SW
Czech and Slovak Social Work

Connecting theory and practice

# Participation: A Path to Inclusion

1
2024
volume 24

Published by
the Czech Association of Educators in Social Work
the European Research Institute for Social Work
the Slovak Association of Educators in Social Work

**Sociální práce / Sociálna práca**
**Czech and Slovak Social Work**
Peer-reviewed scientific journal for fields of social work

**ERIS Journal – Winter 2024 – Participation: A Path to Inclusion**
English edition of Sociální práce/Sociálna práce/Czech and Slovak Social work



The Journal is published 6 times per year. (4 times in Czech and Slovak, 2 times in English)
ISSN 1213-6204 (Print), ISSN 1805-885X (Online)
Registration Number of the Ministry of Culture: MK ČR E 13795

**This issue was published on 29th February 2024.**

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**Published by:**
Czech Association of Educators in Social Work, Joštova 10, 602 00 Brno, IČO: 49465619
European Research Institute for Social Work (ERIS), University of Ostrava, Českobratrská 16, 702 00 Ostrava, Czech Republic
Slovak Association of educators in social work, Ružová 13, 974 11 Banská Bystrica, Slovensko, IČO: 37846591

**Layout:** Radovan Goj (www.goj.cz)
**Print:** Printo, spol. s r. o. (www.printo.cz)
**Journal Website:** www.socialniprace.cz

## Editorial



## Papers



## Research Notes

# Editorial

Our call for papers for this issue of ERIS Journal invited authors to deepen the understanding of the link between inclusion and participation, by presenting their research and projects with various publics. Whether coincidental or a sign of the times, the contributions gathered here focus largely on the expertise of social work service users as a means to improve the quality of services, training and professional support. It also represents a fertile ground for innovation, as is made apparent by the recommendations for professional practice in several contributions. Consequently, participation is understood as a way to deconstruct professional representations and practice, based on feedback from experts by experience – but the implication of service user participation in this framework raises numerous practical and ethical questions, emphasized throughout the articles.

Thus, Emily Chetty, Karen Mills, and Brian Littlechild's article explores the participation of care leavers in social work training, the possible links with epistemic exploitation and how to mitigate them. From a theoretical perspective, the article draws on theories of epistemic exploitation in the context of oppression in the UK, identifying care leavers as a marginalized group while taking their experiences of oppression. Furthermore, among other things, the article "explores the participation of those with lived experience of social work involvement, commonly known in the UK as Experts by Experience (EbE) within social work education, specifically those who have the experience of being in local authority care, Care Leavers, alongside the concept of epistemic exploitation (Berenstain, 2016)". Finally, the article also examines the practice of co-production and the involvement of those concerned (EbE), without omitting the historical context of participation within social work.

Kvetoslava Repková's article also focuses on the use of service users' expertise in the evaluation of social services. In it, the author reports on a pilot experiment in Slovakia, involving experts by experience in the evaluation of the quality of social services at the ministerial level. While the relevance of involving service users in evaluation processes is no longer a matter of debate, the article does raise a number of questions about the representativeness of the panel of service users, and the operationalisation of such approaches.

The article by Laurence Costes and Hakima Mounir addresses the issue of integration through economic activity for women who are far from employment in France. The two authors focus on a group of women, trying to understand the inclusion objectives of so-called "socio-professional remobilization programs". The central question running through the article is: in what way do these actions not convey a promise of inclusion without being able to guarantee socio-professional integration? "Based on research conducted with women who have taken part in these schemes, this article aims at reviewing the effects of such measures on the inclusion and integration of women into the labour market". These programs require a client-centred support concerning a range of issues, aimed at increasing these women's chances of gaining access to employment.

Finally, the article by Sabina Zdráhalová and Alice Gojová presents the results of qualitative research carried out in the Czech Republic with parents of children placed in care for reasons of neglect, with the aim of understanding their perspective and experience of separation. The authors consider neglect as a social construct and highlight the discrepancies between families' needs and the social services on offer. They advocate a critical social work practice, a structural reading of families' situations, and less standardized support, more focused on families' needs.

Two of the articles in this issue are not directly related to the theme of participation. The first, by Magdaléna Hovanová and Katarína Šiňanská, deals with the correlation between social support (i.e., the quality and number of social bonds) and adolescent radicalization trajectories, based on research conducted in Slovakia. With the

correlation clearly established by the research, the authors set out to draw recommendations for the prevention of radicalization by social workers.

The second is an article by Magdalena Opletalová and Zuzana Truhlářová, entitled "Social Work in (Not) Ending Housing Need". It brings together the points of view of a number of actors in the housing field in the Czech context, to explore the role that social workers can play in resolving the housing crisis, as well as the levers at their disposal and obstacles. They highlight the need for concerted action at micro, meso, and macro levels, in order to overcome social workers' sense of powerlessness, and to prevent situations of vulnerability among the client group.

To conclude our introduction, we refer the reader to a research note by Anita Gulczynska, Kornelia Kruk, Natalia Krupinska, and Marcief Plociennikowski, entitled: Post-industrial City Undergoing Regeneration as a Living Space of Disadvantaged Neighbourhood Youth. Qualitative Pilot Study. The aim of the study is to discover the reality of the city (Lodz) for some of its youth (places of inclusion versus exclusion in the city) and its complex determinants. This research attempts to enrich the theoretical justifications for the development of forms of social and educational intervention that empower young people from disadvantaged neighbourhoods in urban regeneration programs.

***Liénard Laure, Jovelin Emmanuel***
*Editors of the issue*

# An Exploration of Care Leavers as Experts by Experience in Social Work Teaching in the UK and Epistemic Exploitation

*Accepted for publication on December 9th, 2023.*

Emily Chetty, Karen Mills, Brian Littlechild

Emily Chetty[1] is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Hertfordshire and is a qualified social worker. Emily leads on co-production with care leavers and those with lived experienced within a social work qualifying programme. As a practitioner, Emily has worked within children and families' statutory services in the UK, specifically with children in care and care leavers.

Karen Mills[2] practised as a Probation Officer prior to taking up an academic career. Currently Programme Lead for the Step up to Social Work Programme at the University of Hertfordshire she teaches on topics such as social policy, reflective practice, and safeguarding/drugs use. Karen's current research interests concern classroom culture and anti-racist/anti oppressive practice.

Professor Brian Littlechild[3] is Research Lead for Social Work, University of Hertfordshire and Visiting Professor, University of Ostrava, Czech Republic. He has a long-standing commitment to the development of research and services in health and social work / social care settings, professional social work, violence and aggression in health and social work / social care settings, and co-production and risk assessment in mental health and children's work.

**Abstract**

OBJECTIVES: This paper explores the participation of care leavers in social work education, possible links with epistemic exploitation, and how to alleviate these. THEORETICAL BASE: This paper sets theories of epistemic exploitation within the context of oppression in the UK, identifying care leavers as a marginalised group and considering their experiences of oppression. METHODS: This paper uses a mixed methodology approach with elements of appreciative inquiry, participatory observations and reflective accounts from an educator's perspective working with care leavers as experts by experience within social work teaching. OUTCOMES: Experts by experience in social work education are a crucial part of student learning, bringing several benefits and developments to social work practice. Care leavers bring a nuanced position from lived experience and can offer insight into children's social work. There is potential for this involvement to become exploitative if there is insufficient preparation and a lack of meaningful understanding for the students, the EbE's, and educators. SOCIAL WORK IMPLICATIONS:

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This paper offers a different lens when considering EbE involvement in social work education, inviting the reader to consider the role of EbE's, how this is developed within education, and to provoke consideration of the meaning behind this practice, to ensure that there is purpose and reduced tokenism or exploitative consequences.

**Keywords**
Experts by experience, participation, care leavers, social work education, epistemic exploitation, epistemic injustice

## INTRODUCTION

The participation of those who are working with or have experiences of working with services is an integral element of social work practice. Participation and co-production are fundamental across the UK in social work education, practice, government policy and regulatory guidance. This article explores the participation of those with lived experience of social work involvement, commonly known in the UK as Experts by Experience (EbE) within social work education, specifically those who have experience of being in local authority care, Care Leavers[4], alongside the concept of epistemic exploitation[5] (Berenstain, 2016). This article will consider the safe practice of co-production and EbE involvement, by exploring the historical context of participation within social work and the expectations within regulatory guidelines, using existing literature to highlight the strengths within current involvement of EbE's across England. This will be balanced alongside some criticisms of current practice with EbE's and views around anti-oppressive practice. Epistemic exploitation will be outlined within the context of England, outlining the history of oppression in England and connections with the use of EbE's, and in particular oppression experienced by those who are care experienced. Using observations from the classroom and anecdotal feedback from both EbE's and university lecturers, this paper will consider how the use of EbE's might be exploitative and will make recommendations on how to minimise these risks to create safe learning spaces for EbE's, students and educators.

## HISTORY AND CONTEXT OF PARTICIPATION IN THE UK

Participation of service users became a key part of social work education and teaching across the UK and Europe at the turn of the 21st century at a time when movements for equality for marginalised people and communities became more mainstream (Fox, Videmšek, 2022). In 1990, the NHS and Community Care Act instituted the requirement for service user involvement in service planning and delivery. This made way for an ongoing acknowledgement that service users' involvement was key in health and social care practice. As legislation such as the Human Rights Act (1998) and the Children Act (2004) provided clarity on the importance of autonomy in people lives, it also invited social workers to consider their role and partnership with those with which they are working.

Partnership and participation with children, young people and their families who are working with statutory services is encouraged within Local Authorities across the UK. In 2007, the UK

[4] The term Care Leavers is within UK legislation the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 which defines a Care Leaver as someone who has been in local authority care for at least 13 weeks or more passing over their 16th birthday.

[5] Epistemic exploitation refers to the exploitative use of someone's knowledge, usually from a marginalised group, based on their lived experiences of oppression.

Government outlined a commitment to improve the wellbeing and outcomes for children and young people, particularly those who were in public care (Department for Education and Skills, 2007). This included the statutory requirement for every UK local authority to create Children in Care Councils, to "give children in care a forum to express their views and influence the services and support they receive" (Department for Education and Skills, 2007:7). This shift into ensuring those who are experiencing services have their voices heard is reflected within frontline practice.
Models such as Signs of Safety (Turnell, Edwards, 1997) place emphasis on working with families and empowering them to take ownership of the safety plans that statutory services are implementing. Similarly, within systemic family therapy approaches to social work, families are encouraged to voice their lived experiences and perspectives, and practitioners may take a position of alliance, whereby families are the experts in their own lives (Madsen, 2007). Power and empowerment are central to the discussion of co-production and participation, as they signify a change in the power within the relationships and seek to align both parties in a balanced partnership (Hartworth et al., 2021). The Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) encourages co-production across social work practice and advises that for this to be successful and meaningful, "the principles of equality, diversity, accessibility, and reciprocity" (SCIE, 2013:7) should be followed.
As with all elements of social work practice, participation and co-production needs to be reflected in the education of social workers and embedded in social work teaching. This has been mandated within the UK for over twenty years (DH, 2002). Social Work England (SWE) was established by the Children and Social Work Act 2017 and further legislation set out in Social Work Regulations Act 2018 when it became the regulatory body for social work within England. SWE sets out the compulsory regulations for social work education and training. These standards need to be adhered to by all social work qualifying programmes across England, to ensure that the education provided offers students high quality training and to improve social work practice across the board. The Qualifying Education and Training Standards Guidance (SWE, 2021) states that those with lived experiences should be part of the ongoing quality and effectiveness of the programme, and their views are incorporated into the programme design and delivery (Regulation 3.2, 4.5). It had been considered that social work qualifying programmes that did not involve those with lived experiences were "not providing a balanced education", and this could lead to "stunting the growth, development, and improvement of future service provision" (Tyler, 2006:386).

## LIVED EXPERIENCE AND CLASSROOM PARTICIPATION

EbE involvement in social work programmes across the UK can vary greatly, with some involvement being limited to admissions and guest teaching whereas others are involved in co-design of programmes and modules within courses. There has also been an argument for EbE's to be involved at a more senior level within social work programmes, and that this collaboration seeks to create a structural culture shift (Hatton, 2016).
Across literature, there is an overwhelming support for EbE involvement in social work education, though it has been argued that practice of EbE involvement in the social work courses would gain from having a stronger theoretical lens and support for further research to take place (Reith-Hall, 2020). Those with lived experience offer a different perspective in the classroom, where they bring their reality, which students can link with theoretical and academic perspectives (Anghel, Ramon, 2009; Hughes, 2017; Geregová, Frišaufová, 2019; Winn, Lindqvist, 2019; Reith-Hall, 2020; Happell et al., 2022). This provides students with a holistic learning experience and offers them a sense of how services work for those who need support and how to ensure they can bring positivity to their future careers and roles. Students are able to develop their empathy and understanding of those who find themselves in crisis, and where they can challenge their own preconceptions of those who use services (Anghel, Ramon, 2009; Hughes, 2017; Geregová, Frišaufová, 2019; Winn, Lindqvist, 2019).They are introduced to people with lived experience, as

the experts, and would become social work practitioners who were able to see the "true benefits" of participation and working alongside those they are working with in their care planning and decisions (Tyler, 2006:386).

However, there may be another side to involvement of EbE's in the classroom as tokenistic, with stories and experiences exploited for the benefit of meeting regulations and expectations. Tokenism is the involvement of EbE's at a symbolic level where there is a lack of influence on practice or services, and an absence of meaningfulness within their involvement (Geregová, Frišaufová, 2019). EbE's may be given the opportunity to have a voice and be heard, though it could be that this has no influence over change, and EbE's do not make the decisions, the power here remains with the educators (Arnstein, 1969). If the involvement of EbE's is done in this way, then this limits the outcome to no more than box-ticking and a false representation of involvement. This could be the result of those working with EbE's having limited understanding as to why EbE involvement is crucial and the underpinning principles (Tyler, 2006; Hatton, 2016; Reith-Hall, 2020). At worst, the involvement of EbE's might become epistemic exploitation and this paper will move to consider this face of participation.

## THEORETICAL BASE AND CONTEXT

### Epistemic exploitation

Epistemic exploitation is the exploitation of the oppressed knowledge, stories, and experiences to benefit the oppressor (Berenstain, 2016). Berenstein explains this concept exploring the intricacies around Black and Brown people educating White people about the experiences of racism or women teaching about misogyny and gender injustice. She highlights the notion of how marginalised groups can feel compelled to educate their oppressors, and that this can result in "unrecognised, uncompensated, emotionally taxing, coerced epistemic labour" (2016:1). This approach to understanding experiences of those who have been oppressed is seen as a normal step towards gaining knowledge and a way to break down societal discourses, though this is at the expense of those in society who have less power. It could be argued that those who "are oppressed are uniquely positioned to know certain things that others who lack the same standpoint do not" (Dunne, Kotsonis, 2022:345) and that the *insider perspective* is key in understanding oppression and creating change. Berenstein (2016:3) notes that although there may be a genuine request of curiosity, with the right intentions, questions can also be fuelled with "bias, microaggressions, or harassment". It is understood that experiences of oppression and 'isms' can result in symptoms of psychological trauma, and this re-telling or re-living of experiences can leave emotionally exhausted, or at worse, return them to a traumatised state. This where practice can become exploitative, as the recognition of this impact is not always seen or understood by those who are asking the questions. Berenstein (2016:5) highlights that marginalised people are once again the ones to "bear increased cognitive and emotional costs that take a cumulative toll on their mental and physical health".

Berenstein goes on to explore ideas around *gaslighting* and *testimonial injustice* as a way to challenge the credibility of the lived experiences and the realities of those who have experienced oppression. The concept of *gaslighting* is understood to be where one's reality is challenged by another, and that they are told their experiences are not real. Though typically understood as a psychological concept, there is an argument for this being a sociological experience. She argues that this is embedded in structural and institutionalised inequalities against marginalised group to control their realities and therefore reinstate power and disregard their lived experiences and realities (Sweet, 2019). Similarly, *testimonial injustice* is a notion that a person is not see as reliable or with integrity due to the prejudices held by others, therefore the dominant narratives and discourses remain in line with the oppressor (Fricker, 2007).

This also considers whether different marginalised groups are considered more credible than others, depending on how they are perceived and the power status in society. There has been

an acknowledgement of how oppression across marginalised groups can be seen as hierarchical, though Audre Lorde (1983) notably argued against this. The Equality-of-Oppression paradigm supports that equal attention should be given to marginalised groups, and that there are equivalent experiences for both individuals and society (Schiele, 2007), however it is argued that this has resulted in a 'increasing denial...suppression….deflection (Graham, Schiele, 2010).

**Oppression in the UK**

When exploring epistemic exploitation and links with participation in social work teaching in England, it is important that we hold a lens to the powerful discourses of oppression across the UK and Europe. Oppression exists in our society across different areas of social construct, for example race, gender, ability, religion, and age. Oppression is where there is not only power exerted over those seen to be different to the dominant, also where those who are seen as "othered" are viewed to have a lower evaluation of worth, experience rejection and exclusion from areas of society and/or their realities are denied (Nzira, Williams, 2008).

Despite the long history of oppression across the UK and Europe, it appears that systemic change and the eradication of oppression is a continued battle on a global spectrum. In recent years, there has been a shift of the dominant narrative, whereby marginalised groups voices have become louder on mainstream platforms.

The murder of George Floyd by US police in June 2020 influenced conversations across personal and professional worlds. Across organisations, schools, universities, communities, and governments there were conversations about the racial injustice for Black and Brown people, as well as institutionalised and systemic racism and white privilege. Following on, in March 2021, the murder of Sarah Everard by a police officer in London, UK, brought a mainstream dialogue where women's voices were dominant as many spoke out against violence against women and misogyny in society. Women and those assigned female at birth, started to challenge the dominant male discourse and instead, spoke around education for young men to work towards erasing gender inequality.

The voices of those who feel oppressed by society are becoming louder. This appears to be echoed across the world, as we saw the increase of protests, changes to organisational policies and an increase of awareness on social media. There have been some noted benefits, as the language starts to change and those in privileged positions start to notice injustice and power dynamics. This shift in the global discourse around racism and oppression pushed those in social work, and social work teaching to realign the lens onto anti-racism and anti-oppressive practice both within the content and teaching approaches (Thyberg, 2022).

Within systemic social work practice, John Burnham and Alison Roper-Hall (2012) offers terminology to help practitioners consider these different aspects of identity, experiences, and power dynamics, developing a mnemonic Social GGRRAAACCEEESSS (Burnham, 2012)[6]. Whilst all forms of discrimination are equal (Graham, Schiele, 2010), not all differences are the same, and there is 'differences among the differences' (Burnham, 2012:146). For example, religion can be discriminated against and people from these groups can experience oppression by wider society as they may not be able to access areas of society and can feel excluded, though their religion may not have a clear visual clue. Burnham describes differences as existing on a continuum of the "visible-invisible and voiced-unvoiced" (2012:146) depending on the extent to which they are observed by others and highlights the importance of consideration when thinking about people's identities. In the context of oppression within the UK, those marginalised groups that

[6] The mnemonic was jointly developed by Burnham and Roper-Hall and in different forms has become an embedded part of systemic practice since the 1990s. The mnemonic stands for Gender, Geography, Race, Religion, Age, Ability, Appearance, Class, Culture, Ethnicity, Education, Employment, Sexuality, Spirituality, Sexual Orientation (Burnham, 2012).

sit within society, both visible and invisible, voiced, and unvoiced, can feel as their lived reality is not accept within the dominant discourse. The lack of acceptance of this voice, experience, and worldview sits at the heart of epistemic injustice.

Care Leavers within UK society, hold characteristics that are both invisible and unvoiced. It is argued that those who are care experienced are seen through a "problem-lens" (Bakketeig et al., 2020) and are likely to be stigmatised by their experience of being in care and presumed to be unlikely to achieve. There are societal assumptions that care leavers are expected to have poorer outcomes, though this is not evidenced within statistical data (Hartworth et al., 2021). Those who are care experienced are more likely to end up in the criminal justice system, develop mental health problems, and more vulnerable to substance misuse and other health complications (Power, Raphael, 2018; Harrison et al., 2022). As with other oppressed groups, the negative narrative around those who are care experienced, comes from a dominant discourse around power imbalances and those who exert power over them. People who are care experienced continually speak of having very little control over their own lives and that professionals continue to hold power over them, feeling ashamed of their care status and the stigma that is attached (Ridge, Millar, 2000). This discourse may continue to play out into adulthood, as there is likely a mistrust in authorities leaving Care Leavers feeling excluded from societal spaces, undervalued in society, and their existence is hidden. This highlights how Care Leavers can be sidelined in society and their experiences as Care Leavers needs to be seen through this lens of an unvoiced and invisible marginalised group within UK society.

This argument for Care Leavers being recognised this way has become a national conversation, as local councils across the UK begin to recognise care experience and Care Leavers as a protected characteristic that acknowledges the discrimination and oppression, in the same way that other marginalised groups do, and needing additional protection. Across the UK, this movement has extended for all local councils and the UK Government to recognise care experience as a protected characteristic, alongside others outlined in the Equality Act (2010)[7]. Seeing those who are care experienced, in the same way we perceive marginalised groups (Who Cares? Scotland & Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2018) which acknowledges the complexity of their positions as EbE's within social work education and the risk of epistemic exploitation.

## METHODOLOGY

The aim of this research is to reflect on how care leavers contributed to teaching as EbE's on this particular programme, the impact on students, EbE's and educators, and how current practice could be improved. Using the literature above as a base for understanding theoretical contexts of participation, oppression and epistemic exploitation, the author has used a mixed methodology approach combining elements of an appreciative inquiry (AI), participatory observations, and self-reflective accounts.

AI allows a focus on "exploring the possibilities instead of the problem" (Bergmark, Kostenius, 2018:624) and brings more attention to the strengths identified rather than the negatives. Kumar et al. notes that AI "communicates concepts like hope, potential, positivity, dream, engagement, co-design, enjoyment, thriving, and life-giving" (2023:1006). By completing reflections through this lens, it leans away from problem-based methodologies, which can bring limitations such as being solution-focused rather than exploring the meaning (Bergmark, Kostenius, 2018). Bringing together this methodology with participant observations, whereby the author reflects on their observations of EbE's and students in the classroom, as well as considering the author's own

[7] There are currently nine protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010: Age, Disability, Gender reassignment, Marriage and civil partnership, Pregnancy and maternity, Race, Religion or belief, Sex and Sexual Orientation.

experiences in the classroom. This means that the author was able to become part of the research setting and these reflections on the sessions and recalling observations have been key (Gray, 2004). It is important to note the limitations of this research, as it is based within the author's own observations and "a high degree of personal interpretation" (Gray, 2004:255). It is therefore important to acknowledge potential bias and objectivism. To further this research, interviews with EbE's, students, and educators could unpick experiences of those participating in the teaching sessions and bring differences in their perspectives.

These observations took place as part of a pre-qualifying master's programme, which was focused on the training of children's social workers. The teaching sessions sat within two modules on the course, which had already been designed by the University team, and the request was for EbE's to design these sessions, to compliment the learning for students and to provide a rounded holistic experience. The EbE's participatory role was to co-produce and co-deliver teaching sessions, where their time and contribution would receive a fair monetary payment.

EbE's in this case were care experienced and continued to work with care leaving services in the UK. The recruitment for EbE's took place with a leaving care service and the allocated personal advisors[8] within the service. The call was for any care leaver who may be interested in the education of the next generation of social workers and were open to sharing their experiences, perspectives, and stories to contribute to teaching. It was important that people did not feel obliged or coerced into this role, and that there were clear expectations set out. To do this, each person was contacted individually, to discuss what an EbE role looks like on this programme, the expectation of involvement and payment which would be provided (Anghel, Ramon, 2009; Hughes, 2017; Fox, Videmšek, 2022).

Barriers that created difficulties in EbE participation and recruitment were also due to the organisational structures and limitations. For instance, transport, childcare costs, and payments that do not affect benefits can create very difficult obstacles to overcome and need to be held in mind by both educators and the wider University systems (Tyler, 2006). Due to university regulations, those who did not hold Right to Work in the UK were unable to participate, which meant EbE's needed to either be British citizens or have the appropriate immigration status to work in the UK. This did limit the pool of EbE's, as a dominant group of care leavers in this particular service were those who had entered the UK as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and may have been awaiting decisions about their claim. A Care Leaver was unable to participate in the teaching sessions, as they had a young infant who for insurance reasons could not be in the teaching venue, and the individual was not able to access childcare. They were offered to contribute virtually, though they found this to be too intimidating, so chose to no longer participate. It was also important to acknowledge some would find it difficult to speak in front of a group of people they do not know, as this can be overwhelming and intimidating, therefore opting to not take part.

Once a group of EBE's were in place, three planning sessions took place with a group of with a view of co-producing and co-delivering three teaching sessions. These sessions focused on the following themes:

- The child's world: living through abuse and neglect
- Communicating with children and young people
- Trauma, recovery, and resilience

In the planning sessions, EbE's were encouraged to speak openly and authentically of their experiences of social work and social care systems. These sessions took place online along with the EbE lead who would be facilitating the teaching sessions. These sessions tended to focus on the EbE's negative experiences of social workers and a disillusioned view of the services to which

[8] Personal Advisors have a statutory role within leaving care services who provide advice, guidance, and support to care leavers (16–25year olds). This role is set out within UK legislation; The Children Act (1989) and the Children (Leaving Care) Act (2000).

they have been exposed. There was a strong narrative from the EbE's to create change in the system, to create better experiences for those who find themselves in similar situations, and that by contributing to teaching, they could have an influence on future qualified social workers (Hughes, 2017; Horgan et al., 2020).

Two EbE's took a more active and participatory role in the co-design and co-delivery, and between them attended the three teaching sessions. Both were asked to arrive early, to have a brief check in prior to the students arriving, and again had a follow up debrief after the sessions. Their personal advisors were aware of their involvement and were available to be contacted should the EbE's require any follow up support. Following these sessions, the EbE's have been involved in the validation and design of upcoming programmes, and in the assessment process for new students.

Within the programme, there were approximately 35 students who were present in the teaching days. The demographic of students is mixed, though heavily female dominated. The ethnography of the cohort is mixed, with a slightly higher percentage of Black and Brown students. The students vary in age and have come to social work education at different stages in their professional development, some from previous experiences of working within statutory services such as health, education, or criminal justice. The specific comments on the ethnographic makeup of the group seems appropriate, to acknowledge the differing power imbalances in the room. Most of the students appear to be part of a marginalised group in society and may have had different experiences of oppression or have worked with those marginalised groups in a professional capacity prior to their social work training. In all three sessions, there was at least one other educator in the room, who supported the sessions.

