



Original research article

Social support in the working poor

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Abstract

Introduction: There are many groups of people who are threatened by poverty. One of these groups is relatively new – *the working poor*. These people work but their income is still below the poverty level. Fortunately, in the Czech Republic, the number of such people is relatively low – approximately 4%. However, poverty can lead to involuntary social exclusion. Social support can help avoid such exclusion. Social support is influenced by the quality of family relationships, relationships with neighbours and the creation of social networks. Social support helps to solve difficult situations on one's own.

Methods: The research was carried out using quantitative strategy. We used the standardized MOS questionnaire for social support for the collection of data. The processing and subsequent statistical analysis were carried out using the IBM SPSS Statistics 24 programme. The sample group included the working poor from South Bohemia.

Results: We found that social support in this group of people was not very large; it is average. As we assumed, the highest score in social support was achieved regarding the area of family/love. Age, education and gender were not statistically significant.

Conclusions: Our research showed that most working poor respondents did not have a high level of social support but a maximum average. The highest level of social support was achieved in families, which many studies state is the most important social support during the management of difficult situations. We believe that the development of the relationships with neighbours and the whole community could contribute to a higher level of social support in the region. We see a large contribution in community work.

Keywords: Poverty; Social support; Working poor

Introduction

Working for minimum wage – the working poor

The term “the working poor” can sometimes be seen as nonsensical because one who works cannot be poor. However, lately this phenomenon has started to emerge and become a more real problem (Andress and Lohmann, 2008). The working poor are people who work but are still considered or consider themselves poor. Their income responds to approximately the minimum wage (Šustová, 2013). Their low income is often compensated by the state by financial social support (Zavadilová, 2016). There are a few definitions that try to define the working poor. One of them is that the working poor are those whose living standard is below the poverty level even though they have a full-time job (Baum, 2008). Another definition is that the working poor receive less than 60% of the median income of a state for the job done. However, the only official definition of the working poor comes from the USA (Wójcik-Żołądek, 2013). It says that the working poor are people who spent at least 27 weeks in the labour force (that is, working or looking for work) but whose incomes still fell below the official poverty level. (A profile of the working poor, 2015). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the USA

had 45.3 million poor people in 2013. 10.5 million (23%) were the working poor (the number of the working poor reached 10.5 million in 2013, 2015).

Wójcik-Żołądek (2013) states that compared to the other countries of the EU, the Czech Republic is in a better situation and only 4% of the working population are threatened by poverty. Sirovátka and Mareš (2006) also agree with this statement. They claim that there has been a low number of the working poor in the Czech Republic so far. According to Bělíček and Rychlíková (2017), in 2017 more than one fifth of the people in the Czech Republic worked for less than 83 CZK per hour. Eurostat (2016) regularly updates the list of 36 European states, which shows how much the people are endangered by poverty even though they are employed. According to this table, in 2014, the Czech Republic had only 3.6 points, which is positive. Romania was the worst with 19.6 points.

Today there are many theories, definitions and divisions of poverty. Everything is based on the incidence of poverty. It is a complex phenomenon. In different countries, poverty is perceived differently. Most studies agree on the fact that poverty can be perceived as the social status of a person with insufficient material assets. Another theory is simpler. It says that poverty is when a person is unable or unwilling to provide for themselves (Krebs et al., 2007).

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The European Committee states that poor people are those whose income is lower than the established level. According to Eurostat (2017), the level is 60% of median income in the EU. They say that this is a minimum level for an acceptable living standard. There is also a conflicting theory which says that poverty is only the result of the wrong distribution of sources in society, and the poor claim that they are only victims of this situation (Linhart et al., 1996). Poverty has many dimensions, such as psychological if a person is dealing with helplessness, feelings of dependence, embarrassment or even humiliation. All this can lead to voluntary or involuntary social exclusion (Narayan et al., 2000).

