


## Studying hard-to-reach populations applications using river sampling. The case of foster families

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**Abstract:** This paper presents the application of nonprobability sampling method – the *rivers sample* method to reach a group of professional foster parents in Poland – case of hard-to-reach populations. This is a population whose public, nationwide register does not exist and, additionally, little is known about it in terms of the characteristics of its – therefore, therefore quota sampling was not feasible. *River sample* method involves recruiting respondents by inviting them to the survey while they are doing some other activity on the Internet. The invitation to take part in the survey can be made through online banners, advertisements, information in forums or e-mails and on thematic websites. It provides a quick, low-cost, flexible way of reaching the target group of respondents. This method has also two main limitations – under-coverage and self-selection – which may affect the sample bias and thus the possibility to generalise to populations. Despite these limitations, the herein study obtained a sample reflecting the real proportions in terms of specific characteristics of the population of professional foster families in Poland: their distribution by province and the diversity of forms. In general, the river sample method works efficiently especially for exploratory studies and hard-to-reach groups.

**Keywords:** rivers sample, nonprobability sampling, internet survey, foster carers, family foster care

## Introduction

Across the world, the number of children needing a foster home is increasing; however, the number of individuals willing to foster a child is decreasing (Randle, Miller, Dolnicar, Ciarrochi, 2012). It is therefore critical to gain insight into the barriers preventing people from fostering a child. One way to increase interest in the role of a foster carer is to professionalize it. This extensive research, combining both qualitative and quantitative techniques, has been devoted to this topic. As part of this research project, online surveys with professional foster carers and organisers of family foster care were conducted. Moreover, for the purpose of this study, 27 in-depth interviews with foster parenthood leaders were conducted, including representatives of institutions forming the family support system and foster care in Poland.

Before presenting the details of the study, the theme of foster care systems and literature on online survey methods will be explored, especially the river sample.

### **Professional foster families as an important element of social assistance system**

Foster care is temporary care provided to children who cannot live with their parents or legal guardians. When a child is removed from their home due to abuse or neglect, the state agency has the responsibility to provide them with care and a place to live. In general, a distinction is made between family foster care (various forms of foster families) and residential foster care (the so-called “orphanage”). In Poland, in 2021, 72,941 children (Ministerstwo Rodziny i Polityki Społecznej, 2022, p. 9) were placed in foster care, mainly due to their parents’ alcoholism, inefficiency in caring and raising children and the usage of violence (MRiPS, 2019). The vast majority of them (78% – 56,656 children) (MRiPS, 2022, p. 9) grew up in various forms of family foster care and the rest (22% – 16,285 children) in institutions.

The family foster care in Poland, which consists of 36 865 entities, is divided into four types of foster families: kinship (63% of all family forms of foster care), non-professional (29%) and professional foster families (6% including specialised ones – for underage mothers, for disabled children, for minors and emergency family) and family foster homes (2%) (MRiPS, 2022, p. 13). Interestingly, professional forms of family foster care, i.e. the last two categories, account to almost 20% of all children in family care (MRiPS, 2022, p. 43).

Although in some countries foster care systems are based on both foster families and institutions (with comparable prevalence), researchers are unanimous on the advantages of family forms over institutions. Overall, better outcomes have been

observed in cases of fostering within the family forms. The majority of studies find evidence indicating that placements in foster families are more propitious regarding better child development and they lead to better level of functioning of care leavers than does residential group care (Courtney 1998; Hardera et al. 2013; Barth, 2005; Gutterswijk et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2011). For instance, the results of three separate meta-analyses conducted by Dongdong Li, Grace S Chng, Chi Meng Chu<sup>1</sup> showed that children in family foster care had been consistently experiencing better care and represented fewer problems across the three outcome indicators (perceptions of care, internalizing, and externalizing problems) in comparison to children in residential care. These results imply that family foster care offers better caring environment, possibly due to the provision of not only more individualized, stable, and responsive caregiving but also safer, more home-like environment compared to residential homes (Li, D., Chng, G. S., & Chu, C. M., 2019: 659, 661). Hence, that is a visible evidence that institutional care, especially in early life, has a detrimental effect on all areas of child development and increases susceptibility to display behavioral and intellectual difficulties in later years (Europejska Grupa Ekspertów, 2012; Johnson, Browne, Hamilton-Giachritsis 2006; Nelson et al. 2014). At the same time, it should be taken into consideration that some studies indicate that children within residential group care tend to have more complex cognitive and behavioral disorders than children in foster care (Bolvig, Thorsager 2023). In the Polish context, not only the research of Anna Kwak (2006), but also the results of audits conducted by the Supreme Audit Office in 2012 (Najwyższa Izba Kontroli, 2012) and 2014 (Najwyższa Izba Kontroli, 2014), show the greater effectiveness of the empowerment of the care leavers from family forms than from institutions. The value of the *incomplete empowerment* indicator, created as part of a project on deinstitutionalisation regarding foster care in counties, is also worrying. This indicator depicts the percentage of the care leavers returning to their biological families, which are most often not the most favourable upbringing environment. In the first half of 2017, the rate was 40% for young people from residential foster care and 8% for family foster care (Bitner et al., 2018, p. 63).

A crucial argument in favour of the advancement of family foster care is also the cost-effectiveness regarding particular types of care provided for abandoned children (Grietens et al. 2015; James 2011). As research in CEE/CIS suggests, largescale residential care is three to five times more high-costed than foster care and that small group of homes are one and a half times more expensive than foster care (Everychild 2011).

In a diverse, indiversional context, a prominent number of studies compared the costs of various forms of care indicating that the cost of institutional care is in fact multiple times higher than the majority of other forms of alternative care. Such evidence has emerged also among others; Romania (Tobis/World Bank, 1998),

the US (Courtney 1998), South Africa (Desmond 2001), Serbia, Montenegro and Slovakia (as cited in Browne 2009), Estonia (National Audit Office, 2007), the UK (Ward 2009, Holmes & Soper, 2010), Latvia, Lithuania, and Romania (UNICEF (Norberg et al) 2010), Armenia (UNICEF 2010) or Finland (Eurochild 2014).

It is also proved by recent data from Moldova which showed that the cost per child in residential care has been consistently higher relatively to the family-type care cost – approximately 1.2 times higher in 2017 and as much as 2.8 times higher in 2021 (Ecorys 2022: 26). In Poland, the monthly cost of maintaining a child in family forms of foster care is two or even three times lower than in residential care (MRiPS, 2022, p. 29). The average cost of maintaining a child in 2021 in family foster care per month was – 2370 PLN, with 2549 PLN in a professional foster family and a family foster home (MRiPS, 2022, p. 21), and between 6011 PLN and 9474 PLN in disparate types of residential care (MRiPS, 2022, p. 28).

