

# BEING A PRISON CHAPLAIN IN A GODLESS COUNTRY: AN EXPLORATION OF THE CZECH CORRECTIONAL CHAPLAINCY

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## BACKGROUND

- Prison chaplaincy, along with religiosity in the criminal justice system, are widely researched in the US (e.g., Maruna, Wilson, & Curran, 2006; Sundt & Cullen, 1998).
- The Czech Republic remains one of the most secular countries in the world; about 72% of the population does not identify with any religion or church (Pew Research Center, 2017).
- The religious landscape in the country lead to prison chaplains being a largely unexplored population, existing in the tension between a total institution and their church.
- Due to the lack of research concerning this population in the Czech republic, this study aims to examine the position and identify the role of a prison chaplain in the context of Czech prisons.

## METHODS

- A post-doctoral project (2018-2020) examining prison chaplaincy and the role of religiosity in re-entry included 10 semi-structured interviews and observations conducted with current and former prison chaplains.
- Thematic analysis of qualitative data from the interview/observation sessions yielded the current results.

## REFERENCES

- Maruna, S., Wilson, L., & Curran, K. (2006). Why God is often found behind bars: Prison conversions and the crisis of self-narrative. *Research in Human Development*, 3(2/3), 161-184.
- Pew Research Center. (2017). Unlike their Central and Eastern European neighbors, most Czechs don't believe in God.
- Sundt, J., & Cullen, F. T. (1998). The role of the contemporary prison chaplain. *The Prison Journal*, 78(3), 271-298.

## FINDINGS

### Solitude

- Chaplains consider themselves as having a two-sided role, as they answer to both their church and the prison.
- As there is usually only one chaplain in the prison, they self-identify as “loners” who have no one to cooperate with or talk to in the facility.
- Given that they enjoy certain privileges, they are singled out by the other correctional staff and oftentimes feel misplaced.

### Relationships of power & intimacy

- Prison staff regularly communicate their negative attitudes non-verbally: thwarting chances to meet with a prisoner or not providing spaces for their Bibles.
- Although chaplains can serve other prison staff, it rarely happens in practice, as being seen in the presence of a chaplain can be considered shameful among employees.
- Chaplains put emphasis on individual approach to prisoners, which leads them to be viewed as “naïve” or “untrustworthy.”

### Towards legitimization

- Chaplains reflect that the negative attitudes towards them cease over time.
- The changing attitudes are reinforced when common goal of lowering recidivism is articulated, along with changed behavior of religious prisoners.
- Support of the staff can also be strengthened when chaplains help coordinate the release of a prisoner.

## CONCLUSION

- Chaplains experience tensions created by the clashes between their emphasis on quality, individualized relationships with the prisoners and the structure of prison that focuses on security and order.
- The prison staff oftentimes exhibit distrust towards the chaplains and see them as easy targets for manipulation by the prisoners.
- Cooperation among chaplains and other prison staff (e.g., psychologists, case and social workers) can be especially beneficial for effective prisoner care.
- Given the exploratory nature of this study, the sample size is relatively small. The authors hope to extend the inquiry to investigate causal questions suggested and examined in the literature originating in the US, and provide an empirical comparison of prison chaplaincy in the US and the Czech Republic.



WE WOULD LIKE TO OFFER OUR SINCEREST THANK YOU TO PROF. JINDŘICH ŠTREIT FOR ALLOWING US TO USE A PICTURE FROM HIS PROJECT THAT MAPPED HIS WORK WITH PRISON CHAPLAINS.  
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