There is a constant way of dividing poverty which has been used for a long time. Poverty can be divided into *absolute* and *relative* (Michalos, 2014). Absolute poverty occurs when a person is unable to satisfy their most basic needs, e.g. they are unable to ensure clothing or food. It focuses on consumption. In 1995, the Copenhagen Declaration defined absolute poverty as the condition of the deprivation of basic human needs, such as food, water, health or housing. The people do not only deal with insufficient income, but the approach to services as well (World Summit for Social Development 1995, 1995). This condition can reach a life-threatening phase. Here, the bottom line can be subsistence – resources which satisfy only the most basic needs for survival. In the Czech Republic, this is called material indigence (Kukla et al., 2016).

Relative poverty means that a person or their family are able to satisfy their needs on a much lower level than the social level. This definition was brought in by Townsend (1979) in 1979, who claimed that people can be considered poor if they do not have the means to live. Such people feel socially excluded. Relative poverty focuses on income. In the Czech Republic, it is called social indigence (Kukla et al., 2016).

Another division of poverty is *objective* and *subjective*. Objective poverty is determined by the law (state) and it is clearly stated what the satisfaction of basic human needs means and on what level they should be. It also defines to whom and what level of support should be provided (most frequently, such poverty is established by the percentage of medium income or subsistence). Subjective poverty is a subjective assessment of one's own condition and often does not correspond with objective poverty (Krebs et al., 2007).

There are other groups of people who are most frequently threatened by poverty. Such groups are single mothers, seniors, ethnic minorities and also the already mentioned and relatively new group of the working poor (O'Doherty, 2017).

Social support

Contemporarily, we can find a large number of studies which deal with "well-being" as well as the factors that possibly affect it (Blatný et al., 2005; Kahnemann et al., 1999). Social support is the help or support received in situations when a person needs it. People mostly draw social support in common life and not only in difficult situations. Křivohlavý (1999) claims that scientific interest in the topic of social support began with the management of different difficult situations. Many studies (Uchino, 2006) are also interested in the effects of social support on decreasing morbidity and mortality.

In the classification of strategies for the management of difficult situations, social support belongs to the so called tendency strategies. Such strategies have a typical feature where a person does not turn their back on the problem but tries to use the support of their environment and thus solve it. Social support has a large effect on the reduction of stress and thus health condition and the total satisfaction in life (Cohen

et al., 2000). Stress is defined as a reaction to a stressor/physiological stimulus/negative impulse as well as anxiety. For this reason, the reduction of stress using social support is the first thing at the beginning of its management. In 1966, Richard Lazarus defined stress as the relationship between a person and their environment, which is significant in the incidence of stress as well as its management and coping with it (Folkman, 2013). On the contrary, social support is not influenced by a person's objective health condition. Here, personality characteristics are rather important (Koubeková, 2002) and as a facilitatory factor of the frequency and intensity of social support extroversion is usually mentioned (Tišanská and Kožený, 2004). A higher level of emotional stability and the tendency to search for and expand one's social network are closely related to a high level of expected and gained social support. Scientists also deal with the question of how to find the most adequate level of social support that a person is provided with (Krpoun, 2012).

Social support in working people working for the minimum wage

It is very important to create relationships and look for quality social support. It has been proved that social support can function well as a protective factor in negative and even traumatic situations and against burnout syndrome (Křivohlavý, 2001). According to some studies, social support, as well as well developed social relationships, helps people to live longer and to have better physical and mental health. Social support provides certainty and confidence during the management of difficult situations (Šolcová and Kebza, 2003).

Job loss, restriction of working hours, loss of income or just a partial loss of income and its restriction can be included in the traumatic situations that affect the psychological and physical condition. It is a large life change and in such situations a person needs to find a new direction, which is very difficult without the help of another person (Baštecká et al., 2013). There is also physical and psychological suffering due to income problems, which is reflected in other problems, such as nutrition (e.g. lack of quality nutrition etc.). Every person experiences individual symptoms and range of the influence of insufficient finances, which are based on the psychological resistance and previous life and work experiences as well as the mentioned social support (Buchtová et al., 2002).