Most countries face a deficit of candidates for foster parents. This phenomenon has been observed for several years in Poland as well. The decrease in the number of Polish foster families (non-professional and professional) in the period of 2012-2020 reached 8% – from 14,005 to 12,846 forms (MRiPS, 2021, p. 41). However, the nearly threefold increase in this number during mentioned period involved only family foster homes (MRiPS, 2021, p. 41). In an anonymous survey<sup>2</sup> conducted by the Supreme Audit Office, foster parents indicated a number of reasons for the lack of interest in taking on the role of foster carer. First and foremost, families stated that it is a difficult job, often with children burdened with multiple deficits concerning physical or mental health. The work as professional foster parents is carried out 24 hours a day and seven days a week, with low pay and no stable employment conditions. Furthermore, oftentimes, foster families face negative attitudes within a the neighbourhood. Another problem refers to a contact with biological parents which is sometimes described as “pathological” (NIK, 2016, p. 35).

According to mondial research (Wilson, Evetts 2006; ACIL, 2014; Family for Every Child (FfEC), 2015; Thomson et al., 2016; Cording, 2019; European Commission (EC), 2021; Reimer, 2021), professionalisation of foster care may have turned out an antidote to the lack of candidates for foster parents and a source of advancement regarding conditions of care for abandoned children. The professionalisation in our country mainly involves professional forms of foster parenthood, i.e. people who run professional foster families, family foster homes and family-type care centres. Therefore, they have become a significant group analysed in this paper. The author was keen to obtain as representative research sample as possible in order to generalise the results to the population of professional foster carers. Unfortunately, the lack of data allowing to randomise respondents precluded the use of a probability-based sample. The details of the sampling and characteristics of the methodology used are presented below.

### **Problems while researching professional foster families**

There is no official register or list of all professional foster carers in Poland in a given year<sup>3</sup>. Only the starosts<sup>4</sup>, who place children in foster care for the needs of family courts, keep their own registers of foster families. However, these registers are not publicly available. The only exception is data on foster care facilities, including family-type facilities – these are published on voivodes' websites. For the reasons outlined above, it was not possible to randomly select a sample (Babbie, 2005, p. 204) of professional foster carers for the purpose of this paper to ensure that the sample was representative of the entire population.

Quota sampling, a non-probabilistic sampling method, was considered in these circumstances (Babbie, 2005, p.204). This sampling technique preserves the structure of key characteristics inherent in the population. Therefore, it was necessary to identify the percentage distribution of interesting and relevant characteristics/variables in the population of professional foster carers in order to replicate the same distributions in the sample. However, this task proved to be unfeasible as very little data is on the foster parents' characteristics (including professional foster carers) is available. Statistics collected by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MRiPS, 2020) and Statistics Poland (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 2020) have facilitated determination of particular forms of professional family foster care in specific voivodeships. The data concerning foster carers' educational attainment level or the length of time they have provided foster care are not collected. Moreover, Statistics Poland provides data collectively for all forms of family foster care (GUS, 2021, p. 26) based on the age of foster carers and their lone function – without a differentiation for each form of family foster care. In addition, it was troublesome to obtain any characteristics of persons running family-type foster care institutions/facilities.

The above-described limitations of sampling – due to the unequal availability of respondents (no list of all professional foster carers exists) and very limited data on the fundamental characteristics of the group of interest – led to the selection of non-probabilistic sampling, the so-called river sampling (AAPOR, 2013), also known as intercept sampling or real-time sampling (Olivier, 2011; Walsh et al., 1992; Yun & Trumbo, 2000; APPOR, 2022).

In general, analyses of foster parenting in Poland lack in internal research regarding representative samples of foster carers. Only organisers of family foster care, who coordinate them in counties, have access to data and direct contact information of foster carers. Without their consent and cooperation it is impossible to access this group of respondents. The only way of reaching this group remains through foster carers' associations, foster carers' internet forums or the snowball method. Using these outreach channels one does not have the possibility to contact

all foster carers, but rather a selected subgroup of them – feasibly those more active and cooperative. Polish research is dominated by qualitative studies on small groups of foster families a.o. Danecka M., Matejek J., Mirosław J., 2021; Danecka, M., Kęska, A., Płasek, R., 2018; Arczewska, 2021), case studies e.g. Koalicja, 2015) or non-representative quantitative – surveys on non-random, small local research samples of foster carers (a.o. Gajewska, G.G., 2021; Basiaga J., 2014; Basiaga J., Łukasik I., 2020; Harewska N., Gajewska G., 2021; NIK, 2016). Only single studies commissioned by Regional Social Welfare Centres, with close cooperation with organisers of family foster care, might be acknowledged as representative in research samples for a specific voivodeship through quota selection (Pracownia Badań “Soma”, 2013). Nevertheless, this type of research is still encumbered with a certain risk of error. This issue concerns mostly the respondents selection among already selected persons with whom care coordinators happen to have regular and sufficiently frequent contact.

According to Chan Cheong Chong (2013), analyses of literature on international research in foster care have highlighted methodological issues. These issues include the cross-sectional design, comparison group, adult-centric design, sample size and sampling, standardized instrument, male caregivers are left out, and quantitative vs. qualitative. Moreover, these methodological problems frequently occur in discussion of any foster care studies. Chapman, Wall and Barth (2004), as cited in Chong (2013), attested that large scale of foster care studies is limited. The sample size, as well as sampling method used by many foster care studies, are questionable (e.g. McAuley, 1996, za Chong, 2013). As a result of Chong's (2013) analysis, it was recommended that future foster care studies shall embrace the following aspects: longitudinal design, more random and larger sampling, broader comparison groups and choice of the standardized instruments.