Preparations took place with the students at the beginning of the teaching module, where they were advised of EbE's joining the teaching spaces and being part of the co-design. Students were advised to have a compassionate and curious teaching space, to recognise the power imbalances within the room and respecting the perspectives that the EbE's will bring. The terminology used continued to be Experts by Experience, and students were not specifically advised of the EbE's position as Care Leavers, though this was shared by EbE's in the teaching sessions. The term EbE has been purposefully used to provide equality in status and to support their positions within the teaching team (Geregová, Frišaufová, 2019). Though it is also noted that this blanket term does not acknowledge the variations in experiences of services (Hughes, 2017).

## FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Students shared their appreciation and gratitude for the EbE's in feedback to the teaching team, noting how it was helpful to have these different perspectives within the classroom (Anghel, Ramon, 2009; Hughes, 2017; Geregová, Frišaufová, 2019; Fox, 2020; Hartworth et al., 2021). Students appeared to be engaged with the learning, interacting well with EbE's, creating an inclusive space for them, and on the most part respecting their boundaries with questions. Hughes (2017) connects the involvement of EbE's to adult learning theories whereby involvement can enable transformative learning for students.

During the sessions, it was noted that at times, EbE's chose to share powerful stories of their own experiences and challenged positions in the classroom. EbE's shared their own speculation that they may have experienced more trauma from being in care and working with social workers than living with their birth families, from whom they were eventually removed. They seemed conflicted in that they knew they were exposed to significant harm and agreed with the decision-making by services at the time, they felt the experience of being in care also left them feeling harmed and abused.

This personal testimonial is seen to be valuable within the classroom, as it can bring transformative learning, where students are exposed to life stories that could be seen as privilege to hear (Mezirow, 2003; Hughes, 2017). However, it is also argued that EbE's involvement is only perceived as

valuable when testimonials are shared, rather than their opinions or judgements being their expertise (Hughes, 2017). As previously noted, the benefit of participation is well documented in the social work literature, but there is a tendency for educators to "inflate the credibility affixed to testimonies" (Dunne, Kotsonis, 2022:8), which can create additional pressures on EbE's whilst overlooking the potential harms they experience (Dunne, Kotsonis, 2022).

In these observations, it was noted that discomfort within the classroom arose when students appeared to challenge or disagree with the EbE's perceptions or opinions, especially when they spoke of their frustrations around their own experience with social workers. Anghel and Ramon (2009) discuss that this clash is expected, as the students would hold their positions as social workers in a positive light and have solidarity with the institution they belong to. The link here with epistemic injustice is clear, as the EbE's experiential knowledge was challenged, and students felt able to question this. It could be that due to the stigmatised attitudes held around Care Leavers, there is a prevalent discourse that minimises the credibility in their knowledge base (Happell, Warner et al., 2022; Okoroji et al., 2023).

Both EbE's reflected that though they had enjoyed the experience, they were left feeling emotionally exhausted and noted an unexpected emotional impact from the sessions (Anghel, Ramon, 2009; Fox, 2020). Despite the focus of the sessions not being on the details of their own lives and specific experiences, both EbE's felt that the conversations about how to work with children and/or young people experiencing trauma and the impact of trauma, abuse, or neglect, left them feeling vulnerable and exposed. This identifies the link between a fear of re-traumatising those with lived experience for the benefit of social work education, causing psychological impact by participating in discissions of oppressive systems as the oppressed in the room (Berenstain, 2016; Fox, Videmšek, 2022).

When the EbE's were debriefed, it did appear that there was a balance of emotion, as they also hold a great sense of achievement and empowerment, where their perspectives in the room on the whole were validated and the knowledge they hold was given worth (Anghel, Ramon, 2009; Hughes, 2017; Geregová, Frišaufová, 2019; Fox, Videmšek, 2022). The dialogue between the EbE's and the educators before, during and after the sessions allowed ongoing learning and development. Involving students in this dialogue could bridge the gap that may be between these three positions in the room, strengthening collaboration both in social work education and into wider social work practice (Reith-Hall, 2020).

Anti-oppressive and anti-racist practice is essential within social work, and it is important that students are able to have a safe space in the classroom to explore these concepts. When EbE's come into the room with differing experiences and perspectives of statutory social work systems, there is a need for this space to be a safe environment for all. Despite EbE involvement, courses continue to be taught through the lens which caters to the dominant identity (Boatswain-Kyte et al., 2022) and social work education continues to be taught from a position that supports social work systems. This may be at the expense of those with the lived experience of being oppressed by that very system.

As educators, it is important that this role is to facilitate learning and balance the different perspectives (Boatswain-Kyte et al., 2022). It is important that students feel safe to express themselves and look deeper into perspectives. However this cannot be at the expense of criticising EbE's lived reality nor denying the existence of that reality. To achieve this, students need appropriate preparation when entering the teaching space, be reminded of their values as student social workers and anti-oppressive practice. They need to be encouraged to phrase questions with compassion and empathy, reminded that EbE's are not there to be challenged or judged. The responsibility to create safe spaces for EbE's sits with the educators, lecturers, universities, and institutions. As Dunne and Kotsonis (2022) note, it is the "moral duty to exercise extreme caution and moral sensitivity to safeguard against" risks of epistemic exploitation and negative consequences on EbE's.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

To move forward, the following recommendations are being made with the intent to improve the practice of working with EbE's in social work teaching and to promote the working with those who are care experienced.

Care Leavers as EbE's can bring an authentic lens on how they have experienced children's social care across services, usually having been involved with partner agencies such as health, mental health, education, family court, and possibly others such as police, criminal justice systems, or hospitals. It has been argued that Care Leavers should also be considered as a marginalised group, therefore the risk of epistemic exploitation is as present as with other marginalised groups. It is important or educators to bring this lens to their work with Care Leavers as EbE's as a starting point.

The findings demonstrate there is a clear need for educators to develop strong links with local organisations or services as part of the recruitment process for EbE's. This allows the opportunity to create mutually respectful relationships with those wishing to participate, and to ensure that the recruitment process is anti-oppressive. Opportunities for co-production need to be presented in a way that does not place burdens, force personal testimony, or where there is an expectation to participate. Recruitment for EbE's should not be cherry-picked and opportunity should be given to hear the different perspectives, not solely the ones that necessarily aligned with social work involvement. Educators need to consider the barriers that can prevent EbE's, particularly care leavers, from participation and how these can be overcome. The starting point is to consider the logistical factors, such as payments, transport, and childcare. There needs to be flexibility in the working partnership, with the Universities and educators creating flexible pathways for those to overcome obstacles to participate.

To minimise concerns of epistemic exploitation, choice is key. EbE's need to feel they are able to participate in a way that feels authentic and safe to them. To achieve this, principles of empowerment and anti-oppressive practice needs to be central in practice. Teaching content needs to be co-produced, with an acknowledgment of the power dynamics that may be at play, and conscious attempt to bring balance. As demonstrated within the observations, regular planning sessions and check-in's with EbE's have been important in being able to have wider discussions, and to bring focus to the content that EbE's feel is important to develop. It's noted that providing a debrief space for EbE's after sessions were particularly valuable, to ensure they feel emotionally supported and contained. This reaffirms the need for connections with the services who are supporting them and in particular a link with their personal advisors, who may also offer support outside of the teaching partnership as way to acknowledge the emotional labour and exhaustion that may come from their participation.

Whilst in the room, issues of epistemic injustice can be reduced by ensuring students have preparation including preliminary discussions around why the use of EbE's is important and again, acknowledge the power imbalances within the classroom and how students can address these both individually and as a group. Exercises such as developing questions and considering the language used can be a useful way to help students understand the experience of EbE's within the room.

## CONCLUSION

This article has considered the history of participation in England and the UK, alongside the history of oppression, exploring the concept of epistemic exploitation and how this needs to be considered when working with EbE's in social work education. It has been noted that the importance of EbE involvement lies in the significant benefits this brings to all those involved: students, educators, EbE's and future provisions.

The focus on care leavers has offered a space to consider the nuanced experience that they bring to teaching, recognising their position in society and to work towards altering the dominant discourse

that surrounds them. This article has linked how EbE involvement can become exploitative if there is not sufficient understanding and preventative work done. The recommendations made are not an exhaustive list of how to reduce risks and create safe spaces and is a part of the ongoing dialogue that needs to continue within institutions alongside EbE's. A key message is for educators and universities to consider the implications on any EbE they are working with and ensuring that there are active responses to minimising any harms on EbE's through their participation. It is important to enter into co-production with a lens on epistemic exploitation, to ensure that the participation of EbE's is safe and inclusive. This article has highlighted that this moral responsibility lies with educators, as social workers fighting against social injustice and promoting anti-oppressive practice within participation and social work education.

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# "We Ask what Clients Think." Involving User Representatives in Quality Evaluation – a Pilot Project from Slovakia

*Accepted for publication on November 14th, 2023.*

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**Abstract**
OBJECTIVES: To disseminate the pilot experience with involving user representatives in the work of teams evaluating the quality of social services according to the Social Services Act. THEORETICAL BASE: The study builds upon the concept of valorisation of user representatives´ social roles through their participation in the quality evaluation teams and valorisation of their experiential knowledge for better delivering of social services. METHODS: Context-based analysis and synthesis of available data sources of the pilot project conducted within the national project Quality of Social Services. OUTCOMES: Despite the mostly positive reflections of the stakeholders on the involvement of user representatives in evaluation teams, the pilot project indicated as yet their unclear status, expectations on competences, tasks and working model. Therefore, the question of institutionalizing the involvement of user representatives in evaluation teams (from November 2022 inspection teams) remains open even after termination of the pilot project. SOCIAL WORK IMPLICATIONS: Contribute to raising awareness and education of all segments of society, including user representatives, on what their active involvement in social services should mean, how it should contribute to improving the quality of social services, and what conditions should be created for it.

**Keywords**
quality evaluation, user involvement, social role valorisation, social work, social services

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## INTRODUCTION

The institutional origins of quality evaluation in the social services sector in Slovakia date back to the adoption of the Act No. 448/2008 Coll. on Social Services effective from January 2009 (hereinafter "the Act"). Initially, the Act imposed obligations on providers to fulfil a set of quality conditions divided into three areas: procedural, personal and operational. An amendment of the Act, effective from January 2014, extended quality evaluation to the area of fundamental human rights and freedoms of service users. The Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic (hereinafter "the Ministry"), through its civil servants, was entrusted to conduct the quality evaluation, with the possibility of inviting (external) experts to the evaluation teams, if they had completed a second-level university degree and at least three years' experience in the respective field of evaluation.

In order to support the introduction of the quality system into practice, the national project **Quality of Social Services** (hereinafter the "NP QSS") was implemented in 2019–2023. The project was funded by the ESF, Human Resources Operational Programme, and its implementer was the Implementation Agency of the Ministry (hereinafter the "IA"). From the beginning of the NP QSS, there was an intention to involve user representatives in the evaluation teams on a pilot basis and subsequently to initiate a change in the legislation of social services so that the pilot practice becomes a systemic part of the quality evaluation.

**The aim of the study** is to disseminate the initial knowledge gained from this pilot experience, which represents a particular form of user involvement in social services. In the text, we will present the theoretical backgrounds of this pilot idea, the project conditions for its practical implementation, as well as the selected reflections of the actors involved. We will not go deeper into the question of the pilot outcomes´ sustainability, i.e., whether the pilot experience has influenced the new inspection in social services field effective from November 2022, as this was only being analysed in more depth at the time of the study preparation. We conclude with implications for social work, particularly in terms of its core mission to empower users and support their participation in social work interventions (IFSW Europe e.V., 2010; IFSW, 2014).

## RELEVANCE TO SOCIAL WORK

We outline several aspects of the relevance of such a focused study to social work (per se) and, more specifically, in terms of its central focus on user involvement, which is considered to be a specific perspective of participationism (Evers, 2003; Krogstrup, 2003). *Firstly,* the social services sector is one of the most significant areas of social work practice (Munday, 2007a; Payne, 2014) and therefore all professional issues that relate to social services contribute to the development of a contemporary social work identity (Levická et al., 2015). *Secondly*, social work is a human rights profession in line with its global definition (Staub-Bernasconi, 2012; IFSW, 2014; Alseth, 2020; Hermans, Roets, 2020). The human rights essence of social work is fulfilled through its varied functions and practices that are aimed at upholding the human rights of individuals as users of various kinds of social services. If we consider quality evaluation as a specific social work activity, then the evaluation itself is based on human rights principles (WHO, 2012). These are reflected in the requirements to shape such system conditions that empower social service users and/or their representatives to participate actively and equally in the evaluation process (Simpson, House, 2002; Munday, 2007b; Omeni et al., 2014). User participation is a direct form of fulfilling obligations under international human rights instruments (in particular the UN, 2006) and related international frameworks for quality measurement (EC, 2010; WHO, 2012). In addition, creating the conditions and empowering users for quality evaluation complies with the requirements of participatory democracy as an inherent part of the standards in social work practice that meets human rights (IFSW Europe e.V., 2010).

*Lastly,* the sharing of national experiences focusing on the issue of involving user representatives in various aspects of social services is considered relevant because, despite the growing emphasis on the importance of this issue across Europe (Omeni et al., 2014), it remains a relatively new phenomenon, particularly in Central and Eastern European countries (Munday, 2007b). And even if the issue is valued to some degree, it can be seen differently (Krogstrup, 2003), as current strands of thinking about the concept can be different (e.g., welfarism, professionalism, consumerism, managerialism, and participationism) while none of them can be monopolised (Evers, 2003). Therefore, it is not surprising that the issue of user involvement returns cyclically to the pages of this journal, albeit in differently oriented professional concepts: as a call for a more intensive discussion regarding the penetration of participation into the social work portfolio (Gojová, Černá, 2022); or a call to clarify the relationship between an expert approach and participation based on people's authentic lived experience (Musil, Winkler, 2019); or, alternatively, the issue of user involvement is raised in the context of the professionalisation of social work (Matulayová, Schavel, 2021).

## THEORETICAL BASE

The theoretical concept of the study is based on three initial pillars. The first concerns *social services*. In the international literature focusing (not only) on quality evaluation issues, social services are defined quite broadly and include two main categories: a) standardized services provided to people as members of categories (statutory and complementary social security schemes linked to health, ageing, occupational accidents, unemployment, retirement and disability); and b) personal social services provided directly to persons, individuals which are related to their special needs and circumstances (e.g., social services for persons faced by personal crisis; persons in a need to be reintegrated into society; persons in long-term care needs; or persons in a need of social housing) (Munday, 2007b; EC, 2010). This study covers the area of personal social services, as their definition corresponds to the understanding and scope of social services defined in Slovak legislation.

Another key concept is *user involvement*. Munday (2007b) believes that this concept is rather bland in itself and needs to be explored within broader concepts. In a sociological sense, it can be approached through "reality" as a social construction (Berger, Luckmann, 1999). If the reality of the provided social services is considered to be a social construction derived from an evaluation of their quality, then the opinions and claims of experts based on their privileged position in society (e.g., social workers operating in social service settings or civil servants of the Ministry) are not sufficient for evaluation. It is essential to involve into the evaluation the "holders" of this social construction, the individual users of social services (primary service users), their families or user representatives, to value their first-hand experience and "experiential knowledge" (Beresford, 2003). The author considers knowledge based on distance between direct experience (of users or their representatives) and its interpretations (by experts) as inaccurate, unreliable, and distorted as each actor (experts, users, or other parties) brings their own perspective and interpretation to the creation of knowledge and construction of reality (Omeni et al., 2014).

According to Beresford (2003), the weak application of the user perspective in social services stems from the traditional pre-eminence of "objective" scientific knowledge compared with the "subjective" knowledge of people who are of its holders—service users. Thomas, Wolfensberger (1999), Lemay (1999) attribute this to the influence of so-called devalued social roles, of which the traditional example is the role of the social service user (client). In people's common experience, the user (client) role is associated with a situation in which a person is poor, dependent on the help and support of others and on various social services provided over a long period of time, in one place, for a large group of people, with no possible mobility between different settings. This is why Lemay (ibid.) defines the client role as a permanent, life-defining role that suppresses the meaning

and influence of a person's other social roles, limits opportunities to learn the skills needed for other roles, and thus reduces the ability to perform them. Persons in the client role experience "bad things" (as opposed to "good things of life"; Thomas, Wolfensberger, 1999; Armstrong, 2006) because they are perceived as people of a low value. Their knowlege and experience is considered to be demeaned and devalued (Beresford, 2003). The strategy to promote their social inclusion is therefore to valorise their social roles through, among other things, their targeted involvement in all systemic aspects of social services - in their planning, development, delivery, monitoring, and evaluation (Simpson, House, 2002; EC, 2010; Nies et al., 2010). Such stronger user involvement in personal social services then becomes a "good thing" in terms of social justice as well as improving social service outcomes (Munday, 2007b; Omeni et al., 2014).

In this study, we address one component of the comprehensive topic of user involvement in social services – their involvement in the *quality evaluation*. For these purposes, users can be involved at an individual level (as clients - individual primary users of the evaluated service providers), influencing decisions about their day-to-day help and support, and also at a collective level (Fleming, 2012; Strøm, Slettebø, 2021). At the latter, they are in the position of **user representatives** who either represent the interests of primary users in relation to the management of organisations (e.g., as selected members of committees that make decisions on various aspects of service operation) or represent people with first-hand experience in external evaluation (inspection) teams. They proceed on behalf of a public authority (e.g., a responsible ministry) as independent of the provider being evaluated. In that case, the URs act as "external observers" who observe a service setting and its operation to understand what looks like good and bad and what is possible to achieve for primary service users, mainly those with the most complex needs (Šiška et al., 2021). Through this "two-track approach" (involving users at an individual and collective level) there are complementary possibilities to valorise the social roles of people with first-hand (lived) experience and, from different perspectives, achieve more their control in designing and running services, which are at the head of a participatory-based strand of thinking and debate on user involvement in social services (Evers, 2003).

The literature mainly reports studies that focus on user involvement in evaluating the quality of social services at the individual level, often through user/customer satisfaction surveys (Nies et al., 2010), which draw on ideas from the classical evaluation tradition (Krogstrup, 2003). Yet, fewer available sources report on active involvement of user representatives in the work of external evaluation teams that conduct independent quality evaluation (inspection) of social service providers. And where they are available, they tend to relate to the sector of health care services (Simpson, House, 2002). That is why we decided to convey in the study the national experience from the **pilot project** implemented as part of the NP QSS with involving user represenatives in the work of teams evaluating quality of social services at system (ministerial) level. The aspect of effective involvement of primary service users (clients of the evaluated services) in the evaluation, despite its unquestionable importance, was not the subject of the pilot project and is therefore not dealt within the scope of this study.

## PILOT PROJECT BACKGROUNDS

We will present the value basis of the pilot project and selected rules for its practical implementation.

### Pilot project – value backgrounds

One of the partial objectives of the NP QSS was to "*...test the feasibility of introducing a user perspective into evaluation activities*" (IA MPSV SR, 2019:7). That was mainly inspired by the experiences of Austria and Germany with the nueva (Nutzerinnen und Nutzer evaluieren; Users evaluate) method (GETEQ, n.d.). Since 2001, persons with certain impairments and disabilities were trained to take on the role of external evaluators of the quality of services

provided to persons with disabilities, whereby quality was derived from how it was approached and perceived from the perspective of service users. The method builds on the concept of social role valorisation (Wolfensberger, 1992; Thomas, Wolfensberger, 1999) with the assumption that the participation of user representatives (hereinafter "URs") in the quality evaluation will enhance the consideration of the user perspective in the evaluation. Moreover, it enables URs to acquire the necessary competences to become respected members of evaluation teams under the motto "We ask what clients think", all in accordance with standardised criteria and evaluation procedures. Nueva's quality evaluation concept builds on a combination of the *peer-principle* based on similarity with the *competency-principle* based on training to ensure that URs in the evaluation are able to "go beyond" their own life experiences and perceptions and respect the experiences and perceptions of other social service users.

The basic principles of the nueva model were also incorporated in the NP QSS. It was based on the idea that URs, people with similar characteristics and life experiences as primary service users, but who are independent of the providers being evaluated, can authentically contribute to a comprehensive evaluation of the quality of social services. URs gain special expertise to observe the environment of the evaluated service, as well as to conduct interviews with primary service users focusing on their needs and expectations, as well as their satisfaction with the service. In addition, URs can appropriately formulate recommendations to improve the quality of the evaluated provider, particularly from the perspective of its primary users (Repková, 2018; Repková et al., 2021a).

**Pilot project - rules for implementation**

In the NP QSS, the evaluation teams were assembled as a combination of internal evaluators (employees of the Ministry; hereinafter "IEs") and external evaluators - experts. One group of the external evaluators met the qualification laid down in the Act (a second-level university degree and at least three years" experience in the field to be evaluated; hereinafter "EEs"). Another group of external evaluators were **external evaluatots - user representatives** (hereinafter "EE-URs'), whose participation in evaluation teams was not regulated by the Act. For this reason, this part of the NP QSS was referred to as *pilot* and evaluations with EE-URs were titled as *pilot evaluations*. Based on the nueva model and consultations between the NP QSS´ actors (Ministry, IA, Social Work Advisory Board, Institute for Labour and Family Research), the following criteria for the selection of EE-URs were identified: a) authentic life experience with a specific characteristic (e.g., disability, care dependency in old age or a crisis life situation); b) current or past experience with a position of social service user; and, c) communication skills for conducting interviews with users of the evaluated providers. UR's involvement in the activities of the civic sector was also a favouring factor for the selection. They were selected to cover the three main clusters of social services in which the quality evaluation was piloted: a) social services for persons with disabilities and care-dependent older persons; b) social services of crisis intervention; and, c) social services to support families with children. Based on an intensive cooperation with selected civil society associations, a total of 9 EE-URs (out of 10 originally planned) were selected for the pilot, of which:

- by gender: 6 women and 3 men
- by cluster of social services: 6 EE-URs for evaluation in social services for people with disabilities and the elderly; 2 EE-URs for social services of crisis intervention; 1 EE-UR for social services to support families with children
- by education: 5 EE-URs with a university education, 4 EE-URs with a completed secondary education

In order to prepare all evaluators (IEs, EEs, EE-URs) for the pilot evaluation activities, their preparatory training was organised at the end of 2019 for a total of 50 hours. The training of IEs and EEs was focused on different quality concepts, human-rigts background of quality issues in

social services, legislative rules for quality evaluation, modelling of evaluation activities, ethical aspects, teamwork, and prevention of formalism in quality evaluation. The preparatory training of EE-URs was organized separately and, based on consultation with the Social Work Advisory Board, focused on 5 themes: my life; what is important in people's lives; working with and for others; presentation of evaluation results; controversial and challenging situations related to evaluation (Repková, 2018). There was no emphasis on training EE-URs in the area of legislative aspects of quality evaluation. The decision to carry out the training of EE-URs independently was based on the original intention to delegate to them special tasks in the evaluation process: to conduct interviews with the service users of the evaluated provider and observe various aspects of its functioning (e.g., availability of the external and internal environment, conditions for open communication and interactions, the possibility of free use the premises of the provider, etc.).

In order to standardize the rules regarding the position and tasks of EE-URs in evaluation teams, certain methodological guidelines were elaborated within the project. The starting was the material from 2020 "*User representatives - position and tasks in the pilot evaluation (summary)*" (Repková, 2020a). It followed up the experience gained from the preparatory training and specified in more detail the rules for the participation of EE-URs in the activities of evaluation teams, as follows:

- for the purposes of the pilot evaluation, the URs are regular members of the evaluation teams in the position of EE-URs, as they have undergone a regular selection procedure according to the conditions of the NP QSS
- EE-URs participate in the activities of the evaluation teams on an equal basis with other IEs and EEs, they are not deliberately excluded from any of the activities related to the evaluation
- during the pilot evaluation, methodological support of a tutor is available to the EE-URs on an equal basis with other team members
- EE-URs carry out their evaluation activities independently or with personal assistance provided at their own costs

In addition, two other materials were issued, namely "*Framework rules for the use of interview with users in the process of quality evaluation*" (Repková, 2020b); "*Observation in the process of quality evaluation – methodological framework*" (Repková, Marendiak, 2020).

The pilot evaluations were organised in a manner of steps (corresponding to the WHO QualityRights Tool Kit, 2012):

- establishment of an evaluation team to conduct the pilot evaluation of a service provider (the team was usually composed of one IE in the position of evaluation team leader, 1-2 EEs, one EE-UR, one tutor)
- coordination meeting of the evaluation team and preparation for the on-site evaluation work (analysis of available information on the evaluated provider, division of tasks during the on-site evaluation)
- conducting the on-site evaluation (2-4 days at the provider's site to gather evidence on the fulfilment of the individual criteria and quality standards under the Act, working with documentation, observation, interviews with users, staff, management)
- processing of findings from on-site evaluation, ongoing consultation of the team
- drafting the evaluation report and discussing it with the provider evaluated
- submission of the evaluation report, feedback on the work of the pilot evaluation team

Initially, under the pilot project, a total of 24 pilot evaluations were planned to be carried out in 2020–2021. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic had a major impact on the whole social services sector and thus on the planned NP QSS activities. In the end, only 12 pilot evaluations were carried out, only half of which (six in total) with EE-URs representation. Five of these were targeted at providers of social services for persons with disabilities and/or the elderly in care needs (2x homes for seniors, 2x specialised facility, and 1x social services facility), one evaluation was carried out in a social service of crisis intervention (shelter). Five EE-URs participated in six pilot

evaluations (one of which in two evaluations)[2]. EE-URs were assigned to the individual pilot evaluations so as to exclude potential conflicts of interest (ensure that the particular EE-UR is not a past or current client of the social service provider being evaluated in the pilot).

## PILOT PROJECT - MAIN FINDINGS

In the following, we summarise the main findings of the pilot project with a focus on answering these **questions**:

a) What were the initial expectations of the NP QSS´ actors from the implementation of the user perspective in the evaluation process?
b) What were the initial experiences of the NP QSS´ actors with the implementation of the user perspective in the evaluation process?
c) What challenges in terms of the user perspective in the evaluation process emerged from the pilot project? What have we learned?

