. In addition, in brackets the age and length of sentence have been indicated.

## Results

### Pains of imprisonment

Pains of imprisonment are an intrinsic experience of imprisonment<sup>17</sup> and make it much more difficult, and sometimes even impossible, to „get on with life”, especially when their effects continue beyond the prison walls<sup>18</sup>. The analysis of the narratives of prisoners serving their sentence for the first time points to several pains that they face from their first days in prison. These are interrelated and interdependent. In addition, not all individuals experience the ailments of these pains to the same extent. My intention, however, was not to invent and multiply new pains of imprisonment<sup>19</sup>, but rather to present the ones that respondents mentioned most frequently and that caused them the most suffering.

#### Pain of the first contact with the criminal justice system

The first contact with the criminal justice system is a difficult experience and for many subjects represents a kind of shock. It begins as early as the moment of arrest, intensifies during the court proceedings, and the cumulative point is the announcement of sentence and placement in prison. The inmates who found themselves behind bars experienced stress related to the new hostile environment (guards, bars, closed cells), which was expressed in difficulties with sleep, with food intake, with being vigilant, consisting in listening to every noise, even the smallest one, coming from outside. The inmates also declared that they simply felt

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<sup>16</sup> G. Gibbs, *Analizowanie danych jakościowych*, Warszawa 2011, p. 91.

<sup>17</sup> B. Crewe, *The depth of imprisonment...*, p. 517.

<sup>18</sup> W. Klaus, *Snares and pains, or what stands in the way of the process of moving away from crime?*, [w:] W. Klaus, I. Rzeplińska, P. Wiktorska, M. Woźniakowska-Fajst (ed.), *Criminal careerists. Criminal activity in the subsequent fate of juveniles*, London 2023, p. 448-459

<sup>19</sup> K.D. Haggerty, S. Bucerius, *Proliferating pains of imprisonment...*, p. 12.

terrified and were unable to believe what had happened to them: *for the first few nights I didn't sleep a wink [...] I wondered if this was really happening. At every meal it turned my stomach upside down. What happened was unacceptable to me* (Mare 37, 4 years).

Detention seclusion is primarily a time of great ambivalence of feelings. On the one hand, looking back at the past, asking oneself how it could have happened, looking for the mistakes that were made, the negligence that led to the arrest.

On the other hand, it was a time of preparing for the court hearing, putting together a line of defence, presenting oneself properly to the judge, but also a time of rejecting the acknowledgement of guilt and reinforcing the hope of a quick release: *all I was thinking about was not getting to prison. I came up with all sorts of scenarios, but in none of them did I see myself in prison... it just didn't fit in my head. After all, I am not a criminal* (Bogdan 24, 2 years).

A prison sentence was therefore a traumatic experience for the respondents and was associated with the experience of breakdown and the occurrence of anxiety states: *I had a panic attack, I got all numb, my life collapsed, I started to be panic-stricken* (Kamil 28, 8 years old).

For the respondents, their first stay in a prison is primarily a verification of perceptions and myths about this place acquired mainly from social media or possibly from contacts with former prisoners. Thus, it is a completely new and alien space in which the newcomer has to face both the place itself and the people who make up the prison community (staff and inmates).

Also, the first experiences related to the architecture of the prison, the physical features of the environment (the slamming of bars and doors, the clanking of keys, uniformed guards, walls and entanglements) with a predominantly cold and hostile atmosphere and a specific smell (inmates spoke rather of stench) heightened the unpleasant experience and reinforced fears and the feeling of losing control over one's life. These first experiences and attempts to adapt to prison conditions are described by Szczepanik as „overcoming the place”<sup>20</sup>.

At the same time, in the lives of inmates, an initiation in relationships with fellow inmates was taking place for the first time. Many of

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<sup>20</sup> R. Szczepanik, *Stawanie się recydywistą: Kariery instytucjonalne osób powracających do przestępczości...*, p. 151.

the subjects experienced this encounter with other inmates with a sense of fear and trepidation, having in mind the stereotypical televised rituals of degradation of prison status performed by advanced inmates<sup>21</sup>. In order to conceal these unwanted emotions, they take every measure to demonstrate self-control and self-discipline, which corresponds to the notion of „consumptive wariness” used by Warr<sup>22</sup>. Szczepanik refers to this as „mastering anxiety” and explains:

Consumptive anxiety» is the strong concern about whether emotions will triumph over reflexes, whether they will take over a man’s body and mind, that is, whether they will deprive the newcomer of resources conducive to effective forms of action for regulating relations with the environment and occupying a desired place in the group<sup>23</sup>.

