


## 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 non-probability sampling – the *river sample* method to reach a group of professional foster parents in Poland – case of hard-to-reach population. This is a population whose public, nationwide register does not exist and additionally, it is little known about it in terms of the characteristics of its members, 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 group of respondents who are the target but it has its limitations- under-coverage and self-selection – which may affect the bias in the sample and thus the possibility to generalise to populations. Despite those limitations the presented study obtained a sample that reflects the proportions regarding the known characteristics in the population of professional foster carers in Poland: their provincial distribution and diversity of forms. In general, the river sample method works efficiently especially for exploratory studies and hard-to-reach groups.

**Keywords:** rivers sample, non-probability 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 foster carer is to professionalize it. This is a topic to which this extensive research has been devoted – both qualitative and quantitative. As part of this research project, there were conducted online surveys among professional foster carers and organisers of family foster care. Moreover for the purpose of the study 27 in-depth interviews with foster parenthood leaders were conducted, including representatives of institutions forming the system of family support 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 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, are distinguished family foster care (various forms of foster families) and residential foster care (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 in 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, are accounted for almost 20% of all children in family care (MRiPS, 2022, p. 43).

Although some of the countrys’ foster care systems are based on both, foster families and institutions, to a comparable extent there is a unanimity among researchers regarding the advantage of the 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 disorder 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 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 best 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 and they indicate that the cost of institutional care is in fact multiple times higher than the majority of other forms with regard to the 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 per child relatively to the family-type care cost – approximately 1.2 times higher in 2017 and as much as 2.8 times 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 2 549 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 also in Poland. The decrease in the number of Polish foster families (non-professional and professional) in the period 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 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 a.o. 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. Many a time foster families face negative attitudes from the neighbourhood. Another problem constitutes contact with biological parents, often “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 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 an issue to 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. Below the details of the sampling and characteristics of the methodology used are presented.

## 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 starostes<sup>4</sup>, for the purposes of family courts which place children in foster care, keep their own registers of foster families, which are not publicly available. The only exception is data on foster care facilities, including family-type facilities – these are published by voivodes on their 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 and that legitimate generalisations.

Non-probabilistic sampling was considered in this circumstances – quota sampling (Babbie, 2005, p.204), sampling that 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 available describing the characteristics of foster parents, including professional foster carers. Statistics collected by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MRiPS, 2020) and the Central Statistical Office (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 2020) have facilitated determination of particular forms of professional family foster care in specific voivodeships. The data concerning the education of foster carers or the length of time, they have provided foster care are not collected. Moreover, Central Statistical Office 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) and very little 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 on internal research regarding representative samples of foster carers. Only organisers of family foster care, who coordinate them in counties, have access to data and contact with foster carers. Without their consent and cooperation it is impossible to access this group of respondents. The only way to accomplish that 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 with a selected subgroup of them – feasibly those more active and cooperative. In Polish studies predominate: qualitative research on small groups of foster carers (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 of organisers of family foster care, might be acknowledged as representative in research samples for a specific voivodeship through quota selection (Pracownia Badań “Soma”, 2013). Still, this type of research is encumbered with a certain risk of error. That concern mostly the matter of 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. Namely, they are: 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, they 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, as cited in Chong, 2013). As a result of Chong's (2013) analysis, it was recommended that future foster care studies shall embrace; 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 biggest 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, it 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). Of course, online surveys have their limitations, which are discussed later in this article and might lead to sample bias. As an example in the US reality, online surveys of foster carers found that African American and Latino or Hispanic families were underrepresented and Caucasian families were overrepresented in studies (Geiger, J. M., Hayes, M. J., Lietz, C. A., 2013). This type of sample bias is attempted by single studies that use online, telephone or postal surveys to outreach to foster carers (DCYF, 2023). This is relevant to the characteristics of respondents who choose to complete the survey online. Therefore, they might differ from those who complete research over the phone. 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 remain through the organisations that coordinate their work, most often public. Few 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, sent by an email 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 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 basis 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 who does not use the internet, thus does not visit certain websites, or who has ad-blockers enabled on their web browsers are excluded from participation in the survey (AAPOR 2022). Under-coverage means that the sample selection mechanism of the survey is not able to select some 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 rise in number of households provided with Internet access. In Poland in 2019 r, the year of discussed research, percentage of households with Internet was over 86%, and it has been growing (GUS 2019). The internet access varies by household type, class of residence and degree of urbanisation. Households with children were more likely to have Internet access than those without. Moreover the percentage of households with the Internet was higher in urban areas than in rural, and with regard to the degree of urbanisation, it was highest in highly urbanised areas (GUS 2019).