Social support includes various areas, such as provided social support, received social support and anticipated (expected) social support (Urban and Kajanová, 2014). The most significant factor of the anticipated social support is family. The received social support mostly has a material or financial character (Crondahl and Karlsson, 2012). Many studies summarize the possible influences on social support and what poor people include in it. Neighbour relationships and creating social networks are important as well. A well working community seems to be a very important and irreplaceable factor in managing difficult situations. Neighbour relationships help to develop trust, co-operation and reciprocity (Catell, 2001). We now speak of creating social networks. Pearlin (1985) and Willmott (1987) claim that people from the lower/working class have fewer options for creating and spreading social relationships compared to the middle class. The study of Bates and Toro (1999) shows that there is a relationship between social support, background, stress and mental health. The total condition of social support regarding the poor is related to the size of the family network.

Šolcová and Kebza (2003) noticed that the relationship between social support and personality variables has not been

studied. The relationship between social support and income, i.e. the relationship between social support and the working poor has not been studied either. This topic opens many possibilities of research and should be considered.

Materials and methods

This study was carried out using quantitative research strategy. We used the method of questioning for the collection of data, specifically the MOS standardized questionnaire for social support. This questionnaire was developed by Rand and Medical Outcomes Study. The questionnaire is the indicator of the level of social functioning and it is designed for the general population. This tool should reflect the subjective interpretation of social inclusion. If a person can create and maintain social relationships, they can gain social support. The original 50 questions were reduced to 19. They should cover a few domains of social support: material help, love, positive social interaction, emotional and informative. The questionnaire is filled in by respondents who assess the support from the point of view of how long they have it using the Likert five-point scale: (1) never – (2) rarely – (3) sometimes – (4) mostly – (5) always. The total score is the average of the values of individual sub-items/domains (Kožený and Tišanská, 2003). The goal of this study was to describe social support in the working poor. The main research question was: *What is the level of social support in the working poor?*

At the same time, we established the following hypotheses:

H1 – there is a statistically significant difference between the social support of men and women.

H2 – there is a statistically significant difference between the social support of the respondents who had an apprenticeship certificate and secondary school graduates.

H3 – social support is influenced by age.

The data processing and analysis were carried out using the IBM SPSS Statistics 24 programme with an established level of reliability $\alpha = 95\%$.

The sample group included the working poor from South Bohemia. Their selection was based on the selected criteria. The first criterion was the place of residence. Then, the respondents' income, which was set to minimum wage. Their income was lower than 11,000 CZK at the time of the data collection. The average monthly salary in 2017 was 29,504 CZK. Another criterion for the selection was the subjective perception of poverty (whether the respondents perceived themselves as poor).

The data collection was carried out in 2017 to the beginning of 2018. A total of 359 questionnaires were filled in and included in the study. The distribution was carried out using the internet and the respondents chose to be included in the study. 50 questionnaires were filled in by the respondents at

the Labour Office when they requested state financial support. All respondents were (orally or in writing) informed that their responses would be used only for research purposes GAJU 037/2017/S. Their identification was not required.

Results

The results of the total social support are as follows. On average the respondents achieved 17.26 points, which can be considered as average social support. The lowest score was 4.75 points, which is very low (almost no social support). Only six respondents achieved this value (three men and three women). One respondent belonged to the age category of 35 and younger, two were between 36 and 45, two were between 46 and 55 and one respondent belonged to the age category of 56 or older. From the point of view of education, one respondent had basic education, three respondents had an apprenticeship certificate, one respondent was a secondary school graduate and one was a university graduate.

The maximum score was 23.75 points, which is the maximum/high level of social support. 17 respondents achieved this score (11 men and 6 women). From the point of view of age, six respondents belonged to the age category of 35 and younger, six were between 36 and 45, one was between 46 and 55 and four respondents belonged to the age category of 56 or older. From the point of view of education, three respondents had basic education, seven respondents had an apprenticeship certificate, two were secondary school graduates and five were university graduates.

Table 1 shows the division of the respondents by sociodemographic indicators. There were 226 (63%) women and 133 (37%) men. From the point of view of age, the respondents were divided as follows: 66 (18.4%) belonged to the age category of 35 and younger, 121 (33.7%) were between 36 and 45, 108 (30.1%) were between 46 and 55 and 64 (17.8%) belonged to the age category of 55 and older. From the point of view of education, 52 (14.5%) respondents had basic education, 146 (40.7%) had an apprenticeship certificate, 125 (34.8%) were secondary school graduates and 36 (10%) were university graduates.

