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PORTRAITS OF OFFENDERS ACCORDING TO CRIMES AGAINST PROPERTY

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Abstract:

Crimes against property account for most crimes committed in Hungary today, according to relevant statistical data. The presentation will show the partial results of an empirical study examining the motivations of the prisoner offenders those who committed these crimes. The factors that push people to become criminals showed a wide range of results in the self-reported questionnaires and interviews.

Key words: *Crimes against property, offenders' motivation, Hungarian prisoners, robbery, theft, juvenile offenders, repeat offenders.*

INTRODUCTION

Considering domestic crime statistics, we can conclude that most of all crimes committed in recent years have been property crimes and violent crimes against property.

To promote effective prevention and law enforcement, it is essential to identify the pressure factors and risk factors that motivate offenders of these crimes. The relevance of this topic is unquestionable, and scientific thinking aimed at broadening the possibilities for addressing the problem is a recurring theme in international crime prevention forums.

Below, I would like to provide an insight into some of the methodological details of the empirical research I have conducted so far in Hungarian prisons to understand the motivation and subjective perspective of the above-mentioned group of offenders as a basis for the preparation of possible methodological

recommendations. and subjective perspectives as a basis for the preparation of possible methodological recommendations.

I. THE ACTUALITY OF THE SUBJECT

The current criminal policy approach in Hungary – and, of course, the restorative justice approach based on the international convention that influences it – is the prevailing one. If we were to define restorative justice: *"According to a document adopted by the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in 2002, restorative justice is an institutional response to crime that, while respecting the dignity and equality of all persons involved, builds on understanding and seeks social harmony."* (Gönczöl, 2010, p. 1.)

According to the basic concept of restorative justice, the procedure itself starts from conflict between the parties and aims to resolve this conflict. The focus of this approach to justice is on the causes and consequences of the offence and the prevention of recidivism. Reparation also plays a frequent role, which is manifested in the active repentance of the accused, since, according to the basic concept, it is not sufficient for the offender to be punished in a manner that satisfies the criminal law requirements of society as a whole, as an effective means of special prevention to prevent future reoffending may be for the person themselves to actively participate in mitigating the damage. *"The restorative approach as we understand it today began to emerge in Western Europe in the late 1970s, following its inception in the United States, and then in Eastern Europe in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The latter was greatly influenced by Council Framework Decision 2001/220/IB (03.15.), which made it mandatory for countries wishing to join the European Union to establish a legal framework for mediation in criminal matters and to consider the resulting agreements in criminal proceedings."* (Szabó, 2022, p. 10.) Considering the above, this approach was naturally adopted by the "successor" to the legislation, Directive 2012/29/EU.

To demonstrate the advantages of restorative justice, we must contrast it with the retributive justice model. The basic concept of this model is to impose proportionate punishment to restore the legal order, thereby expressing society's contempt within an institutional framework. In this relationship, as we can see, the focus is on the relationship between the state and the offender, with the role of the victim being pushed into the background.

Its basic concept can be traced back to Kant and Hegel: *"The philosophers who laid the foundations for the retributive approach, Kant and Hegel, both emphasized that the basis for the justification of punishment is society, not the harm done to the victim, otherwise punishment would be nothing more than a state-institutionalized form of revenge."* (Bárd, 2009, p. 2.)

It should also be noted that the approach that much greater emphasis should be placed on measures aimed at the reintegration of offenders than has been the case in the past can also be interpreted as part of the rehabilitation

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process. The primary goal of this is to ensure that, in addition to satisfying the state's criminal justice requirements, the convicted person can function as a valuable and useful member of society after serving their sentence. All of today's reintegration efforts are designed to promote this, breaking with the outdated view that criminal justice can only be considered successful if the offender is put behind bars after being caught, and even more successful if they do not reoffend later, i.e. become repeat offenders.

It is natural that criminal justice should primarily aim to protect victims and mitigate damage, but it is not less important to take into account that the offender will return to society after serving their sentence, and it is not insignificant for society as a whole whether that person becomes a valuable member of society or a repeat offender after successful reintegration.