Less optimistic for reseachers conducting web surveys are the results of the researched conducted by Centrum Badania Opinii Publicznej (CBOS) on the Polish usage of the Internet rather than having Internet access itself (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, 2019). According to CBOS in 2019 almost seven out of ten adults (69%) in Poland use 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 remain 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). Though, this is not the only methodological problem regarding this approach. (Yun, Trumbo, 2000).

The second source of coverage error is so-called *second-level digital divide*, manifested by discrepancies in the style and frequency of the usage of the Internet



by different groups/subpopulations (Hargittai, 2002). An explicit example are the findings of E. 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 only to the sub-population of people having Internet. 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. Though 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. It is legitimate given that the analyses show that probability sample surveys were consistently more accurate than the non-probability 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 RDD telephone survey. They found that probability samples were generally more accurate than nonprobability panels. On a range of an adjusted outcome measures, the average absolute error 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 reduces 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 study of Lehdonvirta and Coworkers 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 respondent determined by (or at least heavily influenced): 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 well represent the entire target population. If respondents choose a survey for reasons related only to their demographic characteristics, we may “fix” the sample by judicious post-stratification weighting, so far as researchers know the correct universe estimates for these characteristics (Lavrakas, 2008). However, many times 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 nonresponse. This problem would occur, if self-selection were 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, that states the advertised subject matter of the precise study conclusively determines who responds to it. A related weakness is priming or pretest sensitization; respondents are exposed to a piece of content referring to subject matter just before taking the survey. Hence it might be inclined to reinterpret their situation and experience through frames installed in that content. On this basis river samples are more likely to generate higher incidences of the attributes under study than probability samples (Lehdonvirta et al., 2021).

As discussed above, there are many limitations of river intercept sampling, especially within generalisation from non-probability 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 an 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 (whether full population or key subgroups).

The main purpose of present study was to reach hard-to reach subpopulations – professional foster parents. Usually, these groups are low-incidence and not defined by standard demographic variables like age, gender, and ethnicity, but by circumstance or behavior. 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 them and 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 based entirely on non-probability online surveys (Lehdonvirta et al., 2021).

If so, their limitations i.e. self-selection or topic selection become their advantage as they attract disproportionately large numbers of subpopulation members when smaller required. Of course, as was emphasised above, conclusions that might be drawn from such samples are still limited, given that they are non-probability 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, firstly 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 their task 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 the Internet, including official matters (e.g. application for 500 plus) it is highly likely that this category of foster carers poses 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 by telephone encouraged some of them to get involved – especially districts from ‘under-represented’ provinces.

The second technique of reaching the professional foster carers was through non-governmental organisations for foster carers and those acting on their behalf. According to the database of ngo’s 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 of how large a proportion of those are still active. A request was sent to all NGO’s who had an email address online to distribute the survey to the professional foster carers working with them. In addition, author used the database of foster ngo’s she have worked with on behalf of the foundation the author work for, which supports foster parents nationwide. As in the case of foster care organisers, author also reminded ngo’s twice of her request to send a survey to professional foster carers in their care. In the invitation, author emphasized her long-term commitment to foster parenting and her desire to hear and empower the voice of foster parents. 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 our country, 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 in the middle of it, in the invitation author honestly gave an estimate of the time it would take to complete it (about 30-40 minutes) and the possibility to complete it in “rounds” (pause function and return to the place where you last finished the 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 minor overlap between group participants. In the invitations published on Facebook, as in the case of the email mailing, to the information of author’s experience of supporting foster parenting and the need to empower the voice of foster carers was mentioned.

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 it was mentioned, 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 potentially have influenced the reach 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, they cannot serve as a benchmark for the sample of professional foster carers obtained by the river sample method, as it is 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 diversity of foster caring forms.

## RESULTS

The online survey gathered responses from 303 respondents – professional foster carers, which represents 10% of the population of this group in our country (3009 at total in Poland; 2019 data) (cf. Table 1). 36 of them completed the questionnaire in 80%, so the answers to 6 questions out of 38 were not provided. The knowledge about them is also less extensive than about the 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, in the survey took part: 5 persons forming kinship foster family (grandparents or siblings), 6 persons – further relatives of a child in foster care – forming a non-professional foster family and 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 outreach to representatives of this group.