To answer the questions, we use several data sources collected between 2019–2021, which are presented in chronological order:

- initial IEs and EEs expectations regarding the involvement of EE-URs in evaluation activities articulated during the preparatory training (November–December 2019)
- reflections by 13 EEs, 4 EE-URs and 2 IEs on involving user represenatives based on their first experiences from the pilot evaluations presented in their interim reports (early 2020–June 2021)
- results of a group discussion on the users' perspective in the quality evaluation organised during the NP QSS stakeholders´ meeting in September 2021
- reflections of 3 EEs and 2 EE-URs based on the last pilot evaluations completed at the end of 2021, after the September 2021 meeting

### Initial expectations on involving user representatives in the quality evaluation

Initial expectations of the potential contribution of URs to the work of the evaluation teams were very similar among all actors involved. During their preparatory training, both IEs, EEs and EE-URs *positively* mentioned the possibility of including a different perspective to the evaluation - the perspective of the social service users, which may increase the objectivity of the whole evaluation process and its results. They envisaged the possibility of an overall sensitisation of language in the evaluation team; the promotion of valuable social roles for people with user experience; but also the promotion of the status of primary users – clients of evaluated providers, "*... as someone is interested in them*". However, they also identified *potential risks* regarding the involvement of EE-URs in the work of the evaluation teams. They expressed concerns about possible projections of their own lives and the transference of EE-URs' experiences (including their frustrations and unfulfilled wishes) into interviews with primary users, their inability to disengage. The unpreparedness of the whole evaluation team for evaluators with user expertise, and the bias of the providers being evaluated as to whether the views and opinions of EE-URs could be considered sufficiently competent for the evaluation process were also perceived as risks.

During the preparatory training, one EE critically pointed out the stereotypical thinking about engaging EE-URs into the evaluation process if we ask up front a question about how this will (should) be positive and where the risks may lie. As he stated:

[2] In addition to the pilot evaluations, 20 regular evaluations were conducted within the NP QSS by the end of 2022, four of which were not completed due to changes in the national legislation on inspection in social affairs effective from November 2022. Evidence obtained upon request from the IA as the implementer of the NP QSS.

> "*...the contribution of EE-URs should not be thought of as something separate, outside the whole evaluation team, as we are together and therefore the contribution should be shared. Equally, the previous user experience should not be pre-attributed with a specific (positive or risky) impact on the work of the evaluation team, as one's own experience of a social service can have both positive and risky effects*".

He stressed that the work of the evaluation team should be based from the outset on teamwork, division of tasks, and recognition of the weight of each team member's views based on mutual trust.

**Reflections on involving user representatives based on the pilot experience**

Actors' direct experience with conducting pilot evaluations was key to reflecting on the importance of involving EE-URs in the work of evaluation teams. Although some EEs mentioned that they did not have a clear position on the issue before the first pilot evaluation, their attitude changed after completing one or more pilots. Initial expectations of some opposition of EE-URs to IEs and EEs in the evaluation team changed to emphasizing a different dimension of evaluation after practical experience. They *appreciated* the higher level of trust of the primary users and their readiness to cooperate during the evaluation process when the EE-UR was also present. EE-URs, on the basis of their direct experience of the on-site evaluation, appreciated in particular the possibility to focus their interest directly on the primary users of the evaluated service provider and on evaluating the quality of the service from their point of view. They highlighted the opportunity to provide other members of the evaluation team with "*information from a different perspective*". As one EE-UR mentioned:

> "*… a user representative, from the position of the client (user), can assess the quality of the service provided directly at the site of the evaluated organisation, as he/she knows and can identify the needs of the clients and whether the service is provided in accordance with the quality standards; whether the clients of the service are limited in particular criteria and whether the services are provided as they should be... to the satisfaction of both parties...*".

EE-URs also appreciated the possibility to relieve other members of the evaluation team from conducting user interviews and to give them the opportunity to consistently engage in other evaluation activities (e.g., working with provider documentation, conducting interviews with management). They welcomed the opportunity not to limit the observation and interviews with users to selected quality criteria, but to address them comprehensively in terms of the practical fulfilment of users' human rights and freedoms by the provider being evaluated. As they pointed out, such a comprehensive approach makes it easier to identify situations where a particular user's satisfaction with a social service could hide his/her previous difficult life situation leading to a lowering of the threshold of requirements for the quality of social service. EE-URs also highlighted the opportunity to get a deeper and more detailed insight into the demanding work of providers, who are often burdened with a lot of paperwork.

Based on the initial experience from the pilot evaluations, IEs, EEs and EE-URs were able to identify some *potential (future) risks* of implementing a user perspective in evaluation work. EEs highlighted the risk of insufficient training of all evaluators, including EE-URs, in legislation, procedural rules for conducting evaluation, communication skills (e.g., for conducting interviews) and competences for teamwork. The potential risk of not being able to detach from one's own life experience in evaluation was mentioned again, especially in the case of EE-URs. They also identified the risk of future unequal treatment of evaluated subjects if the participation of EE-URs in evaluation teams was not embedded in the law on a mandatory basis. This could also reduce trust or increase uncertainty of EE-URs as to whether there is a real public interest in

their expertise in conducting evaluations and in creating the conditions for their equal status in evaluation teams. The fact that not all project evaluations were planned with the participation of EE-URs was considered by one EE-UR to be a failure in meeting the NP QSS objective.
Although, based on the pilot experience, the participating evaluators' comments on involving URs were generally positive, their views on what competencies EE-URs should have to participate in evaluation teams have partly changed over time. Initially, it was assumed that URs need only background information on the relevant social legislation, in particular the Social Services Act. But over time, the EE-URs themselves critically acknowledged that they needed a better understanding of social work issues and social service provision, including an orientation to the relevant laws, if they were to perform their roles well in the evaluation team. One IE noted that if EE-URs are not expected to have such knowledge, then their actual contribution to the evaluation system, which is supposed to be as objective as possible, can be questioned. EE-URs also identified their own limits in ICT skills (e.g., using the internet, online communication).
In the phase of conducting the pilot evaluations and short reporting from them, both EEs and EE-URs repeatedly went back to the issue of ensuring financial and organizational conditions for the participation of EE-URs in evaluation teams, especially in the phase of on-site evaluation. In individual cases, there were specific requirements for barrier-free spaces, about which the evaluated provider should be informed in advance; the need to provide personal assistance; and secure accommodation in sufficient time. It is also necessary to pay additional costs for participation in evaluation teams (transportation and accommodation) and ensuring access to the Internet. Some EE-URs pointed out critically that many of such costs were covered by themselves within the pilot, what was financially demanding for them and demotivating for further cooperation.

**Lesson learned from the pilot project**

In summary, the issue on involving URs in the quality evaluation was addressed by the NP QSS actors at a seminar held in September 2021, when the pilot activities were gradually being completed and when the Ministry was working on a revision of the legislation in this field. The discussion was first organized in a workshop, which was attended by 18 persons with direct experience of the pilot evaluation (IEs, EEs, EE-URs, tutors). Later, the results of the workshop were discussed in the plenary session and preliminary conclusions were formulated.
During the workshop, the participating actors sought answers to **five questions**:
*Q1: Whether the generally positive expectations related to involving EE-URs in the pilot evaluations have been confirmed as anticipated and, if so, in what way*
*Q2: Whether the pilot confirmed those dilemmas and risks regarding the involving EE-URs in the evaluation teams that were anticipated during the preparatory training*
*Q3: Whether it can be assumed that the process and results of an evaluation would differ depending on whether EE-UR was represented in the evaluation team or not*
*Q4: What other aspects regarding the involving EE-URs in the evaluation teams have been found to be important based on the pilot practice*
*Q5: Whether, based on the experience gained during the pilot, it is possible to formulate a recommendation to the Ministry to make involvement of EE-URs in evaluation teams mandatory with more specified rules*
We summarise the **main conclusions** on each of the raised issues.
**Q1:** The project actors overwhelmingly confirmed the fulfilment of positive expectations on involving of EE-URs in evaluation activities. They highlighted the use of a partner-based approach during evaluations; using optics based on EE-URs' own previous experiences with social services, which supported them to gain more credible information during interviews with primary users – clients of the provider being evaluated.
**Q2:** During the pilot, situations where the EE-UR lacked personal experience with the type of social service being evaluated (e.g., when an EE-UR with personal experience with domiciliary

care service evaluated the quality in a specialized facility) or when the EE-UR did not have the characteristics of the target group of the provider being evaluated (e.g., when a younger person with a disability was in the team evaluating a home for the elderly) proved to be particularly challenging.

Actors at the workshop also pointed out weaknesses in the initial rules for involving URs in the evaluation team that were developed at the beginning of the NP QSS (Repková, 2020a). The rules were set rather broadly, leaving it up to the agreement of the evaluation teams themselves how they would proceed in a particular case. If EE-URs were to become part of regular evaluation practice, then, according to the results of the discussion, a set of interrelated issues would need to be addressed in more detail in the future, as follows:

- define more precisely what the user perspective, which is represented by the participation of EE-URs, means in the evaluation (whether the EE-UR status is fulfilled by the mere presence of a disadvantaging characteristic, e.g., older age, disability, experience of housing loss, etc., or whether past or current user experience of the type of social service being evaluated is also necessary, or whether it is a combination of both, or whether something else is also needed)
- specify more precisely the status of EE-UR in relation to other evaluation team members (EE-URs were perceived differently - sometimes as external experts, sometimes as one of the user group)
- to clarify more precisely the EE-UR's position in relation to the evaluated provider and primary users of its service. The provider may be uncertain how to treat such a member of the evaluation team during the on-site evaluation. In turn, primary users may perceive EE-UR through adversity, disadvantage, stigma, rather than as an interview partner.
- to define more precisely the roles of EE-UR in carrying out the evaluation (whether he/she is expected to gain long-term knowledge of the day-to-day functioning of the provider or to be a "routine" member of the evaluation team during the on-site evaluation; whether he/she is expected to carry out only observation and interviews or even other activities related to the evaluation; whether to be a "mere" carrier of experiential knowledge or to comment more comprehensively on the professional aspects of quality standards as laid down in the Act)
- to define more precisely the EE-UR working model in relation to the whole evaluation team (whether an EE-UR should work together with the other team members or should come to the provider independently and evaluate independently of the others, in order to assert a specific position and role)

**Q3**: According to the workshop´s participants the evaluation process and its results are (should be) based primarily on objectively observed facts about the provider's conditions, therefore the EE-UR's participation and expertise does not have a substantive impact on its results. The rapporteur of the discussion group (IE from the Ministry) stressed that EE-URs cannot look at quality intuitively, as this can sometimes be in conflict with the objective indicators defined under the Act. Therefore, they are also expected to be familiar, at least in a framework, with the relevant legislation in the field of social services in order to be able to "competently" carry out their evaluation activities.

**Q4:** Discussants pointed to the "overqualified" and high level of personal and practical competencies of the EE-URs involved in the pilot, which was surprising compared to the initial perception of their profile. According to them, the majority of EE-URs (5 out of nine) fulfilled the status of EEs and thus could have been engaged in the evaluation already on the basis of the current legislative rules (Section 104 of the Act).

**Q5:** There was a consensus among the actors involved in the discussion that the experience was not sufficiently extensive and valid for comment on revision of the current legislation. The questions of the necessary competences of EE-URs, their status and roles in the evaluation team, the

appropriate working pattern, as well as the relationship with providers being evaluated remained open, even after termination of the pilot project.

In one of the latest reports from the pilot evaluations, which were winding down after the organisation of the workshop, one EE came back to the issue of the substantive contribution that involving URs can make to the most objective quality evaluation. She disagreed with the initial assumption that the authentic life experiences of EE-URs would "automatically" engender a sense of trust and security in the primary users interviewed, and thus "automatically" increase the credibility of the information obtained from the interviews. In the EE's view, it is not about the similarity of life history (e.g., the presence of a disability and an experience with using a social service), but rather the communication skills that the EE-UR possesses and *"...what emanates from him/her personally*". She was also critical of the static rules about what EE-URs are expected to do during the evaluation - conduct interviews and observations. She considered them to be "discriminatory", preventing equality between the members of the evalution team and limiting the opportunities to sufficiently exploit the individual potential of each EE-UR.

## SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

We presented the Slovak experience from the pilot project on involving URs in the quality evaluation in social services implemented in 2019–2021 as part of the NP QSS. In summarizing and discussing the results, we will not address the question of whether or not the project's ambition to revise the national legislation on the basis of the pilot has been fulfilled, as questions on sustainability of the pilot's outputs are currently only being discussed and evaluated. We will also not assess whether or not the pilot can be considered a success story or not, for a number of reasons. *Firstly*, a summary and discussion framed by the answer "fulfilled" or "not fulfilled" or "successful" or "unsuccessful" would simplify the topic of applying the user perspective in the evaluation of the quality of social services. As Evers (2003) argues, the question of whether user involvement (in the broadest meaning) "yes" or "no" is no longer an issue today. Rather, there is a need for a broader discussion on the different meanings and possible impacts of user involvement in different contexts. The importance of contextual and environmental factors, and the need of avoiding a "one size fits all" approach to involving initiatives in social services, has also been pointed out by Omeni et al., (2014). The *second reason* is the limited scope of the pilot experience and the lack of evidence on which to decide about the future legal direction on involving URs in the evaluation teams at this time. *Another limiting reason* is that the experience gained in the pilot evaluations was almost exclusively with providers of social services for people with disabilities and the elderly. Moreover, the EE-URs involved in the pilot were highly formally qualified individuals, some of them with many years of social work practice, even with lecturing experience. Their involvement in the evaluation teams was therefore perceived through their high level of professional understanding of the evaluation work, rather than through the "typical UR image" on which the pilot project was initially based (cf. URs in the nueva model; Krogstrup, 2003). The latter consideration significantly narrowed the range of understanding of what practical issues, problems and challenges would be posed by the participation of URs in other social service clusters (cf. Omeni et al., 2014). Munday (2007b) points the issue of the possible heterogeneity of social service users who may be involved in such initiatives as one of the main reasons why it is quite difficult to adequately and completely address the perspective of users in social services (including their evaluation). The author refers to significant differences when it comes to the involvement of well-educated, middle class users compared to socially excluded individuals or families. The pilot project did not allow this type of diversity to be tested and evaluated.

In the light of the mentioned limitations, we consider the pilot experience as only a contribution to the initial pre-understanding of the complex issue on involving URs in social services and evaluation of their quality and a basis for further work and its conceptualization (theoretical, legislative, and practical). So, what has the pilot project indicated, what has it helped to pre-understand?

Above all, if the involving URs in quality evaluation is to be institutionalized, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of the user perspective in evaluation activities. And, what is expected of it in terms of better social service outcomes (cf. Munday, 2007b; Omeni et al., 2014) and more objective quality evaluation. Based on the analysis of the available resources from the pilot project, it has been difficult, rather impossible, to come to such a clarification so far. From the beginning, the pilot project built on the principle of the uniqueness of URs for evaluation work based on their unique and irreplaceable life experience combined with their experience of the service user´s role (cf. the Beresford's experiential knowledge, 2003; the peer principle in the nueva model; the Krogstrup´s bottom-up approach to user participation, 2003). It was assumed that this in itself would bring "added value" to the evaluation, and this was the basis for setting the initial rules for the pilot (e.g., separately organised preparatory training for EE-URs; anticipated benefits and risks of EE-URs' participation in evaluation teams; specific roles of EE-URs in evaluation teams; specific evaluation reports).

But already during the preparatory trainings organised for evaluators, some actors started to perceive such a specific "predetermination" as limiting, even being labelled as "discriminatory" by one EE in the later stages of the pilot. This is also why the guidelines developed to start the pilot evaluations began to emphasise the principle of "on an equal basis with others" (cf. UN, 2006). It was to be applied as a joint work of IEs, EEs, and EE-URs in all phases of the pilot - from the preparatory training to the completion of the evaluation report and its negotiation with the provider being evaluated. This raised the question of the "formal qualification" and competence of EE-URs to carry out the evaluation activity so that it is carried out in accordance with the law and professional ethics (cf. the competence principle in the nueva model; professionalism according to Evers, 2003). However, would such reasoning not lead to a leveling of the impact of the unique life experiences of EE-URs on the work of the evaluation team? Do the the EE-URs not then become just "ordinary members" in the evaluation teams, with requirements comparable to others - to be familiar with the legislation, to have charisma (especially for interviews) and a sense of teamwork? Several considerations of evaluators, especially those in the IE position, corresponded with such a view. It was repeatedly expressed that the already effective legislation allows EE-URs to be engaged in evaluation under the general conditions set out for the position of an expert, or that the results of a quality evaluation for a particular provider would not differ substantially depending on the presence or absence of EE-URs, as objectivity and legality are always paramount in an evaluation (cf. Krogstrup´s top-down approach to user participation, 2003). Some have urged that the "peer" characteristics of the EE-UR (e.g., presence of a disability) should not be the essence of the application of the user perspective in the quality evaluation, as it is rather the communication skills and personality of the EE-UR that are important.

NP QSS stakeholders repeatedly pointed to the importance of theoretical preparation (training) of evaluation team members, including EE-URs, for conducting evaluation. However, the question was not only about the training content, but also about its organisation (e.g., separately for EE-URs or jointly for all members of the evaluation teams). The importance of preparatory training for drawing primary users or URs into social services at different levels and for different purposes is also confirmed by foreign literature (cf. Simpson, House, 2002; WHO, 2012). However, sources also highlight the need for financial support of URs, which significantly influences the extent to which they can be involved (cf. Omeni et al., 2014). An analysis of available NP QSS resources showed that this issue was underestimated in the pilot project. In particular, the EE-URs involved in the pilot evaluations were critical of this, stating that they had to cover the costs related to evaluation activities, especially for on-site evaluation work (e.g., accommodation, travel, but also the provision of personal assistance to accompany them), from their own resources, which was costly and demotivating. In the future, failure to address this issue in a systemic way could jeopardise the sustainability of the intention to involve EE-URs in the quality evaluation in area of social services.

We have mentioned a number of reasons why it was not possible to reach any generalisable statements on involving EE-URs in the system of quality evaluation in Slovakia on the basis of the pilot project. Many of these reasons were also those that generally make it difficult to adopt clear, universal, and sustainable approaches and solutions, both theoretically and socio-politically and practically (Evers, 2003; Munday, 2007b). According to Omeni et al., (2014), all of these underlying factors can either enhance or impede opportunities for involving users or their representatives in the area of social services.

## CONCLUSION AND SOCIAL WORK IMPLICATIONS

Involving URs in social services, including their participation in quality evaluation, is necessarily linked to the mission of social work as a human rights discipline and a tool for promoting participatory democracy (in general). This does not mean, however, that quality evaluation should be carried out exclusively by social workers and prominently defined as a specialised social work practice. Although it can be assumed that persons with a qualification in social work discipline will be significantly involved in the evaluation teams, the fulfilment of the social work mission within the idea of involving URs in the evaluation of the quality of social services may take other forms. Social workers in different positions, in different public institutions and through different intervention programmes can raise the general human rights awareness of primary service users, their families, URs and representative organisations, as well as social service providers and their founders. Social workers are expected to empower users (in general) as consumers of social services. With the increasing emphasis on the promotion of participatory democracy principles in social services, the role of social workers in empowering users and URs for the role of co-producers of social services will become increasingly important. Either towards empowering them to have a direct impact on an individual service provider (e.g., through expressing their own satisfaction with the provided social service, formulating suggestions for its improvement) or empowering them to participate in the independent evaluation teams. Activities of such teams are important not only for individual service providers being evaluated, but also for improving conditions for all providers at a systemic level.

The study was carried out under rather specific conditions. The original rules for the NP QSS were set according to the legislation in force in 2019 when the project started. However, as of November 2022, during the lifetime of the NP QSS, the legal conditions for evaluation activities have changed. The system focused on the evaluation of quality conditions has changed to a system for quality inspection and surveillance of providers' compliance with their obligations under the amended Act. However, despite this change, the original intention of the project to pilot the involvement of URs in evaluation activities is not in question at this time. Rather, it is looking at how the results of the pilot project could be used in the new legislative and organisational context, or how to use resources from the new programming period to do so. Our further research activities focused on involving URs in the evaluation of the quality of social services will also respond to such contextual changes.

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# Women Far from Employment Facing the Test of Inclusion: Participation in "Remobilization" Actions as a Springboard for Socio-Professional Integration?

*Accepted for publication on November 30th, 2023.*

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**Abstract**
OBJECTIVE: In order to promote integration through economic activity for people who have strayed a long way from employment, France is developing local social and professional support policies such as what is termed "remobilization" schemes. Based on research conducted with women who have taken part in these schemes, this article aims at reviewing the effects of such measures on the inclusion and integration of women into the labour market. THEORETICAL BASE: The theoretical approach stands between authors who believe that social intervention measures aim to control and assist beneficiaries and those who, on the contrary, favour a conception of beneficiaries as strategists and utilitarians. METHODOLOGY: The methodology is based on an ethnographic approach based on observation and interviews. OUTCOMES: The results underline that the effectiveness of these schemes lies mainly upstream of professional integration: while

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participation in these actions does not necessarily lead to employment, it does constitute a first step for these women in the face of the test of social inclusion. SOCIAL WORK IMPLICATIONS: Regarding these implications for social work, the results show that a less vertical relationship between the person being supported and the professional would encourage access to emancipation. Encouraging diversity in the training offered would therefore help to steer women towards jobs that are not confined to care work.

**Keywords**
social policies, inclusion, integration through economic activity, remobilization actions, support

## INTRODUCTION

Women who are far from employment (Damon et al., 2008:11)[3] often face specific barriers that limit their access to the labor market. In order to promote their professional and social inclusion, various remobilization and inclusion mechanisms have been put in place.
In this article, we focus on measures termed "socio-professional remobilization actions" that require local support by taking into account a set of issues. These actions aim to prepare women for employment and increase their chances of accessing employment.
These remobilization actions represent an evolution in social policies, directing the focus of social work professionals towards individuals facing the greatest difficulties (Astier, Duvoux, 2006). It involves building mechanisms that aim to address the specific needs of individuals, including women who face significant barriers to employment, a demographic often overlooked in studies on socio-professional integration. Therefore, by relying on this audience of women, we will question the objectives of inclusivity of these so-called remobilization actions: Do these actions not convey a promise of inclusion without being able to guarantee socio-professional integration?
Our approach will follow two tracks. First of all, we will present the so-called "remobilization" actions, their stated objectives including their content and their implementation in low-income areas under the umbrella of "urban policy", supplemented by a focus on the survey protocol mobilized. Then, we will show their ambivalent effects in terms of professional socialization and inclusion to conclude on the limits and contributions of these actions to women far from employment.

## "REMOBILIZATION" ACTIONS IN THE SUPPORT PROCESS FOR WOMEN WHO ARE FAR FROM EMPLOYMENT

In France, the occupational integration schemes are the responsibility of the departments that draw up social and vocational support policies through the implementation of a local offer of integration action for groups facing various difficulties.
These measures involve various socio-professional remobilization actions that require local support and which address a range of issues. This step occurs before the job search and involves three processes: welcoming and listening, identifying obstacles and finding solutions, and determining the right employment path.

[3] According to the general report of the Grenelle de l'insertion, it is "any person who, by his history, his training or his state of health is permanently excluded from the traditional job market and who requires specialized support, both social and professional" (Damon et al., 2008:11). In our sample, the category "far from employment" is very broad, and also finds women who have never worked and others who have stopped any professional activity after a marriage and children, sometimes disaffiliated women socially...

Remobilization involves supporting individuals by identifying a range of employment-related issues, which can include social challenges such as debt and housing, psychological factors like self-esteem and lack of confidence, legal concerns such as paperwork and divorce, and administrative obstacles, such as not accessing certain rights or allowances. It is therefore a question of analyzing the needs, aspirations, potentialities and skills of the person accompanied and being able to take them into account.

Often isolated in their journey, individuals who participate in these actions require integration into a group. They also learn to assimilate social and professional norms, including respect for schedules and commitments. Empowering them and fostering their autonomy are also essential goals. These actions particularly target women facing multiple barriers to employment.

These activities are aimed at people followed by a social or professional integration service (CCAS, Social Centers, CAF, associative actors, and so on.) and to beneficiaries of the RSA (active solidarity income)[4] who are at risk of demobilization and who accumulate social and sometimes psychological obstacles.

**The conduct of workshops as part of "remobilization" actions**

The sessions are most often held in half-day segments (morning or afternoon), sometimes all-day, with attendance requirements on specific times. Training lasts a total of 226 hours, including 70 hours in a company (2 weeks) over a period of 3 to 6 months. It brings together 12 to 15 people depending on the session. The prerequisites for being trained are adapted to the target audience. However, according to a instructor: "*people must understand and express themselves in French, be able to fill out a simple questionnaire. Knowing how to make sacrifices is sometimes necessary. It is necessary to understand the conditions for access to employment. No work experience is required. It is necessary to be mobile, able to work, but above all to be motivated.*"

The objective of remobilization actions is to allow people to prepare best their return to employment or to access a training and overcome two of the main obstacles related: difficulty in communicating in French and in regularizing their situation by filing for legal documentation. Lack of self-confidence is often another limitation. One has to be aware nonetheless that the use of the category "remobilization actions" is not neutral: it evokes a dynamic process that allows the transition from a passive and demobilized condition to an active and remobilized role. It is a question of "activating" women, that is to say, encouraging them to participate and become "active" in their career and "actors of an integration policy". In this way, "the weight of the indeterminacy of the course is placed on the subject itself" (Avenel, 2012).

The social structures mobilized also participate in professional integration because removing social obstacles is essential for access to employment. Therefore, social support is certainly a priority, but it inevitably remains connected to professional support.

The stated purpose is to prepare the person for a professional activity and to increase her chances of accessing a job. The pedagogy must therefore determine the different approaches and steps that should allow an individual to have a concrete perspective on employment.

If the person is not ready to enter a process of professional integration, the remobilization process must define the conditions of her social integration in order to gradually promote her active reappropriation of the necessary steps. The goal is that at each stage the person gets closer to employment.

It is thus a question here of constructing pathways in order to avoid ruptures that can lead to situations of social exclusion, by allowing accompanied audiences to reappropriate a biographical identity for themselves and a relational identity (Dubar, 2001).

Besides allowing for the discovery of a new professionnal sector within a company, these actions then consist of a series of workshops led by "trainers" that focus on theater animations,

[4] RSA : Revenu de solidarité Active/Active Income Solidarity: In France, an allowance that provides a minimum income for people who have lost their jobs, and a top-up when they return to work.

self-presentation, yoga, or sophrology, staging of personal projects such as "the suitcase of talents" that encourage public communication, but also language workshops. They involve the active participation of the participants and the development of a group spirit through mutual aid and the sharing of emotions.
However, the pedagogical approaches developed in the workshops are marked by an "ethnocentric" viewpoint. It remains a difficulty, in fact, as instructors in charge of remobilization actions are not always trained to accompany "ethnicized" women. They are also, sometimes, in a "maternalist" relationship that leads them to act through the prism of traditions and victimization. In other words, they do not always see women in training as people who are able to make choices, express them and have multiple strategies and resources.