A significant amount of foster care research includes evaluations of foster care policy and legislation, causal impact of placement into foster care, programme-specific impact evaluations (Kroeger S, Monahan T., Perry B., (2022)). They use both qualitative research, mainly individual in-depth interviews, less often focus groups (Newquist, J., Ladd, L.D. & Cooley, M.E., 2020), and quantitative research (Sharda, E., 2022; Kaasbøll, Jannike & Lassemo, Eva & Paulsen, Veronika & Melby, Line & Osborg, Solveig O., 2019), as well as their mix (Helton, J. J., Schreiber, J. C., Wiley, J., Schweitzer, R., 2018; Lee, H., Rauktis, M. E., Mulzet, M., Jenkins, A. S., 2023; Geiger, J. M., Hayes, M. J., Lietz, C. A., 2013), although usually their scale is small (Hojer, Luke, 2013). As far as quantitative studies are concerned, they are dominated by minor, mostly unrepresentative samples of foster carers from a particular region or under the care of various agencies. As in Poland, foster care agencies are an essential link when conducting research on foster parenting. Dealing with the bureaucracy of the authorities is certainly the greatest challenge

in conducting foster care research. If the related agencies refuse to entertain researchers, no matter how vital the problem statements are and how excellent the research design is, conducting an analysis will be totally useless. Researchers most often collect data among foster carers through online surveys (CAWI) sent out by the agencies (Geiger, J. M., Hayes, M. J., Lietz, C. A., 2013) or less frequently by telephone (Child, Youth and Family Services, Newfoundland and Labrador, 2012). It is noteworthy that online surveys obviously have their limitations leading to sample bias, which are discussed later in this article. Taking an example of the American research on this subject, online surveys of foster carers found that African American and Latino or Hispanic families were underrepresented and Caucasian families were overrepresented (Geiger, J. M., Hayes, M. J., Lietz, C. A., 2013). This type of sample bias is the problem of single studies that use online, telephone or postal surveys to outreach to foster carers (DCYF, 2023).

Moreover, existing research on survey methodology demonstrates that telephone respondents are more likely to provide socially desirable responses on sensitive issues than online respondents (DCYF, 2023). Unfortunately, the parallel use of different forms of outreach is costly and therefore rarely used, most often in research commissioned by public institutions. In most cases, the authors of quantitative surveys do not collate the obtained sample of foster carers to the distribution and typology of the entire population of this group in a given area.

To sum up, the analysis of the methodology of foster parenting research, both in Poland and abroad, indicates that foster carers are a hardly an accessible group. The only possibility to reach them remains through the organisations that coordinate their work, most often public. A handful of studies are conducted by non-governmental organisations of foster carers (The Fostering Network 2021) independently of local authorities.

### **River sampling and its limitations and advantages**

River sampling is an online sampling method that recruits respondents by means of a survey invitation while they are engaged in some other online activities (Oliver, 2011). An invitation (link) to participate in the survey in most cases is posted on websites or, sent by an e-mail or elsewhere where a members of the target population are likely to be reached (Lehdonvirta, Oksanen, Räsänen, Blank, 2021). River sampling is one of the types of nonrealistic web surveys and shares all advantages and disadvantages of web surveys of this type.

There are two phenomena that can make the outcomes of nonprobability web surveys (including river sampling) unreliable: *under-coverage and self-selection*. They often lead to biased estimates, and surveys unreliability (Bethlehem 2010, p. 162, AAPOR 2022; Lehdonvirta et al., 2021).

River sampling bias consists mostly of Internet population, so the sample bias of insufficient coverage is due to the digital exclusion of certain categories of respondents. Obviously, anyone with ad-blockers enabled or people who do not use the internet, thus does not visit certain websites are excluded from participation in the survey (AAPOR 2022). Under-coverage means that the sample selection mechanism of the survey is not able to access certain elements of the target population since only respondents with Internet access have the possibility to complete the questionnaire form. Hence, in most of the cases the target population is wider than just those with Internet. It is worth emphasising that studies show that people with Internet access differ, on average, from those without Internet access (Bethlehem, 2010:162).

At the same time, in many countries there is a rapid increase in the number of households provided with Internet access. In Poland, in 2019, the year of discussed research, percentage of households with Internet exceeded 86%, and it has been on the rise (GUS 2019). The internet access varies by household type, class of residence and degree of urbanisation. First, households with children were more likely to have Internet access than those without. Furthermore, the percentage of households with Internet access was higher in urban areas (GUS 2019).

Less optimistic for researchers conducting web surveys are the results of Centrum Badania Opinii Publicznej (CBOS) on the Internet usage in Polish households as contrasted with having Internet access itself (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, 2019). According to CBOS, in 2019 almost 7 out of 10 adults (69%) in Poland used the Internet at least once a week. Their online presence is determined primarily by age, and secondly by education, which is relevant mainly to the case of older respondents (55 and over). The Internet is widely used by the youngest respondents (18-24) and those aged between 25 and 34. The vast majority of respondents aged 35 to 44, three quarters of those aged 45 to 54 and more than half of those aged 55 to 64 are also active online. Three quarters of the oldest respondents (aged 65 and over) remain offline. The smallest number of Internet users is among those with primary education, while the largest – among respondents with higher and lower secondary education, although, in the latter case, this is solely due to their age. There are relatively fewer Internet users in rural areas, and noticeably more in cities with a population of 100,000 or more. Certainly rapidly changing Internet demographics may provide better representativeness for online surveys, and some researchers even report nearly-complete interchangeability (e.g., Bruzzone, 1999). Nevertheless, this is not the only methodological problem regarding this approach (Yun, Trumbo, 2000).

The second source of coverage error is the so-called *second-level digital divide*, manifested by discrepancies in the style and frequency of the Internet usage by different groups/subpopulations (Hargittai, 2002). An explicit example are the



findings of Eszter Hargittai showing that “age is negatively associated with one’s level of Internet skills, experience with the technology is positively related to online skill, and differences in gender do little to explain the variance in the ability of different people to find content online” (Hargittai, 2002).

As a consequence, web survey results apply to the sub-population of people having Internet only. Conclusions from web surveys are limited and cannot be used to draw any conclusions about the targeted population as a whole. They can be used to show that certain characteristics or phenomena do exist (have non-zero probability), but the parameter or percentages estimate that the samples produced are unlikely to accurately represent the subpopulation. The other possibility to include them is to make tentative inferences regarding demographic differences in subpopulation characteristics. However, the effect sizes might not be accurate, and could result from selection effects (Lehdonvirta et al., 2021).

Despite these inherent biases, as highlighted by Vili Lehdonvirta, Atte Oksanen, Pekka Räsänen and Grant Blank (2021); online surveys are now often used to make claims about the general population in social and political research. These claims are legitimate given the analyses showing that probability sample surveys were consistently more accurate than the nonprobability sample surveys, even after post-stratification with demographics (Yeager et al., 2011):

Yeager et al. (2011) compared seven nonprobability panels to a probability panel and a random-digit-dialing telephone survey. They found that probability samples were generally more accurate than nonprobability panels. On a range of adjusted outcome measures, the average absolute errors were 3.6% and 4% for two probability samples compared to a range of 4.8% to 8.9% for 7 nonprobability web surveys. The post-stratification reduced the average absolute error in both probability samples to 2.9% and 3.4% but only in 4 out of the 7 nonprobability samples (ranging from 4.5% to 6.6%) (Schonlau, 2017, p. 287).