With a view to strategies for overcoming „consumptive anxiety”, the author distinguishes two types of newcomers. One is the so-called „player”, i.e., a person who consciously strives for a high position in the group, who is active, who puts himself in a position of prominence, initiates contacts and plays the show his own way. The other is the „defensive type”, defensively oriented, trying to avoid confrontation and putting oneself in the spotlight. His performance is rather conservative, with the aim of not revealing his image<sup>24</sup>. The narrators in my research definitely presented a defensive type of behaviour: *nothing to impose, nothing to look for sensations* (Tomasz 31, 1.5 years). As they had no experience of juvenile rehabilitation institutions prior to their imprisonment, they showed no need to position themselves high in the stratification of prisoners, did not seek to initiate conflict situations and clearly dissociated themselves from their fellow inmates, who demonstrated their attachment to the criminal culture by boasting about their achievements (often apparent) and their acquaintances in the ranks of heavily demoralised professional criminals (also often imaginary). Here is an excerpt from Mariusz’s (40, 2 years) statement:

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<sup>21</sup> R.S. Jones, T. J. Schmid, *Doing time: Prison experience and identity among first-time inmates*, Stamford, CT 2000, p. 61-78

<sup>22</sup> J. Warr, *The prisoner: inside and out...*, p. 590.

<sup>23</sup> R. Szczepanik, *Znaczenie doświadczenia pobytu w więzieniu dla dynamiki karier przestępczych recydywistów: Perspektywa interakcyjna*, „Archiwum Kryminologii” 2019, vol. 41, nr 1, p. 85.

<sup>24</sup> R. Szczepanik, *Stawanie się recydywistą...*, p. 158-162.

*You know, it's hard to look at some of the things and attitudes of people here [...] such bad talk about others and then I observe them doing the same thing. One is snitching on the other, but he walks around and says no, you know [...]. Well just the falseness of it is incredible. In the same way, people who come here only for a while, in the sense of some short sentence, want to show their face, how though they are, make themselves look like someone they really are not in the wild, you know. You know, such nerds, damn, no [...]. I've learnt that you just have to sit quietly and calmly here in the plant and that's it, yeah. Follow all instructions and everything is ok.*

In a similar vein is Karol, who was sent to the prison at the age of 59 for financial fraud and does not consider himself as a „degenerate criminal”. He does not associate his future with crime and his self-presentations to the inmates are not characterised by the attributes of a professional criminal. His survival tactic is to adapt to his environment by relating well with other inmates, avoiding conflict and learning what, how and where to say and do:

*With the inmates I have an arrangement, in my opinion, a good one of course in groups, because they are young, let's say middle aged and they are my age. I rather don't have any conflicts, I avoid them, by the way, to put it in inverted commas, «I didn't come here to make a career» and only to do my time [...] However, the most important thing is to know what to say, how to find yourself, how to find yourself and in general, I couldn't get it into my head that I don't belong here, because guilt is guilt judged by the court, so if this is how my life fate turned out, I simply had to buckle down and adapt to the conditions.*

Another convicted murderer, aged 19 and serving a prison sentence of 14 years, cites a lesson he received at the start of his sentence from an older recidivist on how to orientate himself towards other inmates, which he applied throughout his incarceration: *minor, watch your hmmm... ass and do your own thing. Well, that's how I operate. That's how I've acted for these 14 years.* (Paul 33, 15 years).

The use of the defensive type also involves putting on a mask, pretending to be a tough person, exhibiting an image of being strong, a person who „doesn't give up”. This is primarily to protect oneself, to minimise risks and to ensure that you do not fall under the scrutiny of fellow

inmates: *I'm not tough enough, but also showing weaknesses yy... here one perhaps more than anywhere else adopts a mask, that's right, this kind of tough guy pose. It makes life a lot easier, well [...] I pretend more than I am a tough guy* (Szymon 46, 13 years).

The respondents' narratives show that their relationships with their fellow inmates are not very intimate, but rather bear the mark of superficiality and become part of the pains of imprisonment. They are the result of being forced to stay in one confined living space and are not a way to get into the criminal subculture or to perpetuate an image of having a position in a group promoting a „second life of prison”. Thus, interactions with other inmates „are superficial, but they are nevertheless necessary for many people, as they constitute a substitute for social relations and satisfy, to some extent at least, the need for contact with other people”<sup>25</sup>.