We can therefore say that the prevention of recidivism plays a critical role in the effectiveness of a society's criminal policy in terms of prevention, as it qualifies the reintegration and resocialization segment of the criminal justice system. The more effective and adequate the means used during the execution of sentences to ensure the successful reintegration of convicts (offenders), the lower the percentage of recidivism. Conversely, if the number of repeat offenders increases, all measures in the system designed to achieve this goal must be reconsidered. To this end, continuous impact assessment and follow-up in accordance with the possibilities provided by law are also important.

Looking at the overall crime figures, although there has been an almost continuous downward trend over the last twenty years, the number of registered crimes has increased from 167,774 in 2022 to 178,172 in 2023, according to the statistical data published by the Prosecutor General's Office ¹ . Looking at the number of thefts and robberies over the past five years, there were 55,059 in 2019, 48,627 in 2020, 40,852 in 2021, 46,833 in 2022, and 49,127 in 2023 after another increase.

In the case of property crimes, following 81,810 in 2019, there were 74,053 in 2020 and only 65,155 in 2021, followed by an upward trend again from 2022, with 78,467 and finally 87,687 in 2023. In all years, the largest percentage of offences were theft, followed by fraud, vandalism, fraud committed using information systems, and other crimes against property.

In the case of violent crimes against property, there was also a sharp decline between 2019 and 2021, followed by an upward trend, with 2,129 crimes in this category recorded last year. The highest number of offences were theft, followed by fraud, robberies, extortion and despoilment. During the period under review, there was a sharp increase in extortion, which more than doubled between 2019 and 2023.

¹ Statistical Data of the Prosecutor General's Office, 2023

However, it is also clear that more than half of all crimes are property offences and violent crimes against property. The priority given to these crimes is not only due to the relevant statistical indicators. Based on my previous experience, all offenders under the age of 18 first come into conflict with the law by committing minor property crimes, thus beginning their criminal careers, so to speak.

In terms of age group distribution, there is an upward trend compared to 2021 for both children and juveniles, as well as young adults and adults. In 2023, 2,523 children and 8,836 juveniles were registered as offenders, which represents an increase of approximately 1,000 in both cases compared to the data from two years earlier.

II. WHAT COULD BE BEHIND THIS? WAYS OF UNDERSTANDING OFFENDER MOTIVATION

From the practical perspective of law enforcement and crime prevention, the relevance of crimes against property and violent crimes against property is almost universal. At the same time, from the perspective of criminal policy, one of the most important tasks in all areas of criminal justice is to prevent people from becoming criminals and to prevent those who have already committed crimes from reoffending after their release from prison. Criminal policy *"refers to the totality of state, i.e. institutionalized, responses to criminal types of deviant behavior."* (Gönczöl, 2010, p. 72.)

In the concept of restorative justice, prevention is essential in the case of individuals with no criminal record, and for individuals who have already come into contact with the criminal justice system and have a criminal record, it is essential to develop a methodology that is constantly evolving but, for the sake of effectiveness, keeps in mind the fundamental principles of reducing the risk of becoming an offender and, in the latter case, of becoming a repeat offender.

To carry out effective prevention activities and to respond to individuals who have already committed crimes in a way that prevents them from becoming repeat offenders, we need to understand the risk factors for becoming a criminal. Looking at the complex picture of crime in our country, we can talk about the factors that trigger and sustain crime.

In addition to examining inherited factors, socio-economic conditions are those that can contribute most to both juveniles and young adults becoming criminals. Furthermore, it is necessary to examine the extent to which psychological influences (e.g. the role of the family, economic situation, etc.) are determining factors.

Numerous domestic and international studies have addressed the issue of which factors have the greatest influence on life after release, primarily the success of reintegration. Many of these studies specifically address the role of the family in this regard.

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On the international stage, one example is the 2011 study by Berg and Huebner in the USA, (*Huebner & Berg 2011, pp. 146-173.*), which examined the obstacles and hindering factors to resocialization into society after release. However, I highlighted this research because it deals not only with obstacles, but also with factors that have a positive influence on reintegration. Based on its findings, a secure and supportive family background plays a key role in directing prisoners toward reintegration effectively and successfully into society after release, and more importantly, to avoid becoming repeat offenders.