The river sample obtained, reflects high degree of the proportions of known characteristics which feathers the group of professional foster parents, such as their distribution in voivodeships and diversity of forms in Poland. As was mentioned, 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 speak of the sample being representative of the population. At most, that 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.

Below the characteristics of the research sample obtained are presented in terms of the territorial distribution of the respondents and their form of foster care (Table 1).

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

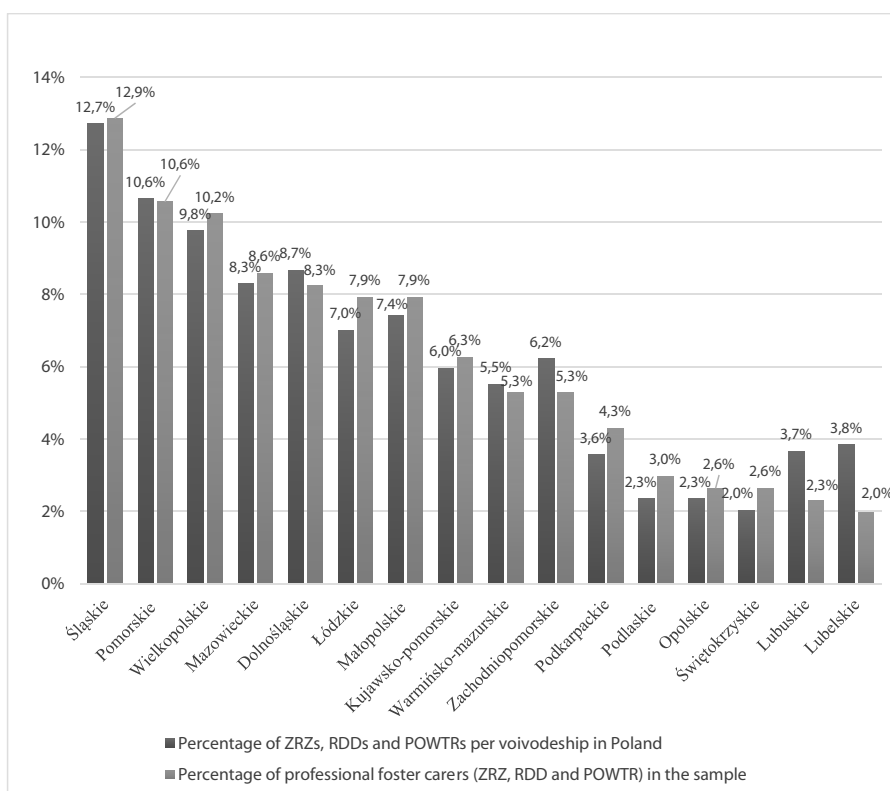
Voivodship	Number of professional foster carers (ZRZ, RDD, POWTR) in Poland	Number of respondents: professional foster carers in the sample	Aggregate percentage of professional foster carers(ZRZ, RDD, POWTR) by voivodship in the population	Total professional foster carers (including ZRZ, RDD and POWTR) in individual voivodeships 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 voivodeship are from 2019. – from GUS (<https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/warunki-zycia/ubostwo-pomoc-spoleczna/pomoc-spoleczna-i-opieka-nad-dzieckiem-i-rodzina-w-2019-roku,10,11.html>) and 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 kept by the voivodeships.

In general, the total share of professional foster carers in each voivodeship in the population and sample was comparable. In both groups, the largest number of professional foster carers was recorded in in the Śląskie, Pomorskie, Wielkopolskie, Dolnośląskie, voivodeships. The largest discrepancy between the population and the obtained sample were registered in the case of Lubelskie and Lubuskie voivodeships – although they do not exceed 2%.

