

## **SITUATION ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL RISK FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN IN LATVIA**

**Signe Dobelniece**<sup>1+</sup>, PhD; **Jolanta Millere**<sup>1</sup>, Dr.sc.soc; and **Ieva Salmane-Kulikovska**<sup>2</sup>,  
Dr.sc.soc

<sup>1</sup> Latvia University of Agriculture

<sup>2</sup> Riga Stradins University

**Abstract.** Children have rights to grow up in favourable conditions that facilitate their development. But not all children can enjoy this, as there are more than 12 thousand risk families with 6.7% of all the dependent children in Latvia. The aim of the paper is to investigate the situation related to the social risk families in Latvia - to identify problems these families are facing, and to evaluate support provided by the state and the local governments. Situation analysis is based on publicly available statistical data and 24 semi-structured in-depth interviews with heads of social service offices and social work specialists. The research shows that families at social risk are characterized by a variety of problems - poverty, alcohol abuse, violence, unemployment, poor housing and other. Most of the problems are related to poor basic skills or lack of them, also to lack of motivation to change. Support for social risk families is provided by the state and local governments but as research data show, there are obstacles to problem-solving, especially in rural areas - shortage of financial and human resources; inadequate inter-institutional cooperation and coordination of work; and the lack of preventive work. To improve work with social risk families it is essential to elaborate more responsive system of services for families with children, to establish more effective collaboration between professionals and to allocate additional financial resources.

**Key words:** social risk, social risk family, social support.

**JEL code:** I31, I32

### **Introduction**

Children are entitled to such living conditions and favourable social milieu that promote for their wholesome development. Healthy development can only be ensured in families in which needs of all the members are met. However, the statistics show a considerable number of families facing difficulties in this respect, thus threatening healthy development of children in

---

<sup>+</sup> Corresponding author. Tel.: + 371 29419676;  
E-mail address: Signe.Dobelniece@llu.lv

these families. The number of such families is higher in rural areas than in urban areas. In 2011, there were 12,530 social risk families registered in Latvia. These families contain 6.7% of all the dependent children (Millere, Pranka, 2013). Risk families are often large families. In order to support families exposed to social risk, it is essential to establish risk mitigation and prevention system that should be focused not only on providing support in the event of risk occurrence but also on risk assessment and prevention, and such support system for risk families with children has been established in Latvia at the national and municipal levels.

The necessity to support families facing difficulties is provided by the theory of structural functionalism. From the perspective of functionalism system can survive and be sustainable only if all its elements function properly. If some of the elements are dysfunctional, and social risk families can be looked upon as such, the balance is destroyed, and the system's sustainability is threatened.

The aim of the research is to investigate the situation related to the social risk families in Latvia, focusing on rural areas. The following tasks are set: 1) to study the theoretical aspects of social risk; 2) to identify problems these families are facing; 3) to evaluate support provided by the state and the local governments. The study focuses particularly on the capacity of the municipalities to deal with the problems, regarded from the point of view of the social work specialists.

Situation analysis is based on publicly available statistical data that provide information about socio-demographic and socio-economic situation and characterize external risks and background factors of risk families. The study also employs the qualitative research data – 24 semi-structured in-depth interviews with heads of social service offices and social work specialists, working with families with children, from 12 municipalities (Vecumnieki, Nereta, Daugavpils, Balvi, Vilani, Gulbene, Salacgriva, Sigulda, Ape, Strenci, Ventspils and Skrunda municipalities). Interviews were carried out in 2013. The study characterizes the situation and the problems related to social risk families as well as solutions local governments are currently able to provide.

## **Results and discussion**

### **Conceptualization of social risk family**

Although members of the society have always been exposed to certain risks, defining the concept "risk" has become particularly topical in the recent decades. Nowadays risks are analysed using different approaches and methods. All these different approaches possess a common element – distinction between the available and the selected actions. The sociologist Ortwin Renn implies that the concept "risk" denotes possibility that certain human actions or natural events lead to undesirable consequences. Analysing the definition of risk, it can be concluded that the concept of risk comprises three interrelated elements: outcomes that affect aspects of what humans value; possibility of uncertainty as well as the combination of both these elements (Renn, 2008).