Non-probability online surveys fall short in representativeness. In a study of Lehdonvirta et al. (2021), river samples recruited via Facebook ads and via a public broadcaster differed significantly from benchmark data provided by Statistics Finland. “On demographic variables the differences ranged from 13.8 to 28.3 %, and on non-demographic variables 15.3 to 38.9%, even after weights were applied” (Lehdonvirta et al., 2021).

A second source of bias, most relevant to river sampling in the sample, is the fact that it is based on self-selection (Bethlehem, 2010; Lavrakas, 2008; Lehdonvirta et al., 2021). Self-selection refers to respondents declaring themselves for participation in a survey. Firstly, they need to be aware of the existence of a survey (they should accidentally visit the website, follow up a banner or an e-mail message) and then, they are obliged to make the deliberate decision to fill in the online questionnaire. As a result, the survey researcher is not in control of the

selection process: the respondent is more likely to be choosing the study rather than the study chooses the respondent. Self-selection bias arises when the propensity to self-select differs systematically between subpopulations (Bethlehem, 2010) and if the reasons for selecting an individual into or out of the sample relate to the behaviours or attributes under investigation. The respondent may participate in a study based upon predetermined, observable characteristics, such as age, race, sex, region of origin or based upon some characteristic that is determined (or at least heavily influenced) by the respondent political ideology, religiosity or other attitudes (Lavrakas, 2008). In most instances, self-selection might lead to biased data, as the respondents who choose to participate, will not sufficiently represent the entire target population. If respondents choose a survey for reasons related purely to their demographic characteristics, we may “fix” the sample by judicious post-stratification weighting as far as researchers know the correct universe estimates for these characteristics (Lavrakas, 2008). However, oftentimes researchers simply are not able to find measured selection variables that explain the self-selection process, nor do they have access to the probability of such design sampling that they could adjust sampling weights for the lack of response. This problem would occur, if self-selection was based on the outcomes of the variable itself or on unobservable variables related with the outcome (Lavrakas, 2008, p. 808).

Nowadays, the two main types of river sampling are advertising and piggybacking. Regarding media content, they may lead to topical self-selection, meaning that states the advertised subject matter of the precise study conclusively determines who responds to it. A related weakness is priming or pretest sensitization in which; respondents are exposed to a piece of content referring to a subject matter just before taking the survey. Hence, respondents might be inclined to reinterpret their situation and experience it differently when responding to a survey. On this basis river samples are more likely to generate higher incidences of the studied attributes than probability samples (Lehdonvirta et al., 2021).

As discussed above, there are many limitations of river intercept sampling, especially within generalisation from nonprobability online samples. Nevertheless, it is crucial to understand the broad variety of purposes of research and apply the appropriate method to them. Furthermore, there is a growing acknowledgement (AAPOR, 2013) that nonprobability surveys could also be a useful and relevant research method. In this context, Matthias Schonlau and Mick P. Couper (Schonlau, Couper, 2017, p. 288) identify the following purposes and applications of non-representative online surveys: 1) pre-testing survey instruments; 2) exploratory research on low-incidence or hard-to reach populations, 3) experiments, 4) trend analysis (in stable populations), 5) correlation/regression analysis, 6) prevalence estimates (full population or key subgroups).

The main purpose of this study was to investigate hard-to-reach subpopulations – professional foster parents. Usually, these groups are of low incidence and not defined by standard demographic variables like age, gender, and ethnicity, but by circumstance or behaviour. According to Lehdonvirta and coworkers (2021) such studies include e.g. gig workers, e-cigarette users or cyberharassment victims. It is though for national probability sample to include respondents from such subgroups. Sometimes there is no available government data about respondents and, that is why, researchers often have to collect their own data on particular social phenomena. In this context,, it is unsurprising that many articles on hard-to-reach non-demographic subpopulations published in leading journals are now entirely based on nonprobability online surveys (Lehdonvirta et al., 2021).

Given the aforementioned facts, their limitations, i.e. self-selection or topic selection, become their advantage as they attract disproportionately large numbers of subpopulation members when a smaller number is required. As emphasised above, conclusions that might be drawn from such samples are still limited, given that they are nonprobability samples. Nevertheless, they do imply new knowledge about hard-to-reach populations.

### **Application of river sampling for studying professional foster families**

Given the impossibility of realising a random sample of professional foster carers, for the purpose of this study the a non-probabilistic river ample was released. Including limitation of this method and the possible bias in the sample, the multiple forms of online outreach to the targeted group were performed.

In order to maximise the chances of reaching as many professional foster carers as possible, first, the author personally sent an e-mail invitation to participate in the study to all organisers of family foster care in Poland (380 such institutions in Poland, mostly to Poviats Family Assistance, Municipal Social Assistance Centres, Municipal Family Assistance Centres), as the task of foster care organisers is to coordinate family forms of foster care at the poviat level they have direct access to professional foster carers and their e-mail addresses. Considering how many matters are nowadays processed via Internet, including official matters (e.g. application for the “Family 500+” programme), it is highly likely that this category of foster carers has and operates a mailbox. To some extent, the use of an online form of communication with offices and respondents was also encouraged by the pandemic situation (Covid) and the change within public institutions for an electronic communication and administration. In order to encourage the organisers to send out the invitation to the survey to professional foster carers in their area, they were provided with an access to the preliminary survey results. In addition,

twice during the survey, author sent a reminder to the organisers about the survey and encouraged by telephone some of them to get involved – especially districts from ‘under-represented’ provinces.

The second technique of reaching the professional foster carers was done via non-governmental organisations (NGOs) for foster carers and those acting on their behalf. According to the database of the Polish NGOs (Ngo.pl portal) at [www.ngo.pl](http://www.ngo.pl), there were about 80 associations and foundations involved in foster parenting in 2019<sup>5</sup>. Most of them were local associations bringing together foster carers from one county. Unfortunately, there is no reliable information on how large a proportion of those is still active. A request was sent to all NGOs having the publicly available information about an e-mail address in order to distribute the survey to the professional foster carers working with them. In addition, the presented analysis was based the data about non-governmental organizations with which the author of this study cooperated on behalf of the foundation supporting foster parents in Poland. As in the case of foster care organisers, Ngo.pl was reminded twice about the request to send a survey to professional foster carers. In the invitation, author’s long-term commitment to foster parenting and desire to hear and empower the voice of foster parents were highlighted. Author also emphasized the broad thematic focus of the survey in order to attract as many respondents from the target group as possible and to counteract thematic bias in the sample. It was pointed out that the questions in the survey focused on the image of foster parenting in Poland, the identity of foster parents themselves, the quality of foster carers’ cooperation with the environment (including PCPR, family courts, etc.) and carers’ demands for needed changes in the family support and foster care system. In order to prevent people from giving up on completing the long questionnaire before finishing it, the invitation gave an estimate of the completion time (about 30-40 minutes) and the possibility to complete it in “rounds” (pause and get back to a saved incomplete questionnaire). The main goal was to prevent abandonment during the survey and a high level of non-responses. These risks were highly possible due to the multiple responsibilities of foster carers and the dynamism of the environment in which they operate.