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

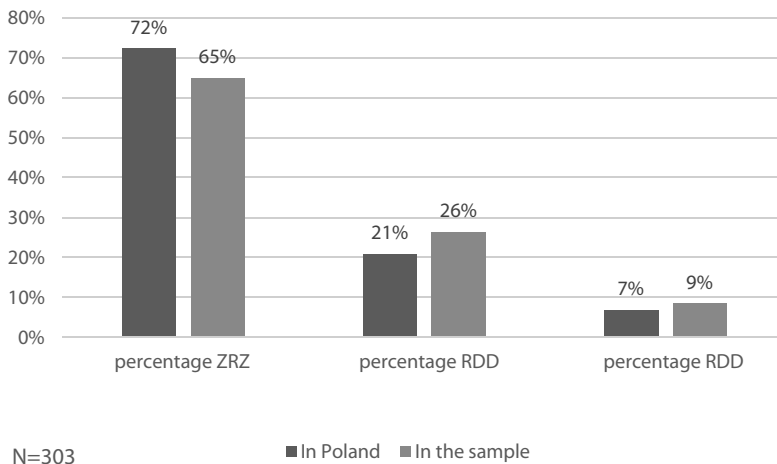


Source: data on the number of professional foster families (ZRZ) and family foster home (RDDs) per voivodship are from 2019. – from GUS (<https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/warunki-zycia/ubostwo-pomoc-spoeczna/pomoc-spoeczna-i-opieka-nad-dzieckiem-i-rodzina-w-2019-roku,10,11.html>) and MRPIPS data.

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 kept by the voivodeships

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, respectively by 21% in the population of professional foster carers and by 26% in the sample and of family-type facilities. That constitutes 7% to 8,6% in the survey. The slight surplus of the last two categories of professional foster carers may be due to their greater formalisation and thus easier access to them – 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 the Central Statistical Office.

Among the helping professions, which include foster carers, women predominate. Data from the Central Statistical Office from 2018 indicate that women in Poland account for approximately 8 out of 10 workers in 'health and social care' and education (GUS, 2018, p. 9). This is also the case of 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/

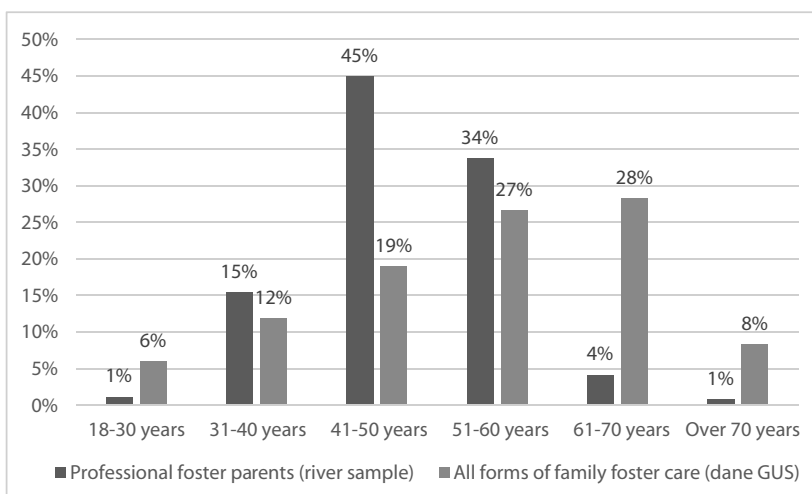


partner (3%), and only 12% alone. According to the Central Statistical Office, for the population of all types of foster carers, the function of foster family or family home was often performed by a single person (44.9% of all cases). This was mainly the case for kinship foster carers.

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.

Compared to the Central Statistical Office 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 – 45.6%. Noticeably, that group of professional foster carers surveyed consisted mainly of middle-aged people. The national statistics show an inflated average age. This is due to the dominance of kinship foster families in our country – most often grandmothers and grandfathers. Yet 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)

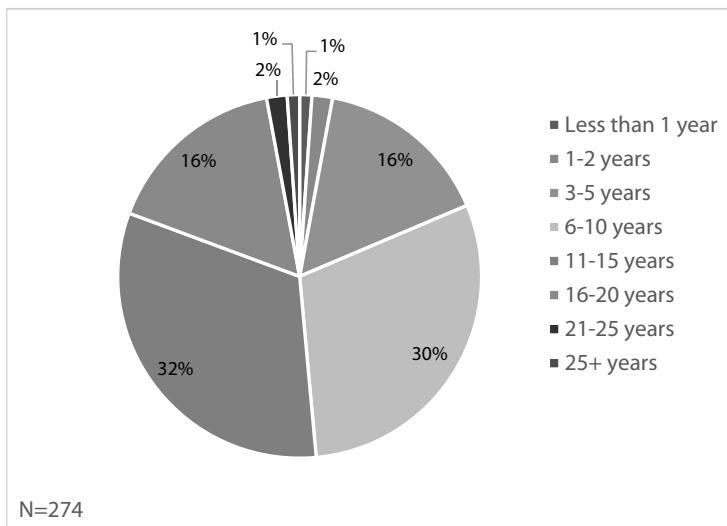


Note: a category of 18-25 was given in the survey, but no one ticked it, so I omit this group from the charts in further analyses.