## Pain of isolation and loneliness

Shallow and superficial relationships between inmates in the absence of real and frequent contact with loved ones (family, friends, fiancée, girlfriend) become a source of pain of isolation and loneliness. Two types of narratives can be distinguished in the participants' statements. The first is the „lonely among the crowd” narrative. Many prisoners emphasise their incompatibility in the world of inmates and the fact that they „do not fit into the prison”. They speak pejoratively about their fellow inmates, as they do not identify with their status as criminals and emphasise their separateness and lack of attachment to the values of the criminal culture. One inmate even state: *I am ashamed that I sit with thugs* (Janusz 60, 2 years).

This choice of solitude by separating from other inmates is on the one hand a manifestation of the fear of one's own behaviour, of not becoming like others, of not becoming demoralised, of not being drawn into the vortex of the attraction of a life of crime and the delusion of taking shortcuts, as one prisoner vividly depicted (Szymon 46, 13 years): *I had enough bread, I was craving rolls*. On the other hand, however, such an attitude has a well-defined goal, which is to maintain the image of

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<sup>25</sup> W. Klaus, *Snares and pains...*, p. 231.

an independent person, in control of his own emotions and behaviour, treating imprisonment as an „unwanted episode” in life that has to be experienced *at the least possible cost, with the least possible losses* (Robert 41, 2 years). In their view, it is not a suitable place to form collegial relationships or friendships. One should not get attached, show emotions and especially weaknesses, as these relationships will not last and will rarely be sustained outside the prison walls.

A rather specific expression of loneliness is the annoyance of other persons with whom it is difficult to find a common language. It results from an excess of contact with other inmates (shared housing cells, common activities and leisure time) with a simultaneous lack of common interests, common ground. Loneliness results from the „all-pervading, overwhelming presence of others”, which takes away mental comfort, distracts, annoys, tires, from which one wants to escape and take refuge in some asylum of silence. One inmate who misses the single cell formulates it as follows:

*the presence of other people is quite tiring. One would really like, damn, and it happens all too occasionally, to feel the mental comfort of being alone. Here we are constantly accompanied by someone. Well, most often fellow inmates, but they supervise us anyway, you know, to make sure we don't have stupid thoughts [...] Well, basically, this all-encompassing presence of always another person or other people is tiring* (Szymon 46, 13 years).

The second type of narrative expresses a longing for family, for loved ones whose absence is felt very acutely. It is unequivocal that each participant has people outside the prison walls who care about them and for whom committing a crime and being incarcerated was not a reason to break ties and reject them. Many declared having a relationship with their immediate family (parents, siblings, wife, children), while others, whose contact with family was limited, pointed to a partner, fiancée or girlfriend as someone with whom they try to maintain contact. Nevertheless, the long-term separation is the pain of imprisonment for a number of reasons. The first is the limitation of contact due to the prison rules themselves, which consist of the granting of furloughs (1-2 per month), visits by relatives to the prison or phone calls (once a week). A frequent problem was that the place of residence of relatives was too far from the

prison, which, with financial problems, greatly limited the possibilities for visits<sup>26</sup>. In addition, inmates have difficulties with constantly being at the mercy of the prison administration and constantly having to ask for the smallest things. The prisoners' narratives clearly indicate that the prison staff was not helpful and that the prison administration, consumed by bureaucracy (pain of bureaucracy) and displaying a formalistic attitude, often shows indifference and sometimes even resentment towards the requests and requests of its charges:

*I don't do anything wrong; I try not to catch receipts. The only thing I caught out recently was that I dragged out a phone call for probably four minutes after 10 p.m. And because of that I caught a receipt, which for me is normally a laugh, for such a thing. Especially as I apologised to the officer, no, I didn't piss him off, you know, I just said I was sorry, I didn't have a watch and that's why I prolonged the call. I told the officer that I was having problems at home, just and I was worried because something was going on. And he didn't care, who cares what's going on at my house. You know, that's what upsets me the most, because here there are people who are supposed to help people, and in my case, nobody helps me (Konrad 37, 2 years).*