The third channel for reaching foster carers with the online survey was to post a link to the survey on the largest foster parent groups on the social networking site Facebook<sup>6</sup>. In total, these groups had 3764 members in 2019, although there was usually a minor inter-group overlap. The invitations published on Facebook, as in the case of the e-mails, mentioned the author’s experience in supporting foster parenting and highlighted the need to amplify the voice of foster families.

The multi-channel nature of the attempts to reach professional foster carers with the online survey, both through official association and community channels, most likely resulted in a few cases of respondents being repeatedly contacted with an invitation to participate in the survey. As mentioned above, the period

of the survey – June to September 2019 – coincided with the COVID-19 and the increased usage of online resources to organise work and daily life which could have potentially influenced the accessibility of the targeted group.

In this study, the online surveys were used for the purpose of the exploratory research on professionalization of family foster care. The targeted group were professional foster parents. Statistically, there are no public studies regarding this category of foster carers – the characteristics of its members. Only the Central Statistical Office publishes aggregate data on all types of foster carers (kinship, non-professional, professional, family foster homes, excluding those running family institutions).

However, public registers data cannot serve as a benchmark for the sample of professional foster carers obtained by the river sample method, as it is a much broader category. The category presented in this study represents only 5% of all foster carers in Poland. The only nationwide data available refer to provincial distribution of professional foster carers and the diversity of foster caring forms.

## Results

The online survey gathered responses from 303 respondents – professional foster carers, which represents 10% of the total population of this group in Poland (3009; 2019 data) (cf. Table 1). 36 of them completed the questionnaire in 80%, so the answers to 6 out of 38 questions were not provided. The knowledge about them is also less extensive compared to other respondents due to the incomplete metric part (they indicated the type of foster family they represent and the voivodeship they live in). The missing data is due to the design of the survey, which allowed to be paused and returned to it at a convenient time.

In addition to professional foster carers, 54 additional participants took part in the survey: 5 persons forming kinship foster family (grandparents or siblings), 6 persons who were further relatives of a child in foster care – forming a non-professional foster family, as well as 43 unrelated foster carers from non-professional foster families. A total of 357 people completed the questionnaire. The significant dominance of professional foster carers in the sample may indicate the choice of effective forms of reaching the representatives of this group.

The obtained river sample reflects the proportions of known characteristics of the population of professional foster parents, such as their distribution in voivodeships and diversity of forms in Poland. As mentioned earlier, there is no other data available on the characteristics of professional foster carers that could serve to compare the sample obtained with their nationwide population. Taking into consideration the non-probabilistic sampling and the burden of conducting research using the river sample method, i.e. self-selection bias, undercover bias or topic selected bias, it is impossible to achieve a sample representative to an entire population. At most, the

sample obtained might be proportional in terms of the two known characteristics of the entire population. This problem is mitigated by the fact that a significant proportion (10%) of the total population was obtained. Moreover, the diversity of experiences and opinions among the surveyed professional foster carers on many aspects of the foster care system may suggest low levels of some of the possible biases, e.g. the survey was completed primarily by respondents frustrated with their current situation as foster carers.

The obtained characteristics of the research sample, divided in terms of the respondents' territorial distribution and their form of foster care, are presented below (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Percentage of professional foster carers by voivodships – in the sample and in the national population of professional foster carers

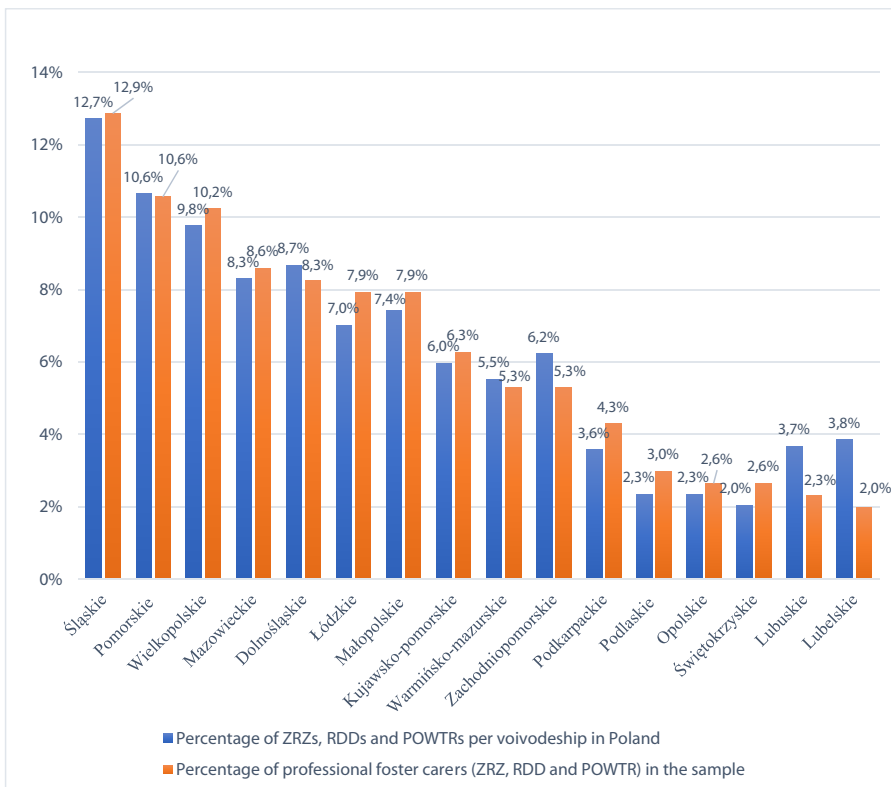
Voivodship	Number of professional foster carers (ZRZ, RDD, POWTR) in Poland	Number of respondents: professional foster carers in the sample	Aggregate percentage of professional foster carers (ZRZ, RDD, POWTR) by voivodship in the population	Total professional foster carers (including ZRZ, RDD and POWTR) in individual voivodships in the sample
Dolnośląskie	263	25	8,74%	8,25%
Kujawsko-pomorskie	185	19	6,15%	6,27%
Lubelskie	121	6	4,02%	1,98%
Lubuskie	105	7	3,49%	2,31%
Łódzkie	214	24	7,11%	7,92%
Małopolskie	227	24	7,54%	7,92%
Mazowieckie	258	26	8,57%	8,58%
Opolskie	76	8	2,53%	2,64%
Podkarpackie	106	13	3,52%	4,29%
Podlaskie	70	9	2,33%	2,97%
Pomorskie	316	32	10,50%	10,56%
Śląskie	378	39	12,56%	12,87%
Świętokrzyskie	57	8	1,89%	2,64%
Warmińsko-mazurskie	160	16	5,32%	5,28%
Wielkopolskie	293	31	9,74%	10,23%
Zachodniopomorskie	180	16	5,98%	5,28%
Total	3009	303	100%	100%