**An ethnographic approach and participatory workshops**
The article is based on an ethnographic approach and mobilizes several techniques: semi-directive interviews, participatory observations, and collaborative workshops conducted between 2021 and 2022 within three social centers and a training organization "Cérations Omnivores" hosting remobilization actions.
30 semi-structured interviews were conducted with women who are said to be "distant" from employment and with 15 professionals accompanying these women (including 3 men) ages 40-56: directors, action and training managers, integration officers, social workers, integration advisors and animators. We mobilized our respective networks to recruit participants for our surveys, in particular by relying on "trainers". All the women interviewed for this study had taken part in the training courses or actions studied: they had volunteered to take part, and took advantage of the exchange to share their experiences and feelings. The main objective of these interviews was to reconstruct the trajectories of women in all their dimensions: school, migration, training experience, family, and work.
The women interviewed were mostly of North African origin (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia), and Sub-Saharan (mainly from Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, Mali and Mauritania). Half of them are single-parent families with at least two children. Their level of study is Level 5 and below. Participants ranged in age from 30 to 58 years. The survey protocol is based on a logic of women's participation. Thus, alongside individual interviews we co-facilitated three "collaborative" workshops (Desgagné, 2001) composed of 4 to 5 people maximum whose objective was to collect information on the integration process of these women and to produce interactions between the participants. This allowed us to co-construct the results with them by considering them not only as actors of their own lives in the pathway towards social integration but also as holders of creative and emancipatory resources. Thanks to this protocol, we have initiated regular workshops of "women-peers" who accompany and sponsor other women in their professional journey.

**Between social integration and the promise of occupational integration**
The vast majority of workshops as part of the remobilization actions are attended by women.
Indeed, on one hand, whereas men are in the majority in integration actions through economic activity (54%), women, on the other hand, are mostly in remobilization-dynamization but also in linguistic actions with socio-professional aims (respectively 72% and 66%): 76% of these women are under 45 years old, and 61% of them have a level below the BAC or professional certificate (Dares, 2018). This gendered dimension of immigration "in scientific literature has remained strangely silent" (Lucas, Warin, 2022).

***Common paths and contrasting destinies***
The women enrolled in the remobilization and linguistic action workshops are, as we have pointed out, mostly migrants and refugees: while half of them arrived as a result of family reunification, the others often emigrated to escape violence (conjugal, family) and to free themselves from the yoke of

the patriarchal system that keeps them under its domination. Some are newcomers who have gone into debt with someone in their family to be able to leave. They have had a family and social journey marked by hardships of all kinds including difficulties related to status (without a residence permit in France), mastering the language, and social security regulations. These women have projects, but they are weakened by migration and their living conditions in France. The main problem affecting almost all of these women is that they dropped out of school very early or simply never attended school. This is why the passage through language and remobilization workshops seems very useful to them, since language, accompanied by the acquisition of a certain self-confidence, are among the main factors enabling professional and social integration. Since not mastering the language is an obstacle to access to fundamental social rights and to understanding their obligations to the French administrative system, this therefore represents an obstacle towards finding a job.

The profiles of women have some similarities:

> Désirée is a 40-year-old Cameroonian woman, she has two children living in the country with her mother. She did a brief stint at school, and arrived in France in 2015: "*I left my country in November 2014. I went through several countries before arriving in France, and my first idea was to go to Italy because I have a cousin there. I arrived in Thiers, I lived with a friend in my village, she helped me a lot and she found me a job with an elderly gentleman. That's how I started going with a woman* to *the social center to learn French, and that's how I heard about the remobilization devices. I was told about training that helps to speak French and find a job. We are very well received but I was not comfortable (...). I have confidence in myself now and I can move forward even more.*"

> Zahra, is a woman from Algeria: "*I met my husband in Algeria and we got married there in 2018. I came here in 2000. I was 28 years old. After the marriage, I applied for family reunification. I took care of my 3 children. I have always taken French classes in an association but without wanting to work, it was just to meet people and to talk. And one day, when* I *got divorced, someone from the social center told me that I can also go further and train and work. That's how she sent me to this device, I'm very happy because the trainers helped us a lot. It was difficult at first because I wasn't used to taking public transport, I was afraid of getting lost, now I've found a job with the elderly."*

> Amala is a 33-year-old divorced woman with two children. She first arrived in Spain thanks to a tourist visa and wanted to join her fiancé living in France, where she found herself hosted by the 115 (emergency accommodation). Since then, she has been living in a CHRS (Accommodation et social reintegration center) and is waiting for accommodation to bring her two daughters: *"it was the social worker who advised me on this training, I left school with a hairdresser's diploma but which is not valid in France. The remobilization workshop helped me to learn French better and to meet other women who resemble me*, I *no longer feel alone, I work in a retirement home, I only need housing."*

The workshops thus allow these women access to the language and beyond to build a women's network to meet and converse with other women in similar situations. They also offer the appropriation of public spaces, women can move, go out, and work as confirmed by the trainers: "*the women who attend these workshops are often part of the so-called precarious public, some women are accommodated either* in *hotels or in accommodation and reintegration centers. Others in social housing. Some are rebuilding after domestic violence.*"
However, the possible outcomes remain fairly clear: analyses show that the *care* sector predominates as a possible socio-professional integration sector, and for women in our sample: caregiver, help for

the elderly, childminder.... This type of employment presupposes the mobilization of "household capital" (Mounir, 2013), the extension of the role, and tasks associated with women in the private sphere to the social sphere. These same findings are also underlined by recent research on migrant women in Switzerland: "The immigration of low-skilled women helps to compensate, in part, for this shortage in certain sectors. The main activities performed by these women are cleaning (for private individuals or companies) and auxiliary work in care services, catering, or sales. Migrant women are strongly represented in the so-called "care professions." (Wanner, 2022:12).

***Towards a better social dynamic***

These remobilization actions therefore do not function directly as a springboard to more stable employment. Although for RSA beneficiaries they are most often part of an "integration contract", their vocation is above all to the restoration of social ties, from the individual to society. As Cyprien Avenel reminds us, "the mission of these schemes is not only to put people to work but also to take into account the "person" and therefore gives real and individualized support an indispensable role upstream of employment" (Avenel, 2012). "The *first element in this process of accompanying women is to welcome the person, whatever her origin, her culture, her problematics, and to be attentive, to be able to reformulate certain things that we hear from them so that they feel heard, in confidence, regardless of what we have in mind, our criteria ... Not right away, I need papers. Which is not always easy with the pressure and the time you have. We will see with the person what her desires are, in which areas she would like to work, see with her what her skills are, work on her CV, cover letter, psychological barriers, her story, and then explain to her what we could put in place.*" (trainer).

Indeed, difficulties in professional integration are often associated with withdrawal, devaluation, and a lack of self-confidence. In these workshops, it is a question of supporting and "re-socializing" these women. The support is more global, the importance is put on the bond of trust and the quality of the relationship. It is social integration that is privileged and worked. The priority is put on listening, discussion, the quality of the relationship in the accompaniment, and on the availability and the constancy of the presence of professionals. The relational form is seen by the trainers and stakeholders as a prerequisite for a more demanding approach in contractualization. It is a question of restoring a social link in order to engage in more "empowering" integration procedures in the long term.

The women concerned have, in fact, accumulated a whole series of social handicaps: poverty, long-term unemployment, family breakdown, isolation, and so on. Remobilization mechanisms provide much-needed assistance in this regard. If at the beginning, the orientation of these women towards these devices is a little constrained by the "contract of engagement" driven by the social workers, the benefits very quickly outweigh the fears and apprehensions of the women who find themselves there "in spite of themselves": "*I was in depression following my disability at work, I was only receiving 600€, it was my social worker who pushed me to go there (to the remobilization device): the first day I was negative, I said nothing ... And gradually I made contacts with the people who participated. It brought me out of isolation, it was happiness.*" (woman). The first advantage of these actions is therefore openness to others and to society, which makes it possible to get these women out of their isolation, to rebuild social ties: "the *system is good because it allows women who are far from employment to leave their homes and benefit from training*" (facilitator) or "*the training is an opportunity to meet other people, to get out of my isolation and find a job*" (woman).

Analyses also highlight that remobilization actions do indeed help to give meaning to "women's daily lives" and to socialize them through meetings with other beneficiaries. Through these devices, women are also trained in a logic where they must "take charge of themselves" through the workshops set up aimed at "regaining self-confidence", learning to recover autonomy, to create projects, to project themselves into a future and, therefore, through these first steps, to revive this feeling of social usefulness, the first step towards proving a willingness to integrate. Also, the intervention of the facilitators in the context of these sessions is not negligible because "beyond

material aid (...) Their presence also ensures a socialization role that meets the expectations of relational support of individuals often in situations of isolation. We can therefore hardly speak of "excluded" in relation to individuals who are not abandoned and left to fend for themselves." (Avenel, 2012).

Among the advantages of these devices is also often the "socialization" which ends up being created during the duration of the workshops, the bonds of affinity that are formed between people, which allow them to find a place in a social group. From then on, at the end of the workshop session, a "big void" is created, leaving the person alone to face herself, even causing a feeling of abandonment, which can create a persistent feeling of dependence on these devices.

This socialization and acquisition of social skills (self-presentation, self-confidence, communication, expression, etc.) appear to be just as important as the transmission of knowledge and know-how (Guyennot, 1998:150). Overall, Guyennot observes that professionals place more emphasis on this social know-how than on professional know-how and knowledge. Professionals then speak of "social skills" by making them appear as priorities in a process of integration. Trainers themselves affirm the importance of these skills as prerequisites for employment. While the majority of women who go through these schemes declare that the workshops that compose them have enabled them to "get them back on track" of a group dynamic or framework (in particular with the help of schedules and schedules of sessions) they needed to get back to looking for work, they often find themselves "trapped" in these "transit areas". Their lack of diploma and sometimes long-standing break between jobs mean that, despite the follow-up to these sessions, only some of them (essentially the most qualified or, even more seriously, the most motivated) reach other training courses or other paths integrating them durably into the world of work. This is the case of those who, at the end of this passage through the device, manage to be directed, either by the social worker, or by employment center, towards training, this time more professionalizing. Thus, it is the possibility, for some of them, to lead to training as a caregiver, personal assistance, and service technician.

Consequently, although the integration schemes are considered by the participants as generally positive and offering many advantages, their effectiveness is not based on the criterion of access to employment, since it is rather a question of social support in the absence of employment, but on the "qualitative effects generated on the behavior of the person" (Avenel, 2012). From this stance, the schemes are perceived as such by the majority of the women who participate in them, but they also largely evoke their distress at the end of them, on the one hand because they find themselves left to their own devices again and, on the other hand, because the obstacles to access employment are still present: "The measures are supposed to allow the "renarcissization" of the person. Models are proposed, even if they are short-term and precarious substitutes, of identification at work. Insertion devices generate contradictory and ambivalent effects. They convey a promise of integration but without being able to guarantee its realization." (Avenel, 2012).

***Access to employment still uncertain***

The limits of these devices therefore lie not so much in the initiative to reactivate a social dynamic and the relearning of a daily discipline, but rather in the use of this "airlock" as a springboard to a professional projection. An airlock is a bridge between two stages, it is the articulation with the next stage which, here, is still fragile and would require the establishment of a more framed accompaniment.

The interviews with the facilitators and the women interviewed insisted on the duration of the session, spread over a few months, which does not really allow achievement of the desired autonomy: "*The duration is very short and it creates a trauma of emptiness at the end that can destroy the mobilization that has begun.*" The question of continuity is thus often raised by the facilitators by a sequence with an internship or the extension of the sessions "*so that we are on a dynamic not from month to month but, for example, a year, ideally 18 months so that people are accompanied.*" (facilitator).

Indeed, if these actions aim to support a social and/or professional integration project, it seems important to also guide the process: "integration cannot be satisfied with preparing individuals for employment by letting them then face the labor market" (Dubet, 2015).
Another limitation of these measures is the heterogeneity of the public, because although the majority of women are in precarious situations, far from employment, they do not have the same resources: language mastery, level of diploma, knowledge of digital tools, and age, and the path to these devices are all elements that play on the learning offered in the workshops and the benefits that can be pulled from it from a professional perspective: "*It puts us all in the same bag!*" noted several participants. This diversity of personal situations can generate discrepancies on the offer side: "*All these devices do not articulate well with people who have just arrived, not in school.*" (woman).
In addition, support "towards employment" is distinguished from support "in employment" (Avenel, 2012). This distinction, or this discrepancy, can lead to ambivalences about the expectations of the participants, including of a promise of employment whose access is, ultimately, not guaranteed.
The content of the workshops that make up the sessions is therefore important: working on self-image, harmony, trust, personal achievement, and offer is no doubt an asset to allow women to regain confidence, an essential prerequisite for a job. This remains at the heart of the very idea of accompaniment, whereas access to employment remains the final stage of a park for those who are very far from it.
Beyond participation in these remobilization actions, women also express a certain dismay at the training opportunities to which this could open. The diversity of "remobilization and support" schemes which precede professional integration leaves them with an impression of opacity in which they find it difficult to find their way around. This opacity is also specific to integration schemes as a whole: "we request (about) to organize or to be an actor of an integration policy that is both opaque and governed by a variety of measures and devices. In this way, we place all the weight of the indeterminacy of the course on the subject itself, as if failing to integrate the greatest number, we were calling for the insertion of each one." (Avenel, 2012). If women generally keep a positive outlook on the process they took part in, they, particularly for those who were in a situation of residence, the exit from these support systems and the "emptiness" felt after having experienced a group dynamic can lead them to question themselves more intensely about their future.
The outcome of these initiatives remains uncertain and difficult to quantify. According to the professionals involved, some of these women do manage to enter the job market, but they remain confined to jobs in personal services (for the elderly, dependent, or disabled) or as cleaners. These actions do not help these women to project themselves into a real professional career, nor do they enable them to "immerse themselves in a professional environment" (Mohib, 2019)
These observations are also made by (Vatz-Laaroussi, 2008; Cardu, 2012) "Faced with obstacles and the local socio-professional reality, migrant women in Quebec develop specific resistance and resilience strategies that guide their choices regarding integration: accepting a deskilled job, going back to school, favoring ties with the national or family community, giving up work and staying at home, etc."
This focus on "care professions" reflects the globalization of economic exchanges, which Hochschild (2017) describes as "global care chains". She notes that "the economy of Western countries depends (...) largely on the domestic work of migrant women" (Avril, Cartier, 2019).

## CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the remobilization and support actions that are part of the professional integration mechanisms are above all to be seen as a first step with a social rather than a professional vocation. Their strengths as a social dynamic are unanimously underlined by women participants and trainers who perceive throughout the sessions progression in strengthening the social link, the

participation in the group, and the rebirth of a certain confidence in oneself and in the future. All this is widely relayed by the women who have benefited from it. These actions are therefore essential to initiate this recovery in control of oneself and carried through a benevolent framework. If these actions can impulse a sense of autonomy, they are also a temporary "well-being airlock", an "apparently friendly pole of care for fragilities" (Castel, 1981) which can generate a certain dependence. The risk is to perceive them primarily as a form of "individual assistance" (Avenel, 2012) or even to participate in "client-electing" (Castel, 1981) the women who will benefit from these actions. The installation of some of these women in "situations of dependence" can also distance them from the employment scene. The integration, even social, put forward by these actions, in the absence of a professional framework, does not seem to break this logic, or even can contribute, sometimes, to strengthening it. Thus, in order to curb this risk, remobilization actions cannot be reduced to a "social management".

Despite the contradictory and ambivalent effects on the prospect of professional integration underlying their implementation, there is no shortage of promising findings.

Remobilization actions organize and manage trajectories and routes on which beneficiaries with multiple profiles travel. The diversity of the audience of women welcomed makes the support offered by these remobilization actions complex. It is therefore important to take into account gender, migration, and interculturation issues in these actions. The sessions or training offered are then characterized by an individualization of the courses more focused on social support, a "work on oneself", than on an orientation towards the professional sphere.

Women, as a whole, underline, in fact, the benefits of the social dynamics that are developed there, which meets part of their needs, particularly when they are in a situation of isolation related to the loss, interruption, or absence of work. For some of them, it is already, in a way, an opening to socialization in the employment sphere, which allows them to make those around them accept the very idea of a professional activity. These effects are "invisible" in the statistics but nevertheless remain essential to allow them to acquire a certain "self-confidence", an important condition for promoting access to employment. Nonetheless, they also mention the limits of their expectations in terms of professional integration, such as job offers in very specific fields imposed by the requirements of the labor market found worldwide (Farris, 2013) such as personal assistance services, care, and household activities, do not meet their needs or aspirations.

While of the capacity of these measures to facilitate directly professional integration may be limited, they do have significant impacts in other areas, particularly in fostering social inclusion and self-confidence (although they do also contribute to professional integration for a small minority of women). However, social intervention through the participation of these women in these actions is a first step towards social inclusion.

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# Contacts between Children Considered Neglected and Their Parents after Placement Outside Their Own Family in Czech Republic[1]

*Accepted for publication on January 11th, 2024.*

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**Abstract**
OBJECTIVES: The main research objective is to determine how parents interpret the setup, support, and evaluation of regular face-to-face contacts with their child following placement in substitute care on the grounds of neglect. THEORETICAL BASE: The theoretical background is constituted by the findings on the importance of children's need for contact with their own parents and neglect as a social construct. METHODS: The qualitative research consisted of in-depth interviews with actual parents selected using purposive criterion sampling. Data were processed using Grounded Theory analytic procedures. OUTCOMES: Research findings indicate that parents perceive setup and support of contact as a complicated and lengthy process that, particularly in the child's adjustment phase, threatens parents' mutual right to parenting and the children's right to their care. SOCIAL WORK IMPLICATIONS: The research results provide social workers with suggestions for the quality setup, evaluation, and support of contact between children and their biological parents.

**Keywords**
social work, substitute care, support for contact between parent and child placed in substitute care, child neglect

[1] The article was written with the support of the Student Grant Competition 2022 project no. SGS07/FSS/22 – Faculty of Social Studies, University of Ostrava entitled Neglected children's contact with their own parents after placement in foster care Specific Research 2021.

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## INTRODUCTION

There is international consensus, enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, that every child, unless in conflict with his/her best interests, has the right to the care of his/her parents and, if placed in substitute care, to maintain regular face-to-face contact with them. One of the situations that may threaten the interests of the child is the assessment of the parental conduct as neglect. Although the placement of a child outside his/her family is considered the last possible solution, and should be done for the shortest possible time, children are most often placed in substitute care precisely on the grounds of neglect (Topinka, 2017). The understanding of what actions on the part of parents are considered neglect is based on standards of child care quality, which varies across different socio-cultural contexts, and the assessment of neglect largely depends on the subjective assessment of the social worker, although recently there have been tools that seek to objectify and standardize the assessment of the child's situation (Mydlíková et al., 2021). If a child has already been placed in substitute care, the state is supposed to support the family in such a way that the child can return to his/her own family as soon as possible (United Nations, 2009). Supporting children's contact with their own parents, to which they have the right, is one of the preconditions for ending a placement and returning the child to his/her family (Atwool, 2013). The paper aims to present the results of a research study that sought to find out how parents interpret the setup, support, and evaluation of regular face-to-face contact with the child who has been considered neglected and therefore placed in substitute care. We consider the understanding of parent´s perspectives to be an important contribution to expanding the knowledge base of social work and improving the care quality of children placed in substitute care.

## THEORETICAL BASE

### Child neglect and its causes

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2022) defines child neglect as *"failing to provide the care or services needed for a child's healthy development in the following areas: health, education, emotional development, nutrition, shelter, and safe living conditions. As a consequence of this behaviour or inactivity, there is a high likelihood of harm to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral and/or social development. Behaviour where parents fail to properly supervise and protect children from injury or other harm is also considered neglect. Behaviour must be assessed in the context of the abilities and resources of the family or other caregiver."*

The above definition makes clear that child neglect is a complex phenomenon influenced by socio-cultural notions about the form of sufficient, standard, and good quality child care (Howarth, 2007). Understanding of neglect as a social construct places high demands on social worker's ability to assess a child's situation, which forms a basis for decisions about interventions, one of which is the placement of children in substitute forms of care. Child neglect is associated in the professional foreign literature with the structural conditions of families, especially poverty (Slack at al., 2004; Casey, Hackett, 2021). A body of research mentions that children in low-income families receive lower quality care and are at greater risk of neglect. Parents experience hardship and stress related to the family's poor economic situation, and this situation may result in the choice of inadequate educational methods.

Although children should not be placed in substitute care because of financial or material need (Act no. 359/1999 Coll.) and family poverty should be a signal for providing support (United Nations, 2009), material need may be assessed as child neglect. According to Topinka's study (2017), social workers from child protection services most often cited individualised problems on the part of parents as reasons for placing children outside their own family. According to the social workers, parents did not provide their own children with sufficient care, such as enough food and shelter. The situation of neglect was often associated with the parents' poor economic situation,

unemployment, young age, mental illness, substance abuse. (Topinka, 2017). The study confirms a tendency of social workers in the Czech Republic to focus mainly on individual isolated causes of problems without assessing the social and structural context (Janebová, 2020). As a result, the intervention is directed only at the individual level of problems and the perception of difficulties as a result of a lack of responsibility and failure of clients in child care. But we can identify two approaches to interpretation of the causes of social problems in terms of non-/responsibility in the literature. The first approach is based on individual irresponsibility and the second on social responsibility (Janebová, 2021). According to the second approach structural causes of problems are seen as interacting categories with personal responsibility (Janebová, 2021). This assumption should be reflected in social work interventions, which, using Keller's (2010) formulation, should not "fight the poor" but "fight poverty". Thus, prevention of neglect must include comprehensive social policy solutions that address the material needs of families (Slack et al., 2004).

**Child neglect and social work instruments**

Regardless of the cause of the situation designated as neglect, social workers are obliged to act in such a way that the placement of the child outside the family is the last resort. The prevention of the placement of children outside their own families is enshrined in international (Convention on the Rights of the Child, Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms of the European Union, Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Freedoms) and national legislation (Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms, Act on Social and Legal Protection of Children) and is based on the right of children and their biological parents to preserve the family integrity, provided that this is in accordance with the best interests of children.

A key element in the prevention of neglect and placement of children outside their biological family is family support, which Brennan and Rosenzweig (2008) define as any measure that comprehensively ensures that children can grow up with their own parents in a family environment. Also, according to the Substitute Care Directive (2009), family support and parental empowerment is key to enable children to grow up in their biological families. The state is a key actor in this type of assistance, as it has the ability to develop social policies and programmes that ensure family support. In the Czech Republic, Prokop (2020) is critical of family support and sees the social security system as inadequate in the context of early assistance.

Although Act no. 359/1999 Coll. gives priority to measures enabling children to grow up in a family, the consequence of child neglect can be their placement outside their biological family. If there are no relatives or close persons who can provide adequate care, the child is placed in substitute family care (Act no. 89/2012 Coll.; Act no. 359/1999 Coll.). Institutional facility and care are the last resort for placing children outside their own family (Act no. 359/1999 Coll.). Substitute care is subsidiary to the care of the biological parent, who have parental responsibilities and are the executors of their children's rights, unless an exception has been made pursuant to Act no. 89/2012 Coll. Neither foster parents nor residential institutions have the same legal relationship with the children as the child has with his/her own parents. *"A foster parent cares for someone else's child. It is a service to the child that results from the fact that the child acquires another, not a new family!"* (Jurajová, 2015:11) Foster care is prescribed for a necessary period of time within which the biological parents are unable or unwilling to take care of their child (Act no. 89/2012 Coll.). According to this legislation, institutional care is another option in the care of children and can be ordered for a maximum period of 3 years.

**Children's contacts with their biological parents**

For children who are used to growing up with their own parents, placement in substitute care is a major intervention in their lives. Despite the fact that their parents' conduct has been designated as neglect, children can have quality relationships with them (Pazlarová, in Matoušek, 2017). Usually, these are parents who have faced an adverse social situation for a long time, within which

they cannot sufficiently care for their children. Kubíčková (2011) mentions that for these children the loss of the relationship with their own parents is a traumatic event with an impact on the child's identity development.
According to foreign research studies, children think about their parents and the reasons for placement almost every day, even in cases where they have never met them (Sinclair, 2005). Their own biological parents represent the most important people in children's lives (Atwool, 2013). Face-to-face contacts serve to reinforce and maintain the bonds between children and their own families and significantly contributes to the children's healthy development (Barber, Delfabbro, 2004), contributes to children's mental wellbeing (Barber, Delfabbro, 2004), to resolve ambivalent feelings of losing their own family (Boyle, 2017), enable understanding of their origin and cultural practices (Atwool, 2013), contribute to children's realistic view of their past and thus contribute to a realistic view of their present and future (Barber, Delfabbro, 2004).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The aim of the research was to find out how biological parents interpret the setup, support and evaluation of regular face-to-face contact with their children who have been placed in substitute care because of child neglect. Given the main objective, we chose a qualitative research strategy and constructivist paradigm to understand how communication partners interpret social reality (Guba, Lincoln, 2005). The limits of the research are given from the constructivist paradigm. Meaning is created through the interaction between the researcher and the communication partner, whereby the researcher is affected by various phenomena on which he/she must reflect (Levers, 2013). The researcher's own subjectivity was a reflection of her own involvement, which is primarily based on the work plan. The author works as a social worker in a social activation service for families with children.
The communication partners were selected using a deliberate sampling method (Miovský, 2006). The criteria were as follows: a) they are the child's own parent whose child is/was placed in foster care or institutional care, b) the child was placed in substitute care because of neglect (the neglect results from a court judgement, the neglect was assessed by a social worker from a social and legal child protection office (hereinafter referred to as OSPOD – the Czech acronym for social and legal child protection office), c) volunteered to participate in the research. All social activation services for families with children (hereinafter referred to as SAS) that have the possibility to work with their own parents in the Hradec Králové Region and all OSPODs were contacted. SAS social workers were willing to participate in the research. Then the SAS social workers approached actual parents with an offer to engage in the research, followed by the contact between the researcher and the parents. The communication partners were asked to have the judgement on the placement of children in substitute care available during the interview. Another limitation of the research is small study of five parents' experiences of their children's out-of-home placements.
Table 1 describes the research sample. As mentioned above, all communication partners worked with social activation services for families with children. The research sample is very diverse, with various forms of foster care as well as institutional care. Interestingly enough, a large number of biological parents have experience of both multiple placements and return of their child back into their care, which may be influenced by the cooperation with SAS and the motivation of biological parents to solve their adverse social situation.

