



Latvia

Tackling child poverty and promoting the social inclusion of children

A Study of National Policies

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Summary

Like in other EU Member States, the demographic situation in Latvia is characterised by the ageing of the population and a low birth rate. In view of the demographic situation in the country, governments have identified the improvement of support to families with children as one of the key priorities, in particular emphasising the significance of consolidating family values in society.

The situation analysis reveals the following main problems regarding child poverty and social exclusion in Latvia:

- a high poverty risk in particular in single-parent families and in large families with three and more children;
- insufficient possibilities for reconciling work and family life;
- a high level of neonate mortality and child traumatism;
- a high level of drop-outs from schools of basic education and vocational education;
- a high number of children and youths with a low level of basic skills;
- a comparatively high number of children in social care institutions;
- the spread of violence against children in families and social care institutions;
- an increase in the number of children with addiction problems;
- problems in integrating children with special needs in the system of general education and in the community at large.

The Ministry of Children and Family Affairs and the Ministry of Welfare may be mentioned as the main institutions dealing with the coordination of child poverty and social exclusion issues at national level.

Although national policy does not define specific objectives concerning the reduction of child poverty and social exclusion, priorities identified by the Government as well as sectoral policies implemented by various ministries, cover the most relevant problem issues to a greater or lesser degree.

The policy of child poverty reduction is perceived mostly through the prism of social benefits and material support established for families. Alongside with poverty issues, other risk factors of the social exclusion of children are covered in the current policies on a more extensive scale. Those areas and aspects that are more emphasised in national policy are possibilities for the child to grow up in a family environment, thus focusing on the work with families in crisis situations and also developing forms of alternative family care. Another area of activity declared by national policy is related to the protection of rights of children and the improvement of the safety of children (reduction of violence against children, a safe environment, etc.). The third area to be mentioned is the improvement of the availability and quality of education for children as well as the integration of children with disabilities into the system of general education and society.

In separate areas, there is evidence of an emergence of positive trends in identifying problems, outlining the necessary areas of activity in the policy-planning process, as well as in implementing certain policy measures in addressing the problems.

The analysis of the political framework is indicative of the fact that the main problems are not related to lack in, or inefficiency of the legal framework, but mainly to the existing policy and the implementation of policy measures in practice. Recognising the importance and necessity of the implemented and planned policy measures, more attention should be paid to the development and improvement of preventive measures, as well as implementation of more targeted measures for definite groups of children subjected to risk of social exclusion. One more recommendation to improve the policy implementation is to use a differentiated approach, particularly in evaluation of different urban and rural problems. The approach used in national policy — to cover a definite problem to be solved in general and within a common framework — can reduce efficiency of the implemented measures.

Therefore, it would be advisable to concentrate on definite priorities in a definite time-period in order to gain maximum benefits from the invested resources.

1. Situation analysis

At the beginning of 2006, the population in Latvia had reached 2 294 000 inhabitants. During the last decade, the ratio of children at the age of 0-17 against the total number of the population has continued to decline. In 2005, the ratio of children against the total number of the population was 18.9 %. It is only during the last three years that a positive trend has emerged for the birth rate indicators to stabilise.

1.1. Income and risk of poverty

According to data of the Central Bureau of Statistics (CSB) from the EU-SILC survey of 2005, in 2004, the at-risk-of-poverty rate in Latvia was 19 %. It was higher than the average indicator in the EU only in four other EU Member States. However, data show that in several household groups the risk of poverty in Latvia was considerably higher than average in the EU countries, for example for households consisting of a single-parent family and three or more children. The risk of poverty in such households in Latvia was the third highest in the EU.

The analysis of households in different demographic groups (see annex, Table 1) according to the incomes at their disposal, gives grounds to conclude that in the course of several years, the lowest incomes have persisted for two household types that are most exposed to the social exclusion risk — households where the child is brought up by only one of the parents as well as families with three and more children.

It must be pointed out that in comparison with indicators for 2004 (see annex, Table 2), trends have remained unchanged.

The key factors influencing household economic resources are the proportion of employed household members and dependents in households. In those households where the ratio of employed members is low, the disposable household income is also comparatively low.

Likewise, the number of children (under the age of 18) in the family is another factor that has a significant impact on the material welfare of the household: with the number of children in the family increasing, the disposable household income declines. Families with many children (three and more children) as well as single-parent families where one of the parents brings up the children must take into account that they may encounter the most serious material problems.

According to preliminary results from the research 'Causes and duration of unemployment and social exclusion' supported by the European Social Fund (ESF), there are no significant statistical differences as regards the poverty level for Latvian and other ethnic composition families (lone-parent families and families with three and more children, entitled to the guaranteed minimum income — GMI¹ in 2007 were analysed).

There are also grounds for concern because in Latvia there is practically no change in the ratio of children in the groups of population with low income levels (see annex, Table 3). Although information about the intergenerational inheritance of poverty was collected for the first time in Latvia within the framework of the EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) survey of 2005, still currently these data are not yet available.

The State and municipalities provide material support to families with children in the form of various benefits. State benefits can be subdivided into two groups: benefits of a universal character (the family State benefit, the childbirth benefit, the childcare benefit, etc.) and benefits for specific categories of families (the benefit to a disabled child, the adoption benefit, the benefit for the performance of guardian's duties, etc.). If they are allocated irrespective of the family income level, it should be admitted that State benefits for families with children are small, especially, the State family benefit. In the context of the present report it is very important to assess assistance provided by municipalities to families with children as it is based on the assessment of the material situation of the family.

During the last five-year period, more than 30 % of children have been beneficiaries of municipal social assistance. In 2005, municipal income-tested benefits were received by 39 103 families with 78 461 children. Only 32.9 % of all families who received benefits received the GMI benefits². The GMI benefit amount should be assessed as very low because in 2005 it amounted only to 53.3 % of the poverty level.³

Likewise low-income families with children are granted and also paid other benefits, such as free meals at school or the kindergarten. In 2005, these benefits were received by 34 089 children. Several municipalities pay benefits for the education and upbringing of children, which in 2005 were received by 44 381 children. Municipalities are forced to address problems of high housing costs and their restricted availability by paying apartment benefits to families with children as well.

In 2004, the alimony guarantee fund was launched. According to the data of the alimony guarantee fund administration, in July 2006, the fund provided means of sustenance for 16 642 children, attributing these means to 11 249 parents.

¹ With income under LVL 27 per person per month.

² Summary on Statistical Overviews of the Social Services Board of the Ministry of Welfare of the Republic of Latvia for 2005.

³ Income level per person in a month so that this person (family) is recognised as poor.

1.2. Employment status for families with children and reconciliation of work and family life

According to Eurostat data, in Latvia, share of children aged 0-17 living in jobless households in 2006 was 7.1. In the period from 2000 a decrease in this indicator can be observed (13.0 in 2000).

The analysis of employment possibilities for families with children identifies several types of families that encounter difficulties as regards the possibility of entering the labour market. The following may be mentioned:

- families with children of preschool age, in particular large families with many children and single-parent families;
- families who take care of a sick child or a disabled child.

One of the factors that influence employment possibilities is the availability of childcare services. Over the recent years, the issue of insufficient number of places at kindergartens has become very topical. At the end of 2005, there were 15 080 children of preschool age on the waiting list for admission to preschool educational institutions (see annex, Table 4).

In-depth interviews conducted within the framework of the national programme 'Studies of the Ministry of Welfare'⁴ financed by the ESF, revealed that in a majority of cases, mothers in large families with many children do not have any salaried jobs. In part it is related to the cultural norm, widespread in Latvia; it is better that the mother herself takes care of a small child, as well as the actual burden and worries of the practical daily routine. Even if a woman chose salaried employment, most probably in financial terms she would not be capable of covering the costs of hiring a nanny. Childcare possibilities in kindergartens are also limited due to the waiting lists as well as in view of the required financial investments (a mother mentioned the 'participation fee' of LVL 20 per month, which is a considerably sum for a large family with many children). However, if the women are employed, then they work in underpaid and unqualified jobs — for example, as maids or salesladies. This situation ensues, to a large extent, from the labour market structure in rural districts. In part it is also related to the fact that it is complicated to combine career development, that requires much time and energy, with care for several children.

Although the material support provided by the State to families with disabled children is gradually increasing, still it is insufficient to be able to pay for the childcare services or to use services provided by care centres. Besides, day care services for disabled children are underdeveloped and are not provided for the whole territory of Latvia. Thus, parents, most frequently mothers, are denied the possibility of integrating into the labour market.

In Latvia, a child may start to work from the age of 15. Youth unemployment is one of the topical problem issues. It is important to point out that in most cases the education of unemployed youth is similar to the educational level acquired by their parents. Results of the survey among pupils of night schools also show that the education acquired by parents has a considerable impact on the perceptions of young people about acquiring education — most

⁴ Interim results of the study 'Causes and duration of unemployment and social exclusion' (in Latvian).

frequently it is young people whose parents have acquired higher education, who want to continue their studies after graduating from an evening school ⁵.

1.3. Health

Infant mortality is one of the indicators that gives an impression about the general health situation of the population, characterises the prenatal and postnatal healthcare as well as the social situation in the country. In 2005, in comparison with 2004, the indicator of infant mortality has improved — in 2005 it was 7.8 ‰ live births in comparison with 9.4 ‰ live births in 2004. Still Latvia has the highest infant mortality among the EU Member States.