Risk can be analysed in three levels – individual level, focusing on a child, family and community levels. In the first level it can be argued that all children are at risk in some way or another; likewise it can be claimed that some children are more exposed to risks than others. For instance, children are seen as at risk if they are disabled, have low self-esteem, have demonstrated behaviour problems or have been abused. Alternatively, it is possible to claim that children themselves should not be looked upon as being at risk – risks are caused rather by the environment in which they develop. It could be proposed that the family in which a child grows is a source of risk. According to the second approach\_family-related risk factors, such as poverty, single parenthood, low parental education levels, a large number of children, not owning a house, welfare dependence, family dysfunction, abuse, parental mental illness, parental substance use, and family discord or illness have been found to undermine child's development. The third approach focuses on community, neighbourhood or school as risk-involving environment. For example, a low-income community with a high crime rate, high level unemployment and low high-school graduation rate might be viewed as a place that puts children and adolescents at risk of poor outcomes (Anderson Moore, 2006).

Identifying risks it is sometimes impossible to distinguish between these levels. For instance, defining what children at risk are, the phrase is sometimes used to refer to poor life outcomes in general. Also when outcomes for children are mentioned, there is a tendency to refer to general, long-term deficits, such as school failure, death, economic dependency or incarceration. Consistent with its aim, the current study focuses on theoretic explanations of the risk phenomenon related particularly to the families with children.

In scientific literature different family-related indicators of risk can be found; however, the current study addresses the indicators of social risk in families with children: economic stress issues; substance abuse, child abuse and neglect issues, domestic violence; child development issues; changes in typical behaviour; other factors which contribute to the family's inability to deal with stress in a way that is healthy and productive (Definition of Families...).

The main criteria for identifying social risk families in Latvia are capabilities of these families to satisfy the needs of the children. Social risk family is a family in which healthy development of children is endangered, basic needs, including emotional needs of children, are not met and children are at risk of losing care of their biological families (Latvijas SOS Bernu..., 2013)

The association SOS Children's Villages Latvia points out three levels of risks (Latvijas SOS Bernu..., 2013). The level of risk indicates potential deficit in meeting basic needs of children and the risk of being separated from families; level of risk is also denoted by the activities of a caregiver in search for help and willingness to accept offered help and support. Risk factors are related to the caregiver's ability to recognize child's needs, to participate in child's care as well as to practical capacities and resources available to the caregiver.

Every child has the right to grow up with their parents. Children who have been separated from their parents are more often exposed to violence, exploitation and maltreatment. Therefore, it is important to support risk families. If the support is provided, children are more

often protected from violence and abuse, do not live on the street or face the risk of being separated from their parents and placed in institutions (Families at Risk).

To summarize the above mentioned, families can be exposed to risk for a number of reasons: different kinds of violence, unemployment, drug abuse and mental illness – these are just few of the risk factors that have a direct impact on the development of children. Insufficient resources and poverty are particularly important risk factors.

### Characteristics of the situation

The population of Latvia amounts to approximately 2 million; 17.3% of them are children under the age of 18. About 1/4 of all households are households with children (Central Statistical Bureau..., 2014).

The figures characterizing socio-economic situation and living conditions show that all indicators in Latvia are worse than the European average: unemployment rate is 15.0%, long-term unemployment rate is 7.8%, at-risk-of-poverty rate is 19.4%, severe material deprivation rate is 19.6%, and at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate amounts to 36.6% (EUROSTAT). Data show that the situation of families with children is worse than the average, especially of single-parent families and families with three and more children (Table 1).