Source: data on the number of professional foster families (ZRZ) and family foster home (RDDs) per voivodship are from 2019 – from Statistics Poland (<https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/warunki-zycia/ubostwo-pomoc-spoeczna/pomoc-spoeczna-i-opieka-nad-dziekiem-i-rodzina-w-2019-roku,10,11.html>) and the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy (MRPiPS) data.

In contrast, data on the number of family-type foster care institution (POWTRs) are from 2019 from the registers of care and educational institutions, regional care and therapeutic institutions, and intervention pre-adoption centres held electronically by the voivodships.

In general, the total share of professional foster carers in each voivodship in the population and sample was comparable. In both groups, the largest number of professional foster carers was recorded in Silesian, Pomeranian, Greater Poland and Lower Silesian voivodships. The largest discrepancy between the population and the obtained sample was registered in the case of Lublin and Lubusz voivodships – although it does not exceed 2%.

**Figure 1.** Percentage of professional foster carers by voivodship – in the sample and in the national population of professional foster carers

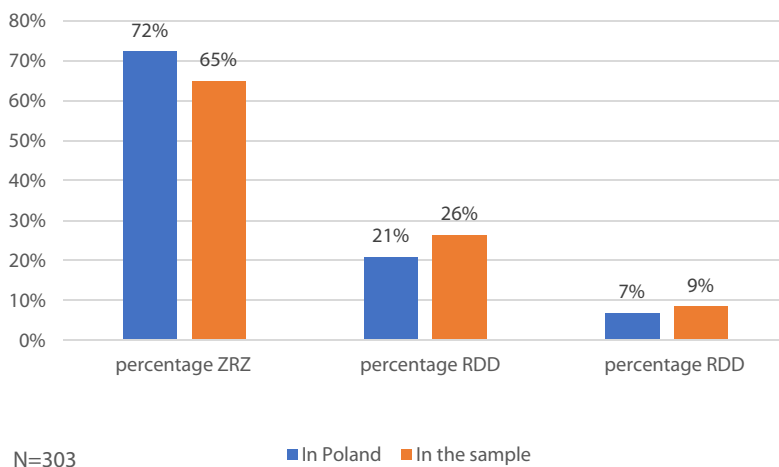


Source: data on the number of professional foster families (ZSZ) and family foster home (RDDs) per voivodship are from 2019 – from Statistics Poland (<https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/warunki-zycia/ubostwo-pomoc-spoeczna/pomoc-spoeczna-i-opieka-nad-dziekiem-i-rodzina-w-2019-roku,10,11.html>) and the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy (MRPIPS) data.

In contrast, data on the number of family-type foster care institution (POWTRs) are retrieved from the 2019 registers of care and educational institutions, regional care and therapeutic institutions and intervention pre-adoption centres held electronically by the voivodships

While various types of professional foster families accounted for 72% out of all professional forms of family foster care in Poland in 2019, this percentage was about 65% in the sample (see Figure 2). The share of family foster homes was represented, by 21% in the population of professional foster carers and by 26% in the sample and of family-type facilities, respectively. This share constitutes 7% to 8,6% in the survey. The slight overrepresentation of the last two categories of professional foster carers may be due to their greater formalisation and thus higher accessibility – e.g. by publishing contact details e.g. in the registers of provincial foster care institutions.

**Figure 2.** Percentage of different categories of professional foster parenting forms in Poland and in the sample



Source: Informacja Rady Ministrów o realizacji w roku 2019 Ustawy z dnia 9 czerwca 2011 r. o wspieraniu rodziny i systemie pieczy zastępczej (Dz.U. z 2013 r. poz. 135, z późn. zm.), Warszawa 2020, p. 40, 42.

The reliability of the sample concerning professional foster carers obtained by the river sample method is also supported by their demographic characteristics juxtaposed with data on the general profile of all foster families, whether kinship, non-professional or professional (excluding family-type facilities) collected by Statistics Poland..

Among the helping professions, which include foster carers, women predominate. Data from the Statistics Poland indicate that, in 2018, women in Poland accounted for approximately 8 out of 10 workers in ‘health and social care’ and education (GUS, 2018, p. 9). This is also the case of the presented study: women represent 85% out of all the respondents. Among the respondents, about 88% acted as a foster carer together with their spouse (85%) or partner (3%), and

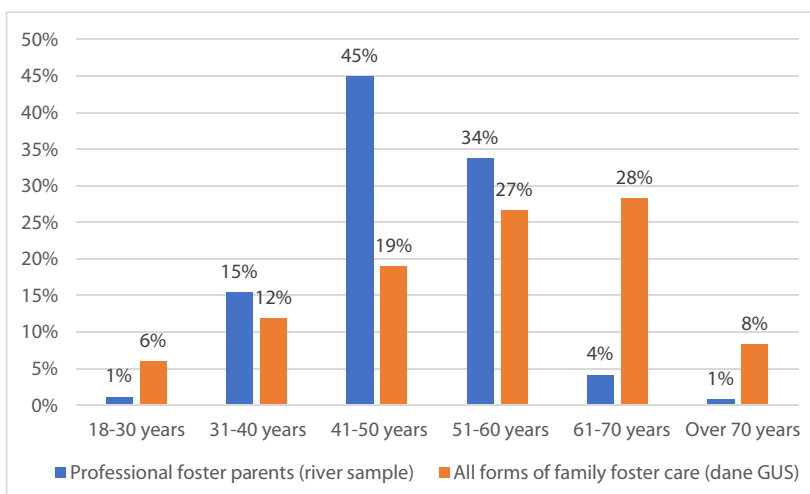


only 12% alone. According to the Central Statistical Office, for the population of all types of foster carers, the function of foster family or family home was often performed by a single person (44.9% of all cases). This was mainly the case for kinship foster carers.