The United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef) in its publication *Progress for Children (2004)* points out that Latvia is the only country in Europe, except for Georgia and Russia, where the number of deaths of children aged five and under has not been considerably reduced since 1990. During the last years, the indices have decreased, although they are still very high compared to other EU Member States.

It should be noted that on the whole, child mortality during the last few years is declining (see annex, Table 5), but it is still very high, especially by external causes.

In 2005 the total frequency of neonate morbidity has declined — from 405.8 cases of illness per 1 000 live births in 2004 to 382 cases of illness per 1 000 live births in 2005.

Although insignificantly, still during the decade there has been some improvement in the health condition of children and teenagers (see annex, Table 6). A positive trend to be noted is that on the whole the ratio of children and teenagers in the 3rd health group is declining ⁶.

However, as established by the researchers of the Institute of the Philosophy and Sociology of the University of Latvia ⁷, physicians find increased deterioration of health in poor families with children, especially, in poor rural families with children where more frequently lingering illnesses can be observed than in poor urban families with children, because for them, receiving medical aid becomes more expensive due to transport costs to the city to see specialists. Health problems of poor children are often caused by unfavorable social conditions: low quality food, minimal opportunity to take vitamins, poor housing conditions (unheated and

⁵ 'Integration of under-educated minority youth into the labour market', Baltic Institute of Social Sciences, Riga, 2006, pp.10-11 (in Latvian).

⁶ 1st health group: Healthy children without chronic diseases. In the observation period no complicated acute diseases were identified. There are no organs or systems functions pathology. The physical and mental development corresponds to the age.
2nd health group: Children with chronic diseases development threats. Acute diseases often occur with complications in the convalescence period; tiredness, high irritability, sleeping disorders are observed. Infants (until one year of age) have a troubled obstetrical (toxicosis, etc.) and genealogical anamnesis. There are functional disorders. The physical development is normal, it can be the first grade weight deficiency. Corresponding neuropsychical development.

3rd health group: Children with chronic diseases in compensatory, subcompesatory or decompensatory stage. Hereditary organ or systems pathology. Functional pathology. The physical development corresponds to the age or the 1st or 2nd stage weight disorders. The neuropsychical development is backward or normal.

⁷ Research 'Sociālās atstumtības riska faktoriu identificēšana trūcīgo ģimeņu bērniem', LU Filozofijas un socioloģijas institūts, 2002.

damp premises), lack of rehabilitation possibilities, enduring stress, depression, living in poverty.

According to the number of hospitalised children, the first place is held by the morbidity of diseases of the respiratory system. In turn, injuries, poisoning and other consequences of external impacts (9.7 % children aged 0-14 and 17.6 % of teenagers) were the second most frequent cause of in-patient treatment for children. This indicator also characterises to a certain extent the insufficient attention that is paid to child safety.

A positive development that should be noted is that in general, there is evidence in Latvia of a stable tendency for the immunisation level to grow. In 2005, the immunisation level against almost all contagious diseases in the inoculation calendar for children reached the desirable inoculation level of 95 %.

It must be noted that the tuberculosis morbidity indicator among children and teenagers should be assessed as high (20 per 100 000 children under the age of 17 in 2005). Although during the period since 2001, when this indicator was at its highest, there has been evidence of a trend for the morbidity level to decline, still in 2005 the same indicator is higher than for the period of 1990-97.

According to the data of the Ministry of Health, in 2005 there has been a decrease in the number of new cases of HIV diagnosis among children — eight new HIV cases have been diagnosed, which is 14 cases less than in 2004 (22 cases in 2004). In 2005 three children were diagnosed with AIDS, constituting 4 % of the total number of AIDS patients.

Although the number of terminated pregnancies has been gradually decreasing, still in comparison with other countries it is very high. The number of terminated pregnancies among minors still persists in remaining high, which gives grounds for serious concern (see annex, Table 7).

According to the data of the Ministry of Health, in 2005 in comparison with 2003 and 2004, the number of underage mothers has increased, i.e. 451 teenagers gave birth to a child at the age of 15-17 (440 in 2004).

1.4. Education

Analysing education as one of the factors influencing the social exclusion risk, it is essential to note the accessibility of education and the educational level of children.

The number of children who do not attend school is still increasing. There were 311 661 children of the compulsory schooling age registered by the Population Register in 2005 (331 942 in 2004). However, 281 454 children have been registered within educational institutions (287 230 in 2004), of whom 2 658 of the compulsory schooling age did not attend school (2 592 in 2004). The difference between the data of the Population Register and data of educational institutions constitutes approximately 10 % of children in the respective age group. There is no precise information on the ratio of children with health disorders and disabled children against the total number of children not attending school. It must be pointed out that it is possible that data of registers are not complete. Therefore it is not possible to adequately assess the reliability of this high ratio.

In general education, as well as in vocational education, there are a high number of children who do not graduate from educational institutions or who are dismissed from schools. The main factors to be mentioned are the weak academic progress of pupils and absence from school.

In the study year of 2005/06, 1 965 pupils finished primary school without a certificate (2 593 pupils in the study year of 2004/05) and 421 pupils graduated from secondary school without a certificate (586 pupils in the study year of 2004/05). The total number of pupils who had to repeat the year in day schools of general education was 8 485 in the study year of 2005/06.

The analysis of the data of the Ministry of Education and Science shows that starting with the study year of 2001/02 there is an increasingly more pronounced trend emerging — the largest number of pupils are dismissed from school in grades 6-10. As a rule, these are young people at the age of 12 to 16 or older (mostly boys) who thus could be viewed as a high-risk group. It is also confirmed by the fact that in this particular age grade group (from the 6th to the 9th grade) — has the largest number of pupils who have to repeat the year twice or thrice.

The largest number of students from vocational educational institutions were dismissed in the first two years of studies: in 2001, 76.4 % were dismissed, and 71.8 % in 2004 (of the total number of dismissed students). According to the first action programme 'Human resources and employment', a large part of students enter vocational education institutions with a low level of knowledge (in 2006, 366 students were admitted to vocational educational institutions with unfinished primary education) and low motivation to study; a large proportion of students come from low-income or socially disadvantaged families. A very large number of students terminate their studies, as the financial situation of families and the situation of orphans does not enable them to live in dormitories of educational institutions and cover transport costs for commuting from home. In contrast to students of higher educational institutions and colleges, the loan system is not applied at secondary education level. Often vocational educational institutions have to perform more of a social than an educational function.

Similar problems are encountered by persons with a low level of prior knowledge or functional disorders. Lack of adapted (special) schools, appropriate programmes and social support deny these individuals the possibility of acquiring knowledge and skills required for working life. In this respect, work on professional career guidance and career education at educational institutions and the availability of appropriate education for persons with a low level of prior knowledge or functional disorders is of paramount importance.

The large number of pupils in primary education, who have graduated from school without a certificate, creates a risk that in future these young persons will not have any opportunity of finding a sufficiently remunerated job, thus they are exposed to the poverty risk and the risk of being excluded from active social life. A large number of pupils have a low level of basic skills and a low competence level. In 2004, 21.5 % of the total number of secondary education graduates did not continue their studies, i.e. they were forced to enter the labour market without qualifications and, evidently, with weak academic success⁸ as they cannot continue studies at the highest educational level. Boys are exposed to a higher social exclusion risk as they constituted 59 % of the total number of pupils dismissed from day schools of general education. Data of the CBS testify that 67.1 % of the labour force with primary education or unfinished primary education are men. It means that men are those exposed to the risk of entering the labour market without qualifications and taking up jobs requiring low skills jobs.

⁸ ISEC data on centralised examinations.

The youth labour market (as well as the Latvian labour market in general) is far from being homogenous and it is still characterised by a high demand for an underqualified labour force. This impacts on the behaviour of young people in the educational system. At the highest level where the highest or medium level of qualifications is required, the awareness of these recruitment criteria often keep young people within the educational system. However, the labour market for the lowest qualified stimulates youths to leave school as they feel that they will be able to integrate into the labour market easily, even without any education or qualifications⁹. Currently, due to labour shortages mostly triggered by outward labour migration, wages also grew significantly for the low skilled (mostly in the construction sector).

In comparison with the study year of 2002/03, there has been an increase in the number of educational institutions providing educational programmes for pedagogical correction. If during the preceding study year such programmes were provided at 67 educational institutions, in the study year of 2006/07 their number has reached already 145. Respectively, there has been an increase also in the number of pupils at pedagogical correction classes — from 1 058 pupils in the study year of 2002/03 to 4 204 pupils in the study year of 2006/07.

Night schools could be viewed as an instrument enabling individuals who have interrupted their education to combine studies and work and to continue education. However, the number of such schools has been gradually decreasing (in the school year 1999/2000, 38 schools of this kind had been registered, at the beginning of the school year 2006/07 only 34 had remained).