Table 1

#### Characteristic of material situation (%)

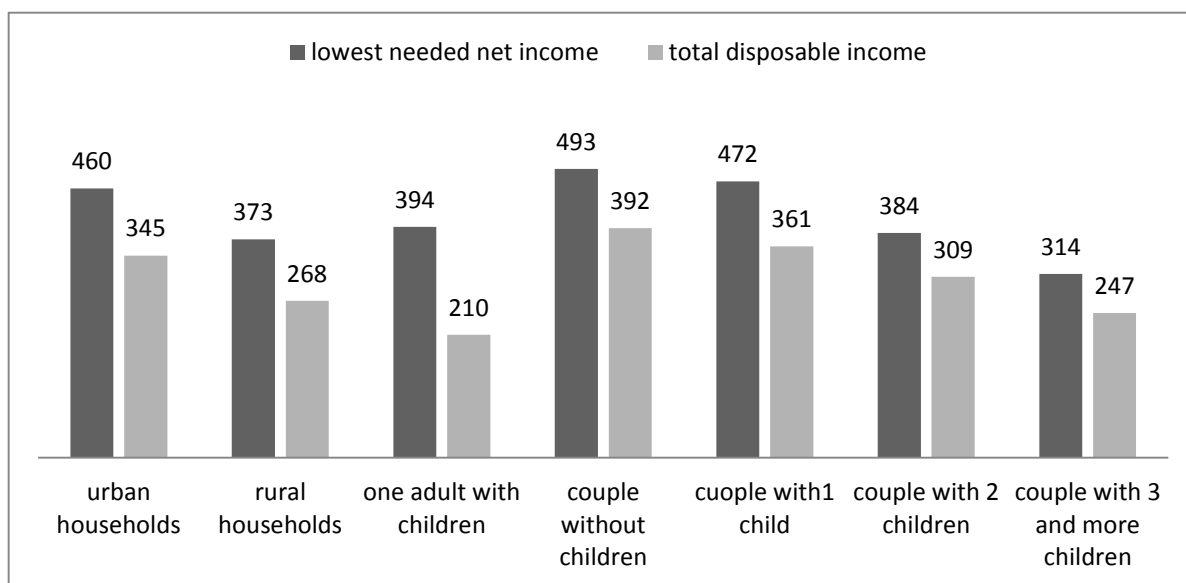
Household type	At-risk-of-poverty rate	Subjective evaluation of the ability to make ends meet	
		with great difficulty	with difficulty
All households	19.4	27.0	29.6
single parent with children	38.3	34.1	31.7
2 adults with 1 dependent child	14.5	14.3	26.1
2 adults with 2 dependent children	16.0	18.5	23.8
2 adults with 3 and more dependent children	32.6	36.9	27.0

*Source: authors' calculations based on the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2014*

Consumption expenditure by number of children in household shows the same trend: average per-household member expenditure for those without children is EUR 316 monthly, and it decreases as the number of children increases, reaching EUR 150 for households with three and more children (Central Statistical Bureau ..., 2014). Unfavourable financial situation of households is characterized also by data that show significant difference between the lowest net income necessary to make ends meet and the total disposable income. The trend that families with children, particularly single-parent families and those in rural areas, are in worse position is obvious (Figure 1).

Data show that households in rural areas have more difficulties to meet their children needs. The number of those families who cannot afford three meals a day, fruits and

vegetables, new cloths, two pairs of shoes for children is almost twice higher in rural than urban areas (Latvijas Republikas Centrala..., 2013).



Source: authors' construction based on *Income and Living Conditions in Latvia, 2013, 2014*

Fig. 1. Comparison between the lowest necessary and disposable income (EUR)