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.

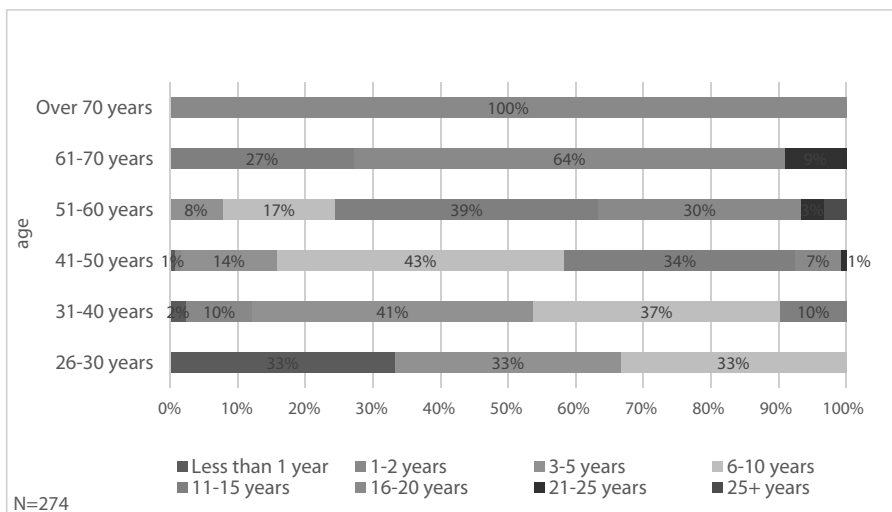
**Figure 4.** Length of time as a foster carer



Source: own survey

A cross-analysis of the metric data allows to conclude that the majority of the professional foster carers surveyed began their adventure of 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 as the age of the respondents increases.

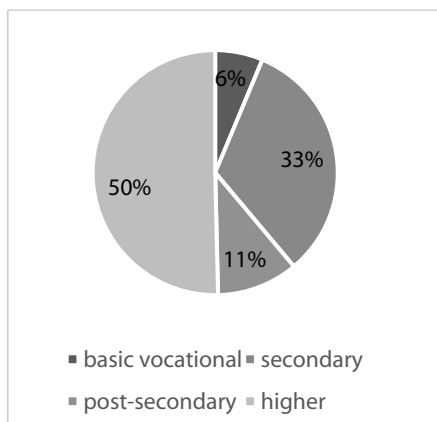
**Figure 5:** Age of foster carers and length of time in the role



Source: own survey

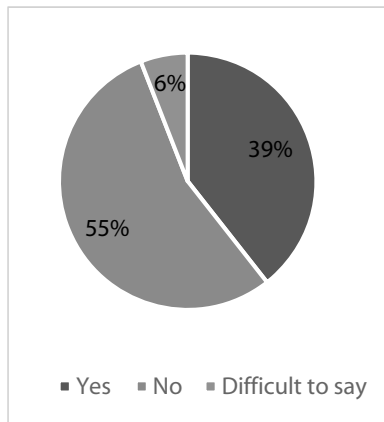
Half of the professional foster carers surveyed have a university degree, 11% a post-secondary degree, 33% a secondary degree and 6% a basic vocational qualification (Figure 6).

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



Source: own survey

**Figure 7.** Profile education of foster carers: psychology, pedagogy, social work



Source: own survey

39% of respondents learned profession 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%. Also among directors of family-type facilities the highest number 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  $\frac{1}{3}$  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 doing some other activity on the Internet (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, for some groups of respondents it is not feasible as in the case of the professional foster carers analysed in the 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 non-probability 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 her 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 results in access to a limited group of foster carers and its 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 last, 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 online survey a sample from which legitimate conclusions can be drawn about the whole population. Rather, it works well for exploratory studies and hard-to-reach groups. Despite the limitations of this method, the presented study obtained a sample that reflects the proportions of the known characteristics of the population of professional foster carers in Poland: their provincial distribution and 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 without access to the web 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 very important to give a 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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