A particular problem is the involvement of Roma children in the process of general education as well as in preschool education. Starting with school year 2002/03, there has been evidence of a decline in the number of Roma children attending general education schools — 1 591 Roma children in the study year of 2002/03, 1 508 in 2003/04, 1 464 in 2004/05, 1 415 in 2005/06 and 1 410 in 2006/07. In rare cases, Roma children get involved in the process of preschool education. Although since 2003 the education of five and six-year-olds is compulsory, many parents of Roma children are still not informed about it. Thus, without receiving appropriate preparation for studies at school already at the very beginning of education, Roma children find themselves in an unequal situation in comparison with children of other ethnic origin.

In 2006, one school in Latvia had classes and pedagogical correction classes for Roma children. Thus particular attention in the area of educating children of ethnic minorities should, first and foremost, be paid to Roma children.

⁹ „Mazizglītoto mazākumtautību jauniešu integrācija darba tirgū”, Baltijas Sociālo zinātņu institūts, Rīga, 2006, p. 22.

1.5. Housing

The availability of housing for families with children is influenced mostly by two factors. Housing prices are not commensurable with family income. The problem is aggravated by the rapid growth of inflation and housing prices (rent as well as purchase). Second, as a result of privatisation, the municipal housing stock has significantly decreased. Thus, municipalities have less possibilities for providing assistance to the low-income population in compliance with the Law on assistance to addressing housing issues.

As indicated in the report *Overview on the Situation of Children in Latvia in 2005*, formulated by the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs: 'Families with children are the most vulnerable in the current apartment market situation. Due to their low-income level these families are more frequently exposed to the risk to get behind with rent or utility payments, which are, in most part, calculated according to the floor space or the number of people living in the apartment. Families with children have less access to mortgage lending for the purchase of housing or for the expansion and improving of the existing housing than childless couples.'

There is a problem related to the eviction of families with children from apartments¹⁰. As stated in the research, the activities of the State and municipalities intended to prevent ejection of families with children from apartments have not shown positive results yet. In the Ministry of Justice such a register was started only in 2003 and there is no information about the situation with regard to the eviction of families with children from apartments in previous years.

The non-governmental organisation (NGO) Network of Children's Rights states in its report¹¹ that the NGO Network in its practice regularly faces cases where families with children are moved to completely unsuitable premises — without floors, windows, heating and water, with leaky roofs.

According to the data of the CBS in 2006, 509 children lived in municipal social houses and 830 children lived in social apartments. In comparison with 2005, the number of children living in social houses has decreased by nine children or 1.77 %, while the number of children living in social apartments has decreased by 119 children or 14.34 %.

1.6. Safe environment

In the whole of Europe, traumatism is the main cause of death among children. In Latvia traumatism is the second most frequent cause why children are hospitalised and the main cause of child mortality (see section on health). It is alarming that in 2006, 42.1 % of traumas were gained at home. Traumatism through transport of children in Latvia still remains one of the most topical problems in road traffic. Although in 2005 children have sustained injuries in traffic accidents comparatively less frequently than in 2004, still the overall figure is statistically high (588 cases in 2005, 655 cases in 2004). Most frequently it is children at the age of 10-14

¹⁰ Pētījums 'Bērnu tiesību aizsardzības stāvoklis Latvijā un pasākumi tā uzlabošanai', Valsts Cilvēktiesību birojs, Rīga, 2003.

¹¹ 'NVO bērnu tiesību tīkla ziņojums ANO par bērnu tiesību aizsardzības stāvokli Latvijā', Organizācija 'Glābiet bērnu', Rīga, 2006, p.61.

who are in traffic accidents while the lowest number of injuries is sustained by children under the age of six.

Most frequently child passengers sustain injuries in traffic accidents because their parents do not use safety belts and do not tell their children to use them; furthermore, the special seats for children are not used either. The low-quality road infrastructure (lack of street lights and pedestrian crossings, , in particular in smaller towns and rural areas) as well as very aggressive driving habits should be mentioned as significant risk factors for the safety of children in the streets.

During the dark hours of the day, the cause of accidents is failure to use luminescent reflectors. In order to improve pedestrian safety the State Police organised a campaign 'Be visible' that was conducted across the whole territory of Latvia.

Out of all the EU Member States, Latvia has the largest number of child traffic accident victims (under the age of 15) — 25.6 per 100 000 inhabitants — and the largest number of drowned children — 8.70 per 100 000 inhabitants. The largest number of traumas is found among the poorest segments of society, as the poorest children live in places with high traffic intensity, in houses on the roadside with few safe places for playgrounds.

Although during the last years the municipalities have done more to provide children with the possibility of spending their leisure time in safe and suitable environments, children still experience the lack of playgrounds, sport grounds and swimming pools in all regions of Latvia.

1.7. Access to care and services

Social risk families

The fact that there is a gradual decrease in the number of registered at-risk families (see annex, Table 8) should be treated positively. It is related to the significance of social work that has been increasingly emphasised during the recent years, in particular support in work with families with children as well as the growth of the support provided by municipalities in addressing social problems and the development of alternative childcare services.

Institutional care

Institutional care is provided by public and municipal institutions, NGOs as well as private individuals. Municipalities provide these services in most cases. Although the number of children in social care institutions still remains high, during the period since 2000 there has been evidence of a gradual decline in the number of children in social care institutions. On 1 January 2006, 3 011 children lived in institutional care facilities for children.

The ratio of orphans to the number of children in social care institutions in Latvia is not high. For example, in 2004 and 2005 it did not exceed 4 % of the total number of children placed in institutions in the respective year. The majority of them are children whose parents have been

deprived of childcare rights or have had them suspended. It is the main cause (approximately 50-60 % of cases) of the placement of children in social care institutions ¹².

On the whole, the number of those children who, upon leaving childcare institutions, are provided care in a family environment has been increasing. In 2005, 38.9 % of children returned to their parents, while 25.4 % of children were provided alternative care (foster families, guardianship and adoption).

Forms of alternative family care

Alternative family care is provided in the form of foster families, guardianship and adoption. The development of alternative family care forms is largely related to the professionalism of involved specialists as well as stereotypes widespread in society. It would be important to encourage discussions on these issues with the purpose of correcting existing stereotypes about roles in the family, stimulating the involvement of men in childcare, raising the issue of men assuming responsibility for their health as well as promoting views about adoption as something that needs not be concealed and is positive ¹³.

Since the introduction of foster family care in Latvia, the number of foster families up until 2004, has been very low — 15 foster families. From the start of 2005, there was evidence of an increase in these numbers. In July 2006 the total number of foster families reached 230. According to the data from the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, 90 % of families performing foster family duties live in small municipalities and for the most part, one of the family members is not employed and works in agriculture (the household land holding). One of the reasons might be that it is easier for foster families residing in rural districts to provide a living space for a foster child. In 2005, 197 children received foster family care.

Adoption as a form of alternative family care is more widespread than foster families. Until 2004, the number of children adopted by foreigners considerably exceeded the number of children adopted in Latvia. However, in 2005 the ratio between children adopted in Latvia and children adopted by foreigners significantly decreased (earlier it was an average of 1:4, in 2004 — 1:2, in 2005 it was almost 1:1).

The number of children adopted from social care institutions has been gradually increasing. At the same time, it can be observed that the number of potential adoptive parents in Latvia who want to adopt more than one child, is gradually increasing. In 2005 there were five such families, in 2004, three families. However, it is insufficient as the majority of children for adoption are brothers and sisters (not adopting brothers and sisters in one family, problem — one child in one family, the other in other family).

Guardianship is the most widespread form of alternative family care. At the end of 2005, 8 683 children were under guardianship. Over recent years, no significant changes in the number of guardians and in the number of children under guardianship have been observed. Still these indicators reveal a tendency to slightly decrease. It might be explained by the fact that a larger

¹² Summary on Statistical Overviews of the Social Services Board of the Ministry of Welfare of the Republic of Latvia for 2005.

¹³ „Laulību šķiršanas, laulību noturības un dzimstības veicinošo faktoru izpēte”, Latvijas Ģimenes terapeitu biedrība, Rīga, 2005, p.52.

number of children from social care institutions are returned to families or by an increase in the number of adoptions.

1.8. Violence against children and discrimination

According to statistics, since 2004 there has been an increase in the number of cases where children have become victims of violence. It can be explained, in most part, by the increased understanding and information for the society about the problem of violence against children that have resulted in the reporting of such cases more actively (in the past, people were not reported to social workers or to the police about such cases).

The most widespread types of crimes in 2005 where children have suffered from violence are robbery, rape, cruelty and violence against the child. The general trend is that the number of children who have been victimised as a result of criminal offences is increasing (see annex, Table 9).

The spread of violence against children in the family can be mentioned as a problem topical for Latvia. According to the data in the survey 'Research of factors promoting marriage, birth-rate and positive child-parent relationship', undertaken by the Dardedze centre against violence in 2004, there is a correlation between violence in the family mentioned by pupils and the assessment of the material welfare of their families.

Pupils suffering from violence in the family (see annex, Table 10), point out more often an excessive use of alcohol by a family member. On the whole, 12.4 % of the interviewed pupils indicate an excessive use of alcohol by one of the family members, and most frequently it is the father who is mentioned in this connection (78 % mention their fathers).

In 2005, four rehabilitation institutions provided social rehabilitation services for child victims of violence. These services are financed by national budget.

