Changes in Living Conditions in Poland
Under Economic Transition

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This paper presents changes in living conditions which have taken place in Polish provinces during the transformation period. To define the changes, 31 measures grouped into 12 fields have been established representing some basic aspects of living conditions. The years 1990 and 1994 were taken as the period of comparison. For analysis of changes in the value of living conditions, indicators were made using the statistical measures of dispersion, dynamics, and a graphic method. The average standard of living has decreased by 4.5 of one percentage point. Among 49 administrative provinces in Poland, only seven noted an increase. It is concluded that there are growing regional disparities in the living conditions of Polish people (JEL O50).

Introduction

The standard of living measures the effectiveness of economic management. The general feeling is that it should always be on the rise. If living conditions stay unchanged, they arouse public concern and set people looking for ways of improvement. For a long time, this phenomenon has been a reason for migration. The more mobile part of society is usually more progressive which increases the natural disparity in the living standard of any given area.

In the 1990s, Poland has undergone radical changes in the socio-political system, but reform of the social system has not yet started. The public still enjoys free social security benefits inherited from the previous Communist system. At the same time, it is taking advantage of free-market services made available in the new system. This duality pervades almost all spheres of life in Poland today. The transformation taking place now has a significant but varied influence on the standard of living in particular regions.

This study describes recent changes by using values of 31 measures grouped into 12 fields representing the basic aspects of living conditions. The two years compared were 1990 and 1994, and analysis was carried out at the national and regional levels. Absolute values of the measures were standardized in relation to the extreme values in the given year. Changes in living conditions in the country as a whole were analyzed by the statistical measures of standard deviation (S), variation coefficient (V), and dynamic index. On the regional scale, analysis was based on the dynamic index and the relative change of rank in provinces [Luszniewicz, 1972, p. 8; POLSKA '95, 1995.].

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The National Level of Living Conditions

Minimum values in 1994 were lower than in 1990 in many fields. The most serious drop and relative deterioration occurred in social security benefits, personal consumption, and public security. The minimum values concerning education, culture, and environment did not change for the worse. At the same time, a rise in maximum values took place, although it was less than the drop in minimums. This relative global improvement was mainly seen in medical care, education and culture, and personal consumption (Figure 1).

Changes in extreme values are, therefore, undesirable. As a matter of fact, disparities (distances between static values) between regions with the best and worst living standards have increased. The biggest increase was observed in the spatial dispersion for personal consumption, medical care, unemployment and welfare, along with the size of social security benefits. The differences were smaller only in the condition of the environment.

The trend of the synthetic index is negative both for the country as a whole and for all the fields together. In 1994, the average standard of living dropped by 4.5 points compared to 1990. A positive trend was observed in only two of the twelve fields—technical infrastructure and demography.

Regional Disparity of Living Conditions

At the regional level, a positive trend for the synthetic index had been observed only in the seven provinces of Łódź, Warszawa, Katowice, Piotrków, Konin, Poznań, and