The predominant age category among the professional foster carers surveyed was between 41 and 60 years of age – 78% belonged to this category. Only 5% were over 61 years of age and 16.5% were between 26 and 40 years of age (Figure 3). No representatives of the youngest age category, 18-25, were recorded in the sample.

There is a huge discrepancy between elderly foster carers surveyed in this study and the number indicated by the Statistics Poland data from 2019 (GUS, 2020, p. 26) for foster families (of all types) – where seniors (60+) accounted for as much as 36.5% of all foster carers and those between 41 and 60 years of age amounted to 45.6%. Noticeably, that group of professional foster carers surveyed consisted mainly of middle-aged people. The national statistics show an inflated mean age. This is due to the dominance of kinship foster families in our country – most often grandmothers and grandfathers. Nevertheless, data on the average age of professional foster carers has not been published.

**Figure 3.** Comparison of the age of professional foster carers (river sample) and the age of all types of foster parenting (Central Statistical Office)

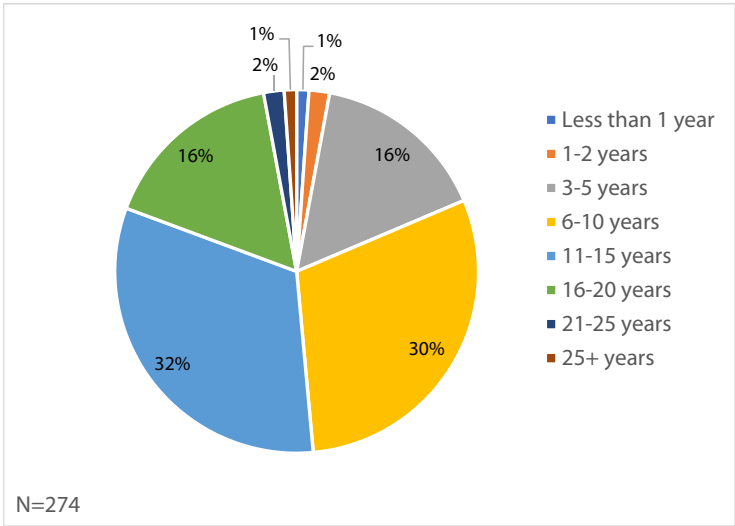


Note: a category of 18-25 was given in the survey, but no one ticked it, so I omit this group from the charts in further analyses.

Source: own survey and GUS 2020

Almost half of the respondents (48%) have been acting as a foster carer (in total, regardless of the transformation from one form of family foster care into another) for more than 10 years, but not more than 20 years. Another 30% of respondents have had a length of service between 6 and 10 years, while 19% of them have had a period less than 5 years. The record holders with more than 20 years of experience represent almost 3% of the sample (Figure 4). These figures illustrate the long-term treatment of their role by professional foster carers. During their time of service, 67% of respondents experienced a transition from one form of foster care to another. This was least often the case for intervention foster families (17.6%) and family-like facilities (46%), but most often for family foster homes (89%). In the case of professional and specialist foster families, the percentage was 67%. It can be assumed that, in line with the trend observed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MRiPS, 2016, p. 18), professional foster families are most often transformed into family foster homes in order to be able to accommodate more children.

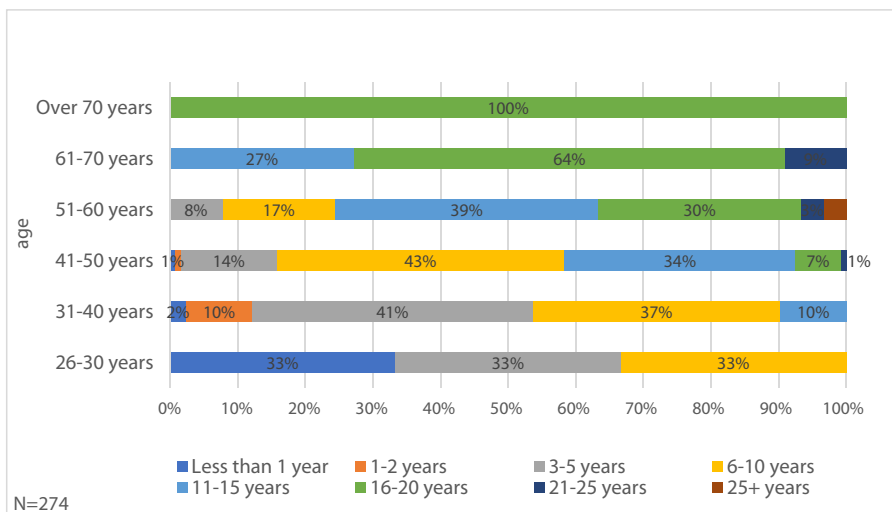
Figure 4. Length of time as a foster carer



Source: own survey

A cross-analysis of the metric data allows to conclude that the majority of the professional foster carers surveyed began foster parenting between the ages of 30 and 40 (Figure 5). There were no respondents in the sample who have decided to become a foster parent while already retired. In contrast, respondents of retirement age continue the role of foster carer initiated 15-20 years earlier. Unsurprisingly, the average number of years in the foster carer role increases along with the respondent's age.

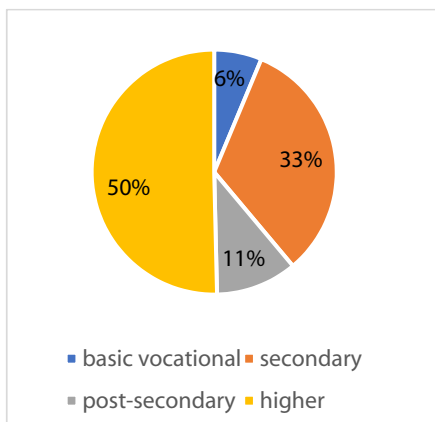
**Figure 5:** Age of foster carers and length of time in the role



Source: own survey

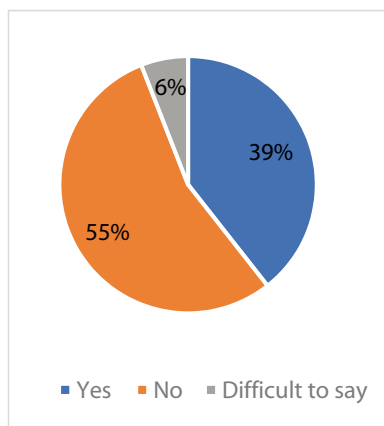
Half of the professional foster carers surveyed have a university degree, 11% a post-secondary degree, 33% a secondary degree and 6% a basic vocational qualification (Figure 6).