In 2005, such social rehabilitation services were provided to 1 434 children. On average, 872 children received these services at their place of residence, while 531 children received these services at institutions. Of the total number of recipients of services, 897 of the children were boys, 537 were girls. In 2005, the largest group of service recipients was constituted by children in the 11 to 15-year-old age group.

1.9. Use of addictive substances

The high prevalence of alcoholism and drug addiction is a very acute problem, not only among adults but also among children and youth.

The number of minors registered with the Narcological Service of the Narcological State Agency has increased. At the end of 2005, 1 026 minors (aged 10-17) were registered with the Narcological Service, having alcohol, drug and/or other psychoactive substance abuse-induced problems, i.e. 371.9 per 100 000 young persons of the respective age.

In 2005, 74.3 % of the 140 new registered cases were boys, 25.7 % were girls. The analysis of the new cases registered in 2005 by age group shows that the majority (78.6 %) are teenagers aged 15-17 (74.3 % in 2004). The analysis of the new cases among minors by the main substance that they have used, reveals that the structure of abused substances has undergone considerable changes in the recent years. The use of several drugs and psychotropic substances among minors has increased. If in 2001 there were 13.3 % of new cases among minors that involved the use of drugs and psychotropic substances, then in 2005 there were already 46.6% of cases.

No accurate information about the use of tobacco products among minors is available for 2005. However, the analysis of various research data on smoking among children and minors leads to the conclusion that the use of tobacco products is widespread among minors as they are consumed by approximately one third of minors and the number tends to be growing. Latvia is among those EU Member States with the highest number of youths who smoke.

Accurate statistical information about computer addiction among children is not collated, likewise no comprehensive research studies have been undertaken on the spread of this phenomenon. Still an insight into the spread of this phenomenon among children in Riga may be provided by the research study 'The spread of new technology addictions among youth in the city of Riga', which was undertaken in 2004 by the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the University of Latvia, commissioned by the Drug Addiction Prevention Centre of the Riga City Council. (During the research study a survey was conducted among schoolchildren under the age of 20, still data on children under the age of 18 on several issues were collated separately).

The research found that 11 % spend more than four hours per day on the computer, while 7 % spend six or more hours. The computer addiction risk is more widespread among boys and pupils of junior school age. Among boys almost every fifth (19 %) pupil in secondary educational institutions in Riga and 11 % of girls respectively can be included in the computer addiction risk group.

Some 35 % of the youth believe that frequent handling of computers (in particular playing computer games) can be the best remedy against depression, a bad mood, and anxiety. It could also indicate that young people do not receive sufficient emotional support in the family and social support networks in the community are underdeveloped.

In the course of the above research study the conclusion was also drawn that computer addiction could be very closely related to gambling addiction — young people who frequent more or less regularly gambling halls and use slot machines, are found more among those young people who are called, in relative terms, participants of the computer addiction risk group.

Although Article 50 of the Law on the protection of children's rights states that a child must not have access to gambling pools nor participate in games of chance, 30 % of the respondents — underage pupils — still have been in some gambling pool.

1.10. Crime

According to the data of the Ministry of Interior, 2 864 criminal offences in Latvia in 2005, had been committed by minors. The number of serious crimes committed by minors still remains high (see annex, Table 11). Every second crime is committed by minors in a group, every third crime is committed by minors who neither work nor study and every fourth crime committed while under alcoholic intoxication.

The fact that the level of repeated offences (recidivism) among minors is high in Latvia, gives grounds for serious concern. In 2004 the level of recidivism constituted one third of the total number of crimes committed by minors.

In comparison with 2004, the number of convicted minors in 2005 decreased by 384 cases. A dangerous tendency that should be mentioned is that during the last 10 years the number of convictions for the illegal manufacture, storage and sale of drugs has dramatically increased among minors (11 times).

On 1 January 2005, the ratio of juvenile convicts in Latvia constituted 2.9 % of the total number of convicts, which should be viewed as a negative development, as this indicator in Latvia is one of the highest among EU Member States.

The social exclusion risk of juvenile convicts is augmented also by the fact that their educational level is very low. Although accurate information about the educational level of juvenile convicts is unavailable, the overall data about the educational level of convicts largely describes the situation in the area of education for juvenile convicts. According to the data of the Ministry of Justice, 23 % of convicts in 2005 did not have primary education, 2 % did not have basic education (1st to 4th grade) and 1 % were illiterate.

The restricted possibilities of acquiring education in detention should be mentioned as a problem for Latvia. In 2005, the possibility of acquiring education was available in 10 prisons out of 15. In 2005, primary educational programmes of pedagogical correction and primary educational programmes of pedagogical correction for ethnic minorities, primary educational programmes as well as the general secondary education programme were licensed and implemented in 2005 for the training of convicts. In 2005, 1 642 or 23.6 % of convicts were involved in acquiring education.

Until the beginning of the operation of the State Probation Service, community work as a coercive measure of educational nature was not actually used for juvenile offenders. In 2005, the Probation Service received 77 court judgments on the application of community work while 73 children registered for community work.

There are also two social correction educational institutions in Latvia — one institution for boys and one for girls. There, children with social behaviour disorders are placed if the social correction of the child's behaviour at his/her place of residence has been unsuccessful or the young person has already committed a criminal offence before reaching the age of 14. In 2005, there were 83 children at the social correction educational institution for boys and 22 at the institution for girls.

1.11. Children with special needs

In the context of the present report — in the analysis of various groups of children and their exposure to the social exclusion risk — disabled children should be mentioned as one of the most vulnerable groups.

According to the data of the Ministry of Welfare, there is evidence of a gradual decline in the number of disabled children. During the period 2000-05 the number of disabled children has decreased from 9 502 to 9 313.

Disabled children with severe mental development disorders aged 4 to 18 are provided care in specialised social care centres for children and specialised wards of social care centres for children. In turn, municipalities provide home care or care at day care centres. The trend for the number of disabled children in care institutions is on the decline while the number of disabled children who receive municipal services at their place of residence increases. This should be assessed as a positive development.

Children with special needs can acquire education at special educational institutions. In order to stimulate the integration of disabled children into society, it is essential that the possibilities of these children to acquire education at general education schools be expanded.

In order to stimulate the integration of children into society and to ensure the availability of education close to the place of residence, in 2006, 89 schools of general education started implementing special education programmes, attended by 9 376 pupils with special needs of various kinds. In this area improvements in comparison with 2004 are very significant because in 2004 only 1 168 children with special needs, attended schools of general education.

There is a positive trend for the number of children with special needs receiving home studies to decrease amounting to 1 095 children in 2006 and to 1 458 children in 2005. It testifies to the integration of children into educational institutions.

Still, the integration of children with disabilities into schools of general education is low and the main restricting factors that should be mentioned are the inaccessibility of educational institutions for learners with special needs, the insufficient early medical, pedagogical, psychological and social diagnostics of these children, the unavailability of medical assistance in institutions of general education, shortage of specialists for work with this risk group and the insufficient range of study materials for young people with special needs.

1.12. Culture, sports and recreation facilities

Children are provided with interest education (informal education) by public and municipal institutions as well as NGOs and private individuals. Options that are free of charge are provided mostly by public and municipal institutions.

The number of pupils involved in programmes of institutions of interest education increases with every year. The number of pupils with special needs involved there also continues to increase. In comparison with the study year of 2001/02, in the study year of 2006/07 the number of these pupils has increased by 41 %. However, it must be pointed out that the ratio of these children against the total number of children involved in general interest education is low

as institutions of interest education lack the equipment required for work with children of this group and the training of the teaching staff is insufficient.

In 2006, there were 69 municipal institutions of interest education in Latvia (children and youth centres, environment education centres and centres of technical creativity) involving 28 800 pedagogues and 78 882 pupils, of whom 2 106 were children with special needs. The majority of children — 57 % — have been involved in cultural education programmes, and a much smaller part of children found in youth work and environment education — 4 %. There are cultural educational institutions of a professional nature (music and art schools) in all regions and districts of Latvia. In 2005, they were attended by a total of 23 199 pupils.

According to the information provided by municipalities, more than 20 300 children attended camps during the summer season of 2005, of whom 3 000 children were in social assistance and integration camps, and 500 children attended camps for young persons with special needs. There has been a gradual increase in the number of participants in camps for children from social risk groups.

It is necessary to promote employment and leisure activities of children and youth, as only some children can participate in educational, adventure, sports, recreational and integration camps.

1.13. Participation in society

Pupils' self-governments are one of the ways of the participation of civic society that encompasses the largest number of children and youths.

According to the Law on education, pupils have the right to establish pupils' self-government bodies and they operate in the majority of schools. Various forums of students and other involved parties hold seminars, camps and conferences within the framework of this initiative.

In the assessment of the operation of pupils' self-governments, pupils themselves point out the main problems — external problems (the attitude of school administration, disorderly normative acts, etc.) as well as internal factors (lack of pupils' motivation, lack of knowledge about management, etc.).

In order to support the participation of children in the resolution of issues that are important for them, children's forums are organised with the support of the State and municipalities. Gradually the participation of NGOs representing interests of children and youths as well as children and youths' organisations in policy development and implementation increases. However, it must be noted that these opinions are not sufficiently reflected in the policy-planning documents.