Table 1: Research sample characteristics

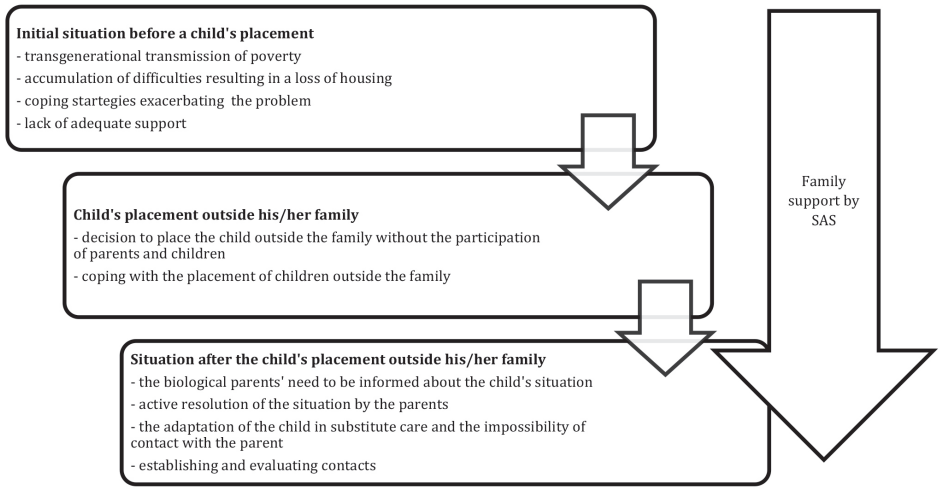
| Communication partner | No. of children | Children with substitute care experience | Current state | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| P1 (mother) | 4 | Temporary foster care (1 child), Children's home (2 children), Children's home with school (1 child) | 1 child back in mother's care (from temporary foster care) | - |
| P2 (mother) | 2 | Relative foster care (1 child) | Relative foster care | |
| P3 (father) | 1 | Temporary foster care, Mediated foster care | Mediated foster care | - |
| P4 (mother) | 4 | Temporary foster care (1 child), Relative foster care (2 children), Mediated foster care (1 child) | 1 child back in care of both parents (from temporary foster care) | - |
| P5 (mother) | 7 | Facility for children requiring immediate assistance, Children's home | All children back in in care of both parents | - |

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews.
The data were analysed using constructivist Grounded Theory according to Charmaz (2014) using line-by-line coding and intentional coding.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

During the analysis, we created categories that according to the development of the situation are divided into the initial situation before placement, placement outside the family of origin, and the situation after placement (see Figure 1 for more details). The description of the initial situation before the child's placement in substitute care by parents coincided in several basic features. The parents themselves came from backgrounds in which there was transgenerational transmission of poverty. Both in their original families and later in their own, they faced an accumulation of problems that often culminated in the loss of housing. The choice of coping strategies combined with the unavailability of adequate support in many cases led to a further escalation of the situation. The situation resulted in the placement of children in substitute care, which, although initiated by the parents as a way of providing for the child's needs, was carried out without their involvement and without the involvement of the child. After the children's placement, the parents were not informed about the child's situation, and were not allowed contact with their children, although they actively tried to resolve their own situation. They did not understand the lack of possibility of maintaining contact with the child during the adjustment in substitute care and also, according to their opinion, the process of contact setup did not take into account the interests of the children and parents. A continuous theme of supporting original families through SAS shows in all categories. All parents described similar experiences unless otherwise noted in the text.

Figure 1: Categorisation of research results




## Initial situation before placing a child outside his/her own family

### *Transgenerational transmission of poverty*

During interviews, parents described their own childhood in families that were in adverse social situations (P1: *"My parents did not have enough money. My mother drank…, It wasn't easy at home)"*. Their parents tried to solve their adverse social situation by themselves, as they had no support (P2: *"Nobody ever helped my parents. Then I myself didn't know where to turn…,")*. When they later started their own families, they themselves dealt with situations related to a lack of funds for rent or food without any support. Their only support was their own family (P3: *"I didn't know that someone could help me. I could only turn to my brother or my mum, but they had enough problems of their own.")*.

### *Escalation of difficulties resulting in a loss of housing and coping strategies*

**Situations leading to the placement of a child outside their own family** were perceived by parents as an escalation of the difficulties they had faced since their original families. Table 2 shows the parents' reasons for placing their children outside their home, which we compare with the reasons given in the court judgement.

Table 2: Reasons for placement of children outside their own families from the perspective of parents themselves

| Communication partner | Family support | Reason for placement (according to communication partners) | Reason for placement (according to court judgement) |
|---|---|---|---|
| P1 | yes | Domestic violence, lack of financial resources, (resulting in substance abuse) | Loss of shelter accommodation (non-compliance with the conditions of shelter) |
| P2 | no | Domestic violence (resulting in lack of financial resources, substance abuse) | Loss of housing |
| P3 | no | Lack of financial resources | Loss of housing |
| P4 | no | Lack of financial resources (resulting in loss of housing, subsequent substance abuse and crime – petty theft) | Loss of housing |
| P5 | yes | Lack of financial resources (resulting in loss of housing) | Loss of shelter accommodation (non-compliance with the conditions of shelter) |

The first pattern that stood out in the interviews was the interconnections between domestic violence, lack of financial resources, and substance abuse, which usually culminated in the loss of housing ("*I had a partner who beat me and forbade me to go out with people or work.*" P2) ("*…Instead of solving the problem, I took drugs to forget about it… to solve the domestic violence to survive... I took care of them, they had food, clothes…, I tried to give them love, but I couldn't handle it the way I wanted to.*" P1).
The second pattern was lack of finances ("*The landlord increased our rent, I was on maternity leave, and my partner went to work…we didn't get any benefits, and didn't have enough for food and rent*", P5), which led to loss of housing. The loss of housing was dealt with through petty criminal activity ("*I had to steal to get somewhere to sleep with the kids. I used to go out with them and then sleep over at friends' houses…. I didn't know what to do.*" (P3)

***Lack of adequate support***
Table 2 shows which communication partners were able to access family support. Communication partners P1 and P5 agreed that OSPOD was more of a controlling body, with support provided by SAS social workers *("I had a guardian angel who came to me regularly and dealt with everything we needed as a family and children, she was always there when the children and I needed her.*" P1). The SAS social worker was the first person she confided in about domestic violence and substance use and who motivated her to take her children and leave the partner, supported her in arranging for a shelter. At the shelter, the communication partner failed to comply with the regime and rules and the shelter terminated her contract. The mother described the situation: *"The first reprimand I received was for not watching my children in the common areas of the shelter…but I needed to cook, so how was I supposed to do that? ...When I left them alone in the room, they blamed me for leaving them unattended."* (P1). The stay in the shelter was also difficult for other communication partners *("I thought I would be relieved not ending up on the street with my children, but there, it was another extreme. I didn't know how often I was supposed to change my bed according to their rules, when I could have my children and so on…"* (P5). The communication partner also left the shelter after three reprimands. The first reprimand was for leaving a shelter door opened by the children, the second was for failing to comply with the curfew *("... I came back 30 minutes after curfew. I went grocery shopping, missed the bus and called the shelter to apologize, but no one cared."* P5).
Communication partners P2, P3, and P4 felt no support in preventing placement of children outside of their own family.

**Placement outside the child's family**
***Decision to place a child outside his/her family without the participation of parents and children***
Decisions to place children outside their families were initiated by a social worker. Communication partners P2, P3, P4 made the decision to place the child outside the family on their own, taking into account the best interests of the child *("I asked my sister if she could do it for me. First, she said no because of the money and then she said she would do it through foster care."* P2 *"I left the kids with my mum…I didn't have many other options and I knew they would be safe there."* P4)
In all cases, a social worker from OSPOD filed ***the proposal for child's placement outside the family***, even though the parent had made the decision to place the child while in a difficult life situation. Parents perceived that they were not involved in the assessment of their life situation *("they asked my mother a lot, nobody talked to me much and probably not to my children either."* P4). Parents, who had no support prior to placement and were meeting the OSPOD worker for the first time, did not perceive the worker as supportive *("no one dealt with me about housing issues or that I was taking drugs…."* P4: *"Nobody gave me any information, I only had it from the court. … I had no idea that there were some services that could help me."* P2). Communication partner P1 states, *"I knew that the children were going to go to the children's home and foster care, but not until a month later. We had agreed with SAS how we would say goodbye to the children and how we would prepare them for this. But*

*suddenly OSPOD changed their minds and took the children from me earlier, neither I nor they knew about it… It must have been so hard for them that we couldn't say goodbye to each other, I couldn't even tell them, nobody talked to them about it."*

***Coping with the placement of children outside the family***

Communication partners reported that placing a child outside their own family was *the "hardest decision in my life"* (P4). However, they realised that it was the best decision because their children were safe: *("I felt terrible. I had to move to a hostel, and I didn't want my child to be growing up with those people"* P3). "All communication partners perceived the placement as their own failure and reported that it was one of the most challenging situations in their lives (*"I wanted to die – it was that hard. I felt terrible as a mother."* P2). Two communication partners thought about committing suicide (P1: *"I didn't know what to do. I didn't have any information, and I didn't know about my children, and OSPOD pushed me away. I was thinking of killing myself."*).

Support was given to communication partners by the SAS social worker (if he/she worked with them at the time). The SAS social worker helped the parents to process feelings of guilt associated with the placement of their children outside the family. He also empowered the communication partners in such a way that they were able to communicate with professionals who were important in working with their children. P3 mentions, *"…After that I started managing on my own."*

**Situation after placement of the child outside the family**

***The parents' need to be informed about the child's situation***

The communication partners who had their child placed in an institutional facility received information about the location of the placement. They were informed what a children's home and/or an institution for children requiring immediate assistance referred to and could imagine what the care of their children would look like. The communication partners who had their child placed in foster care did not know what a foster care instrument meant, regardless of whether the decision to place the child outside of his/her family was their choice or the choice of OSPOD. Most communication partners thought foster care was equal to adoption and by that they were already losing their parental rights *("I thought my child was adopted and I would never be able to see him again."* P1).

Parents varied in their level of information about the exact placement location of their children. For example, communication partner P3 did not know where the children were located *("I had no idea where in foster care my child was placed at all and someone told me to contact foster parents, but I didn't know who they were or how I was supposed to contact them.").* The court judgement ordering the child's placement was the only possible source of information for the parents themselves, but they did not understand it sufficiently (P2: *"I had no information, I had no one – just what I got from the court."*). Some of the parents tried to use social counselling. P1 stated: *"I went to OSPOD with SAS – we planned to ask where my child was… what it all meant for me. The social worker from OSPOD told me that she didn't have time for me now …and that it was all written in the judgement. SAS asked her if we could come back another time…she said to her she didn't feel like talking to us."*

The most essential need of biological parents was information about the future of their child. They needed to know how they could receive information about their child, what rights they had, how they could be involved in their child's upbringing and make decisions about the child, and when and how they could contact the child *("Nobody makes you aware of information and your rights…you have to learn it yourself…but it's a completely new situation for you, and you don't know what to do."* P5 *"They left us in limbo…there was no support from OSPOD. They didn't ask us about if I wanted to see my children….").*

Communication partners also mentioned that navigating the substitute care system was very important to them. This support was provided by the SAS social worker who helped them understand the system to navigate it. P1 mentioned: *"I couldn't have managed it on my own. I didn't*

*know what to do…. I was so grateful for SAS. I would never be where I'm now without their social worker."* The SAS support helped the biological families to gain information about their child/parental rights/contact rights and navigate the substitute care system.

***Active resolution of the situation by parents***

All communication partners reported their efforts to solve their adverse social situation, either by entering a rehab facility providing addiction treatment for mothers with children (P1 *"I did my best to attend outpatient treatment, but it was too late...I applied for inpatient treatment with my child and then I was admitted for it."*). One of the communication partners successfully managed treatment, found housing, job, arranged for insolvency, and found supportive organisations *("I had to enter an inpatient facility for treatment, so I asked my sister to take my daughter into care. I managed it the first time, and to this day the doctor's proud of me and says that's why he does his job. Well now I have a flat, 3 jobs and I'm paying insolvency."* P2). P3 found himself a housing which he furnished for himself and his son and found the SAS to support him in managing his budget and finances. P4 entered prison, and upon completion of her sentence found accommodation together with her partner and cared for her youngest child. P5 found suitable housing, went to work, and attended parenting therapy with her partner (P5: *"OSPOD went against us even though we had a flat, went to work, went to therapy, she came to see us every week with SAS."* The above statements suggest that the support of SAS social workers played a significant role in helping to resolve the adverse social situation.

***Adaptation of the child in substitute care***

The adaptation of the child in substitute care was a big topic for most communication partners. Adaptation was the term used by communication partners for the period during which the child adjusts to the new environment of substitute care and during which there is no face-to-face contact between parents and children. They used the term "adaptation" themselves because they had learned it from the OSPOD or an accompanying organisation. Two communication partners (P2 and P4) did not talk about the adaptation phase because there was no communication with the OSPOD or accompanying organisation and they were in a prison or hospital facility.

Subsequently, the communication partners talked about the length of the ***adaptation phase of children and the rule of no face-to-face contacts*** during this period. The children's adaptation phase took from 2 weeks to 12 months (see Table 3).

Table 3: Child's adaptation to substitute care without face-to-face contact with parents

| Communication partner | Type of children's placement | Duration of children's adaptation period to substitute forms of care | Other types of contact |
|---|---|---|---|
| P1 (mother) | Temporary foster care | 3 months | material, written |
| | Institutional facility | 2 weeks | phone, material, written |
| P2 (mother) | Relative foster care | 6 months | written |
| P3 (father) | Temporary foster care | 9 months | material, written |
| | Mediated foster care | 6 months | material, written |
| P4 (mother) | Temporary foster care | 12 months | written |
| | Relative foster care | 12 months | written |
| | Mediated foster care | 12 months | written |
| P5 (mother) | Facilities for children requiring immediate assistance | 5 months | phone, material, written |
| | Institutional facility | 12 months | phone, material, written |

Face-to-face contact was not allowed for parents during the adaptation phase, although communication partners made efforts to make contact and, where appropriate, inquired about the reasons why they could not see their child. The ***no contact rule was legitimised*** by the adaptation period *("The accompanying organisation said I couldn't see him…some adaptation or something like that… he was placed there at my request, so why can't I see him?"* P3.)

Another way of justifying no contact was the child's after-placement reactions combined with the adaptation period. P1 stated: *"I couldn't see my child. I didn't have any information. I didn't know who to communicate with. I was told that my child would be going through adaptation, and I didn't know what that meant or how long it would take. I thought my child would be adopted. I hadn't seen her for three months. Because she cried a lot, they didn't want me to see her."*

Neither explanation was perceived by the communication partners as relevant for the inability to see their own children. P1 mentions *"they provided me with neither information nor the possibility of contact. I perceived it as a trick by OSPOD. I didn't know the real reason why I wouldn't be able to see her. After all, I'm her mother, and I had that possibility with my children in a children's home."* They also mention that other professionals (court and SAS) did not understand the reasons. P1 states: *"The judge said that the child had not seen her mother for 2 months, and that it wasn't good."* P5 mentions: *"SAS also didn't get what was going on and why I can't see my children."*

The parents themselves spoke of the ***children's need*** to have information about their parents and to maintain a relationship with them ***during the adjustment period***. (They need to know that their parents think of them and love them). Children also need foster families and residential facilities to have all the information about the children regarding daily routines. The communication partner P1 mentions: *"I tried to pass on information about her regime being supported by SAS. ...I put together a kind of 'manual on my child'. I think it could have helped a foster parent. But we couldn't meet, we weren't allowed to. I couldn't communicate directly with the foster parent and this information only came to her after about two months."* In contrast, according to the parents, their contact with the child would help to better cope with the adaptation phase. Communication partner P1 could not see the child during the adaptation phase. Her child cried for several months, but after having contact with the mother after an adaptation phase, the situation improved *("My daughter cried all the time, I missed her. After our meeting they told me that she started calming down. I don't know if it was me or if she has got used to it.")* Other communication partners perceived the adaptation period as a cause of the disruption of the relationship between children and parents *("Our children stopped trusting us after a year. They thought we didn't want them. They asked me, why don't you come to see us? I didn't know what to say to them." P5).*

The biological parents tried to have at least ***other types of contact*** with their children during the adaptation period. The types of contact are shown in Table 3. Most parents used material contact, which meant sending a gift to the child. Written contact meant mainly letters or postcards. P4 gave an account: *"Contacts in prison were forbidden. I asked for them –OSPOD wrote that the foster mother wouldn't come to prison, even though the judge in court told me that it was my right.... I used to write to all my children every week."* Telephone contacts were used by two communication partners (P1 and P5) with children who had their mobile phones with them in the facility *("I sent all my kids cards every week. I called my kids in the children's home almost every day. I sent them stuff that was important to them. I was being supported by SAS – what to write so as not to hurt the kids and how to do it well."* P1).

Support for other types of contact was obtained by the parents from the SAS social worker, who provided it with regard to the children's needs. P3 mentions: *"SAS supported me a lot on how to send postcards, so I don't write some nonsense in them."*

***Contact establishment and evaluation***

***The contact establishment*** was a very complicated process. SAS played a key role in supporting the biological parents. P5 mentions: *"It's a such slow system, if it wasn't for SAS helping me…, we would*

*never get my children back."* The parents' first step in trying to arrange for face-to-face contact with their children led to OSPOD, where the parents were advised to make an arrangement with the foster parent (P3: *"I went to OSPOD to arrange for being able to see my son…she told me to arrange with a foster parent, but how to make this happen? If I didn't have their phone number.")* In the case of institutional care, the situation was easier as an assigned social worker was listed as contact for the parents. (P1: *"I found the contact for the social worker on the website, I called them and arranged it with them.")* Communication partners can be divided into two categories. Communication partner P1 arranged regular face-to-face contact for children in institutional care. The other communication partners were referred back to OSPOD on the grounds of not being able to decide about face-to-face contacts. In the case of foster care, arranging face-to-face contacts was one step more complicated, and for this reason the category of institutional care joins later. The biological parent again went to OSPOD, where he listed the above obstacles, and OSPOD referred him to make arrangements with the accompanying organisation for foster families. (P4: *"It was so complicated. I had to go to OSPOD to tell them that I didn't know how to arrange with foster parents. She told me through some accompanying agency, but I didn't know what that meant… only that didn't work either because the lady from the accompanying agency didn't want to make any decisions without OSPOD")*. The biological parents did not know what an accompanying organisation meant for foster organisations, or which one their child's foster family utilised. If they did not receive this information from OSPOD, they had to ask again. Subsequently, the parents contacted the accompanying organisation and tried to obtain telephone contact of the foster family to make an arrangement with them, which was not possible because a social worker from the accompanying organisation only allowed them to communicate through their organisation. Then they inquired about the possibility of face-to-face contact and the social worker told them that he was not authorized to make decision about contact, and they should contact OSPOD. The biological parents whose children have been placed in institutional care received the same information that they could not decide the contact setup. The parents again contacted OSPOD who started to resolve the situation. The parents tried in various ways to arrange contact themselves. In the case of P4 and P5, a case conference was used to arrange face-to-face contact. Support at case conferences was provided to families by the SAS social worker. P2: *"I felt alone there in front of everyone. It was always better with SAS; she was my psychological support. If I didn't know what to say or how to say it, she responded for me and the next time I was more confident."* P4 illustrates the situation: *"She calms me down, gives me courage to stand up for myself in front of so many people. She is important to me. She gives me feedback."*

Communication partners talked about the risk- and the past-oriented ***assessment of their living situation by social workers***. P4 adds: *"There's a lot of past history being addressed, something that happened x years ago. The judge's great at this, she's focused on what's now."* For the communication partners P3, P4, and to some extent P2, the most important part was the child psychologist's assessment for the contact setup, but according to the parents, this never made it to the case conference or case meeting *(*P4: *"Everything is taken note of in the case conference, sent to a psychologist, and then we can hope she approves it."*). Communication partners mentioned that they would like to be more involved in the assessment of their life situation. They also perceived the child's involvement as important. *(*P4: *"Nobody's shows much of interest in my opinion."*).

The life situation assessment established grounds for ***face-to-face contact*** setup. Table 4 shows the frequency and type of contacts. The face-to-face contacts carried out once every 3-4 months are the suggestion of the child psychologist. The communication partners mentioned that they would like a higher frequency of contacts, which they justified by the child's wishes and needs *("I think he wishes to see me more often. Especially at Christmas, birthdays, holidays, and such. OSPOD said to me, the children don't enjoy Christmas that much…, My daughter asks me where I've been for so long. And I don't know what to say to her…, I've asked the psychologist and OSPOD what I should answer, but no one has said anything yet. I'd like more frequent contacts with her."* P4). A lower frequency of contacts was justified by children's crying after contacts with their parents.

Most of the face-to-face contacts between parents and children are assisted; the assistance is provided either by the accompanying organisation or by the social worker of the institution (P4: *"For 2 years it has been set up like this, without a court. The psychologist wants it this way and it's up to her. I wish I could sometimes spend some time alone with my daughter."*). Contacts with children placed in foster care take place in the playrooms available to the accompanying organisations. In the case of institutional care, a place of contact is the residential facility. The place of contact is determined by the professional staff with the parent being transported to the place. The parents themselves would prefer a more natural and individualised contact. They perceive that a more natural environment might be, for example, a playground, their current home, where they could engage in joint activities with their children such as cooking, baking cookies, doing homework, etc. They would also like to reunite with their children at Christmas, birthdays, holidays, and attend important activities in their lives.

Table 4: Face-to-face contacts after the adaptation period

| Communication partner | Type of children's placement | Contact frequency | Assistance |
|---|---|---|---|
| P1 (mother) | Temporary foster care | 1x every 2 months | YES |
| | Institutional facility | 1x every 2 weeks | NO |
| P2 (mother) | Relative foster care | 1x every 2 weeks | YES |
| P3 (father) | Temporary foster care | 1x every 3-4 months | YES |
| | Mediated foster care | 1x every 3-4 months | YES |
| P4 (mother) | Temporary foster care | 1x every 3 months | YES |
| | Relative foster care | 1x every 3 months | YES |
| | Mediated foster care | 1x every 3 months | YES |
| P5 (mother) | Facilities for children requiring immediate assistance | 1x every 1 month | YES |
| | Institutional facility | 1x every 2 weeks | YES |
| | | 1x per week | NO |

Face-to-face contacts are understood by communication partners as an opportunity to exercise their parental rights and take on a parental role *(*P4: *"I want to be a parent, I want to help my children study, I want to bake a cake with them, but I can't."*). Parents have the experience that even though they repeatedly asked for information from all participants in foster care and for the opportunity to participate in important events in the child's life (e.g., a school show, parents' evenings), they were not allowed to do so. P5 states: *"I wanted to know where my child goes to preschool/school and I wanted to go to school shows, to communicate with the teacher. They told me that I didn't need to worry about it…that's what the caretakers are for. I wanted to be a mother, but they rejected me."* For instance, P4 also faced the same situation: *"I asked for information about my child's grades, school shows. And I don't even know if she is healthy. The accompanying agency told me that I didn't need to know."*
Communication partners mentioned that for ***no child were there a regular assessment of contacts in a multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary team (with a social worker from OSPOD, a social worker from a residential facility, a social worker from an accompanying organisation, a psychologist, a foster family, possibly the child, and other professionals present).*** Not being able to evaluate contacts according to biological parents hinders the assessment of current life situation and the setup of contact according to the child's current needs. P4 says: *"Nothing is moving on. It's the way it was done 2 years ago. It's all based on the past – the contacts and information exchange is still the same."* All communication partners wished for regular assessments of their children's current situation.

Communication partners have ***experience with a regular assessment of contacts together with the SAS social worker.*** The parents themselves perceived the assessment as important, because they have the opportunity to give each other feedback (how the contact went, how good it was, what was the child's reaction after the contact, etc.), to create a plan to improve the quality of contacts and information exchange between the substitute care and them. P5 states*: "She evaluated with me (SAS (anonymised))…she came to see me once a week. She went through all that with me. It helped all of us, especially our children."*

As noted above, all communication partners had experience of support through SAS, and for them support was a key element in maintaining a good quality and stable relationship with their children. They rated the support as very broad, provided over a period of months or years. They always perceived it as timely, targeted to their specific situation, with the main objective being a happy and contented child. P1 reports: *"SAS helped me with everything. Not just to go to deal with authorities, but with everything. She supported me. She lifted me up mentally, also my self-esteem. With contacts — she helped me to set them up. She also helped me to seek help. Whatever I needed, she was there for me. She made those two years better than if I hadn't had her. I got information from her about the system, I was better able to navigate…she was there for me too. I couldn't have done it without her."*

## FINAL DISCUSSION

The research results show that parents perceive the placement of a child in substitute care as a consequence of an adverse social situation and the absence of adequate support in it. The parents reported loss of housing and lack of financial resources as the main reasons for placing children outside their family. If assistance was provided, it only dealt with the acute problem and there was insufficient prevention. They lacked information, and the support was perceived as inadequate. According to DePanfilis (2006), when assessing a child's situation, social workers should ask whether more complex social problems (e.g., poverty) are behind the situation, which is understood as the parents' inability to meet the basic needs of their children.

The decision to place a child in substitute forms of care was in most cases initiated by the parents themselves, believing that it was in the best interests of their child, while at the same time they were seeking to address an adverse situation. Nevertheless, they felt excluded from further care of the child, and distrust in themselves as parents.

An important issue for biological parents was the adaptation of their children to substitute care, during which there was no regular face-to-face contact between parents and children. Parents perceive contact setup as a complicated and lengthy process. It is difficult for parents to reach agreement on face-to-face contacts with foster parents or institutional care, although it is preferred in the methodological guidelines. For example, according to *Recommendation of the Deputy Ombudsman on contacts of a child in foster care with biological parents and others* (Ombudsman, 2020), parents should be allowed to agree on contacts between them and the foster family/institutional facility when setting up contacts. Face-to-face contacts usually happen once every 3-4 months. The Parents mention that the individual situation of their children is not taken into account. Contacts are assisted, over a period of several years. The Ombudsman's Recommendation (Ombudsman, 2020) notes that assistance should be approved by the court and should not be long-term. Parents perceived that the impossibility of having contacts with their children impaired their relationship, education, and medical care.

The research results show that, from the perspective of communication partners, one of the key principles of social and legal protection of children, which is the protection of parenthood and family and the mutual right of parents and children to parental upbringing and care, is not fulfilled in the current practice (MPSV ČR, n.d.). Parents in an adverse life situation are perceived primarily as a source of threat and, in line with Janebová's (2018) conclusions, social work tends to be carried out in a discourse of fragile childhood and unsafe parenting, where the focal point

of the assessment of the best interests of the child is primarily parental deficits, without taking into account the structural causes of the parents' difficulties (poverty, housing need) or their role as a victim of crime (domestic violence) and assistance provided to them.

