

Families at social risk

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One of the most acute problems of contemporary Estonian society is that some people have been left aside from normal operation of the society, which brings about an increase in the proportion of families who live at social risk. The families that have ended up in a risk group will produce new risk groups – this means that in Estonia the hazards accompanying the underestimation of human resource rapidly grow. Social risk is viewed as a danger to get in a situation where an individual is not able to control his or her further coping. In a wider sense, the danger for Estonian people to get caught up in social risk derive from the economic and social changes characteristic of a transition society, due to which many families get to the verge of risk independent of themselves, because of the so-called external factors.

In my report I will give an analysis of the families living in social risk in Estonian society based on the population surveys “Eesti 93”, “Eesti 98” and “Eesti 2003”. The risk has been defined on the basis of three factors: economic coping of the family, the danger for a family member to become unemployed and chronic disease. The report consists of two parts and in both of them I will deal with the changes that have taken place within the last ten years: a) social factors (the number of people in the family, age, education, the number of children and place of residence) of the families at social risk; b) the most acute personal problems of the members of the families at social risk.

Economic coping of the family. In the last ten years the number of family members who cope very well economically has considerably increased: material resources do not suffice only when bigger purchases are considered. To that degree the proportion of the people has decreased, who can afford to buy only this and that besides food. At the same time the proportion of family members who do not cope so well economically has not decreased in the last five years. Those whose income only covers the cost of food and accommodation formed one quarter of all families in both 1998 and 2003.

The danger of becoming unemployed. Within ten years the sense of security of family members about their jobs has increased. When in 2003 about a half of the respondents were confident they were not threatened by the loss of their job, in 1993 only one third of the family members shared this view. The proportion of people who claim that becoming unemployed is possible has not changed, 40 per cent of the respondents have lived with that knowledge over the period observed. Thus positive changes in the labour market have taken place, but on the other hand, people have maintained a sense of insecurity, the feeling that for certain factors, which do not depend on them, they may lose their job.

Chronic disease as a factor of social risk. Within ten years the number of family members with chronic diseases has somewhat decreased (29% in 2003 and 39% in 1993). In 2003 a half of the people with a chronic disease responded that the illness has reduced their ability to work and learn to some extent. When we add the family members who have fallen ill and have to be absent from work for some time, the health of family members appears to be a rather significant factor of social risk.

In conclusion. In Estonian society besides elderly people young family members in the best years of their working life, especially those who have decided to bring up three or more children in their families, are at social risk. The result of the delay in securing normal coping of the families at social risk is the increase in the number of children living at social risk and their movement towards the factors characteristic of the group of socially excluded (e.g. insufficient education and vocational training, problems with finding a job, etc.) already in adolescence.