Table 2 shows the domains in the questionnaire and the minimum and maximum achieved score.

In the domain of *Material support*, 10 respondents achieved the minimum score of 4 points and 55 achieved a maximum of 20.

In the domain of *Love*, 9 respondents achieved a minimum of 3 points and 111 achieved a maximum of 15.

In the domain of *Positive social interaction*, 9 respondents achieved a minimum of 4 points and 60 achieved a maximum of 20 points.

In the *Emotional/informative* domain, 6 respondents achieved a minimum of 8 points and 39 achieved a maximum of 40 points.

Table 1. The division of the respondents by sociodemographic data

Gender			Age			Education		
Woman	226	63%	35 and younger	66	18.4%	basic	52	14.5%
Man	133	37%	between 36 and 45	121	33.7%	apprenticeship	146	40.7%
			between 46 and 55	108	30.1%	secondary	125	34.8%
			56 and older	64	17.8%	university	36	10.0%

Source: GAJU 037/2017/S.

Table 2. The domains in the questionnaire and the minimum/maximum achieved score

	<i>N</i>	Min./No. of respondents	Max./ No. of respondents	Average	Standard deviation
Domain – material support	359	4/10	20/55	14.60	4.360
Domain – love	359	3/9	15/111	11.41	3.536
Domain – positive social interaction	359	4/9	20/60	14.65	4.257
Domain – emotional/informative	359	8/6	40/39	28.37	8.280
Valid <i>N</i>	359				

Source: GAJU 037/2017/S.

The first statistically tested difference was related to social support and the respondents' gender. We used the *T*-test for two independent sample groups. The first group were women. Their average was 17.21 (std. 4.76). The men's average was 17.33 (std. 4.98). The achieved level of significance was 0.816 (0.818) and the *T*-test results were $t = -0.233$ (-0.230). We did not record a statistically significant difference between genders.

We also used the *T*-test to find a statistically significant difference between social support and education. The first group were respondents with an apprenticeship certificate. Their average was 16.88 (std. 4.73). The second group included the secondary school graduates, whose average was 17.31 (std. 4.54). The achieved level of significance was 0.444 (0.443) and the *T*-test results were $t = -0.766$ (-0.769). We did not record a statistically significant difference between the respondents with an apprenticeship certificate and the secondary school graduates.

The third tested sociodemographic indicator was age, where we use the Pearson correlation. The achieved level of significance was 0.530 and the *T*-test result was $r = 0.033$, which means that we did not record a statistically significant influence of the respondents' age on social support.

Discussion

The working poor are still an unclearly defined group. According to Strengmann-Kuhn (2002), the working poor are those who have a regular job but their income is below a certain level. It can be the poverty level, minimum wage or a percentage of the average wage. According to Wójcik-Żołądek (2013), the Czech Republic is in a better condition than other EU countries because it only has 4% of working poor. However, according to Bělíček and Rychlíková (2017), in 2017 more than one fifth of people in the Czech Republic worked for less than 83 CZK per hour, which is approximately 10 CZK more than the minimum hour wage in the given year. In our study, we used the minimum wage as the bottom line and included the people whose wage was close to that line. Regarding the working poor, we are speaking about subjective poverty. People assess their current condition and include themselves in the group of poor people. The respondents also included themselves in our study because they considered themselves as poor. This perception often does not correspond with objective poverty because people are still not on the bottom line of subsistence.

Social support is help or support that a person needs in difficult life situations; poverty is certainly such a situation. However, if a person does not look for and spread their social network, social support cannot be sufficient. Paerlin (1985) and Willmott (1987) claim that people from lower classes have

fewer options to create and spread their social relationships. For this reason, social support is not as large as for those with higher income. We can partially agree with this statement. Our study showed that most respondents did not have a high level of social support. They at most had an average level of social support. Only 17 respondents achieved the maximum score. However, they still had some social support. Similar values were found in the study of Hwang et al. (2009) regarding homeless people. This study confirms that the perceived social support in the life of marginalized population groups, such as the homeless, is still present, although it is not at a high level. In this study, it is emphasized that social support can be an important source of better health. However, only a certain type of social support is used here and so they emphasize the necessity of services that would deal with the integration of risk groups in social networks.