Finally, there are implications for research, social work practice, and social policy. I believe that further research needs to be conducted that focuses on families who have a child placed outside their own family. For example, the perspective of social workers at the SAS, OSPOD, accompanying organisations for foster families, but also workers at the Ministry of Social Affairs or regional offices.

For social policy and social work, I would recommend focusing primarily on preventing the placement of children outside their own families. However, if children are placed outside their own families, it is advisable to work with the family comprehensively and always to assess the family's individual situation. I do not recommend working with fixed time limits that lead to avoidance of contact. In the Czech Republic, there is a lack of support for families who have children placed outside their own families. The law in the Czech Republic and abroad is set in accordance with these recommendations.

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# Social Isolation, Social Support, and Radicalisation of Adolescents[1]

*Accepted for publication on November 30th, 2023.*

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**Abstract**
OBJECTIVES: The objective of this paper is to describe and test the relationships between social isolation, social support, and radicalisation, and to determine which factors of social support and social isolation predict radicalisation in Slovak secondary school students. THEORETICAL BASE: The paper is based on the definition of the determinants of radicalisation in the form of the concepts of social isolation and social support, in the context of the developmental period of adolescence. METHODS: In a quantitative, representative research, research was conducted through correlational calculations and simple linear regressions. OUTCOMES: Research findings have significantly demonstrated that adolescents who are less socially isolated among peers outside of the school environment tend to be more radicalised. Also, the greater the degree of social support adolescents have from their close sources, the less radicalised they are. SOCIAL WORK IMPLICATIONS: Research findings may serve as a starting point for social workers and other helping professionals working with adolescents at risk of radicalisation, specifically for those working in primary prevention in school settings and with the potential to link the adolescent, their family, school, and community.

[1] The text is supported by the project VEGA 1/0754/21 *"Push-pull" Social Factors Related to the Radicalisation Rate of Adolescents in the Context of Social Work.*

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**Key words**
social isolation, social support, radicalisation, adolescence

## INTRODUCTION

Several models of radicalisation have been described in the professional sources, but defining the specific role of social isolation and social support in the process of radicalisation is not sufficient, especially in the context of the developmental period of adolescence. Examining the determinants associated with the radicalisation process and then formulating recommendations may have a significant preventive effect. A typical characteristic at present is that radicalised individuals are becoming ever younger. (Kulifaj, Gymerská, Kövérová et al., 2016; Campelo, Oppetit, Neau et al., 2018; Primc, 2022) Radicalisation is a process perceived as a progressive social phenomenon that is significantly linked to social, political, sociological, economic, cultural, spiritual, security, and various other aspects and represents an individual's subjective path to radical views and ideas but does not necessarily lead to the perpetration of violence. (Lichner, Šlosár, Šiňanská et al., 2018; Lichner, 2020; Smolík, 2020)

Campelo, Oppetit, Neau et al., (2018) proposed a comprehensive three-level model to explain the phenomenon of adolescent radicalisation. The first level is represented by individual risk factors (psychological vulnerability), the second level by microenvironmental factors (dysfunctional relationships - experiencing social isolation or risky friendships with radicalised individuals), and the third level by societal risk factors (geopolitical and social events). Belonging to a radical community then reduces insecurity and creates a sense of belonging, of purpose. (Bhui, Everitt, Jones, 2014; Campelo, Oppetit, Neau et al., 2018; Primc, 2022) Membership in a radical group gives adolescents a sense of inner strength and fearlessness, which is often more important to them than the ideology itself. These groups can also fulfil diverse needs in adolescents such as protection, safety, excitement, adventure seeking, friends, status and identity (Bjørgo, Carlsson, 2005). The radically minded adolescent can be perceived as an aggressor, but also as a victim of certain social circumstances that put the individual in a risky situation. In this sense, Kulifaj, Gymerská, Kövérová et al. (2016) introduce the notion of "young person at risk of radicalisation of values, attitudes, and behaviour".

In adolescents, a tendency towards extremism can be observed in various forms (violent acts, participation in banned events, use of banned symbols, founding of organisations). It manifests itself not just externally (by wearing special clothes, hairstyles) but also in general, e.g., by shaping the idea of the world, the way of thinking or acting (Štefančík, Macháček, Poláková, 2013).

Peer relationships have long been pointed to as one of the most important features of adolescence. Peers are pointed to as contributors to health and well-being on the one hand, and as those who are blamed for some of the more problematic aspects of adolescent functioning (including, for example, due to an increase in social media use) (Brown, Larson, 2009; Nesi, Choukas Bradley, Prinstein, 2018). During this developmental period, the tendency to experiment with risk increases, but the adolescent lacks experience and insight into his/her own vulnerability. Greater peer influence may spur interest in activities that are inappropriate. Quality relationships are associated with lower levels of vulnerability to inappropriate peer pressure (Kopčanová, Kopányiová, Smiková, 2016). It should be emphasised that peers are ranked among the significant risk factors in the support and acceptance of violence, as their acceptance and support are an important steppingstone between radical attitudes and violent behaviour (Nunes et al., 2015).

In this period, there is a typical "distance from the adult world", whose rules adolescents refuse to accept. They are considered as those who show unconventional and uncompromising, often oversimplified solutions to complex social problems (Žofčák, 2017). They are open-minded,

accepting new ideas, but often uncritically. They take views out of context and can promote them with strong radicalism (Kulifaj, Gymerská, Kövérová et al., 2016).
In the context of the helping professions, it is also important to assess the quality of peer relationships and to look at them holistically. (Brady, Dolcini, Harper et al., 2009) That is, not just how much (isolation versus participation) but also how high quality (support) the adolescent's relationships are with classmates, but also with classmates outside of school, where the adolescent can already selectively choose classmates (or the adolescent's classmates). Therefore, we find it necessary to examine social isolation and social support specifically in the context of the classroom.

## SOCIAL ISOLATION AND RADICALISATION

The period of adolescence is characterised by phases of turbulence and reorganisation, problems of identity and identification, and is therefore generally considered a risk factor for radicalisation. Finding one's own identity while naturally separating from primary care providers can bring about a loss of security, experiencing insecurity or fear of social isolation. The concept of social isolation tends to be defined as multifaceted and multidimensional (Ranjan, Yadav, 2019). Social isolation represents a disruption of social connectedness or a lack of an objective measure of contact with other people (Hug, 2013; Alivernini, Maganelli, 2016; Niño, Cai, Ignatow, 2016). Although adolescents may also isolate themselves voluntarily and purposefully, for example, for a variety of creative or spiritual reasons. However, when isolation is imposed, such as through rejection by peers, family, and from other people in general, it can have fatal consequences on individuals and change their outlook on life. (Hug, 2013) Fostering intense contacts with peers and seeking to enter new social interactions in diverse areas are essential for adolescents because they desire to be included, well-liked. and respected. Sharing ideas with each other, discussing life problems, concerns, distresses, interest in romantic relationships and intimacy, or many other components of socialisation navigate the formation and maintenance of strong and supportive friendships, so important at this stage of life. Conversely, no, or a lack of, social contact may be seen as disrupting the process of peer group integration, leading to social isolation. Isolation, both in childhood and during adolescence, can later cause an increase in externalising behaviours, as well as manifestations of anxiety and depression, states of loneliness and more (Matthews, Danese, Wertz et al., 2015; Niño, Cai, Ignatow, 2016; Christ, Kwak, Lu, 2017; Almeida, Rego, Teixeira et al., 2021). Some studies (Hug, 2013; Bhui, Everitt, Jones, 2014) suggest that experiencing episodes of isolation is related to the process of radicalisation and at different stages of the process. Also, personal experience of social exclusion in adolescence, experience of bullying, meaningless leisure time, membership of a risk group and others are among the determinants that may lead to the emergence and development of extremism in adolescents (Schubart, 2000 in Štefančík, Macháček, Poláková, 2013). According to de Jong Gierveld, van Tilburg, and Dykstra (2006), there is a continuum from social isolation on the one hand to social participation on the other (determined by the number of positive relationships an individual has). It should be noted that the lack of social contacts is related to several factors, such as both ostracisation by classmates and the child's decision to withdraw from activities that involve social interaction (Alivernini, Maganelli, 2016). It is important to note that not all peer relationships may be regarded as positive.

## SOCIAL SUPPORT AND RADICALISATION

Adolescent social support is a rather broad term referring to help, whether solicited or passively received, encompassing different types of social support from different sources (Hovanová, 2023). It refers to an interactive process in which an individual perceives his/her value, while feeling part of a social network of mutual help and commitment (Tomás, Gutiérrez, Pastor et al., 2020). Consequently, the individual's resilience to stress and willingness to overcome life setbacks and

crises increases (Křivohlavý, 2009). An appropriate form of social support helps to employ effective coping strategies. Adolescents with higher levels of social support acquire higher levels of self-esteem and better social competence. Through it, they are able to share common interests, feel understood and respected (Camara, Bacigalupe, Padilla, 2013; Trejos-Herrera, Bahamón, Alarcón-Vásquez et al., 2017). It is provided through social contacts and social interaction, either face-to-face or through other mechanisms (Vietze, 2011). Social support from friends can encourage more healthful behaviours. Conversely, inferior quality relationships with friends can impair mental and physical health, which can lead to radical behaviour (Wilkinson, Marmot, 2005). Social support prevents criminality and coercive forces that compel (or intimidate) individuals to act out of fear or anxiety (Kort-Butler, 2018). It can be said that if the system directly connects a person's position in the social structure of the environment that significantly determines the distribution of life chances, which are the ties and bonds that relate the individual socially and culturally to his/her social context, these ties provide meaning and orientation for life choices (Lubelcová, 2014). It is social support that may guide and give meaning to choices of action (radical group choice), therefore it is important for the social worker to be aware of the adolescent's sources of social support.

## RADICALISATION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE SCHOOL MILIEU

Undoubtedly, adolescents spend a lot of time at school, and he/she is part of the class team. This space offers a number of opportunities for peer relationships and can therefore be considered an important socialisation context. The school classroom is created within the institution - the school, i.e., on the initiative of the outside. From the student's point of view, its composition is random, he/she usually cannot choose his/her classmates. It is a stable, closed group which has a formal character. Over time, the class becomes an internally differentiated social group. Even within this subculture (differing, for example, in customs, language or rituals), even smaller groups of children with shared interests may emerge, in which the beginnings of anti-social groups can be recognised in some cases (Kulifaj, Gymerská, Kövérová et al., 2016). Personal relationships, sometimes deeper, are formed among the students, and the class also becomes an informal group, often a reference group, which is why it is important to have knowledge about the structure of the classroom. Slovak society is multicultural and multiethnic, and this trend is on the rise. It is made up of a number of national minorities and ethnic groups (e.g., Hungarian, Roma, Czech, Ruthenian, Ukrainian, and German). It is not easy to see the role of the school in such a society, where the promotion of tolerance is fundamental, because the processes taking place in the school replicate those of society. There have been several racially oriented attacks on members of minorities in Slovakia, some of which have been fatal (Kulifaj, Gymerská, Kövérová et al., 2016). Elements of violence, extremism, xenophobia, and other types of intolerance also occur in schools. Students can be found behaving in unacceptable ways (humiliating classmates, expressing themselves inappropriately, ridiculing an ethnic or a national minority...), including those who are not afraid to present their views not just in front of their classmates at school but also share them on social networks (Kopčanová, Kopányiová, Smiková, 2016). The education of helping professionals working in the school environment in the field of cultural, national, but also cognitive diversity is not widespread enough compared to abroad (Zacharová, Lemešová, Miškolci et al., 2019). Nevertheless (or precisely because of this), the school education system has a significant role to play, as it promotes social responsibility, prevents stereotypes and discrimination, serves as a source of knowledge and democracy, and fosters active citizenship. Therefore, the school system may be seen as a powerful tool of the State in preventing radical views and in reducing the likelihood of an individual becoming radicalised later in life (Primc, 2022).

## METHODS

This study is a partial output of the project, which has as its main objective building a "push-pull" model of social and family predictors of adolescent radicalisation and testing the assumption that the process of radicalisation is influenced by specific operationalised factors. The main objective of this paper is to test the relationships between radicalisation and social isolation (a quantitative indicator of peer relationships) and social support (a qualitative indicator of peer relationships) as possible interacting factors during adolescence.

Data collection for the research was conducted in two phases, and the present paper is compiled from the first one. The battery consisted of several questionnaires, but for the purpose of the present study three questionnaires were used.

*The Radical and Extremist Attitudes and Behavioural Tendencies in Adolescents* (REPTSA) questionnaire (Lichner, 2020) consists of 2 factors, Personal values, attitudes and beliefs of young people (hereafter referred to as personal values in the tables) and General values and beliefs that support radicalisation and extremism in young people (hereafter referred to as general values in the tables). The methodology included 33 items to which respondents answered on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), according to how they subjectively identified with the statements.

*The Classmates Social Isolation Questionnaire* (CSIQ) (Alivernini, Manganelli, 2016) is a short, 10-item self-assessment questionnaire measuring the level of social isolation of classmates in the classroom and classmates outside of school. The degree of social isolation in both factors is measured through a 5-point Likert scale (0 - none, 4 - a lot), which has been repolarised for ease of interpretation. The questionnaire measures the extent to which students are socially isolated during time with classmates in class and also after school (SIWC, SIOS), outside of class and school, when classmates no longer spend time "forced" with everyone, but voluntarily with those they want to by choice, thus they can be much more selective in their choice of friends (Alivernini, Maganelli, 2016). It is important to draw attention to the fact that the questionnaire does not focus on peers outside the school who are (or are not) in contact with the adolescent, but specifically on classmates. That is to say, the group on which the school as an institution and the helping professionals who work there have an impact.

*The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support* (MSPSS) (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, Farley, 1988) measures perceived social support from a support system that includes parents, friends, and a significant other. It represents a brief but comprehensive and easy-to-understand instrument, even for a group of adolescents. It consists of 12 items divided into three factors. It measures social support through a 7-point Likert scale (1- completely disagree, 7- completely agree). Crombach's alpha coefficient reached satisfactory values in each factor in each questionnaire.

Table 1: Descriptive indicators for respective questionnaires and factors in the authors' research

| | **REPTSA** | | **CSIQ** | | **MSPSS** | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| factor | personal values | general values | social isolation at schools | social isolation outside school | significant other | family | friends |
| alpha | 0.903 | 0.782 | 0.782 | 0.857 | 0.887 | 0.909 | 0.924 |
| M | 1.974 | 2.750 | 2.584 | 2.302 | 5.308 | 4.906 | 5.000 |
| min. | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| max. | 7 | 7 | 4 | 4 | 7 | 7 | 7 |
| SD | 0.618 | 0.567 | 0.958 | 0.611 | 1.694 | 1.773 | 1.632 |

*alpha – Cronbach's alpha coefficient, M - mean, SD - standard deviation*

**Research sample**

The research sample consisted of secondary school students from all over Slovakia. For the selection, the criteria of representativeness were strictly taken into account. All secondary schools with Slovak as the language of instruction were included to ensure that students understood the meaning of all the questions and also to eliminate possible cultural specificities. Subsequently, 3 schools were drawn from each region of Slovakia in a structure of 1 gymnasium and 2 other vocational schools. After agreeing with the school management on the purpose and content of the research, a link with an online questionnaire was administered to the drawn schools, which the students filled in during the school lessons. The research sample consisted of second- and third-year secondary school students (N=382). The mean age of all the respondents was 17 years (SD = 10.389; Min - Max = 15–20; Med(x) = 17.79). In the context of gender, 51.4% of the study population were girls (44.6% were boys). The research sample showed uneven distribution, so non-parametric testing was resorted to.

## RESULTS

As indicated above, the objective of the study was to investigate the possible existence of relationships between radicalisation and social support, together with social isolation, as possible interacting factors during adolescence. The starting point was the fact that it is in the period of adolescence that it is very important to have a close person for sharing one's feelings and experiences. Peers are an important part of adolescents' lives, thanks to whom the need to belong somewhere is saturated. If the adolescent is not socially isolated, has an adequate level of social support and is satisfied with his/her life, he/she may not fulfil these needs in other ways and places, such as in radicalising youth groups.

To confirm these assumptions, surveys were conducted through correlational calculations, and later simple linear regressions were resorted to. Social interaction with classmates at school means that students who belong to the adolescent's peer group are grouped together in the same classroom, as he/she selectively chooses them on the basis of liking (in the research represented by the social isolation factor classmates outside school) and others who form a normal part of the classroom collective (in the research represented by the social isolation factor classmates in school). Table 2 represents the relationships between the factors of radicalisation and the factors of social isolation of adolescents.

Table 2: Spearman's correlation coefficient of the factors of radicalisation and social isolation of adolescents

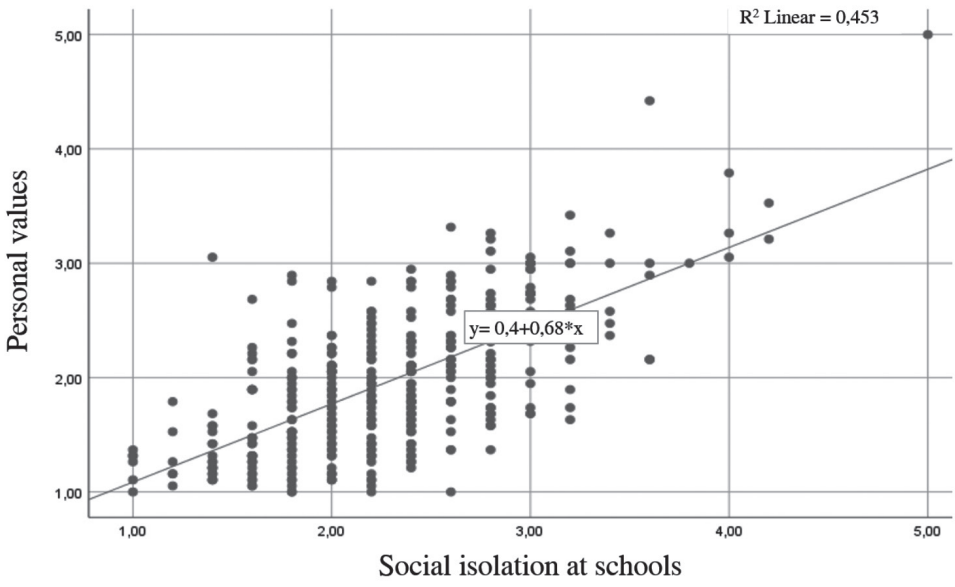
| | | **REPTSA** personal values | **REPTSA** general values |
|---|---|---|---|
| **CSIQ** social isolation at schools | r | 0.076 | 0.041 |
| | p(α) | 0.141 | 0.424 |
| **CSIQ** social isolation outside school | r | - 0.627*** | - 0.716*** |
| | p(α) | <0.001 | <0.001 |

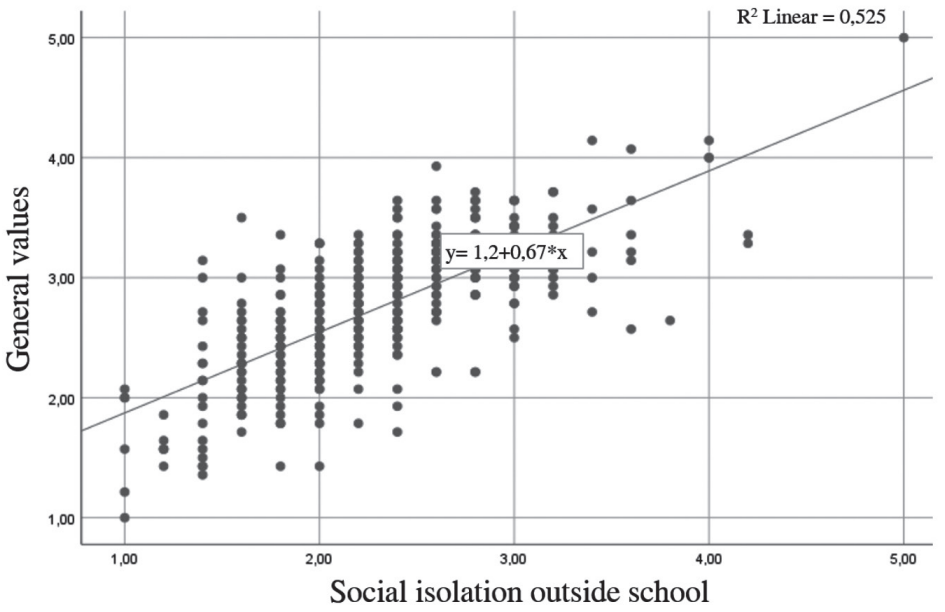
Statistically significant associations were found between both radicalisation factors and the factor of social isolation from classmates outside school, with strong correlations. This means that the less isolated an adolescent is from his/her classmates outside school, the more radicalised he/she tends to be in both personal values, attitudes, and beliefs and in general values and beliefs that promote radicalisation and extremism. Paradoxically, these results are the opposite to our assumptions and

imply that social interaction with classmates outside of school can give adolescents a sense of belonging and identity already in a radical group because they need to identify with that group. This may stem from adolescents' strong need to explain the world, where, for example, it is the more radical political parties that offer rapid explanations. Their popularity is also increasing with high levels of scepticism in the wake of the COVID pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and chaotic State leadership. This is confirmed by the average scores on the REPTSA questionnaire items, where the highest ranked items deal specifically with the functioning of public policy (e.g., the item We should have a leader at the head of the State who will rule Slovakia with a firm hand with the interests of all - M=3.49; If someone is not employed for an extended period of time, or does not attend retraining courses, he/she is not entitled to any social-welfare benefits from the State - M=3.29; Someone who is out of work for a long time or does not receive training is useless for the society and does not deserve any benefits from the State - M=3.29; If someone does not work for a long time or does not attend retraining courses, he/she is not entitled to any benefits from the state - M=3.29; Someone who does not work for a long time or does not attend retraining courses is useless for this society and does not deserve any support from the State - M=3.06).

To explore the issue in greater depth, the data was also subjected to analysis through simple linear regression. Radicalisation factors were included separately as the dependent variable, and social isolation from classmates outside school was the independent variable. The conditions for calculating a linear regression were met despite the non-normal distribution of the data, as Rabušic, Soukup, and Mareš (2019) present this condition as unnecessary for a sufficiently large research sample (N > 100; authors' research N = 382).

Figure 1: Regression lines for the dependence of radicalisation and social isolation factors on classmates outside school






The regression lines are shown in Figure 1, and the results of the regression analysis are presented in Table 3. One table includes simple linear regressions separately for each radicalisation factor. It can be seen that approximately 52% of the variability in the dependent variable (radicalisation - personal values) and approximately 45% of the variability in the dependent variable (radicalisation - general values) is explained by social isolation. Thus, radicalisation rates are strongly conditioned by social isolation, but in a negative direction. Based on the results obtained, it can be concluded that adolescents with low levels of social isolation tend to become radicalised.

Table 3: Summary results of simple linear regression of radicalisation factors (personal values, general values), regression coefficients and t-values on social isolation from classmates outside school

| | R | $R^2$ | F | B | St. error | t | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **REPTSA** personal values | 0.673 | 0.523 | 419.368 | 0.402 | 0.039 | -17.730 | <0.001 |
| **REPTSA** general values | 0.724 | 0.451 | 314.345 | 1.201 | 0.033 | -20.478 | <0.001 |

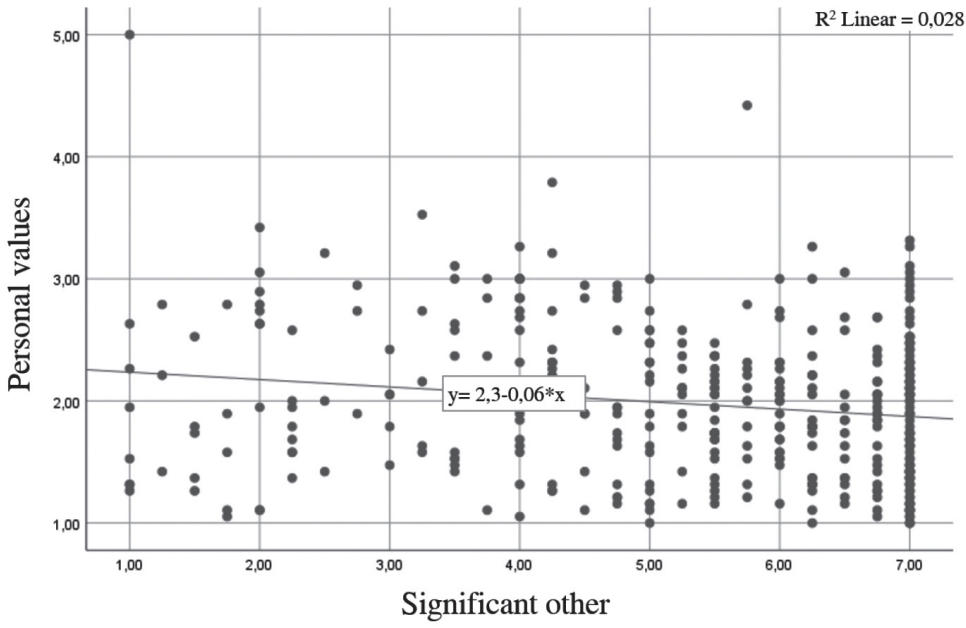
Table 4 describes the relationships between radicalisation factors and different sources of social support. Statistically significant negative correlations with weak strength were demonstrated in the radicalisation factor of personal values and the social support factors significant other and friends. This means that the higher the level of social support adolescents have in these factors, the less radicalised they are in the context of the radicalisation factor of personal values.