Also in the US, Thomas J. Mowen, Richard Stansfield and John H. Boman conducted research on this topic in 2018, entitled *Family Matters: Moving Beyond “If” Family Support Matters to “Why” Family Support Matters during Reentry from Prison.*

All international research on the subject has reached a consensus that an emotionally stable and supportive environment, especially the family, is very important, particularly in preventing recidivism.

When systematizing the factors that increase the risk of criminalization, it is primarily advisable to categorize the causes within and outside the individual. However, in conducting the research, it is not my intention to treat the two groups differently, as I wish to interpret and evaluate the sample subjects as individual cases and life stories. Without claiming to be exhaustive, I believe that the most important risk factors for becoming a criminal are: abuse suffered in childhood, domestic violence, sexual abuse, being the victim of other crimes, addiction in the family, extreme poverty, livelihood and existential problems, social segregation, discrimination, history of mental illness, suicide (both in the case of the individual and their relatives), attachment problems, parental alienation, removal from the family, other early childhood traumas, early school leaving, behavioral disorders, etc.

Examining the triggering and sustaining factors and their relevance can help to understand the underlying mechanisms of crime within a given population, which is why research in this area is of paramount importance.

Of course, research can provide the most accurate picture of a given category of crimes and their offenders if we narrow down the scope as much as possible. In this sense, it is not advisable to examine crimes that differ in nature, material weight and, thus, motivation, either because of the low probability of feasibility or the possibility of compromising realistic research results. Thus, based on these practical considerations, the circle of offenders of crimes against property and violent crimes against property was selected when outlining the research plan.

"According to Bronfenbrenner's model, the influences mediated by society reach the individual through micro, meso, exo and macro systems." (*Bronfenbrenner, 1986, p. 2.*) Microsystems cover the individual's immediate relationships. They are, of course, the primary arena for socialization – and thus

resocialization. *The indicators of effectiveness* (Bolgár, 2018, p. 3.) depend on the participants who meet the person in question – on the characteristics of these individuals, i.e. the quantity and quality of the interactions in question. The meso system is the arena for these human interactions, the characteristics of which can also influence the nature of relationships in the micro system.

As Bronfrenbrenner puts it, in terms of the culture and hierarchy of the prison organization, the consistency or even security that exists there can also have an impact on the relationship between the prisoner and the staff. The exo-system refers to the wider environment involved in socialization and its institutional system. The macrosystem is the totality of the culture prevailing in the environment, as well as the fundamental roles and attitudes characteristic of society.

This model shows us that integration and reintegration into society is essentially an extremely complex interaction between the individual and, ultimately, society. Thus, in the process of reintegration after prison life, we can conclude that its success is largely determined by the attitude of society, including its expressions of acceptance and stigmatization. Nevertheless, it is well known that an individual's immediate environment can have the greatest impact on their reintegration, and that family, friends and social contacts are the people who can most help – or hinder – them in this process. However, based on the conclusions of the research, society's segregating and "labelling" attitudes can in many cases push individuals towards criminalization and even recidivism.

During my previous career as a police officer, I often observed that becoming a criminal is greatly influenced by negative experiences in childhood, which is why I believe that identifying risk factors and addressing them as soon as possible can reduce recidivism through appropriate preventive measures.

Individuals who come into conflict with the law at such a young age are more likely to become repeat offenders. The obvious reason for this may be that the development of moral norms is skewed in their case, which is very difficult to correct, and that many of them are already in a family or friend microenvironment when they commit their first minor offences, from which they adopt the wrong "model" in most cases. Most of them return to the same micro-environment after being punished, which pulls them back down in a kind of "spiral".

It can be said that, within the framework of the current criminal law regulations, the primary aim of individual penalties and measures is to ensure successful reintegration into society and, in the case of children and young people, to help them become useful members of society. Of course, the demands placed on society and the criminal justice system also play a role, as I mentioned above.

A relevant point for me in terms of international crime prevention activities was learning about the Kyoto Declaration, which is linked to the Fourteenth United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice. The Declaration was available in English in open internet sources, but only in part

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in Hungarian. I gained a comprehensive understanding of it from the perspective of Prof. Dr. Miklós Lévy's relevant study².