Although there is a common assumption that poor people have a higher level of social support, (in other words – they help each other more), it is not so. Bauman (2001) warns that such people have a lower level of psychosocial behaviour due to a decreased ability to empathically understand others.

Material or financial support is received by only 1/7 of the respondents. We can say that the social support that is material in nature (Cron Dahl and Karlsson, 2012) is average or low regarding our sample group. The domain of "love" achieved the highest values. For the interpretation of our data, we can broaden the word "love" to family relationships, i.e. perceive the family as the most important. We can say that our respondents achieve the highest level of social support from their family (love). The highest average score appeared regarding the question "Is there anybody you love/who needs you?" Urban and Kajanová (2014), who see family as the most important factor of the anticipated social support, agree with this statement, as well as Bates and Toro (1999), who say that the level of social support depends on the size of family networks and the quality of their relationships.

We learned that the level of social support regarding the working poor does not depend on gender. The study of Hwang et al. (2009), whose respondents were homeless, confirms that the level of social support did not depend on gender regarding all four domains.

Conclusions

It is very important to create well functioning interpersonal relationships and look for quality social support. Many studies have proved that social support can function very well as a protective factor in difficult and stressful situations. Decreased income (individual or household) is certainly included in stressful situations.

Our research regarding the working poor has shown that most respondents have a low level of social support. Most respondents achieved an average level of social support. The highest level of support is provided by family, which many studies consider the most important in managing difficult situations. We would like to put forward that the development of neighbour relationships and the relationships in the community could help in the use and gaining of social support outside of the family circle. For this reason, we see a large contribution

in community work, where the emphasis should be put on the development of interpersonal relationships.

Conflict of interests

The authors have no conflict of interests to declare.

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Sociální opora u pracujících chudých

Souhrn

Úvod: Existuje mnoho skupin lidí, které jsou ohroženy chudobou. Jednou z nich je i poměrně nově vznikající skupina *pracujících chudí*. Tito lidé pracují, navzdory tomu je jejich příjem pod hranicí chudoby. V České republice jsou počty těchto lidí našťastí relativně malé, pohybují se okolo 4 %. Nicméně chudoba může vést k nedobrovolnému vyloučení ze společnosti. Díky sociální opoře je možno se sociální exkluzi vyhnout. Vliv na sociální oporu má kvalita rodinných vztahů, charakteristika sousedských vztahů a vytvoření sociálních sítí. Sociální opora pomáhá při řešení zátěžových situací vlastními silami.

Metodika: Výzkum byl realizován pomocí kvantitativní výzkumné strategie. Pro sběr dat byla zvolena metoda dotazování, konkrétně se jednalo o standardizovaný dotazník sociální opory MOS. Zpracování a následná statistická analýza dat proběhla v programu IBM SPSS Statistics 24. Výzkumný soubor představovali pracující chudí z Jihočeského kraje České republiky.

Výsledky: Bylo zjištěno, že sociální opora u skupiny pracujících chudých není příliš velká, je maximálně průměrná. Jak jsme se domnívali, největšího skóre sociální opory respondenti dosahovali v oblasti rodiny/lásky. Věk, vzdělání ani pohlaví nebyly v této skupině statisticky významné.

Závěr: Z našeho výzkumu vyplynulo, že většina dotazovaných pracujících chudých nemá vysokou sociální oporu, dosahovali maximálně průměrné sociální opory. Největší oporu získávají v rámci rodiny, což i mnohé výzkumy považují za prvotní sociální oporu při zvládání zátěžových situací. Domníváme se, že rozvoj sousedských vztahů a celkové komunity by mohl přinést zvýšení sociální opory v okolí. Vidíme velký přínos v komunitní práci.

Klíčová slova: chudoba; pracující chudí; sociální opora

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