1.14. Gaps in data collection

As it is stated in the report ¹⁴, the bulletin of the CBS does not provide information on street children, begging or living in poverty and strife, suffering from emotional, physical or sexual violence within the family, school or society, involved in prostitution, in pre-trial investigation institutions or belonging to other high-risk groups. At present, the State and municipal institutions do not register all those so-called 'problem children' in a database. Thus it is difficult to understand how it is possible to develop long-term and short-term policy projects, programmes, action plans, etc. (measures intended to improve the situation of children) without objective, comprehensive information about the state of children in Latvia, as well as without decent analysis of this information.

2. Policies to prevent and alleviate child poverty and social exclusion

2.1. Policy framework

The Government declarations, which set the main goals and objectives of the Government since restoration of independence of Latvia in 1991, were characterised by unwillingness to identify the tackling the poverty problem among the priorities of the Government. The Governments hesitated to mention the concept of poverty and tried to replace it with a concept of welfare. The position of the Government could be described with the following quotation: 'Instead of fighting the poverty we should increase the welfare of the people'. Only in 2004 declarations of both Governments ¹⁵ highlighted the fight against poverty as one of the priority tasks in the Government declarations.

Inclusion of the poverty issue in the political agenda in Latvia was supported by several factors: increased focus on issues related to this problem in international society in the 1990s and the local economic and social problems in the country as a consequence of transition to a market economy, which were even more aggravated by the economic crisis in Russia and inflation in the middle of the 1990s.

To facilitate tackling the poverty problem in Latvia, in 1997 the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank signed an agreement with the Ministry of Welfare on rendering of support for the development of the 'National poverty prevention strategy'.

With the support of international organisations, comprehensive studies were carried out on the poverty situation in Latvia, during the period from 1997 to 1999. The results of the research served as the basis for development of the 'National poverty prevention strategy' and policy guidelines. However, during the period 2000-03, no special programmes were formulated for reducing poverty. Only with the formulation of the Joint Inclusion Memorandum as a mandatory prerequisite for the accession of Latvia to the EU, and after accessing the EU, Latvia prepared the first 'National action plan for reduction of poverty and social exclusion' (NAP inclusion), 2004-06. As there was no uniform approach in the country, poverty-related problems were

¹⁴ Pētījums 'Bērnu tiesību aizsardzības stāvoklis Latvijā un pasākumi tā uzlabošanai', Valsts Cilvēktiesību birojs, Rīga, 2003, p.31.

¹⁵ Declarations of the Government headed by I. Emsis in March 2004 and the Government headed by A. Kalvītis in December 2004.

addressed with the help of various mutually uncoordinated activities within the framework of various policies and institutions.

In view of the demographic situation in the country, governments have identified the improvement of support to families with children as one of the key priorities, in particular emphasising the significance of consolidating family values in society. In 2004, when identifying government priorities, ensuring the implementation of a poverty and social exclusion reduction plan was mentioned as one of the tasks in declarations of two governments concerning the planned activities of the Cabinet of Ministers. Although in the formal sense it can be viewed as the political framework in the context of reducing poverty and social exclusion, still no quantitative objectives or projected indicators have been identified in any of the policy-planning documents concerning specific groups of the population, including children.

In the current Government declaration about the intended activities of the Cabinet of Ministers, the reduction of social exclusion is focused on the area of responsibility of municipal social services and social workers.

Although the national policy does not define specific objectives concerning the reduction of child poverty and social exclusion, priorities identified by the Government, as well as sectoral policies implemented by various ministries, cover the most relevant problem issues to a greater or lesser degree.

One of the factors that created the lack of a complex approach to addressing problems of child poverty and social exclusion was a lack of coordinated action and cooperation among institutions and involved parties. To overcome these problems, in 2004 a decision was taken to establish the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs. The main task of the Ministry was determined: the coordination of the formulation and implementation of national policies in the area of protecting of children's rights, rights of children, the family and the youth.

Although the concept and the action plan for the implementation of the concept 'National family policy' for 2004-13 have been formulated, the notion of 'child poverty' as such is not found in the document and subsequently there are no specific tasks and activities for the reduction of child poverty. The policy of child poverty reduction is perceived mostly through the prism of social benefits and material support established for families. Specific activities have a positive impact on the material situation of the families, which, in their turn, could stimulate the decline of child poverty, for example, raising the minimum salary, a favourable taxation policy for families with children, the improvement of possibilities of reconciling working life and family life, etc.

Alongside poverty issues, other risk factors of social exclusion of children are covered in the current policies on a more extensive scale. Those areas and aspects that are more emphasised in the national policy are possibilities for a child to grow up in a family environment, thus focusing on the work with families in crisis situations and also developing forms of alternative family care. Another area of activity declared by the national policy is related to the protection of children's rights and the improvement in the safety of children (reduction of violence against children, a safe environment, etc.). The third area to be mentioned is the improvement in the availability and quality of education for children, as well as the integration of children with disabilities into both the general education system and society.

Until now, policies implemented in Latvia have been characterised by the use of the universal approach to the support of families with children at national level and an income-tested approach at the level of municipalities. At national level, support and services are provided to families without assessing their income level. A differentiated approach to families is more practised at municipal level, where social services are allocated on the basis of an assessment of the family's needs and material situation. The national, as well as the municipal level, lack a targeted approach aimed at alleviating poverty and social exclusion among particular groups of children at high risk (street children, orphans, children with disabilities, drop-outs from schools, etc.).

The achievement of significant improvements in alleviating poverty and social exclusion among particular groups of children at high risk is also prevented by the fact that the majority of policy measures are focused on alleviating or preventing consequences. In politics, insufficient attention is paid to the preventive measures aimed at alleviating poverty.

Along with defining the policy priorities and political framework at the level of Government and policy-planning experts, the mass media plays an increasing role in defining the issues of the political agenda. A very positive factor to be mentioned is intensified attention of the mass media to analysing socially sensitive issues, which include ensuring the rights and security of children. The initiatives started by society and the mass media have promoted the interest of public administration institutions in solving such issues as the security of children on the Internet, or search for missing persons (including children). Unfortunately, at present, the public administration institutions react more to disposition or minimise the consequences of solving the above-mentioned issues, and are less oriented to purposeful prevention.

The assessment of the balance that exists between the focus on the family and on children in their own right, allows concluding that in Latvia the main emphasis in legislation is put on the rights of the child. For example, in a situation where parental power has been temporarily suspended, and the child is staying with a foster family during this time, when the situation changes the opinion of the child is taken into consideration. If parents amend their behaviour and recover their parental power, then in order to return the child to the family, the desires and interests of the child are also taken into consideration, and a return to the family is possible with the consent of the child.

Irrespective of the institutional structure in Latvia since the restoration of independence, issues concerning the protection of children's rights have been in the focus of responsibility of various public administration institutions (the National Centre for the Protection of the Rights of the Child, the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, the National Inspection on the Protection of Children's Rights). Alongside public institutions, respect for children's rights has also been supervised by the Child Rights Protection Division established at the National Human Rights Office. At the end of 2006, the National Human Rights Office was transformed into the Ombudsman's Institution.

The Ministry of Children and Family Affairs and the Ministry of Welfare may be mentioned as the main institutions dealing with the coordination of child poverty and social exclusion issues at national level. The Ministry of Children and Family Affairs views these issues more in the context of the family support policy, in particular focusing on the issues of protecting children's rights. In turn, the Ministry of Welfare as the agency responsible for coordinating the formation and implementation of the social inclusion policy concentrates on those aspects that pertain to social assistance for families with children and to care and rehabilitation services for children. In the formal sense, basic principles have been established for coordinating the activities of

institutions in the process of policy development and in practice more or less the participation of all involved ministries, social partners and NGOs is ensured. However, the practice until now reveals a lack of a common strategic approach to policy-planning. Institutions rely more on the continuation of the already sectoral policy measures and their reflection also in the policy-planning documents of other sectors and it can be referred also to the resolution of problems of alleviating child poverty and social exclusion.

Alongside the above ministries, an essential role is played by the policy implemented by the Ministry of Finance in the area of budget and taxation policy, which has a direct impact on changes in the income levels of families with children and thus also on the reduction of social exclusion.

The analysis of the political framework is indicative of the fact that the main problems are not related to lack or inefficiency of legal framework, but mainly to existing policy and implementation of policy measures in practice. Recognising the importance and necessity of the implemented and planned policy measures, more attention should be paid to the development and improvement of preventive measures, as well as implementation of more targeted measures for definite groups of children subjected to risk of social exclusion. One more recommendation to improve the policy implementation is to use a differentiated approach, particularly in the evaluation of different urban and rural problems. The approach used in the national policy — to cover a definite problem to be solved in general and within a common framework — can reduce efficiency of the implemented measures, since it is unified and general and not targeted.

Therefore, it would be advisable to concentrate on definite priorities in a definite time-period in order to gain maximum benefit from the invested resources.

2.2. Analysis of main policies

Policies to ensure an adequate income for children and their families

A significant aspect that influences employment specifically in families with children, is a lack of measures promoting the reconciliation of work and family life, for example, possibilities of using a flexible working time schedule or part-time options, out-of-family childcare services, i.e. an insufficient development of a family-friendly infrastructure.