According to the Kyoto Declaration, an essential part of an effective crime prevention strategy is a thorough examination of the causes of crime, followed by the utilization of conclusions drawn from the circumstances of the individual. One of the most important tasks in all areas of criminal justice is to prevent people from becoming offenders and to prevent those who have already committed offences from reoffending after serving their sentences.

Children (under 14), juveniles (14-17) and young adults (18-24) are all categories of persons subject to special treatment as both victims and offenders in terms of substantive and procedural criminal law. In terms of current issues in criminal justice, one relevant problem is that this group of people is becoming offenders increasingly frequently and in an increasingly wide range of circumstances. In many cases, however, it is evident that although the subject only comes into conflict with the criminal justice system in adulthood, the signs of deviance and criminalization and the events that trigger them are already present before adulthood.

The examination of factors contributing to becoming an offender, characteristics observed during the proceedings, and reintegration, as well as the conclusions drawn from the results, are important areas for all segments of child protection and criminal justice. The range and methodology of the crimes they commit have changed in recent years, which can be attributed to a number of reasons (e.g. the influence of the media, the use and impact of information and communication technologies, changes in the dynamics of social communities), the examination of which, within the framework of studying the offender group, can be extremely useful for crime prevention. The examination of triggering and sustaining factors and their relevance can help to understand the background mechanisms of crime within a given population, which is why research in this area is of paramount importance. In addition to the examination of inherited factors, socio-economic circumstances, etc. can contribute to people under the age of 18 becoming criminals. Furthermore, it is necessary to examine the extent to which psychological factors (e.g. the role of the family, economic situation, etc.) are determining factors and cause the development of disadvantaged or cumulatively disadvantaged situations.

In the interests of uniqueness, the Declaration also aims to take cultural diversity into account, which in a broader sense is also linked to preventive activities that can be tailored to the specific needs of individuals.

² *The referenced study: Prof. Dr. Miklós Lévy (2022) The Fourteenth Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice; the Kyoto Declaration; *Belügyi Szemle* *Belügyi Szemle*, 2022/7, <https://belugyiszemlejournals.org/index.php/belugyiszemle/article/view/1033>, pp. 1349–1367.

Evidence-based crime prevention, as defined in the Declaration, requires the development of reliable and accurate data collection. At the international level, data collection is governed by the International Statistical Classification of Criminal Offences. It stands to reason that current trends in crime can only be identified with the help of accessible, reliable and high-quality data records. The Declaration considers it essential to continuously improve the relevant records to ensure that they are up to date, reliable and accessible. In addition, a key part of evidence-based crime prevention is the ex-post impact assessment of measures and the adjustments made based on the findings.

It goes without saying that cooperation between law enforcement agencies within and across national borders is essential for successful implementation.

In terms of progress in criminal justice, the Declaration sets out the objectives of protecting victims and witnesses, improving detention conditions – such as addressing overcrowding in prisons – and promoting successful reintegration into society. The latter is a high priority, as the increase in the number of repeat offenders and the failure to prevent recidivism are clear indicators of dysfunctional prevention. The primary goal of restorative justice is to reintegrate offenders into society in such a way that they become value-creating members of it. To this end, close cooperation and effective and coordinated action between the institutions concerned and their professional staff is required.

The Declaration pays particular attention to children and young people as a particularly vulnerable group, whose protection is also a priority.

Victim-centered criminal justice and consideration of the individual needs of victims are, according to the prevailing approach, of paramount importance.

In the case of juvenile offenders, the increased vulnerability of young people who come into conflict with the law cannot be ignored during rehabilitation, and particular emphasis must be placed on the causal background of the offence. In this regard, the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice³ cannot be ignored, as they also place emphasis on resocialization, especially in the case of young people.

In the questionnaires used in the first research cycle, as well as in the semi-structured interviews closely related to them, I clearly highlighted in the attached research plan – and in the above , I clearly highlighted some of the risk factors discussed in the attached research plan, and I placed greater emphasis on examining their contribution in the case of the sample group.