**Figure 6.** Educational level of foster carers



Source: own survey

**Figure 7.** Profile education of foster carers in one of the three associated domains: psychology, pedagogy, social work



Source: own survey

Slightly under two fifths (39%) of respondents obtained education was related to fields such as pedagogy, psychology, social work and related fields, while 55% had no such training (Figure 7). A profile education is not formally a recruitment criterion for foster parent candidates. Respondents obtained their profile education primarily through university (68%) or post-secondary education (31%). The highest number of persons with higher education was among those running family-type facilities (72%), specialised foster families (46%) and family children's homes (40%); the lowest number was among professional foster families (31%) and intervention foster families – only 27%. Among directors of family-type facilities the highest percentage of persons whose profession was related to fields useful in working with children in foster care was recorded – 72%. For those in charge of family children's homes and specialist foster families, the percentage is about 50%. In the case of representatives of intervention foster families, only 1/3 of them have directional education useful for working with children. Probably, despite the lack of a formal requirement for higher education (or even secondary education in the case of foster families and family children's homes) and a profile in pedagogy, psychology or social work – the practice of running family forms, especially those for a large number of children and children with disabilities, encourages people to improve their competences.

In conclusion, the characteristics of a typical respondent – a professional foster carer – obtained from presented study were as follows: a married woman, between 41 and 61 years of age, whose tenure as a foster carer is between 6 and 15 years. During this time, they have most likely experienced the transition from one form of family foster care to another. Most likely respondents have a secondary or higher education, not necessarily profiled in fields such as psychology, pedagogy or related fields.

## Discussion and Conclusions

Sampling is undoubtedly a relevant element of the research process that determines the quality of the data obtained. *The rivers sample* method belongs to the category of non-probabilistic sampling. It involves recruiting respondents by inviting them to the survey while they are involved in other online activities (Oliver, 2011). The name refers to the idea of researchers dipping into the traffic flow of a website, catching some of the users floating by. The invitation to take part in the survey can be made through online banners, advertisements, information in forums or e-mails and on thematic websites (Lehdonvirta, Oksanen, Räsänen, Blank, 2021).

While researchers understand the significance of random sampling from the general population, it is not feasible for some groups of respondents, as in the case of the professional foster carers analysed in this article. Particularly when

the group of interest is *niche* or there is no register of its members to conduct random sampling, it is worth considering the use of the rivers sample method. As highlighted by Vili Lehdonvirta, Atte Oksanen, Pekka Räsänen and Grant Blank (2021), many articles on hard-to-reach non-demographic subpopulations (e.g. gig workers, e-cigarette users or cyberharassment victims) published in leading journals are now based entirely on nonprobability online surveys (Lehdonvirta, Oksanen, Räsänen, Blank, 2021).

The presented research on professional foster carers using the river sample method is unique in the country. So far, no research has collected a nationwide sample of professional foster carers, focusing at most on provincial samples or qualitative analyses (Danecka, Kęska, Płasek, 2018; Arczewska, 2021; Gajewska, 2021; Basiaga, 2014; Harewska, Gajewska, 2021). As in foreign research, the author attempted to reach foster carers through foster family care organisers who coordinate foster care at the county level and who distributed the invitation to participate in the online survey further to representatives of the target group. In addition, the invitation was sent to non-governmental organisations bringing together foster carers or working on their behalf and posted on online forums for representatives of this group. Dealing with the agencies which coordinate family foster care in counties and their bureaucracy is certainly the greatest challenge in conducting foster care research. Without their consent and cooperation it is impossible to reach this group of respondents. This can only be done through foster carers' associations, foster carers' internet forums or the snowball method. However, this sampling method gives access to a limited group of foster carers and is of a non-probabilistic nature.

Of course, river sampling is not free of methodological problems. There are three phenomena that may make the outcomes of web surveys unreliable: under-coverage, self-selection and topical self-selection. Under coverage is due to the digital exclusion of certain categories of respondents (AAPOR 2022), self-selection (Bethlehem, 2010; Lavrakas, 2008; Lehdonvirta et al., 2021) refers to respondents selecting themselves for participation in a survey. The latter, topical self-selection, means that the advertised subject matter of the study ends up determining who responds to it (Lehdonvirta et al., 2021). Due to its biases in the sample, it is not easy to obtain by means of an online survey a sample from which legitimate conclusions about the population can be drawn. River sampling works relatively well for exploratory studies and hard-to-reach groups. Despite the limitations of this method, the presented study obtained a sample reflecting the real proportions in terms of specific characteristics of the population of professional foster families in Poland: their distribution by province and the diversity of forms. Possibly, the sample may be biased by the fact that the study took the form of an online survey and therefore excludes people with no Internet access or with limited computer skills, most likely older people. It is possible that the survey included

people more aware of the needed changes in the situation of foster carers, willing to share their opinion in this regard, although the percentage of “hard to say/don’t know” responses was quite high for the individual questions in the survey. At the same time, it is fundamental to give voice to professional foster carers themselves, aiming for as representative a sample of them as possible.

There is definitely room for non-probabilistic river sampling in social research. It provides a quick, low-cost, flexible way of reaching the group of respondents we are interested in. Sometimes it is the only possible way of reaching minor numbers of communities not defined by demographic characteristics, so it has its undeniable value in learning about micro-worlds.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Based on publications from the last 20 years, a total of 23 studies were included. The total sample consisted of 13,630 children in care, with 7,469 from foster care and 6,161 from residential care.
- <sup>2</sup> N = 227.
- <sup>3</sup> The amendment to the Act on Family Support and the Foster Care System of 7 October 2022 introduced a provision on the register of family forms of foster care. However, it is not known whether it will be available to the public and on what terms. The provision from the Act:  
The register referred to in paragraph 1 is kept by the starost, the organiser of family foster care, marshal of the voivodship and the voivode by means of an ICT system provided by the minister in charge of family affairs enabling the maintenance of this register, transfer of data to it, deletion of data from it data and making data available from it.
- <sup>4</sup> local authority responsible for foster care.
- <sup>5</sup> <https://spis.ngo.pl/?search=rodzin+zast%C4%99pczych> [accessed 22.07.2021]. This figure was estimated from a search engine located at [www.spis.ngo.pl](http://www.spis.ngo.pl), into which the keywords were entered: “foster parenting” and “foster families”.
- <sup>6</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1811539538895869/> (dostęp: 2.05.2023); <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1581192745436673/> (dostęp: 2.05.2023); <https://www.facebook.com/groups/507190613016245/> (dostęp: 2.05.2023); <https://www.facebook.com/rodzinyzastepcze.wspierajacie> (dostęp: 2.05.2023).

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## ERRATA

12/18/2024: Multiple changes made to document, including added color to images and corrected formatting for references.