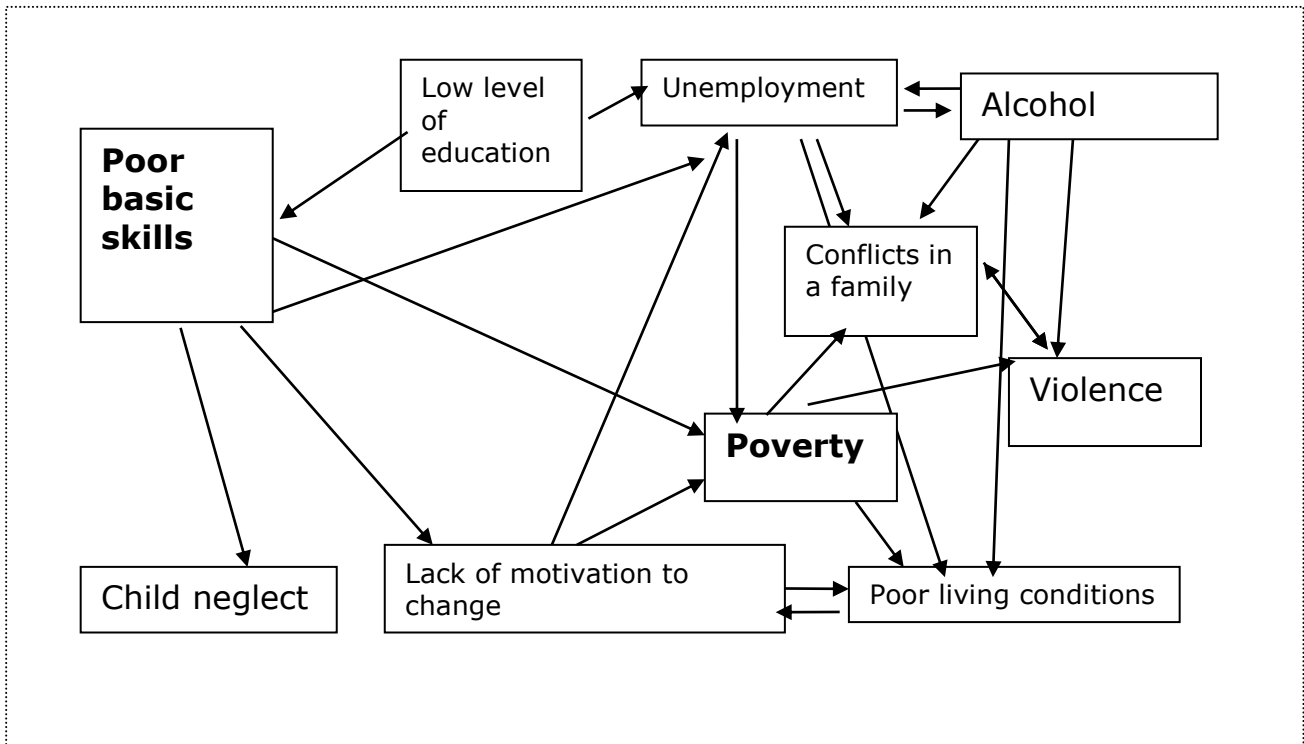
The figures above can be used to characterize the socio-economic situation but they do not have any other practical application, because only individuals with a status of a needy person (income less than EUR 128.06) are eligible for social assistance. Since this is a very low level of income, the number of needy persons is relatively small, amounting to 10.3% in 2012 (Informacija par pasvaldibu..., 2013), however, 19.8 % of children had the status of a needy person in 2011 (Millere, Pranka, 2013); it means that about 1/5 of all children have difficulties to meet their basic needs.

Socio-economic problems are important but they are not the only problems families are facing (Figure 2). The interviews' data show that families at social risk are characterized by excessive alcohol consumption, physical and emotional violence, lack of mutual conformity, unemployment, housing problems and the lack of opportunities for self-realization. Most problems of risk families are related to poor basic skills or complete lack of them, also to lack of motivation to change and to improve their living conditions.