The family, as the primary arena of socialization, is unavoidable in terms of the values that a given child represents and the moral and emotional attitudes with which they behave towards other people, values, or even law-abiding behavior. While early theories investigating the psychology and causal

³ *Beijing Rules, United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice, 1985

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relationships of crime considered genetics to be the primary determining factor – simplifying it to say that criminal tendencies are innate – modern theories tend to look for answers in socialization processes, or rather process failures.

The family is not only of paramount importance in this regard because of its role in transmitting values and setting examples, but its position in society can also have an impact on a person's later criminality. Unfortunately, for young people growing up on the margins of society as children of marginalized groups, criminal behavior may appear to be the only alternative for self-assertion – and for gaining wealth, prestige and conflict management skills through the commission of crimes.

In addition to the above, the family environment greatly influences a child's attitude towards learning and their chances of success – or failure – in the school environment. Unfortunately, even with the best intentions and parental efforts, disadvantaged and multiply disadvantaged children still do not have the same opportunities in public education today. However, these obstacles are compounded by parental neglect, passivity, and possibly hostile attitudes towards the institution itself or towards learning activities. Of course, one of the primary tasks of public education is to compensate for these disadvantages, but in many cases, this cannot be achieved, or only partially.

I think we can clearly state that in society, both education and crime are issues and problems that affect the whole of society. If education does not work, or if the number of crimes rises significantly, this raises questions that affect all members of society, either directly or indirectly. The two areas are also linked by the fact that, in the event of any errors or operational deficiencies that may arise, the functioning of the school system or the justice system must be examined, and new, more effective solutions are developed.

Of course, it would be segregating, even discriminatory, to claim that there is a clear parallel between early school leaving or under-education and becoming a criminal. However, effective crime prevention, especially methods aimed at preventing recidivism, cannot be discriminatory or segregated and must avoid all kinds of preconceptions and negative prejudices. It should also be noted that, as explained in Robert K. Merton's theory of anomie, those at the lower levels of society have similar goals to other members of society, but due to their situation, they do not have access to the same resources as those in the upper strata. Among other things, this idea gives schools a key role as the most important arena for correction, where access to these tools is, so to speak, equalized. However, if the gap between the disadvantaged and the upper classes continues to widen in public education, this could greatly increase the risk of becoming a criminal. In their 2022 paper *Psychological Characteristics and Health Behavior for Juvenile Delinquency Groups*, Song and his colleagues identified three distinct groups among adolescents, in line with Hungarian studies: average (non-problematic/rule-abiding); problematic; and delinquent young people. The authors

divided criminal teenagers into two further subgroups: repeat offenders and non-repeat offenders. Although the number of juvenile offenders is on a downward trend, several studies on deviant juveniles have been conducted in Hungary in recent decades. While the focus and methodology of these studies may vary, problematic, dysfunctional families and the role of school always feature prominently among the risk factors.

According to the European Sourcebook of Crime and Criminal Justice Statistics, except for a few countries, we are witnessing a decline. In Hungary, between 2019 and 2021, children accounted for 1% of all offenders, juveniles for 5-6%, and young adults for only 17-18%.

When we think about why it is essential for children and young people to participate in public education, one of the first things that comes to mind is that school, as a place of education and socialization, is important for young people.

In addition to learning within the framework of the curriculum, this is where the all-determining socialization processes take place that shape a person's personality, or indeed its dysfunction, for life. In addition to the values and moral norms conveyed by teachers, peer groups also play a very important role in preparing the child in question for social coexistence and becoming a useful member of society. Based on this, it can be concluded that school is not only an extremely important place for acquiring lexical knowledge, but also for learning moral norms and other rules.

From a psychological point of view, young people receive decreasingly positive feedback due to their problematic behavior, which reduces their motivation, while their peers and teachers increasingly treat them negatively, causing them to gradually distract themselves from the educational institution and from learning.

Segregating behavior suffered at the hands of peers or teachers' causes frustration, which can result in aggressive behavior and violent attitudes, which in extreme cases can even lead to serious crimes. These may include acts committed against several people, which have become known in the public consciousness as 'school shootings'. The offenders of these acts are often marginalized young people.