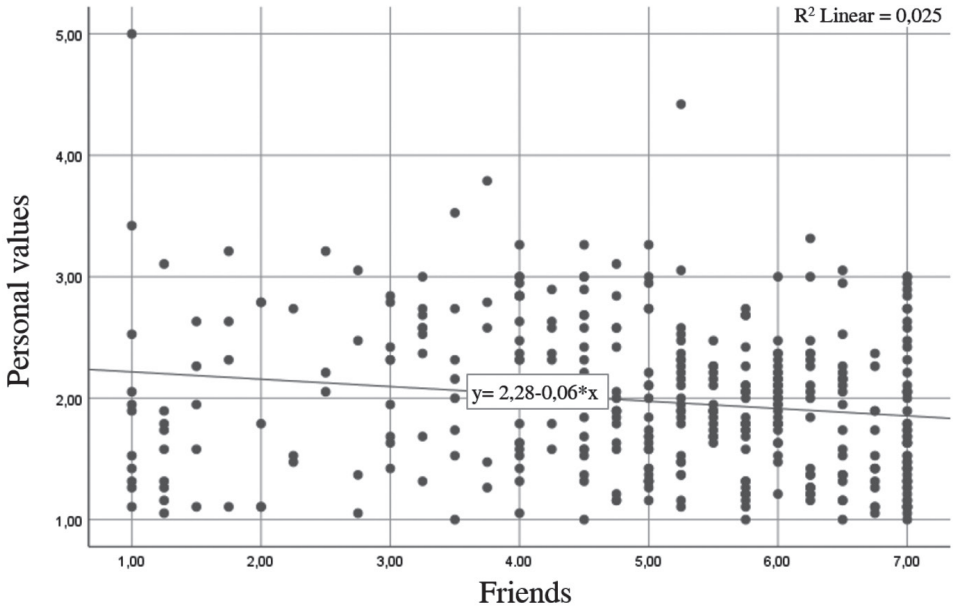
Table 4: Spearman's correlation coefficient of radicalisation factors and adolescents' sources of social support

| | | **REPTSA** personal values | **REPTSA** general values |
|---|---|---|---|
| **MSPSS-SK** significant other | r | - 0.146** | - 0.034 |
| | p(α) | 0.004 | 0.507 |
| **MSPSS-SK** family | r | 0.043 | 0.070 |
| | p(α) | 0.393 | 0.170 |
| **MSPSS-SK** friends | r | - 0.173** | - 0.085 |
| | p(α) | 0.001 | 0.094 |

For social support, a simple linear regression was also undertaken. Since no statistically significant correlations were measured for the radicalisation factor general values, we focused only on the radicalisation factor personal values as the dependent variable. The independent variable consisted separately of the factors of sources of social support significant other and friends. It can be concluded that also in these calculations the conditions for calculating linear regression were met despite the non-normal distribution of the data.

Figure 2: Regression lines for the relationship between radicalisation factors and sources of social support (significant other, friends)






The regression lines are shown in Figure 2, and the results of the regression analysis are presented in Table 5. One table includes simple linear regressions separately for the social support factors. Within the regression results with sources of social support, it can be said that only 2% of the variability in the dependent variable (radicalisation - personal values) is explained by the degree of social support from a significant other, and similarly only 2% of the variability in the dependent variable (radicalisation - personal values) is explained by the degree of social support from friends.

Table 5: Summary results of simple linear regression of the radicalisation factor personal values, regression coefficients and t-values on sources of social support (significant other, friends)

| | R | $R^2$ | F | B | St. error | t | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **MSPSS-SK** significant other | 0.166 | 0.028 | 10.756 | 2.296 | 0.018 | -3.280 | 0.001 |
| **MSPSS-SK** friends | 0.159 | 0.025 | 9.918 | 2.277 | 0.019 | -3.149 | 0.002 |

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper investigates the relationship between radicalisation and, independently, social isolation and social support. The objective was also to find out which factors of social support and social isolation predict radicalisation in Slovak secondary school students. The original objective was also to determine the pattern of the variables under study by means of multiple linear regression, but for its application, the condition that the independent variables (in the case of the contribution factor social isolation classmates outside school and the factors of sources of social support significant other and friends) should not be too highly correlated with each other was not achieved. Therefore, simple linear regressions were resorted to separately.

The results of the research have significantly demonstrated that adolescents who are less socially isolated (in the case of the measurement instrument used, who have more contact) among their

classmates outside of the school environment also tend to be more radicalised, both in their personal values, attitudes, and beliefs and in the general values and beliefs that promote radicalisation and extremism. Also, research results through simple linear regression showed that approximately 52% of the variability in radicalisation as measured by the personal values, attitudes and beliefs factor can be explained by adolescents' social isolation. Similarly, approximately 45% of the variability in radicalisation as measured by the factor general values and beliefs that promote radicalisation and extremism can also be explained by social isolation. This suggests that even in the case of general values, i.e., broader beliefs and opinions, social isolation plays a significant role in explaining radicalisation. As the authors' research has also shown, an adolescent may be well included in a peer group, but the problem arises when the group is a risk group that encourages its members to engage in risky behaviours (Telzer, Fuligni, Lieberman et al., 2015), such as one where members hold radical or even extremist attitudes that are considered undesirable in the society. An adolescent's primary motivation for joining a particular group may not be related to any radical ideology, but also, for example, to provide a search for identity, protection, excitement, or to satisfy other social and psychological needs that he/she is unable to satisfy in his/her environment (Kopčanová, Kopányiová, Smiková, 2016). In this case, the collective identity of the group is a central factor in the emergence of the radicalisation process. Group radicalisation presupposes a kind of rational choice for the adolescent. The benefits achieved by the group are shared by all its members, while the direct participants only bear the energy, costs, and other necessary inputs of activism. (Gøtzsche-Astrup, 2018) The community of such a group consists of persons who, for several reasons, do not respect and violate laws, norms, and moral rules. The most common reasons that lead to boundary crossing are harbouring resentment towards authority, compensating for one's own shortcomings, etc. (Moravčík, Struhár, 2019). Adolescents may also engage in risk-taking behaviour as a consequence of conflicts in social relationships, in the sense that the adolescent will focus on the reward attained by engaging in risk-taking behaviour in the risk-taking group. He/she focuses on those social activities that bring him/her pleasure, which often includes engaging in spontaneous and impulsive behaviour (Wills, Resko, Ainette et al., 2004; Hug, 2013). Friends outside of school, which can be considered as classmates outside of school, since they are already selected according to preferences, influence the individual in the process of radicalisation. Those who are more radical are not isolated from classmates outside school, thus they are part of a peer group.

Also, the results of the authors' research in the present study demonstrated the relationship between social support and personal values, attitudes, and beliefs. This relationship took on negative, weak values in two sources, specifically *significant other* and *friends*. The research presented in this study also demonstrated that only 2% of the variability in radicalisation, as measured by the personal values factor, could be explained by social support from *significant other* and *friends* (separately). This means that their influence as sources of social support on radicalisation is relatively small. Social support from family did not confirm any relationship to adolescent radicalisation. Social support was also a predictor in research by Schiff, Pat-Horenczyk, and Peled (2010) examining the psychological consequences (depression symptoms) of adolescents' exposure to radicalisation, but in that research the contribution of social support to the explained variance was also relatively small ($R^2 = 0.07$). This suggests that other potential compensatory or protective factors, such as coping strategies, resilience, optimism, and others, need to be explored. It is important to note, however, that the authors' research measured a negative, statistically significant relationship between radicalisation and sources of social support; the greater the social support from both *friends* and the *significant other*, the less radicalised adolescents are. This is corroborated by the results from Rousseau, Hassan, Miconi et al., (2019), as they found that social support buffers the link between social adversity and radicalisation in a sample of university students from Quebec, Canada. Adolescents are going through a period of meaningful change and emotional instability. If they have strong social support, they are better able to cope with these changes and unstable emotions, which may act as a preventive measure against radicalisation.

In connection with the justifications for joining radical peer groups mentioned above, it can be said that adolescents experience a sense of belonging in them, they feel part of something important, this is the so-called radical group effect. But in this case, it may just be those high levels of social support from the peer group that lead to higher levels of risky behaviour (Campelo, Oppetit, Neau et al., 2018). It may also be because adolescents consider interpersonal relationships as sources of support that help them cope better with stress under certain favourable conditions (Camara, Bacigalupe, Padilla, 2013), and if they get into just such risky groups, the social support there acts as a "pull" factor forcing them to stay there and adapt to the rules and customs, which could lead to negative consequences. Therefore, it is imperative to foster a degree of quality social support from non-radical peers so that it can provide an alternative to radicalisation by meaningfully filling adolescents' leisure time and emotional emptiness. If they have meaningful activities they can focus on and strong social connections, they may be less prone to radicalisation. This account is supported by Webber, Chernikova, Kruglanski et al., (2018) as they argue that the limited possibility of identity in a social setting narrows an individual's ability to see different possibilities of self-identity and social network in constructing their own existence. An adolescent's path to achieving his/her own existence puts him/her at risk of radicalisation. When the milieu for their own existence is available, a milieu with values, norms, and a culture of radicalism, their chances of engaging in the maelstrom of radicalism become wide open. (Lasmawati, Meliala, Puteri, 2021) Conversely, if they have meaningful activities, they can focus on strong, quality social connections, and thus be less susceptible to radicalisation. This may prevent social isolation and the subsequent need to belong to a high-risk radicalised peer group, as demonstrated by the results of this research.
In the context of radicalization, social work is delineated into four areas: 1) justice and human rights, 2) multi-institutional engagement - networking within the system of helping professionals, 3) community engagement, and 4) advocacy (Stanley, Guru, Gupta, 2018).
Generally, it can be stated that within the conditions of Slovakia and the Czech Republic, there is no comprehensive concept that unequivocally describes the roles of social work in the field of radicalization (Patyi, 2023). Social work aligns itself with anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive values (Thompson, 2016), social justice (Hutson, 2021), and therefore should actively apply them when working with youth. There is significant value in the preventive strengthening of social support and alleviating social isolation by social workers since they can be crucial sources of verified information and education about the risks and consequences of radicalization. When adolescents have access to objective data about radicalization and its consequences, they can better understand the dangers associated with radical groups.
The primary goal of social work in the prevention of radicalization, considering the constructs being examined, should be an effort to consciously encourage adolescents to prioritize healthy social relationships, while simultaneously, supporting them toward responsible—not risk-taking—behaviour (stemming from values of tolerance and respect) and a lifestyle that does not jeopardize health through raising awareness and education in the realm of radicalization, fostering tolerance, and employing a multicultural approach. A similar role is seen in the case of the need for de-radicalization, where building on secure social relationships is essential. The school environment provides a suitable opportunity for such intervention, where besides teachers, educational counsellors, prevention coordinators, school psychologists, individuals from counselling facilities, or non-profit organizations can have an impact. It appears that primary prevention, namely working with individuals who might potentially become members of radical groups, is particularly effective. This involves those who are on the edge, where a distinct opinion is forming within them (Kulifaj, Gymerská, Kövérová et al., 2016). After a period when social workers were in other positions, or sporadically in pilot projects, social work in school settings in Slovakia can be fully and legitimately developed. The amendment to the Education Law Act, approved in May 2023, introduces a new professional employee— the social worker—who is also to work in school settings. He/she will carry out social diagnostics, social counselling and other methods

and procedures of social work aimed at overcoming obstacles in the upbringing and education of pupils. It will also provide consultation to facility representatives, educational or professional staff, and other activities (*Law Act No. 182/2023 Coll.*). Social work in the school setting is a specialised area of social work where the social worker brings his/her unique knowledge and experience to the school system and to supporting students for the development of their core competencies (School Social Work Association of America, 2023). It would be a disservice to fail to take advantage of the potential of the opportunity to link adolescent, family, school, and community that social work in the school setting brings, even when addressing radicalisation, removing social isolation, or fostering effective social supports for adolescents. We believe that helping professionals working in schools can formulate activities aimed at intensifying relationships among classmates both in the school environment (directly) and outside this institution (indirectly).

Within a multi-institutional framework concerning social work in the context of radicalization, social workers collaborate with the police. However, they are still inadequately trained and often find themselves torn between providing services to clients, advocating for their rights, and the demands that arise from working with the police (Ward, Grannon, Fortune, 2014; McKendrick, Finch, 2017; Finch, Jönsson, Kamali et al., 2022; Haugstvedt, 2022). Field activities fall within the domain of field social work and should be carried out where adolescents live, meet, and spend their free time (Hutson, 2021). Additionally, they can also take place in online spaces that serve as platforms for the dissemination of radicalization (Heesh, 2022). Social work can act preventatively and interveningly (in the form of de-radicalization) at all levels and support values and attitudes, potentially aiding in resocialization and guiding young people toward social inclusion.

Implementation of community social work goes hand in hand with field social work. Community engagement is essential, involving collaboration among community organizations and key players within the non-profit sector. Social workers engage in advocacy activities and facilitate various seminars and workshops on topics such as ethnic belonging, identity, poverty, social inequalities, consequences of wars, and more (Stanley, Novell, Robb et al., 2015).

This contribution addresses the constructs of social isolation and social support, which research shows to be significant in working with groups of adolescents, as building a quality social network acts as a predictor in preventing radicalization. These elements represent resources that can be positively influenced, especially through the involvement of social workers in preventive actions against radicalization and interventions in de-radicalization.

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# Social Work in (Not) Ending Housing Need

*Accepted for publication on November 24th, 2023.*

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**Abstract**
OBJECTIVES: To map the performance of social work in supporting people in acute housing crisis, including the factors that represent barriers and those that represent sources of support. THEORETICAL BASE: Housing need, Luhmann approach to exclusion/inclusion, eco-systemic model of social work. METHODS: An integrated approach combining literature research, semi-structured interviews with actors addressing housing need, thematic coding of responses. OUTCOMES: The role of social workers in dealing effectively with housing distress is perceived as simultaneously central, powerless and under threat. SOCIAL WORK IMPLICATIONS: The results of the research contribute to the discussion on the necessity of systemic change in the processes of ending housing distress at the micro, meso, and macro levels, the specification of the role of social work in the processes of ending housing distress, and the necessity of involvement of social workers in setting equitable policies.

**Keywords**
housing need, social work, social workers, human rights, social justice

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## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to analyse the role of social workers in ending housing need, including the factors that represent obstacles and barriers for their work, as well as possible sources of support, from the perspective of actors participating in the ending of housing need at different levels and dimensions.

One of the tasks of social workers is to be active agents in addressing social exclusion in society (Dominelli, 1991; Schirmer, Michailakis, 2015; Vašat, Blahoutová, 2020). The term social exclusion is associated with or perceived as synonymous with the issues of poverty and the situation of people who are or at risk of being marginalised or excluded by the majority society for various reasons (Keller, 2014). One of the most pressing problems with a significant impact on social exclusion is the issue of housing need (Barák, Hejduk, Krebs, 2017). Housing distress can be understood as the result of interactions between various risk factors, including socio-economic structures; housing distress affects both the individual experiencing it and the whole community with whom they interact (Watson, 2017).

### Housing need

Pleace (2018) specifies housing need as a state of exclusion from standard housing. The group of people at risk include those without shelter, households residing in shelters, hostels and in substandard apartments. There are numerous risks associated with tens of thousands of households in housing need, as well as costs to public budgets. In the context of the Czech Republic, the most significant group of people in housing need are families with children under 18, 74,000 out of 115,000 people in housing need (Klusáček, 2021). Less than 16,000 people live in residential hotels on a long-term basis (not including short-term workers). There are 12,000 households without shelter, typically one-person households. The concentration of housing need is typical for relatively few municipalities, with almost half of all persons in housing need living in 20 municipalities. Housing is a basic necessity of life, and housing need in all its forms has many negative consequences for households facing it (Glumbíková et al., 2020).

Schirmer and Michailakis (2015) point to Luhmann's approach to exclusion/inclusion and its use in social work. Luhmann provides conceptual tools to understand inclusion and exclusion in a way highly relevant to social work. He understands society as a complex social system involving all communication. To clarify, a key component of Luhmann's concept of modern society is the functional differentiation between systems such as economy, politics, science, religion, etc. and organizational systems (e.g., government, churches, schools). Their communication with each other creates an environment of social exclusion/inclusion, and the 20th century has brought neither solidarity nor happiness (Luhmann, 1997).

### Social work in ending housing need

Ring (2019); Rolfe, Garnham, Godwin et al., (2020); Manning, Greenwood (2018) identify the important role of social work in ending housing need in the context of social support within a microsystem. Social workers working in this field (regardless of service type or employer) are often exposed to a variety of stresses and risks, which is linked to the need for mental hygiene (Kaczor, 2019). In housing support, workers are confronted with the values of several parties, meeting the values of social work as a profession, the personal values of the individual worker, the values of the employer, the municipality that usually owns the housing, and the values of neighbours, media, and the general public. Nečasová (2020) points to the emergence of value conflicts, ethical dilemmas, and the need to deal with them at all levels of the system.

Society has significant and largely unrealistic expectations of social work interventions because most problems have deeper and more complex origins than can be addressed through social work

alone. (Musil, 2020; Navrátilová, Navrátil, 2021) The very definition of social work emphasises strong humanistic and human rights principles that address the interests of both the individual and society as a whole (Janebová, 2015).

**Situation in the Czech Republic**

There is no legal regulation that would define social housing and the eligible persons who can use it, nor the rights and obligations of individual entities implementing social housing, whose competences and responsibilities are not anchored. (Kalenda, Glumbíková, Gojová, 2021). Ending housing distress is the opposite of falling into housing distress; it is a crucial social policy instrument. The first real legislative proposals in the field of social housing date back to 2007, when Prime Minister Topolánek entrusted the Ministry of the Interior with this task. In 2017, the law was prepared by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and approved by the government, submitted to the Chamber of Deputies, however, it did not advance to the next reading. The Law on Housing Support, which is supposed to be an alternative to the Law on Social Housing focusing on a wider target group, is also in the programme of the current government of Prime Minister Fiala (Potůček, Svoboda, 2020).

The data obtained in the evaluation report carried out within the framework of the system project of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs "Social Housing - Methodological and Information Support in the Field of Social Agendas" show that municipal representatives are largely of the opinion that the establishment of the Social Housing Act is highly desirable. Both municipalities implementing social housing projects and the staff of the Contact Centre mention the necessity of the involvement of political representation (at the national and municipal level). Among the municipalities involved there was a consensus that without the support of political representation it is not possible to implement social housing at any level, as the political representation is the one who decides (not only) on the allocation of funds (Glumbíková, 2020).

Mackie, Johnsen, and Wood (2019) state that despite numerous expert studies (including Czech Republic[3]) and expert statements, where the key principles of ending homelessness are known (individual support, choice, support services, multidisciplinary collaboration) barriers to implementation persist, such as lack of affordable housing, funding, ineffective collaboration between actors, bureaucratic processes, and above all lack of political support. Significant amounts of money have been invested in research on housing need in many countries, the problem has been described at many levels, yet the solution still lacks sufficient political support. The literature indicates that housing need cannot be ended without sufficient capacity of affordable housing and an adequately set funding system, and this can be translated into effective interventions, which would create the potential for long-term savings in a number of sectors (health, prisons). Lack of effective collaboration across sectors can be another barrier, as multidisciplinary working is key. A significant barrier is bureaucracy and red tape, which can be a barrier for people in housing need and for workers.

In the Czech context, where social services are standardised through the Social Services Act, there is no type of social service whose primary duty is the return of people in housing need to standard housing. (Potůček, Svoboda, 2020). Social workers work in social services run by non-governmental non-profit organizations, church organizations, municipal contributory organizations, or municipal authorities. In the housing sector, many of them have a fixed-term contract and work within the framework of projects. Social work is in a difficult situation - the misery of social work consisting of performance activities, obscured identity and low social prestige (Elichová, 2017).

[3] Authors' note.

## OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The aim of the paper was to identify how different actors perceive the role of social work in ending housing need, what barriers and obstacles exist, and what factors can provide support for social workers[4] in supporting clients in housing need.

**What is the importance of social workers in ending housing need?**

**What factors influence the performance of social work in ending housing need?**

Sub-questions related to second research question:

What are the specific problems and obstacles that SWs face in ending housing need?

How could be social work practice in ending housing need be improved?

### Research methods

The study was conducted using qualitative research. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with respondents (Novotná et al., 2020) from different groups of actors in ending housing need.

### Research respondents

Respondents were selected by purposive sampling (Hendl, 2005), and in the semi-structured interviews, the selection indicator was the respondents' participation in the process of planning or setting up a system for solving housing need at the level of public administration or social services. Further, respondents included persons with experience of housing need. Respondents agreed to be recorded, and to preserve anonymity excerpts of direct speech were consistently anonymised.

The research was carried out from December 2021 to October 2022, 41 semi-structured interviews (3 persons in housing need, 10 SWs, 1 social services worker, 3 NGO methodologists, 3 service managers, 3 NGO directors, 3 local government workers, 6 government workers, 2 Social Housing Platform workers, 1 police officer, 4 municipal politicians, 2 members of Parliament) were conducted via Zoom and recorded. Sample expansion occurred continuously throughout the research process, with a "voice" given to each level and sector. Purposive sampling was the chosen sampling technique, authors are familiar with the field and identified information-rich actors for the initial interviews from own experience (working on a draft law on social housing). Further interviews were added through snow-ball sampling techniques; thus, the final sample composition was only created during the research process (continuous reflection). A limitation of this study is that only actors interested in the topic agreed to participate in the research; others did not respond to the interview request. The resulting number of respondents reflects the saturation of the data and the willingness of actors to participate; there are no opponents of ending housing need among politicians, however valuable such a conversation would be.

### Data interpretation procedure

The source of the data was semi-structured interviews with respondents, and the data interpretation procedure was implemented through the following steps: the first phase was the researchers' familiarisation with the data — verbatim transcripts of interviews with respondents were read repeatedly, observations were recorded, and interesting data were sought. In the next phase, themes were clustered and concept formation took place; concepts of an abstract nature were created and inductively embedded in the data. Interviews in verbatim transcripts were marked with meaning units. The units of meaning were named, and codes were created. Based on similarity, these units were combined into more general concepts. Thematic coding was used to evaluate the interviews (Novotná et al., 2020). Quotations from the interviews are presented in the text in their original wording, i.e., without stylistic modifications and verbatim, and are marked in italics. Where relevant

[4] In the following text only SW.

to the context, the position of the author of the quotation is also indicated in parentheses after the statement, e.g., mayor, housing department worker, etc.
A deeper analysis, including the identification of positive factors, will follow in the next article.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

**What is the importance of social workers in ending housing need?**
The thematic analysis revealed that all respondents perceived the importance of SWs in ending housing need to be very significant, as illustrated by statements such as - *it plays one of the most pivotal roles; it is a critical element of making it work; it is a key role; essential; most important; irreplaceable role.*
SW interviewees stressed the importance of their role, particularly in the microsystem (*most people in housing need don't have much chance of unsticking themselves from it. ... that social worker support is absolutely key to getting some change there).* They identified social work practice as one component of ending housing need, but not the only one. At the same time, with high levels of density, it was reported that SWs were aware of the public expectations that come with their work in social housing; we can talk about an awareness of responsibility and irreplaceability. Respondents reported that they perceive public expectations according to effectiveness, social change, and conflict resolution that they cannot meet within the ethos of their profession - *that social work tends to be focused on disciplining the poor. ...if there's a mess somewhere, or there's a conflict, ...they'll send social workers there and they'll sort of iron it out or resolve it* – SW. In the context of high neighbourhood expectations and also limited opportunities to end clients' housing distress, respondents cited negative impacts on themselves and their co-workers – these SW are sometimes burned out by how they cannot help. They cited with high frequency the need for a systemic solution to housing need as a priority, i.e., ending it, which they expect from the adoption of appropriate legislative measures, thus they perceive politicians as the main solvers and expect action from them (*ending homelessness, ... it is not up to social workers, but to politicians* – official of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs). SWs questioned the relevance of their profession due to its low influence within the mesosystem and macrosystem.
Respondents who were clients of social services and had personal experience with housing need expressed confidence in SWs and their ability to provide them with access to housing, *she has some contacts at the municipality so somehow it can be done nicely* – person in housing need. SWs are seen by respondents as being on their side, being a support for them, *Because I'm schizophrenic, some things are harder for me than for other people, so I see it as being great that someone is standing by me!* – person in housing need.
Respondents from the out group, which is a very diverse group, including various actors whose professions are in some way involved in the possible ending of housing need at different levels, or come into professional contact with people in housing need, perceive SWs as important actors within the microsystem, no other perspective was heard in any of the interviews conducted. For example, the most frequent answer was: *Social workers are the individuals helping people not to fall into homelessness or to get out of it* – politician. The role of social work in facilitating contact with the authorities and in administrative support for people in housing need is perceived as important, as well as support in dealing with problematic situations. These expectations are well illustrated by the statement of the housing officer*: they should be on hand to help those clients so that they are able to live. And being able to live means paying the rent, being familiar with the environment, not causing neighbourly conflicts, not setting fire to the apartment, and ideally, if there is a problem, dealing with it immediately.* – municipal official.
As the interviews echoed respondents' expectations for political solutions to housing distress and high-density respondents expressed their expectations towards top-level politicians, data from interviews with two members of parliament were added to the research. The MPs expressed their

attitudes towards ending housing need as very positive (*I see housing as an essential prerequisite for a person to be able to live a fulfilling life*) and engaged (*I think we as a society have a responsibility to help these people as social housing is an essential part of a democratic society*). They see SWs as working primarily with clients on an individual basis, in terms of counselling (*they are kind of the first aid to help people navigate what their options are*) and direct support (*many clients may have difficulty even doing some tasks independently*.) However, in both interviews, the need for SWs to work together to push for legislative change was also raised, as respondents saw the low sensitivity of other MPs to vulnerable households as a barrier to the passing of the Social Housing Act, and suggested sharing specific stories of people in housing need as a possible source of change. (*I think personal stories or experiences help a lot… when you realise that people lose their housing for all sorts of reasons, which you then realise can happen to you at any time*.) Thus, the role of SWs also emerged in these interviews at the macro-system level as a factor that could positively influence the passage of needed legislation through the sharing of practical experiences.

The role of social work in ending housing need appears contradictory in the respondents' statements, where the great importance (*absolutely crucial* – municipal politician) and low prestige (*anyone can be a social worker* - mayor) and powerlessness (*social work cannot influence the housing market* – SW) are pointed out, wages, the slide into poverty, and prevent the ever more frequent and faster slide of entire population groups into systemic poverty; it cannot and often does not want to address visible and especially hidden racism, or ensure functional payment of social benefits.

Among the repeatedly expressed views of SWs that they can do nothing in the systemic area are those of MPs who state that the views of legislators can only be changed in favour of ending housing destitution by sharing the lived practice of SWs. Some respondents frame this situation as a lack of radicalism among SWs.

**What factors influence the performance of social work in ending housing need?**

According to the thematic analysis, the key factor is the availability of housing, both in terms of physical accessibility, i.e., local accessibility and qualitative indicators (size and layout of the apartment, location of the apartment, barrier status), then financial accessibility (prices of apartments, income of people in housing distress, timeliness of payment of benefits), and finally the availability of housing for specific target groups that face discrimination. If housing is not available, social work cannot lead to an end to housing need. The majority of respondents—SWs and officials at the municipal and state level—expressed their frustration with this situation (*when the municipality has no flats and the benefit system is collapsing, nothing can be done* – SW).

**What are the specific challenges and barriers that social workers face in ending housing need?**

Potential barriers to ending housing need are sub-divided below according to the level at which they predominantly manifest, although in most cases they overlap with other levels. The division is therefore indicative only and the list of barriers in the following subchapters is not exhaustive; the individual barriers are ranked in the text according to their density and severity, with the level of severity also derived from the authors' experience.