Social workers point to insufficient involvement of social services in developing basic social skills of these families as well as to a variety of methods and resources that could be used to teach the necessary skills, e.g. involving family assistants, developing social housing, providing training to young families, developing youth homes:

*"...there would not be many families at social risk, if there were possibilities of timely training skills to raise children..."* (Ventspils municipality), *"...work should be implemented with mothers to teach them basic skills – cooking, cleaning, doing the laundry, shopping. Then there would not be so many children that have to be taken off their parents. We are ready to*

pay for a supporting person. Before the crisis [these provisions] were included in the binding documents; during the crisis [they] were taken out..." (Skrunda municipality); "...some families are unable to function – they do not know how to survive with their low income; they have low requirements for life and they are unwilling to change life, find a job... It would be necessary for family assistants to work with these families, ideally – in group-homes for low income families..." (Sigulda municipality).



Source: the summary of data based on the results of in-depth interviews

Fig. 2. Main problems and causes related to families at risk

The issue of the lack of basic skills is particularly topical for young people when they leave institutional care: "...young people after non-family care lose the granted housing, because they do not know how to live...what to do?... youth house is needed at least for one year after leaving an institutional care..." (Balvi municipality).

The informants also point to the widespread lack of motivation to develop and improve the living conditions: "...there is the lack of professional work with parents. For example, in the situation when the child is put in a children's home, parents do nothing to get the child back. How to motivate, to achieve that family is interested in recovering?" (Nereta municipality)

Informants also note other problems that are specific to the risk families, e.g. violence, excessive alcohol consumption, inadequate housing conditions. It is also pointed to the insufficient resources of the municipalities to solve the problem and to render help and support to these families. "... female victims of violence – they have nothing, just a psychologist. About 12 women at the moment are in need of a professional rehabilitation... our resources cannot ensure it... we do not have addiction specialists, just general practitioners. To see the

*addiction specialist, a person should travel 35 kilometres to Rezekne – who of these people in the country have such sum of money? We do nothing, just talk and extort benefits.”* (Vilani municipality).

The study also demonstrates the opinion that problems for the families at risk are often inherited, and there is lack of positive examples.

### **Support by the state and municipalities and factors restricting it**

The state and municipalities are obliged to provide support to families with children, particularly to large families. Social assistance and wide range of social services are offered to these families. Much attention is paid to material assistance – for supporting families and children LVL 160 million (approx. EUR 227 million) were used in 2011; 82.4% came from the State budget and 17.6% were allocated by the local governments (Latvijas Republikas Centrālā...,2013).

The State issues universal benefits - childbirth allowance, childcare benefit, parental benefit, state family benefit, state social security benefit etc. These payments are mostly flat-rate or related to social insurance. Unfortunately universal benefits are not flexible, as they do not consider material situation of a particular family. Local governments that provide support have more potential to respond to particular risks after evaluating the particular situation.

Provision of social assistance is mainly responsibility of the local governments, and it is means-tested. Local governments provide guaranteed minimum income benefit, housing benefit, benefit in emergency situations and other benefits to support the poorest persons. But they fail to address the problems because of inadequacy of these benefits and low coverage. For example, in 2012 only 54% of needy persons, including 33 thousand children, received the guaranteed minimum income benefit, 75% - the housing benefit (Informācija par pasvaldību..., 2013). However, social assistance has impact on the improvement of material situation of households. According to the statistics, 26.8% of the income of single-parent families and 18.4% of the income of large families come from social transfers (Latvijas Republikas Centrālā..., 2013); at-risk-of-poverty rate before all social transfers is 43.0% but after transfers it is reduced significantly to 19.4% (Income and Living..., 2014). In 2015, certain increase of state social benefits is planned.

Social services, reimbursed by both the state and the local governments, are available for families. The State provides social rehabilitation for children – for the victims of violence; for drug-addicts, for persons with visual or hearing disabilities, for working-age persons with functional disabilities etc. Other services are under the responsibility of local governments but the available services fail to address all the necessities due to the limited financial coverage.

The study results show that specialists of social services are not satisfied with the result available resources can ensure. The informants mostly point to the lack of financial resources as main obstacle to providing support and implementing the work successfully. There is opinion that support to the families-in-need is often limited to the identification of the

problem: "...there are cases, when during ten consultations problem is identified but what to do after? Nothing happens after that." (Ventspils municipality). "...we could rehabilitate much more families, for instance, those having conflict situations but we cannot do it, because we do not have money. We would like to isolate family members who had suffered from violence but it is not possible. We have a crisis room but the abuser may access it. To purchase this service for twenty days – it is expensive..." (Ape municipality). The problem of limited resources as the obstacle to obtaining good results was mentioned by nearly all the informants.