Policy measures implemented until now cannot be assessed as a purposeful action for ensuring the reconciliation of work and family life. In Latvia the policy and initiatives implemented by the EU in this specific area have stimulated the inclusion of the given issue into the political agenda. Only recently has Latvia started addressing those mistakes that were made at the beginning of the 1990s when kindergartens were closed down.

It is therefore necessary to consistently develop and expand the range of childcare services for families with children (by establishing a baby-sitters' service, day care centres, kindergartens, etc.) by also actively involving employers in providing these services.

According to statistics, in 2003, 11 400 underage children did not receive subsistence in a sufficient amount from their divorced parent. In order to improve this situation and ensure equal opportunities to maintain children for all parents who maintain children alone, an initiative of the

Ministry for Children and Family Affairs to establish a 'Alimony guarantee fund' can be positively valued. During the two and a half years since the 'Alimony guarantee fund' started operating, its employees, in cooperation with bailiffs, have succeeded in recovering more than LVL 500 000 from subsistence non-payers. The previous activities of the und prove its necessity, especially for helping single-parent families. Single parents are a group most subject to risk of social exclusion. The initiative of the Ministry and the fund to improve methods and cooperation mechanisms with institutions involved in recovering subsistence can be positively valued.

The assessment of the Government policy, followed until now in providing various State social benefits for families with children, leads to conclude that their basic objective has been an attempt to address demographic problems but not to alleviate the poverty of families with children or child poverty. Municipal social benefits (GMI most of all) are focused on alleviating poverty.

The current policy measures lay very significant emphasis on increasing the financial support to families, as on average, the current benefits for families with children are low and they do not provide sufficient support in situations when family incomes decline. Although the significance of social benefits for groups of the population exposed to the social exclusion risk is undeniable, the marked focus on increasing various benefits for families with children or the general character of measures (directed towards all families) reduce the possibilities of those families, actually exposed to the social exclusion risk, to improve their situation. The implementation of such a passive support does not ensure the minimisation or elimination of poverty and social exclusion causes.

The assessment of the current State and local government financial support and the optimisation of the many State social benefits would be more important, providing more support to measures promoting social and economic integration.

The following measures which have the most significant role in the area of supporting families with children with low incomes should be mentioned — the tax-wage policy — the gradual raising of the monthly non-taxable minimum and the tax relief for dependents.

Neither until 2007 (, nor in the planned policy programmes till 2008, have any measures been planned for the improvement of the taxation system that would be aimed at achieving specific economic or social objectives. Although in Latvia the political agenda has sometimes raised the issue about the necessity to introduce a progressive income tax or to reduce the general personal income tax rate or that on low wages, until now no changes have been made in the currently existing system. Thus, the tax burden on labour is also comparatively heavy and particularly affects low-income groups, where a large proportion consists of families with children.

According to data on the range of recipients of municipal social benefits, families with children constitute the largest group of recipients receiving the GMI benefit. According to the Household Budget Survey analysis, large families with many children and single-parent families are one of the groups in the population most exposed to the risk of poverty. That is why it is not quite clear why the question of reviewing the GMI is not discussed within the framework of the NAP inclusion 2006-08 or in the context of family policy.

Both the above measures in this area would be significant, not only for the promotion of employment but also for stimulating getting out-of-poverty of the low-income population. However, the comparatively low minimum wage and the non-taxable minimum amounts should be mentioned as the main factor diminishing the effectiveness of the said measures to really improve the situation of families with children.

In fact, the non-taxable minimum is that part of the income which should provide resources necessary for human existence at a minimum level. It means that resources ensuring the existence of the individual at the minimum level should be excluded from taxation with the personal income tax. In Latvia, the non-taxable minimum amount is very low. Minimum wages are taxed. The minimum remained unchanged during the period from 1997 until 2006. One of the calculation indicators characterising the minimum amount of resources necessary for the individual is the full value of the average monthly per capita subsistence minimum basket of goods and services in lati that has been calculated by the CBS. In September 2006, it amounted to LVL 118.86, being 3.7 times higher than the monthly non-taxable minimum.

As concerns subsidised services for families with children in Latvia, the following should be mentioned: free meals at school, interest education (informal), subsidised transport services for children under the age of six, for disabled children, orphans, pupils, etc.

The support to interest education and transport cost discounts for children should be assessed as positive public and municipal policy measures that alleviate the social exclusion risk of children and enable children to integrate into society.

Until now free meals at school have been granted taking into consideration the material situation of families with children. The availability of this service depends on the financial possibilities of the municipality, on the one hand, and if families apply to the social assistance service to receive this service, on the other hand. The priority task identified in the declaration of the current Government — to introduce free meals in basic school and primary school — can be assessed positively. It is important that the task identified in the declaration is also implemented in practice.

Latvia has become involved in the EU support programmes in providing milk and dairy products to pupils in educational institutions and in the programme for the poorest section of the population, providing the possibility of receiving food products once a month.

A more extensive involvement of schools into the 'School milk programme' should be promoted to ensure that all children receive wholesome and healthy nutrition.

Policies to ensure access to essential services

Although in Latvia primary education is prescribed as compulsory, still the analysis of the situation in section 1.4. shows that the ratio of children who do not attend school, are dismissed from school or graduate school with a very low level of knowledge and skills is high. When discussing the implementation of compulsory secondary education in Latvia, it would be essential to assess and find solutions for the problems identified in providing primary education. Otherwise the given legislative norms may become formalistic, committing the same system errors.

Being aware of the danger of the drop-out problem and its social and economic consequences that it generates, the resolution of this problem has been identified as a priority in the national policy-planning documents. *Guidelines for Life-long Learning for 2007-13* lists the accessibility of education and life-long learning as one of the priority areas for social exclusion risk groups, in particular emphasising flexibility in providing a second chance of acquiring education in line with needs. A significant support of the EU Structural Funds for the period of 2007-13 has been projected for this particular area of activity within the framework of the first action programme 'Human resources and education'.

The most essential factor for a successful resolution of the problem will be the achievement of the identified objectives and tasks.

Although primary and secondary education in Latvia is free of charge, still the costs required to prepare the child for school (study materials and textbooks) in comparison with the average income of families with children can be assessed as high. Families with average and low incomes, in particular, feel the weight of this burden. Several times, the issue of providing free textbooks and copybooks for children has been raised as well as the insufficient stocks of textbooks at school libraries; however, until now no specific solutions have been found.

Another significant issue is the availability and quality of educational services in various regions, cities and in rural areas. Shortage of teaching staff has become an acute problem for the educational system that is typical for the whole of Latvia. It will not be possible to ensure any improvement in the educational level of children and quality of education without resolving the issue of attracting teachers to schools. In this respect, the change of generation of the teaching staff, the remuneration system for teachers, the quality of school infrastructures and their accessibility for disabled children should be emphasised.

The improvement to infrastructures and the provision of up-to-date study equipment, including information and communication technologies (ICT), in general education and in particular vocational education are important from the point of view of the quality of the study process, as well as the attractiveness of education. Skills and knowledge acquired at school have a significant impact on the employment opportunities of children in future.

In the educational policy, the multidimensional approach and the use of team work has been gradually emerging in work with children representing various social exclusion risk groups (disabled children, Roma, children with behaviour disorders, etc.) that includes work with the family, envisaging the cooperation of social workers, psychologists, pedagogues and medical specialists. In future, this approach should be implemented as routine practice but not as separate initiatives.

According to national legislation, children under the age of 18 receive free healthcare services that cover the range of the most relevant healthcare services (out-patient care, in-patient care, exemption from patients' contributions, dentistry, etc.).

High medication costs and the availability and quality of services in rural areas should be mentioned as the main healthcare problems for low-income families with children that are confirmed also by the interim results of the research study 'Causes and duration of unemployment and social exclusion'. The only solution for low-income families with children on how to cover the high costs of medical services is to apply to municipalities requesting the assistance of social services. The problem is that this assistance depends on the interest,

financial possibilities of each municipality; likewise assistance provided in various municipalities may differ significantly.

Another indicator that should be assessed as unsatisfactory is the persistent high level of infant mortality and the high tuberculosis morbidity level among children.

The availability of healthcare for families with children and in particular with low and average incomes, is obstructed by the widely spread practice of 'payments in envelopes' for provided services. Over the last two years, this particular problem has become the focus of attention of society and mass media.

It is public pressure that has stimulated the involvement of medical associations, professional organisations in discussing the problem and seeking solutions. Until now the only solution for reducing the proportion of unofficial payments at medical institutions that is offered, is to raise the remuneration of medical workers. However, it must be pointed out that the solution cannot be reduced only to a narrow aspect of the problem.

The consistently implemented inoculation programme for children should be assessed as the success of the healthcare policy, ensuring a high inoculation level among children for the majority of contagious diseases.

In view of the high prevalence of alcohol abuse, drug addiction and smoking among children, more attention in the healthcare policy should be addressed to promoting a healthy life style in various groups of children and youth. To address this problem, it is necessary to achieve a closer cooperation among ministries and various sectoral agencies to provide prevention, educational, treatment, rehabilitation and social reintegration activities.

After the restoration of independence, very insignificant resources were allocated for the expansion of the housing stock. The number of residential houses and social housing built by municipalities over the last fifteen years is insufficient to provide the required support to the poor population, including families with children.