In addition, a risk factor associated with school is early school leaving and truancy, which greatly increases the risk of young people joining extremist groups or subcultures and of socialization processes not taking place in the appropriate manner, resulting in some form of deviance on the part of the individual.

Inappropriate peer relationships can also lead to addiction, substance abuse and the commission of crimes directly or indirectly related to these. This means that individuals may not only commit illegal acts by possessing or, in more serious cases, distributing drugs, but may also commit property crimes or even violent property crimes due to the increasing financial costs involved.

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However, the role of peer groups could be discussed in such breadth from numerous perspectives that, due to time constraints, I would like to limit my presentation to public education and its participants.

Statistical data from a few years ago on the enforcement of sentences shows – even if the statistical data is not the most recent – the proportion of undereducated people among those held in prisons. The level of education broadens opportunities for social advancement, so the risk of becoming a criminal due to unemployment, financial difficulties or, in extreme cases, extreme poverty is greater among the undereducated. In addition, in the case of disadvantaged young people, it should be noted that if they do not manage to break out of their situation, it can become a self-perpetuating, self-reproducing process. Numerous theories have been put forward regarding the role of school.

Regarding the relationship between educational attainment and the risk of becoming a criminal, we can support the correlation between the two with several scientific theories. Bourdieu, for example, believes that school clearly determines the place of students within society. According to his theory, much of the knowledge tested in school, or rather the expectations, is something that children from the upper strata of society already bring with them from their families, whereas for those from the lower strata, learning at school is almost impossible. For this reason, instead of promoting integration into the upper strata, i.e. upward mobility, the school system reproduces social inequalities, thus resulting in social reproduction.

It is therefore self-evident that schools should prioritize the task of balancing out the disadvantages and advantages of family background to halt this negative process.

According to Bernstein, the reason for reproduction lies in differences in language skills. According to the theory of language use, it greatly influences a person's thinking skills. The elaborate language code used in schools and the limited language code brought by disadvantaged children cause difficulties not only in communication but also in thinking and learning.

It is also very important to mention the role of past failures. The model brought from the family, which in many cases also shows under-education or even deviant behavior on the part of the parents. Schools find it difficult to respond to these phenomena and are unable to alleviate the children's difficulties, thus promoting social reproduction. As a result, these young people experience constant failure, which contributes to dropout rates and appears as a risk factor on the path to criminality. According to some views, these disadvantaged young people experience their first serious failures at school. This is the first area of their lives where they are expected to behave differently from their families. The resulting frustration causes them to develop an aversion to school. Due to various inequalities (family patterns, poorly structured schools and environments,

segregation), they have neither the motivation nor the opportunity to meet expectations.

Finally, I would like to mention an interesting piece of research as an example, which depicts the link between education and crime from a different perspective and in relation to a current problem. Orsolya Bolyky and Eszter Sárík's study, Thoughts on child and juvenile crime considering statistics, came to two very important conclusions on the issue in question when examining the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on juvenile crime.

Their first important conclusion was that children's homes were particularly hard hit by the pandemic measures. The usual lifestyle of children with special educational needs living in these homes changed because of the restrictions, which was a source of conflict. Preparing students for exams and other mandatory tasks imposed by the pandemic placed a significant burden on educators and increased tension between the children and the adults working there. However, the pandemic also had a detrimental effect on children growing up in stable family circumstances.

Another important conclusion is that the disadvantage of missing out on education is that the lack of a structured, meaningful daily routine can lead to boredom and demotivation, which in turn can lead to aggression and deviant behavior. Staying at home and using the internet without parental supervision has influenced internet crime (online harassment) and has also resulted in more intensive "consumption" of pornographic content.

With this digression, I simply wanted to point out that long-term truancy has harmful consequences not only for children growing up on the margins of society, so it cannot be said that dropping out of school and failing to receive an education is harmful only in their case.

III. METHODOLOGICAL EXPERIENCES OF QUESTIONNAIRE-BASED RESEARCH TO DATE

The methods I have used in my research so far have been questionnaire surveys and semi-structured interviews. Under the terms of my research permit, I was able to carry out these research activities in four Hungarian prisons. In addition, I had the opportunity to conduct an in-depth interview with a offender who was relevant to the criminal offences in question and who was extremely complex.