Other reasons unrelated to the scarce financial resources were also mentioned. Social workers consider inter-institutional cooperation to be weak and ineffective; there is also a lack of coordination between various specialists involved – each specialist is doing something but the work is not oriented towards a common goal. Problem-solving is also hindered by the lack of necessary skills: "No teamwork... Specialists also frequently lack necessary competencies and skills..." (Strenci municipality). The informants possess an opinion that education establishments should be more involved in problem identification and solving already in the period of adolescence; they should cooperate more but the current experience shows that cooperation with schools is very difficult, and as the result of this families acquire social risk status: "...cooperation with schools is required, and the cooperation is not always positive. Children run away from schools, and these schools do not attempt to solve the problem – the social service can do nothing in such situations..." (Ventspils municipality). "...we face difficulties cooperating with schools because they lack understanding of who should do what..." (Nereta municipality).

It is also pointed to insufficient human resources; more social workers to work with families and children and also skilled service providers are essential to ensure successful work implementation. Services should be more available and accessible – closer to the residences. "We need more social workers to work with families and children – there is only one social worker for work with families per 5,000 population. This is not the right approach... there is a shortage of service providers; those who are available are not always providing the best result, for instance, school psychologists and social pedagogues are worth nothing – they work just with children and are subjected to the management of the institution. Schools do not want to cooperate. Also a speech therapist is only diagnosing..." (Balvi municipality).

It is claimed that, solving problems related to risk families, too much emphasis is put on the material aspect and there is a lack of preventive work; the family is underestimated at the national level. "...the state mostly cares about the material aspect but there is a need of the preventive care ...." (Balvi municipality). "...in general, all the public policy is not focused on the family; the family is not a value, and everything results out of this..." (Ventspils municipality).

The social workers express an opinion that work with risk families is less effective also because local government members have limited awareness of the activities of social services: "...they do not understand what we are doing and for what purpose..." (Vilani



municipality). Most social service professionals lack different kinds of resources when rendering support to the risk families, and this fact is a serious obstacle to a successful problem solution.

However, the lack of resources is not the only problem. The study also points to the internal risks – particular characteristics of the clients – that lead to the current problems “...*rural municipalities have limited resources but the worst thing is our clients’ lack of responsibility and low motivation to improve their living conditions...*” (Balvi municipality).

The current study shows that the problems are mostly attributed to low basic skills and low motivation for improving living conditions, and these factors cannot be prevented by granting additional financial resources to the risk families. In the current situation social services are financially supporting these families but this support turns out to be short-term, as the causes of the problem remain. In order to improve the situation, the work of social service specialists has to be intensified and the range of available social services widened.

## **Conclusions**

Children are entitled to such living conditions and favourable social environment that promote for their healthy development. However, these conditions are not ensured for many children, because 6.7% from all the children in Latvia live in risk families.

The scientific literature presents different understandings regarding the concepts “risk” and “risk family”. This study defines risk family as a family in which favourable preconditions for wholesome development of children are not satisfied, basic needs, including emotional, are neglected, and the risk of losing the biological family care is persistent.

Risk families with children are facing a variety of different problems: poverty, social exclusion, violence, unemployment, drug abuse etc. In social work specialists’ opinion, most crucial factors that contribute to social risk are lack of basic skills and lack of motivation to change and to improve one’s living conditions; problems for the families at risk are often inherited, and there is lack of positive examples.

Wide range of support for social risk families is provided by the state and local governments. Main focus is on the material support – allowances and benefits; however, social services are offered to risk families, too. Social work specialists are aware of the importance of the material assistance to these families; yet they acknowledge that this support does not address all the problems of risk families, because material assistance neglects causes of the problems, therefore professional social work with risk families is essential.