The main problem for low-income families with children is to cover costs related to the maintenance of housing. A certain guarantee of security for families with children is the prohibition prescribed by legislation to evict a family with children without allocating another living space. However, in view of the cancellation of the rental thresholds in January 2007, the problem of the municipal housing stock has become more aggravated. In Riga, the capital city of Latvia, however, this problem has no significant impact on families with children because a small number of them are living in such housing stock.

One of the main tasks in the housing policy in future is to promote the availability of housing for families with children through the cooperation of the State and municipalities.

Policies to promote care and protection children at risk

A consistent approach of the State in ensuring a transition from institutional care to the development and realisation of alternative services to ensure family-oriented environment for children can be positively valued. The decrease in the number of children in social care centres is indicative of the development of alternative family care services. More and more often Orphans' Courts (Parish Courts) place the children who have lost parental support in foster families. At the same time, it has become possible to ensure that children who have lost parental maintenance under the age of one year are placed in foster families and not in the State-financed social care centres. Thus a child is provided with an opportunity to grow in a family-oriented environment and not in an institution. This is important for further development of the child.

The main attention in this area should be paid to two lines of activity. First of all, information for society and explanatory work about provision of support to orphans and children who have lost parental maintenance, when one becomes a guardian, a foster family, a confidant or support family. The second line of activity to be mentioned is improvement in the coordination of family alternative care system among the public and municipal institutions, NGOs and education of municipal social workers in order to ensure qualitative services and support to potential as well as existing clients.

The cases of violence discovered in the institutions of social care are alarming, especially towards children with physical and mental disturbances. The public, as well as law enforcement institutions should improve security and protection of these children against violence in institutions of social care, as well as ensure opportunity to apply for help in case of need.

It is necessary to develop a cooperation with alcohol/drug rehabilitation programmes because it is clear that there is a relationship between extensive use of alcohol by parents and violence towards children and other family members. It is very important that alcohol/drug rehabilitation opportunities are widely accessible.

Due to the development of IT technologies and their increased availability for children and youths, an issue of security of children on the internet has become topical. As a result of a campaign organised by the mass media in 2006, the public administration institutions (the Secretariat of the Minister for Special Assignments for Electronic Government Affairs, the Ministry for Children and Family Affairs) have started a social campaign about security of children on the internet. The initiative supported by the Government to determine criminal liability for inducing underage persons in sexual activities irrespectively of the way how a proposal has been made by making amendments to criminal law can be positively valued. In this respect, more attention should be paid to educating society and, especially, to education of children.

In Latvia, attention to such a social problem as the increase in the number of street children is paid sporadically. The actual number of street children is not known. A slight insight into the problem may be acquired by analysing data on children who do not attend school or use services of shelters and night shelters. However, information about certain street children does not appear in any registers or data sources.

There is no single policy in the country on how to work with street children. The resolution of these issues has been delegated to local governments. For the most part, this problem is addressed by local governments, providing shelter and night shelter services as well as cooperation between employees of social services and law enforcement agencies and custody courts.

In Latvia, the non-governmental sector gets actively involved in addressing problems of street children with the support of international funds and programmes, providing research into the problem and services as well as establishing a cooperation network for resolving this problem ¹⁶.

In order to address this problem, the cooperation networks among the public, municipal agencies, non-governmental institutions and law enforcement agencies should be improved.

Availability of sports for children and youths, in particular focusing on children with special needs, has been identified in the basic guidelines on sports policy for the period 2004-09; it has been also established as one of children's rights in national legislation (the Law on sports, the Law on education, the Law on the protection of children's rights, etc.). Support to the implementation of infrastructural projects for sports and recreation of children and youths is provided within the framework of national budgetary programmes. The initiative of the Ministry for Children and Family Affairs to develop playgrounds and sports fields, development centres, adjust the environment to ensure sports activities for young people can be positively valued. However, it is carried out in the form of individual projects and not as regular policy initiatives. At municipal level, support to sports and recreational activities depends, in the most part, on the financial possibilities of the local governments. Thus, regional differences can be observed in this area in the availability of services, as well as the range and quality of these services.

The fact that the basic policy guidelines *Guidelines for National Cultural Policy for 2006-2015*. A National State has identified the strengthening of the role of culture and cultural education in reducing social inequality and poverty as one of the areas of activity, should be assessed as positive. The availability of culture for children and youths, in particular children with special needs, has been emphasised.

The elimination of child discrimination is discussed in the context of promotion of overall tolerance, where alongside other discrimination factors, social conditions are also stated. However, no specific measures for reducing this type of discrimination are envisaged, but mainly concentrating on reducing intolerance towards different ethnic and religious groups.

Evaluating the existing policy-planning documents (basic guidelines, strategies, programmes) and legal acts in the area of protection of children subjected to risk of social exclusion conclusion could be made that to a greater or lesser extent they cover main aspects of social exclusion risk for children ¹⁷. Papers are prepared but financial resources are not allocated. However it should be noted that one of the major problems is provision with adequate resources needed for implementation of the planned measures.

¹⁶ Association for Street Children.

¹⁷ Basic policy for the Education of Convicts for 2006-10, 'Action plan for the implementation of the policy for the reduction of disability and its consequences for 2005-15, "The Roma in Latvia 2007-09" programme, 'National programme for elimination and control of addiction to and prevalence of narcotic and psychotropic substances for 2005-08', etc.

3. Monitoring and evaluation tools and mechanisms

There is no single, comprehensive policy in Latvia to reduce child poverty and social exclusion and therefore we obviously cannot speak about a single system for monitoring and evaluating the policy.

Since there is no single policy in the respective areas, monitoring of these issues is partially performed through the NAP inclusion monitoring mechanism and by the Ministry for Children and Family Affairs within the scope of its competence. The model of policy development, monitoring and evaluation provides for report preparation as the main monitoring instrument. Each of the above-mentioned ministries prepares reports once a year. It should be noted that the information included in these reports partially overlaps.

The Ministry for Children and Family Affairs prepares annual reports on the implementation of measures included in the 'Latvia suitable for children strategy' and in the annual programme for implementation of this strategy; however, child poverty is not the focus of these reports. The Ministry of Welfare, which is responsible for coordination of the social inclusion policy in Latvia, in compliance with assignments set by the NSR (National Strategy Reports), prepares reports which reflect fulfillment of the NSR assignments related to the issues of social exclusion included in the plan, including the policy measures that are related to children.

The monitoring mechanism offered by the NSR has not undergone any significant changes in comparison with the NAP inclusion 2004-06.

The current monitoring model foresees the development of implementation reports based on the information given by the parties involved and the process is based only on reporting and sharing information. In fact, such an institutional arrangement serves more as an information distribution channel in public administration and among the involved parties, and it presupposes more of an observer's status than the role of an active co-participant in the process.

However, it is also possible to speak about certain positive changes in the attitude and increased interest of the monitoring committee in issues related to social exclusion.

In February 2007, the Ministry of Welfare issued a decree by which it established the Committee on Coordination of the Social Inclusion Policy. The committee was established on the basis of the former Committee on Monitoring the Implementation of the National Action Plan for the Reduction of Poverty and Social Exclusion. The Ministry of Welfare undertook a survey of members of the former committee. After the summary of the results of the survey, it was concluded that committee members would like to receive more information about various examples of good practice in the area of social inclusion in Latvia, as well as in other EU Member States. Likewise there was interest expressed about poverty and social exclusion indicators, studies undertaken in Latvia and in the EU in the area of social inclusion as well as the exclusion situation in Latvia and EU Member States, etc. Thus, taking into consideration the wishes and interests of the parties involved, the new committee will attempt, within its operational framework, to cover all issues of interest, devoting also more time to mutual discussions.

The above committee includes representatives from almost all ministries, as well as representatives from regional development agencies, municipalities and NGOs, the CBS, the Standing Committee on Social and Labour Affairs at the Parliament, the State Police, Chief

Order Police Board, as well as social partners. Meetings of the committee will be held at least once a quarter and extraordinary meetings will be held as necessary.

Therefore, it would be important to activate the issue on the situation of children experiencing poverty and social exclusion in the committee.

It should be noted that the existing monitoring mechanisms are imperfect to provide a comprehensive insight into the situation in the area of child poverty and social exclusion. In principle, lack of a single policy to reduce child poverty and social exclusion, as well as the description of the monitoring give grounds to conclude that the ministries will continue to work independently within the framework of their sectoral competence, however, no complex approach will be implemented.

With regard to reduction of child poverty, Latvia has set neither definite quantified targets, nor the timeframe for the implementation of measures or resources earmarked for the reduction of child poverty. It means the reports are based more on data summarising (and only a part of the data which should be analysed) and the description of a situation and not on an evaluation of the implemented policies.

There is a lack of research focused directly on the evaluation of measures directed at reducing child poverty and social exclusion. However, several research studies have been performed during the last few years on problems of social exclusion for children and families with children: about violence against children within family and society, prevalence of use of addictive substances among children and youths, problems of minority youth to integrate into labor market, as well as different health and healthy life-style related habits among children and youths. It should be noted that also in the current policy-planning documents, no research is envisaged on child poverty.