As the questionnaire-based research method involved a much larger number of subjects – I had the opportunity to have 115 people complete the questionnaire – I was able to gain a wider range of experience in this regard.

Below, I would like to discuss some of the methodological experiences and difficulties from which I can draw lessons for my future research activities to obtain results that are as representative and scientific as possible.

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Criteria for inclusion in the sample group: male, Hungarian citizen, serving a prison sentence/under arrest for violent crimes against property or violent crimes against property. The latter category was also determined in consultation with the competent authority, as the group of people serving not only final prison sentences provided greater recruitment opportunities in terms of numbers.

The selection was carried out with the help of staff from the institutes participating in the research, thus ensuring that it was conducted without any influence from the researchers. I considered it feasible to involve approximately 30 people in the selected prisons in completing the questionnaires, as the group of offenders to be studied (men serving sentences for property crimes and violent crimes against property) is widely represented among the inmates.

The Hungarian institutions involved in the first research cycle were as follows:

- Heves County Penitentiary;
- Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County Penitentiary;
- Capital City Penitentiary (any facility that contributes to the conduct of the research);
- Juvenile Penal Institution, Tököl.

When preparing the questionnaire, I tried to use everyday language, as I assumed that scientific and technical terms would have led to interpretation anomalies in the sample group. The questionnaire, covering six topics and comprising a total of 53 sub-questions, asked about the offenders' childhood, family background, some of their personal attitudes related to risk factors relevant to becoming a criminal, their opinions and experiences, their thoughts on education and employment, and their subjective feelings and ideas about their future reintegration. Several types of questioning and evaluation techniques were used, and for some questions, I provided the option of selecting multiple answers.

The anonymously completed questionnaire covered the following main topics, without claiming to be exhaustive:

- Family background;
- Childhood;
- Experiences in education;
- Social exclusion;
- Poverty, livelihood crisis;
- Difficulties experienced in the labor market;
- Other components of a criminal "career", such as peer groups and substance abuse⁴.

Regarding the unanimous experience of the 115 questionnaire samples, language comprehension and communication difficulties were a recurring problem in the sampling process. Although, as mentioned above, I strove to

⁴ Taken verbatim from the methodological annex to the approved research

ensure that the questions I formulated were easy to understand, despite the need for scientific language, the respondents' reports nevertheless revealed difficulties in understanding, for example, the following:

- Names of family relationships;
- Terms for marital status;
- General terms related to employment;
- Expressions indicating the "quality" of emotional attitudes towards specific situations.

Difficulties in understanding were also evident in the fact that respondents were not always able to interpret the instructions for questions rated on a scale of 1 to 5, nor did they consider all options and sub-questions in the case of questions with single or multiple answer options. They themselves pointed out several such circumstances in their subjective narratives during the few minutes preceding the subsequent interview.

Difficulties in linguistic comprehension and self-understanding are therefore evident in the completion process itself, which is naturally – if not exclusively, then certainly – linked to the high percentage of early school leavers, under-educated individuals, and an unmotivated attitude towards learning, self-education and self-development.

Although the questionnaire section presented challenges in terms of completion that could potentially undermine the credibility of the results, based on the evaluation of the results so far, it did not compromise the quality of the self-assessment to such an extent, as the completed questionnaires and the interviews painted a nearly identical picture of the individual institutions.

Obviously, it is not possible to change the questionnaire after such a large sample has been taken – and before another similarly large sample is planned – because the results of two different questionnaires, even if they are identical in terms of subject matter the questions raised, if they differ in any way, they cannot be compared, as this would clearly call into question the representativeness and scientific rigor of the research.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, despite the technical difficulties mentioned above, the questionnaire used previously will remain one of the tools of the research and will be used in seven additional domestic penal institutions in the coming year.

Although I have had to face a number of unforeseen challenges in the course of my research so far, even from a purely practical point of view, I believe that statistical data, consulting with professional staff, and understanding international trends, as well as the subjective statements of prisoners, giving them the opportunity to recount their crimes from their own perspective. After all, without knowing the point of view of the individuals concerned, how can we develop adequate and effective measures for prevention and social reintegration?

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