***Barriers to ending housing need at the macro level***

The lack of a right to housing was identified by respondents in the interviews as a barrier to ending housing need. *Something is written in the law on municipalities, something is written in the constitution and international treaties... but these are not interpreted as giving citizens a legal right to housing.* – official of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.

Respondents mentioned the absence of certain laws. First of all, the law on social housing, (*We want to enforce this law in housing, and I hope that it will succeed in time* – SW). Even without a law, social housing can be implemented, the problem is the lack of funding for municipalities (*We need a law to come so that municipalities have the possibility to actually do these things, ... they have objective*

*obstacles in the lack of money* – municipal official) Part of these problems could be solved through subsidies: *for example, subsidies for the construction of social housing, its repair, or demolition of some old, unusable houses, construction of new ones, etc.* – mayor. The shortcomings are in the benefits policy and its administrative complexity *(the administration is difficult for everyone*).

Another repeatedly mentioned problem is the lack of affordable housing stock, *there is simply no standard housing capacity available for our clients. These are all matters that we could be talking about over and over again, without any result and we all know about them*. – SW. In terms of housing affordability, some target subgroups are particularly vulnerable, and these include people with experience of serious mental illness. *That person can't, at the onset of that illness, at that young, productive age, still have years of pensionable service. One of the classic examples of the homeless, crazy-type is a person who may have graduated from college but then got sick, has no recognized disability from his youth, and has no years of service for retirement. And it's already taking it out on him. He's screwed, he's totally disabled, he doesn't have a recognized disability pension* – SW.

The financial situation of people in housing need has long been affected by over-indebted households and the slow development of legislation to address the situation (*there is absolutely no fertile ground in terms of, for example, indebtedness* – SW).

Macro-level barriers include societal prejudices leading to housing discrimination, especially ethnic ones. *I know people who are in housing need because of massive ethnic discrimination, and a huge part, the reason for their housing need is their Roma ethnicity* – SW.

Some actors also point to the lack of or insufficient prevention of housing loss as a serious systemic mistake: *they can't manage to pay for the apartment, …and they don't get the prevention...* – SW.

Barriers are also mentioned at the level of the profession: *I think a lot of social work in the Czech Republic is perceived as task-oriented, sometimes even merit-oriented. This means that it doesn't help homelessness and ending homelessness because we can't take a merit-based approach to the target group of homeless people, but also people in substandard housing*. – SW. Other respondents from SWs are critical of the situation in the profession: *the terrible system of treating the client as a piece of rag, a member of a set, is actually creeping back on us, because in fact the social worker is taking on the role of advocate and prosecutor in one person*. So, the barrier for clients can be the SWs themselves: *Social workers can be a barrier if they carry the belief that homeless people don't know how to live, or the belief that the homeless lifestyle suits them*. The lack of scrutiny by the Social Services Inspectorate was also identified as a barrier to quality growth: *...a big contribution to improving the quality of social work in housing was to get people who understand social work to get involved in housing programmes. Who know how to do social services inspections well. Who have it strung together, while at the same time being from practice..., and just auditing, auditing, inspecting.* – SW.

The lack of radical action was identified by some respondents as an obstacle to ending housing need. *Services to homeless people are not socially vocal enough. They may offer services, but they have no ambition to change a system that they know barely works*. Yet radicalism represents the hope for change. *The state would have to respond to their calls, not ignore their demands, they would have to have some good experience, but they don't have that, I mean nationally. Here in Prague, we use methods from radical social work, and we get results.*[5] – SW.

***Obstacles to ending housing need at the intermediate level***

A major obstacle at the level of many municipalities is the inability to provide the multidisciplinary support that many people desperately need. *Psychosocial or psychiatric care is essential, ... we do not have provision for this target group.* – SW.

[5] For example, the *Badger Society* occupied the corridor in front of the offices of the Prague City Council. They warned of the end of the humanitarian hostels, when 60 people were threatened to find themselves without a roof. The protesters were successful, and the project was extended. (Ježková, 2022)

The problems at the mezzo level include the transformation of residential services and the need for cooperation with outreach services. *So, an awkwardly done transformation without well-connected outreach social services made us homeless.* – SW.

A number of respondents commented on the quality of service provision, reflexivity, effectiveness and ethical levels, with the focus on ending housing need bringing specific themes, for example in the search for boundaries between support and control: *A social worker who goes to a client's flat to support them, but at the same time the first thing he or she has to do is to find out about complaints from neighbours or rent arrears, which is not his or her job at all, we have completely different bodies for that, there is a housing department, a management company, which has to investigate first whether Mrs Nováková is really throwing beer bottles out of the window. I consider this to be a huge risk and a huge danger, something that a social worker is not supposed to do in any case.* – SW. For many social services, housing is a new area and there is not enough methodological support for workers.

According to the respondents, funding is a key issue for social services, and the need to secure funding can be a risk in terms of equal and ethical treatment of the clients of the service: *... in order to make the service work in some efficient way, those social workers, or the managers of those services, are forced to do things in relation to those clients that are not in accordance with some social worker's code.* – manager of social services.

Finance is an issue for both services and SWs, the service manager states: *I understand that working for about 30,000 net is OK for my colleagues whose husband brings home 2-3 times more than that, but the social worker's salary is then just an extra for the family budget. But I support myself and for my colleagues who have the same, it's not really enough. Certainly not with the current inflation.* – SW.

Although NGO managers are often aware that Housing First and other effective models for ending housing need are the way to go, and that housing is a condition of recovery for clients, they do not engage in some of the projects. *The primary problem is the unaffordability of small units. Because we work with individuals (not families) it is difficult to meet the number of clients housed in apartments according to EU subsidy standards. Municipal districts hardly allocate social flats to our clients. Moreover, it is impossible to find social workers on the labour market.* – SW.

Ending housing need has a very important regional dimension depending on the municipality's housing stock and the approved rules for its use. At the municipal level, the cooperation established is also important: *There is really a difference whether the housing is done directly by a staff member of the municipal department or by a social worker from an external provider. There is a big difference then in communication and information transfer. There I see a neurological spot.* – member of the Housing Commission.

At the municipal level, there is perceived political pressure on service implementers due to funding. The head of social services comments on the situation as follows*: ... there is pressure on us to make this social housing project a success, so we have to provide for these people. And I say, I don't have the capacity to do the services.*

***Barriers to ending housing need at the micro level***

Barriers to ending housing distress can affect all actors, individuals and households in housing distress as well as SWs who end the housing distress of their clients.

For people in housing need, barriers to ending housing need may include, for example, mental health conditions. The NGO methodologist comments on this*: ... people who have been through some kind of personal crisis are at risk. And that crisis could have turned into some longer-term mental health problem, into, say, loss of mental health, and so of course it's always a psychosocial crisis.* The issue of mental health is cited as a barrier to ending housing need by another respondent who has personal experience of housing need and is a client of the service: *But I have a bit of a flaw in my thinking there. Because I'm schizophrenic, some things are harder for me than for other people.*

Drug addiction can be a problem *(working with people who are addicted is difficult enough. I'm not saying it's an unsolvable situation, on the contrary, one can be a good neighbour there. But it's definitely*

*very challenging for a social worker to give such a person the support he or she needs* – Director of an NGO) or others: *But the problem is that the household is perceived as risky in the housing market, privately, but also by the municipality. That's why the municipality doesn't want to rent to her. The reasons for this riskiness are some disabilities, Roma ethnicity, foreigners, families with children, the more children, the riskier.*

The contemptuous or arrogant actions of the individual officials are another possible obstacle that discourages people in need from getting the necessary support (*The human dignity that they can hold on to at the moment is one of the reasons why many people end up on the streets and do not use the help*).

The financial situation of households is a threat: *Financial instability is a common problem. An electricity bill comes in that is much higher than the household expects and suddenly the household is completely derailed* (Official, Agency for Social Inclusion). The mayor also mentions the financial situation in relation to education and wage levels: ... *people who have not received the right education are particularly at risk. Because it really happens at the beginning of everything. Now even the parents, I see the families, the grandmother had a housing problem, the mother has a housing problem, and then the children come out into the world and they have a housing problem again.* The financial situation of families at risk is greatly affected by debt: *indebted households tend to be a big problem, or over-indebted households* (NGO director).

People who have not established close relationships were perceived as more at risk: *I think people who 'remain single' are the most at risk. That is, they are people without a partner, whether they lost that partner through a break-up or widowhood, etc. Or it's children who have some kind of family loss. So I think the most at risk part is the part that doesn't have some kind of union* – Governor.

Domestic violence is a complication to ending household housing need. ... *the moment there is domestic violence, first of all, it's hard to maintain good neighbourly relations and secondly, then I think what needs to happen most of the time, that a member of the household should leave the family. So ...there's a person who needs to be stabilized and settled again* – NGO director.

Respondents who had personal experience of housing need repeatedly stated that the long wait for an apartment was a major problem. *The amount of time I've been waiting for that apartment, it could have been quicker. Of course, I know there is some bureaucracy and there is paperwork here, this and that, it doesn't happen right away, you have to wait, you have to be patient*. One respondent's statement also described the situation he faced in the asylum house: *I snore at night and it happened that a client attacked me there because of my snoring at night. He started choking me and something* – person in housing need.

Concerns were expressed from the sheltered people about the SWs' ability to provide a sufficient level of support in the long term: *I am afraid that I will never be completely independent. ... That I need some support, not always, but sometimes, sometimes I do.* – person in housing need.

For SWs, a significant risk in supporting clients in housing need is a lack of self-care - *during the settling in process, the social worker, in trying to help the person, can often forget themselves, and this can be disastrous. Not just for that particular client and person, but for the whole service* – NGO director.

The fact that SWs are professionally and emotionally committed to helping clients, but their practical capacity is inadequate, also plays a role. SWs sometimes forget to reflect that a lot of these problems are systemic and structural. And that they are simply not able to move the client themselves. ... *in the long run it's basically destroying for those social workers, and it can be one of the factors of burnout* – NGO methodologist. Burnout syndrome is a risk both for the worker and for those around him/her (colleagues, clients, subordinate workers). SWs in the context of supporting people in housing need to deal with challenging situations of their clients on a daily basis, which are very often traumatic events. *Of course, the hardest part here for me was that these people always had 1000 wronged stories inside them.*

Low public awareness of their work and ethics is also difficult for SWs. See the words of a member of the housing commission: *The problem is trying to keep that person in that system at all costs.* ...

*a personal attachment to that person, where I am already on their side and not on the side of that agency.* Supporting social work is also seen by some actors as preventing abuse of the system and the role of soft cops as a stated goal. ... *actually, a lot of homeless people are in that situation quite voluntarily, and it's a situation where they are trying to make the most of navigating the system* – police officer.
Working conditions can also be a barrier to doing social work, whether it's related to wages or other factors *(It's challenging when there's not even support from management*).
The successful ending of housing need can also be hindered by the misconduct of specific SWs, which can have various causes at the level of the organisation but also at the level of the individual. *... we deal repeatedly with the fact that these people have not had their electricity sorted out three months after moving in. We already know there may be a problem, but it can be dealt with in advance* — municipal official.
There was also criticism from people in housing need. *I've experienced a kind of lumping together... Sometimes the behaviour of social workers, for example, was not entirely kosher*. Frequency of contact (which may fall into the meso level) was also cited as an important element of cooperation.

**How could the performance of social work in ending housing need be improved?**
All respondents commented only on supporting social work in the microsystem. With the highest density, respondents commented on the possibilities of improving the performance of social work through education ... *the education system that teaches social work should be reformed. ... Czech social work is not bad, but it is going through a transformation, it needs to focus on the community type, a lot on making people more competent, on specialized services, let the bachelors be really practitioners, including postgraduate lifelong learning... I think that standardized compulsory postgraduate education of the health personnel type, social workers definitely deserve,* and sharing of good practice *(one needs someone to show them following school).* Courses in crisis intervention, motivational interviewing, therapeutic training, and long-term placements, including abroad, were mentioned *(we need more support for motivational interviewing and similar training; we need to pass on those experiences, even abroad* – SW*).*
In terms of accredited courses and training, affordability was mentioned - *things that we seem to be lacking in training* - financial, time, and support tools in terms of social worker being able to afford it, and quality - *a lecturer from anywhere who wants to make a bit of money and doesn't always do a good job* – SW.
Other sources of support were identified by respondents in the area of team - support from supervisors and quality feedback from more experienced colleagues, the need for practice. There was also a focus on the composition of the team professionally - the need for multi-disciplinarity and full-time peer workers was emphasised (*we should not be afraid to take on peers* – manager of social services).
Multidisciplinarity is necessary to implement social services that meet the needs of clients in housing need*: ...part of that should be some robust, even multi-disciplinary support, meaning that one social worker having some caseload may not be sufficient for some type of need, etc.* (Social Housing Platform worker). The need for multi-disciplinarity is also voiced by the SWs: ...*I think we also need to start creating multi-disciplinary teams, ... I need to have a health worker in the team who can get there for me, I need to have a care worker in the team who can do care tasks. I can do the social stuff, but I'm not a carer and I'm not a paramedic.*
The NGO director recommends increasing the representation of peer workers: ...*actually taking those clients into the decision making of those social services. That means that mental health professionals, what we call peers, should actually be fifty-fifty on the team.*
The need for good local collaboration was mentioned in a number of interviews, and this included council officials, the Jobcentre, the national and municipal police, health services, other social services, employers, property and property management companies, councillors, as well as social work quality inspectors. The collaboration was reported as mutually important and beneficial.

A quality methodology is supportive (*I am fortunate to agree with the methodology* – SW), but at the same time it can be binding if it is too rigid. Respondents cited both the need for quality methodologies and the need to be able to participate in their development (*when I started, we had a retreat where we actually discussed the methodology, point by point, and I was able to participate* – SW). The last area mentioned was supervision (team and case) and interviewing, and a significant dimension mentioned was both frequency and quality. *I take supervision to mean that it should be the complete foundation for the team* – manager.

## DISCUSSION

The research focused on SWs in ending housing need and their role, existing barriers and possible sources of support. Finding and maintaining housing is a critical factor in a client's overall well-being. The pressures on SWs in ending housing need are described in a number of papers. According to Van den Berk-Clark (2015), the pressure on SWs using the Housing First approach stems from the daily interactions of workers with clients and is negatively influenced by lack of resources and work overload, and the demands of supervisors and society. Workers often do not have sufficient material resources, and supervisors expect high effectiveness of interventions. In order to cope with such conditions, they develop working patterns involving routines, which can lead, for example, to favouritism towards one group of clients, e.g., favouring clients with mental illness over clients with addictions. Worker-client relationships in long-term housing support are unique and last for many years; the consequence can be that the relationship with the client takes precedence over the methodology.

The conflicting pressures that place SWs in difficult-to-resolve housing situations are described by Ylvisaker and Rugkåsa (2021) in Norway. SWs seek ways to handle the application of control while being loyal to clients, colleagues, and authorities; dilemmas arise due to contradictions between regulations and methodologies, limited financial resources, unclear competencies and concerns about colleagues' reactions to innovative interventions. The situations addressed are very similar to those mentioned by respondents in this study.

Spijkerboer et al., (2016) elaborate on the situation in the Netherlands, finding support for workers mainly in clear methodologies and instructions from supervisors, as well as the possibility to consult with the team; intuition can also be a support for the worker. The multi-disciplinarity of teams was repeatedly emphasised as a supporting factor for quality.

Padgett (2020) describes housing instability as a barrier to mental health recovery, with housing stability also related to physical health.

The demands of social work can place a great deal of pressure on the personality of the SWs, and they can become an "endangered species" (Punová, 2020). The very nature of their workplace's significant demands not only on the profession itself, but also on their health (physical and mental) and personal lives. SWs face expectations from their clients, colleagues, and supervisors, as well as politicians and society at large. The resilience of SWs is an important issue where it is essential for employers and society to focus not only on supporting clients, but also on the well-being of the workers and, in addition to caring for clients, it is essential for the profession to care for carers. Workers themselves mention the great pressure they feel. This pressure is a risk especially because a healthy and balanced personality of a SW is the cornerstone of their quality actions or practice (Kaczor, 2019). In ending housing need, the frustration of workers whose work cannot lead to a goal without a change in external circumstances (availability of housing, changes in legislation) is a reality of every working day. Many SWs respondents, as well as other actors, cited the risk of burnout as very significant, and supervision was repeatedly mentioned as a possible source of support.

The need for supervision in the prevention of burnout syndrome is also highlighted in other studies, for example Benešová, Šmidmajerová (2018). Firm boundaries and support for caregivers,

including consideration of mental hygiene needs, are among the prerequisites for the ability to perform quality social work in the long term. However, the statements of many research respondents suggest that SWs should take on even more responsibility and take part in implementing changes for the benefit of clients also at the meso and macro levels. Nevertheless it is clear to SWs that changing the legislative is necessary for the effectiveness of their work, most of them (65%) are not involved in influencing systemic change, mainly due to a lack of knowledge and skills regarding engagement in policy practice (Zogata-Kusz, Matulayová, Navrátil, 2022).

Respondents from the out group expressed similar expectations to those stated by Janebová (2018), i.e., 'soft cops'. These expectations were defined by the code of disciplining the poor, and expectations of SWs were based on protecting the interests of the environment. Personal failure was cited as a reason for home loss and the aim of social work was not to support but to protect the community and prevent abuse of the system. The discourse of the merit of housing was repeatedly mentioned by respondents, which is consistent with other studies (Lindovská, 2017). SWs perceived economic pressure on the outcome of their work (how many people find and stay in housing, get into debt, find a job...). Performance describable by numbers represented a psychological burden for workers. The elements of managerialism and marketing, where the results of work are to be assessed, monitored, and evaluated, do not serve to benefit clients. SWs face risks in their work, such as economization and the burden of bureaucracy. Social work is also burdened by the need to support clients who face oppression and discrimination, which makes it impossible to be value neutral (Elichová, 2017).

Research respondents who are SWs face similar difficulties as their colleagues abroad, such as finding a balance between control and support and unclear competencies (Ylvisaker, Rugkåsa, 2021), they also attest to the high effectiveness of their interventions (Berk-Clark Van den, 2015). Team support as one of the key desirable factors is consistent with the data (Spijkerboer et al., 2016), and criticism of systemic problems with indirect costs of NGOs was also voiced in interviews (Ring, 2019).

## LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The present study and the significance of the results are limited by some factors that may have biased the data. The limitations of the study include the social setting where people respond, to some extent, to meet the expectations of the interviewer (social desirability). The format of the interviews in the online setting may also have had an impact. And as well, the person of the interviewer, who was known to many actors from a professional and work society.

This study is part of a larger research where data was triangulated through an online questionnaire survey - and this data was not included due to being too comprehensive.

## CONCLUSION

The issue of housing distress and its ending is currently very topical and there are many perspectives on it. The role of SWs is perceived as important by all actors, although different groups of respondents perceive different degrees of its impact on ending housing need. The expectations of different groups are not identical. All groups of respondents (SWs, clients of social services, managers of social services, public administration actors, politicians) agreed that the lack of available housing and funding for housing programmes is a serious problem. There was also agreement on the lack of appropriate legislation. The differences are in the expectation of solutions, with social service workers waiting for politicians to act and politicians waiting for solutions from SW who feel powerless. For social workers, this implies the necessity to see their profession not only in the context of individual interventions, but also with activity within the meso- and macrosystem. This personal setting can also lead to higher job satisfaction.

Figure 1: The importance of SWs in ending housing need[6]


There are high expectations of the role of SW in ending housing distress, while at the same time they are not, or do not feel they are, the drivers of the system. The quality of social work is often not sufficient to end housing need, either in individual cases or at the meso and macro level. For real change to happen, SWs need to be more radical, to clearly criticize dysfunctional elements of the system, to share good practice and to highlight the impact of missing legislation, both at the municipal and national level. SW themselves have a duty by virtue of their profession to contribute to the advancement of social justice and it is therefore essential that they expose the contradictory nature of policies and public attitudes, especially those influenced by prejudice and racism. Client trust obliges workers to engage in legislative change, and this engagement is also perceived as essential by the actors in the legislative process. The powerlessness of SW can be overcome through activism in advocating for change in the meso and macro systems.

**Acknowledgement**
We would like to thank Professor Walter Lorenz for his cooperation and valuable advice.

[6] Explanation of the arrows - however much social workers perceive their influence on macro-system changes, without them the desired changes will not happen (strong arrow). Successful advocacy actions will strengthen other activities in this area (dashed arrow). Good practice can promote positive change, but with little effectiveness (small dotted arrow). The loops arrow illustrates the complexity of the system and other external influences.

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# A Post-industrial City Undergoing Regeneration as a Living Space of Disadvantaged Neighbourhood Youth. Qualitative Pilot Study

Young people participate in collaborative city-building in various ways, which reveals important differences pertaining to social work, alluding to the social consequences of spatial segregation and, as a result, as research literature states, unequal life opportunities. Each city has its disadvantaged neighbourhoods (DN). We focus on the post-industrial city of Lodz in Central Poland and our target group is youth from DN ('disadvantaged' refers to the processes that cause such a disadvantage for people and places) (Snyder, Angus, Sutherland-Smith, 2002).

Given the importance of experiencing a difference in the way that young people living in areas of concentrated poverty socialize, their sense of the city as an accessible, friendly space that unites different groups of citizens seems to be crucial for their education and their successful inclusion in social groups and worlds different from those of their neighbourhoods.

Educational opportunities and their connection with the place of residence gains particular importance in times of extremely dynamic processes of urban change, the main mechanism of which is urban regeneration (UR). In Poland this process of comprehensive change is understood as: "Bringing degraded areas out of crisis, carried out in a comprehensive manner, through integrated activities for the benefit of the local community, space, and economy. …a low level of education or social capital and an insufficient level of participation in public and cultural life".

The legislation requires local governments (Article 10(2)) to co-create modern processes of revitalizing cities with the participation of a committed coalition of local forces, i.e., it emphasizes the necessity of active participation of citizens in its planning and gives them the sense of importance of a democratizing factor influencing the city and levelling socio-economic inequalities.

Yet, research literature proves that in reality the social and educational layer of revitalization is often neglected, and the perspective of youth from DN on changes in the city seems to be particularly underestimated. Firstly, they are discriminated against in many ways in decisions on the space distribution of their courtyards (Gulczyńska, 2013). Secondly, the educational result of limited participation in UR is learning to subordinate and passively participate in centrally designed changes. Yet, those involved in revitalization processed would benefit from knowing the perspective of young people and those from DN in particular in order to avoid reproducing existing settings for social inequality. This would show areas of agency for social work and its practices empowering this marginalized social group.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Having just finished the pilot stage of the qualitative research, our understanding of theoretical concepts at this stage is only sensitizing. Sensitizing concepts only outline the area of research, without indicating specific objects of observation (Blumer, 1954:150).

The first of the theoretical concepts we employed was the distinction between space and place, following Yi-Fu Tuan:

"Space and place are basic components of the lived world; we take them for granted. When we think about them, however, they may assume unexpected meanings and raise questions we have not thought to ask" (pp. 3).
This distinction is fundamental in our search for the thresholds between the city of accessible youth and the one from which it is excluded or in which youth can only quasi-participate. Once again, as Yi-Fu Tuan points out: "Space is more abstract than place. What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value." (pp.6).
The next sensitizing concept is our understanding of the city. Drawing on the concept of the "urban regime" (Kaczmarek, Kazimierczak, 2019), we understand the city as a battlefield between various entities of the urban scene, where local actors must form a coalition to achieve their goals. Abuse of power by 'privileged groups' (strong social or institutional coalitions) is revealed in the distribution of capital and/or control in the city. To capture and describe them, we will employ the concepts of power by Foucault (Foucault, 1977). The distribution of urban space and the possibilities of influencing it by various groups of inhabitants, demonstrate the power relations prevailing in it and the mechanisms of their maintenance or transformation. Our hypothesis is that qualitative city mapping from the perspective of DN youth will capture hidden divisions, spatially-embedded mechanisms of extending the power of some groups of inhabitants over others, taking both forms of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977).
Therefore, we think that the concept of a "territorial stigma" has a unique sensitizing character (Wacquant, 2007; Górniak, 2017). The labels of "pathology", "loafers", or "slackers" imposed on the poor not only permanently contextualize social reactions to them, but also justifies their unequal treatment in urban regeneration processes (Górniak, 2017:73–86). Discourses devaluing the identities of the inhabitants often accompany the urban regeneration projects and justify actions supporting the social hierarchy harmful to certain groups (society level, cities), including gentrification processes (Gray, Mooney 2011; Kallin, Slater, 2014).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The project started in January 2023 by the authors of this article. The pilot group was six participants of a youth club (aged 13–17) located in the centre of Lodz.

### Research aims

The theoretical aim of the study is to uncover the city in the way in which is real to this segment of youth (spaces of inclusion versus exclusion in the city) and its complex determinants. The practical aim is to enrich the theoretical justifications for the development of forms of social and educational interventions empowering young people from disadvantaged neighbourhoods in their empowerment in urban regeneration.

### Research method

The qualitative content analysis method (Graneheim, Lundman, 2004) regulates the process of conceptualizing research and data collection. This method is based on extracting units of meaning that are important from the point of view of the research problem from the text topics. The data to reconstruct the stories of the surveyed youth was provided by "walking interviews", during which "the researcher walks alongside the participant during an interview in a given location" (Kiney, 2021). It offers "insights into the connections between the participant and their community" (Kiney, 2021). Interviews were conducted individually (one club member and two students). This technique combines elements of interview and observation, thanks to which a spatial reception of a place is made possible (Nóżka, Martini, 2015). This allows for observation of details and of hidden social and cultural meanings that the respondents attribute to a given place (Gierczyk, Dobosz, 2016). When used together with spatial mapping (Phil, 2008), it highlights the problems

and concerns of local communities and interpersonal relations related to a given space. The audio recording was supplemented with photographs of spaces that the respondents indicated as significant.

**Research process**

The overall study will consist of two stages:

1) Qualitative pilot study: the basic topics will be outlined framing themes for detailed analysis in the course of the second study. Six young people from one of Lodz downtown community centres were our respondents during "walking interviews". (Kiney, 2021). According to the methodology, conversations during the walks were recorded, transcribed, and qualitatively collectively analysed. After close reading of the texts, a categorization key was created, and the categories were defined and supported with the statements of the study participants. The pilot phase has just been finished.

2) Main study: we will return shortly to the field to saturate the categories with enriched data, however this time they will be derived from the process governed by theoretical sampling, saturating the main categories reflecting the "invisible city of disadvantaged neighbourhoods' youth" in great detail.

Based on the results of the pilot study, a lecture will be presented in September 2023 at a cyclical meeting of the network of state institutions and non-governmental organizations forming a partnership aiming to support the city office in planning and implementing the urban regeneration process.

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