In November 2003, in the Ministry for Children and Family Affairs a Children's Council was established having a consultative function. Children aged 14-18 from schools and social organisations of children participate in the council. More active work of the council was during preparation of the report on the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in Latvia. Unfortunately, the last meeting of the Children's Council was held in April 2005. Therefore, it would be necessary to activate the work of the Children's Council, ensuring involvement of children and more active participation in solving the issues that are topical for children.

Analysing the existing governmental monitoring reports, one has to conclude that opinions of children themselves are not sufficiently reflected. There are no explicit indications on how the opinion of children is acquired and how it is considered in both planning of new programmes and assessing efficiency of the existing programmes. We could assume that partially it is done through mediation of the Youth Initiative Centre, Children Council or NGOs who represent the interests of children and participate in decision-making, however, the opinion and involvement of the children should be evident.

In 2003, the Human Rights Office carried out a study — *The Situation with Regard to the Rights of Children in Latvia and Measures for Improvement of the Situation* — in which the situation of children in Latvia was analysed and problems related to children's rights

established. Among recommendations¹⁸, which are topical also within the context of this report, it is possible to indicate: 'ensuring of analysis and control of appropriation and use of financing assigned from the State budget for needs of a child, in order to evaluate actually provided aid to children, gathering of information about real situation of a family and child, promotion of improvement of a material situation of a child, provision of aid and support to families with children which have insufficient income for maintenance and development of children (poor families, low income families, single families, young families, etc.), families with children where one of the parents has enduring illness or is disabled, is a user of alcohol or psychotropic substances, when a mother is on her childcare leave, when a family has a child with particular needs or disabled child, etc.'

The Human Rights Office has also pointed to the necessity to promote cooperation between the State and municipal organisations and social organisations in realising preventive work with a child and family.

The Government of Latvia has prepared two reports on implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989 in the Republic of Latvia.

Apart from the already mentioned governmental monitoring activities of the situation of children in Latvia, which are carried out by official bodies, there are several NGOs who have experience and a tradition in situation analysis and preparation of alternative reports to governmental on the situation of children in Latvia.

Since 1992, many NGOs have been founded and developed which work in the field of protection of the interests and needs of children and families with children. At present moment, there are already hundreds of such organisations. The following organisations are active: the Latvian Children's Fund, Save the Children, Unicef National Committee of the Republic of Latvia, Association for Street Children, the Latvian Red Cross, Association of Large Families' Unions, Centre of Social Aid of the Salvation Army, the Latvian Association for Family Planning and Sexual Health 'Papardes zieds', the Latvian Orphans' Union, Mission 'Steps', several crisis centres and other organisations.

One organisation — Save the Children — as well as the NGO's Network of the Rights of Children is actively involve in consolidation of information and preparation of reports on the situation with children in Latvia. Save the Children has prepared an alternative report to the UN on the situation in the area of protection of the rights of children in Latvia, as well as a report based on the opinion and problems indicated by children themselves. In 2006, Save the Children has also prepared a report developed on the basis of the opinions and problems indicated by children themselves¹⁹.

Providing evaluation of the existing government mechanisms for monitoring the policy of child poverty and social exclusion, it should be noted that they are fragmented and there is insufficient coordination among different institutions. Therefore, it would be necessary to develop a single, comprehensive monitoring system, as well as start regular evaluation of policies for reducing child poverty and social exclusion instead of ministries reporting only about implementation of existing measures.

¹⁸ Pētījums 'Bērnu tiesību aizsardzības stāvoklis Latvijā un pasākumi tā uzlabošanai', Valsts Cilvēktiesību birojs, Rīga, 2003, p.64.

¹⁹ 'Latvijas bērnu ziņojums Apvienoto Nāciju Organizācijai par ANO konvencijas par bērna tiesībām izpildi valstī', organizācija „Glābiet Bērnus”, Rīga, 2006

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Annex

Table 1
At-risk-of-poverty rate in 2004
(in percentage terms)

	<i>The share of persons with an equivalised total net income below 60 % of the national median income ¹</i>
ALL HOUSEHOLDS	19
of which:	
all households with dependent children ²	19
of which:	
Single parent with children	41
Two adults with one dependent child	11
Two adults with two dependent children	17
Two adults with three and more dependent children	32
Other households with dependent children	19

Source: CBS data.

Table 2
Cash income at the disposal of the household depending on the composition of the household in 2004

	In LVL per household member per month
Household types:	
Single person	113.03
One adult with children	76.18
Childless couple	123.10
Couple with children	96.43
Other households with children	79.19
Households by number of children:	
One child	114.16
Two children	92.37
Three and more children	53.23

Source: CBS data.

Table 3
Breakdown of incomes and the total number of household members in groups of quintiles in 2004 (in percentage terms)

	Disposable income	Number of persons in households	Number of children in households
Total	100	100	100
Including by quintile group of disposable income			
1 st (lowest) quintile	8.1	23.7	35.8
2 nd quintile	11.6	18.1	16.8
3 rd quintile	15.7	19.4	16.7
4 th quintile	24.0	21.1	20.4
5 th (highest) quintile	40.6	17.7	10.3

Source: CBS data.

Table 4
Total number of preschool age children on the waiting list for admission to educational institutions (kindergartens)

Year	1999/2000	2000/01	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06
Number of children	6 178	6 041	6 119	7 254	10 659	17 081	15 080

Source: Data from the Ministry of Education and Science.

Table 5
Mortality by cause of death in different age groups

	Age groups (years)								
	0-4			5-14			15-19		
	1995	2004	2005	1995	2004	2005	1995	2004	2005
Deaths, including by cause of death	503	228	204	180	67	70	197	125	103
Tumours	19	5	2	20	10	11	15	10	8
Diseases of the nervous system	8	5	5	6	10	7	3	8	9
Diseases of the respiratory system	26	4	8	8	2	2	1	4	2
External causes of death	67	30	35	118	36	36	159	93	72
Transport accidents	4	-	2	38	7	12	67	44	28
Drowning	17	6	8	43	16	12	19	10	8
Exposure to the impact of smoke, fire and flames	15	7	7	6	2	-	4	2	1
Violence	3	2	5	2	-	-	19	5	6

Source: Collection of statistical data 'Children in Latvia'.

Table 6
Health condition of children and teenagers (%)

	Breakdown by health group											
	1 st group				2 nd group				3 rd group			
	1995	2000	2004	2005	1995	2000	2004	2005	1995	2000	2004	2005
Observed children at the age of 3-4	57.1	55.9	56.7	57.0	37.9	39.7	39.1	38.8	5.0	4.4	4.2	4.2
Children of preschool age	57.3	56.7	57.7	58.4	39.0	39.7	38.7	37.9	3.7	3.6	3.6	3.7
First graders	60.3	57.3	57.2	57.2	35.8	39.0	38.9	38.8	3.9	3.7	3.9	4.0
Other pupils under the age of 14	56.6	55.6	56.6	56.6	37.6	39.8	39.3	39.2	5.8	4.6	4.1	4.2
Observed teenagers at the age of 15-17	58.8	58.3	59.2	59.1	35.2	36.8	36.8	36.9	6.0	4.9	4.0	4.0

Source: Collection of statistical data 'Children in Latvia'.

Table 7
Number of terminated pregnancies for minors

	Total				Including by age group							
					Under the age of 14				from 15-17 years of age			
	1995	2000	2004	2005	1995	2000	2004	2005	1995	2000	2004	2005
Total number of terminated pregnancies	31 324	22 201	18 190	17 338	20	10	14	11	805	585	537	501
Including induced	25 933	17 240	13 723	12 785	17	7	12	11	634	470	422	374
Terminated 1 st pregnancy	2 868	2 372	2 250	2 181	20	9	11	9	536	401	402	373

Source: Collection of statistical data 'Children in Latvia'.

Table 8
Operation of custody courts (civil parish courts)

	1998	2003	2004	2005	2006
Number of at risk families	8 697	13 066	9 436	8 712	7 039
Of which registered during the year	2 814	2 467	1 626	1 363	1 204
Number of children in at risk families	19 348	23 665	18 451	17 037	14 071
Number of persons deprived of childcare rights by the decision of the custody court	1 776	2 154	1 672	1 600	1 563
Number of children whose parents have been deprived of childcare rights	2 544	2 300	1 918	1 943	1 905

Source: Collection of statistical data 'Children in Latvia'.

Table 9
Number of children victimised as a result of criminal offences

Year	1998	2003	2004	2005
Number of children	701	1 655	2 126	2 779

Source: Data from the Ministry of Welfare.

Table 10
Frequency of cases of emotional, physical and sexual violence indicated by pupils (%)

	Emotion violence in the family	Physical violence in the family	Emotional and/or physical violence in the family	Sexual violence in the family or outside the family
5 th grade pupils	22	14	25	3
9 th grade pupils	30	15	36	10

Table 11
Criminal offences committed by minors (at the age of 14-17)

	1995	2003	2004
Total, of which:	2 591	4 255	4 189
Homicides, including attempted homicides	14	11	10
Serious bodily damage	19	20	18
Rape, including attempted rape	25	10	7
Robberies	69	256	212
Property crimes	1 922	2 490	2 413
Hooliganism	137	257	296

Source: Collection of statistical data 'Children in Latvia'.