The second reason for the pain of isolation and loneliness is the absence and thus inability to participate in the lives of family and other loved ones. This manifests itself in several ways. One problem is the lack of financial support and care provision for those who are ill and require constant care. This is compounded by the awareness of the disappointment caused to loved ones: „there the family suffers” (Robert 41, 2 years), „outside everyone suffers because of my sins” (Janusz 60, 2 years). The narrators see this as an expression of personal failure in their role as male breadwinner and head of the family<sup>27</sup> the result of which can be a progressive breakdown of the marital bond or partnership relationship. Konrad (37, 2 years) formulates this experience as follows:

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<sup>26</sup> W.H. Chui, 'Pains of imprisonment': narratives of the women partners and children of the incarcerated, „Child & Family Social Work” 2010, vol. 15, nr 2, p. 202-204

<sup>27</sup> C.C. Datchi, *Masculinities, fatherhood, and desistance from crime: Moderating and mediating processes involved in men's criminal conduct*, „Journal of Men's Studies” 2016, vol. 25, nr 1, p. 44–69.

*I would generally prefer to go on ring [electronic surveillance], you know, because sitting here is just lost time for me. Lost time. My relationship is also slowly falling apart, because my partner can't cope, because she doesn't have any money now either [...] I don't know, I think my neurosis has returned or something. You know, because I got neurosis when I was out there. Well, and I think about my house all the time so that I can leave, get my kids back [...] It blocks me that I'm sitting here and makes me break down.*

Another pain is the limited opportunities to fulfil one's role as a parent. Przemek (26, 1.5 years) had a baby while serving a prison sentence. He did not have the opportunity to accompany the child and his partner from the very beginning, which he experienced very strongly. Other participants spoke of the deterioration and even loss of their relationship with their children, and the biggest loss was the lack of participation in the upbringing of the children, as Szymon (46, 13 years) put it: *I did not see my children grow*. Marek (27, 5 years) ended up behind bars one month after the birth of his child. After serving three months of his sentence, he was allowed a break in his sentence for one year, after which he returned to prison again and continues his incarceration. His knowledge of the child is negligible:

*it was hard at first. My fiancée was just with a month-old baby in a flat that she simply could not pay for herself. She was on a pension, so she was in a difficult situation [...] Me in prison. Well, the hourly contact during the visit there once a week is really a torment, you know [...] Now the child is six years old and he often asks when I'm going to come back from this job. Until he was four years old, he used to go here for visits, well he wasn't aware of what was here. There weren't so many bars here either, that has only changed in the last year. I've been going on these furloughs for two years now, it's just for the sake of the cause, the family maybe not so much the cause, I didn't tell him where dad was, just that he was, well, just at work.*

For some prisoners, it was also painful to be consciously separated from a toxic family in which they suffered violence and physical and psychological abuse. The ubiquitous alcohol, quarrels, insults, face slapping were the reasons for running away from home from an early age, getting into bad company and addiction. For Przemek (26, 1.5 years),

a family brawl was the reason for committing the crime of beating his father, and the acquired aggression in the family home makes him unable to cope with stressful, anxious and threatening situations. While he does not speak ill of her mother, he cannot speak about his father without negative emotions:

*my father abused me physically and mentally. When he was drunk, he used to hit me in the face, so I often ran away from home [...] Now I've even cut off contact with my parents completely. I don't want to have anything to do with anyone. I could never even count on them. Maybe I feel a little sorry for my mother, but generally not for my father. For me, he is not a father.*

### Pain of self-forgiveness

Self-forgiveness is part of the famous forgiveness triad (alongside forgiving others and receiving forgiveness from others), which has received the least attention in the academic literature on imprisonment. Interpersonal forgiveness is heavily emphasised particularly in the restorative justice perspective<sup>28</sup>, which stresses the benefits of forgiveness and reconciliation between victim and offender. In contrast, self-forgiveness, also referred to as intrapersonal forgiveness is defined as „a willingness to abandon self-resentment in the face of one's own acknowledged objective wrong, while fostering compassion, generosity, and love toward oneself”<sup>29</sup>. It is thus about a positive change of attitude in one's feelings, actions and beliefs about oneself. But, as Suzuki and Jenkins<sup>30</sup> note, through their actions offenders provoke painful and destructive effects such as shame, guilt and self-blame, which can lower self-esteem and thus block the process of desistance.