The main obstacle to problem-solving, especially in rural areas, is shortage of resources – financial and human as well as shortcomings related to inter-institutional cooperation, coordination of work; also inadequate understanding of the problem and the lack of preventive work. Effective and responsive system of services for families with children as well as more effective collaboration between professionals and allocation of additional financial resources to

improve quality of the social services is crucial and needs to be coupled with additional support for the most vulnerable population.

## Bibliography

1. Anderson Moore, K. (2006). *Defining the Term "At Risk"*. Retrieved: <http://www.childtrends.org/wpcontent/uploads/2006/01/DefiningAtRisk1.pdf>. Access: 22.11.2014.
2. Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia. (2014). *Children in Latvia. Collection of Statistical Data*. Riga. Retrieved: <http://www.csb.gov.lv/en/dati/e-publikacijas/children-latvia-2014-38527.html>. Access: 16.09.2012
3. *Definition of Families at Risk or of High Risk Families*. Retrieved: [http://www.umchs.org/umchsresources/administration/workplan/Education/E05\\_Comprehensive\\_Parent\\_Staff\\_Conference/Definition\\_of\\_High\\_Risk\\_Families.pdf](http://www.umchs.org/umchsresources/administration/workplan/Education/E05_Comprehensive_Parent_Staff_Conference/Definition_of_High_Risk_Families.pdf)). Access: 22.12.2014.
4. EUROSTAT. *At-Risk-of-Poverty Rate after Social Transfers by Sex*. Retrieved: <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=tps00184&plugin=1>. Access: 28.12.2014.
5. *Families at Risk*. Retrieved: <http://www.childhood.org/project-reports/families-at-risk/>. Access: 22.12.2014.
6. *Income and Living Conditions in Latvia, 2013. Collection of Statistical Data*. (2014). Riga. Retrieved: <http://www.csb.gov.lv/dati/e-publikacijas/ienakumi-un-dzives-apstakli-latvija-2013gada-40553.html>. Access: 22.12.2014.
7. *Informacija par Pasvaldību Sniegto Sociālo Palīdzību 2010., 2011. un 2012. gada*. (Information on Municipal Social Assistance in 2010, 2011 and 2012) (2013) Retrieved: [polsis.mk.gov.lv/LoadAtt/file5666.xls](http://polsis.mk.gov.lv/LoadAtt/file5666.xls). Access: 28.12.2014.
8. Latvijas Republikas Centrālā statistikas pārvalde. (2013). *Bērni Latvijā*. (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia. *Children in Latvia*). Retrieved: <http://www.csb.gov.lv/dati/e-publikacijas/berni-latvija-2013-38420.html>. Access 22.12.2014.
9. Latvijas SOS Bērnu ciematu asociācija. (2013) *Gimenu Stiprināšanas Sociālās Rehabilitācijas Pakalpojumu Konceptija*. (The association SOS Children's Villages Latvia. *Conception of Social Rehabilitation Services for Family Strengthening*) Retrieved: <http://www.sosbernuciemati.lv/lv/ko-mes-daram/informativie-materiali/>. Access: 2.12.2014.
10. Millere, J., Pranka, M. (2013). *Sociālajam Riskam Pakļauto Gimenu Situācijas Analīze Latvijā. Pētījums*. (Situation Analysis of Families Exposed to Social Risk. Research). Retrieved: <http://www.sosbernuciemati.lv/lv/ko-mes-daram/informativie-materiali/> Access: 28.12.2014.
11. Ortwin, R. (2008). *Risk Governance: Coping with Uncertainty in a Complex World*. Retrieved: <https://books.google.lv/books?id=aaPZ5LKgaU4C&pg=PR5&dq=Renn,+2008&hl=lv&sa=X&ei=B6aeVJSN8fCywOF7oGYCw&ved=0CB8Q6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=Renn%2C%202008&f=false>) Access: 22.11.2014.