Participants' narratives are heavily imbued with accounts of difficulties in self-forgiveness, which manifests itself in various ways. One of these is the helplessness in the face of the problems faced by the loved ones

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<sup>28</sup> T. Chapman, A. Chapman, *Forgiveness in restorative justice: Experienced but not heard?* „Oxford Journal of Law and Religion” 2016, vol. 5, nr 1, p. 135–152.

<sup>29</sup> R.D. Enright, *Counseling within the forgiveness triad: On forgiving, receiving forgiveness, and self-forgiveness*, „Counseling and Values” 1996, vol. 40, nr 2, p. 116.

<sup>30</sup> M. Suzuki, T. Jenkins, *The role of (self-)forgiveness in restorative justice: Linking restorative justice to desistance*, „European Journal of Criminology” 2022, vol. 19, nr 2, p. 202–219.

and the awareness of causing and prolonging their suffering. Indeed, the family of the inmate is drawn into the machinery of the penitentiary system and itself experiences the discomforts of contact with a total institution: *mum didn't expect to visit her son in prison in her old age* (Grzegorz 49, 3 years). In addition, loved ones are exposed to stigmatisation from those around them, feel shame and sometimes failure, worry about the prisoner experience a sense of loss of control and inability to help their loved one<sup>31</sup>. The inmates mainly express anger and regret to themselves for the negligence they have committed during their time outside, which became the cause of their imprisonment. They search for situations in the past in which they should have behaved differently, which they would have changed. Let Konrad's words be an illustration:

*in fact, I can only measure regret for myself, no? That I just, because I could have done it quite differently, you know, not made myself an alimony debt, maybe I wouldn't have fallen into an alcoholic draught, as I would have noticed earlier, you know, that I was really drifting somewhere in the wrong direction. I don't know, I would have changed that, yes. It's too late now. That's kind of an afterthought* (Konrad 37, 2 years).

Additional pain arises from the resentments that inmates hear from the mouths of their loved ones: family or partner during visits, passes or phone calls. These generate a sense of shame, which is experienced as the humiliating sense of being evil, inadequate and unlovable<sup>32</sup>:

*the family visits, but they keep saying, I could have acted on this, done something, no? So that I don't end up here [...] There was a hinge time. I got 8 months of imprisonment suspended for 3 years, well, but during that time I didn't manage to do anything like that [pay off alimony], because I didn't have, as if to say, the motivation [...]. Now I think I could have acted on something though and I regret that time and it's hard to come to terms with that* (Michał 24, 1 year).

Those whose criminal act was the cause of the victim's death (traffic accident, homicide during an alcoholic libation or family fight) have the

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<sup>31</sup> M. Benisty, M. Bensimon, N. Ronel, *Familial pains of imprisonment: The experience of parents and siblings of incarcerated men*, „Victims & Offenders” 2021, vol. 16, nr 2, p. 247–265.

<sup>32</sup> Z. Szablowinski, *Self-forgiveness and forgiveness*, „The Heythrop Journal” 2011, vol. 53, nr 4, p. 681.

greatest problem in forgiving themselves. These are the inmates who have spent the most time in solitary confinement (6-15 years) and are constantly struggling with feelings of guilt. The trauma created by the taking of a human life is very deep within them and not worked through. This in turn leads to feelings of inferiority or worthlessness and do not motivate positive changes in behaviour. Szablowski<sup>33</sup> states that a person overwhelmed by shame may experience a distortion in his or her self-concept:

*I feel bad about it. For sure, for sure. I've just got this, I'm often reminded of it, there's just such a – I'm running out of vocabulary – well such a trauma, no? That kind of thing. But a man died, no? And a man's life is the greatest value, though. **Have you forgiven yourself?** Well. I had to come to terms with it, what can I do. But it's hard to forgive yourself. It gets you every now and then. You're reminded of everything. I would like to sink into the ground. I don't know how to deal with it (Wojciech 48, 6 years old).*

*Looking back on the terrible years that have passed it is painful. The victim's family said they don't want to know me. **And have you forgiven yourself?** Well, it's hard, hard, no? If a person doesn't want to go back to what happened, they feel guilty, no? I don't want to. I don't like to talk about it, either. **Maybe you need to?** Well, you know, does it help? It's hard to go back to it (Pawel 33, 14 years).*

## Discussion

The aim of this article was to analyse the narratives of first-time convicted Poles during their last period of imprisonment. The main issues involved first defining the main pains of imprisonment inherent in first-time sentenced prisoners.

The research has shown that imprisonment triggers pains of imprisonment from the first moments of incarceration, and even earlier in the court proceedings, detention and transport to prison, confirming previous research<sup>34</sup>. The first days and weeks in prison represent a kind of „liminal situation”, expressed by loss of control over one's life, crisis,

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<sup>33</sup> Z. Szablowski, *Self-forgiveness and forgiveness...*, p. 681.

<sup>34</sup> B. Crewe, S. Hulley, S. Wright, *Life imprisonment from young adulthood...*, p. 70.

breakdown, feelings of helplessness and even despair. The respondents' narratives confirm that from the very beginning of their incarceration they experience a great sense of „consumptive wariness”<sup>35</sup> and „consumptive anxiety”, which are expressed by a strong sense of anxiety and threat. The prisoners' response is an adaptation strategy of „overcoming place” and „mastering anxiety”<sup>36</sup> involving withdrawal from active participation in prison life, not getting into conflicts with fellow inmates, remaining calm and silent and, when necessary, putting on a tough guy mask to defend themselves against violence. This type of adaptation is only aimed at surviving in prison conditions without conflict, but has no preparatory potential for life outside the prison walls<sup>37</sup>.

The analysis was limited to only three broad terms, which may also include other pains mentioned in the literature. Nonetheless, the „pain of self-forgiveness”, which has not been frequently cited in academic research on prisoners to date, as opposed to the interpersonal forgiveness emphasised in the restorative justice perspective, deserves particular attention<sup>38</sup>. It creates a sense of guilt and shame that prisoners are unwilling to talk about and are unable to cope with. The pain of self-forgiveness present in many subjects should be a significant part of the work done during incarceration, as it implies the construction of a positive self-image, leads to a change of identity<sup>39</sup> and allows to face more effectively the adversities encountered after release (i.e., public stigma)<sup>40</sup>.

From the perspective of resocialization it is necessary on the part of the penitentiary administration to ensure that the quality of rehabilitation work is improved and that a better moral climate of the institution is nurtured, since, as Liebling notes, the positive impact of rehabilitation

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<sup>35</sup> J. Warr, *The prisoner: inside and out...*, p. 590; R. Szczepanik, *Znaczenie doświadczenia pobytu w więzieniu dla dynamiki karier przestępczych recydywistów...*, p. 85.

<sup>36</sup> R. Szczepanik, *Znaczenie doświadczenia pobytu w więzieniu dla dynamiki karier przestępczych recydywistów...*, p. 85.

<sup>37</sup> F. McNeill, M. Schinkel, *Prisons and desistance*, [w:] Y. Jewkens, J. Bennet, B. Crewe (ed.), *Handbook of prisons*, London 2016, p. 613.

<sup>38</sup> T. Chapman, A. Chapman, *Forgiveness in restorative justice...*; M. Suzuki, T. Jenkins, *The role of (self-) forgiveness in restorative justice...*, s. 2009, p. 87-89

<sup>39</sup> S. Maruna, *Making good: How ex-convicts reform and rebuild their lives*, Washington, DC 2001.

<sup>40</sup> J. Braithwaite V. Braithwaite, *Shame, shame management and regulation*, [w:] E. Ahmed, N. Harris, J. Braithwaite V. Braithwaite (ed.), *Shame management through reintegration*, Cambridge 2001, p. 18.

programmes matters when these programmes are delivered in a “better moral climate”<sup>41</sup>.

In view of the practical implications, it should be stated that in the case of first-time convicts, every effort should be made to ensure that imprisonment is the last possible punishment and that the sentence is as short and least harsh as possible. Furthermore, it is necessary to amend the law on the application of imprisonment only for non-payment of alimony, as it constitutes a kind of trap for the convicted person as well as for the penitentiary system and aggravates the problem rather than solving it. The maxim proposed by McNeill and Schinkel<sup>42</sup> that “[d]esistance from punishment is one of the best ways of supporting desistance from crime” seems true.

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<sup>41</sup> A. Liebling, *Prisons, personal development, and austerity*, [w:] *The Routledge companion to rehabilitative work in criminal justice*, P. Ungwudike, H. Graham, F. McNeill, P. Raynor, F.S. Taxman, C. Trotter (ed.), London 2022, p. 200.

<sup>42</sup> F. McNeill, M. Schinkel, *Prisons and desistance...*, p. 619.

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