

## **Fear of social decline – results of a DIJ survey**

For more than three decades, social inequality and poverty were hardly matters of public concern. Now, with the increasing precarity of living conditions they have become prominent topics in the public discourse. A society which hitherto perceived itself as homogeneous middle-class society, feels split apart into top and bottom. All of a sudden, the middle of society seems to have disappeared. It has, however, only taken a back seat behind a general fear of status loss and social decline.

Numerous documentaries of working poor and net cafe nanmin in the media every day show that such a decline can happen fast and often ends tragically. Results of a representative population survey carried out by the German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ) in September 2009 show that the awareness of increasing financial and social distress is high: 89 percent of respondents felt that the social climate in Japan had worsened. The risk of status loss, however, is not only seen as something concerning others. The majority of the population feels personally threatened: 72 percent fear that they will have to lower their financial expectations in the future. 65 percent of employees expect to experience a setback in their career in the near future. What is more, 85 percent are afraid to be forced to have to drastically reduce their expenses in old age in order to get by.

### **High share of self-assigned poor**

Taking a look at the financial situation, it seems that such fears are not unfounded: 52 percent state to have no savings for when times might get hard. For this group, sudden unforeseeable expenses can quickly lead to financial distress. More than half of the respondents feel that it is a constant struggle to make ends meet. 42 percent would describe themselves as poor.

Such a high share of self-assigned poor is not directly comparable to the objective rate of relative poverty (15.7 percent). It does, however, deserve attention, as it bears witness to individual experiences of financial setbacks and strong insecurities. Even though also in the DIJ survey, still 74 percent identify

themselves as middle class (cp. Figure 1), as many as 37 percent report to have experienced social decline over the past ten years.

Who helps when push comes to shove? Expectations towards welfare services provided by the state are rather bleak. Only 16 percent trust to receive help from a governmental institution in times of distress. Trust to be sufficiently supported by the state in old age is even lower (7 percent). Nearly three fifths of the population is afraid of the future.

### **Comparison with others is decisive**

Fear and insecurity can be found in the whole of society. Not only precarious groups, but also those who are well set are afraid of financial setbacks and status loss. Our data show that the objective precarity of the living conditions is not decisive for the degree of a persons' fear of social decline. What is more influential is the self-assigned stratum: Fear of status loss is higher, the lower one places oneself in society. Also the middle strata disclosed above average levels of fear of social decline. Most of all the lower middle is afraid to forfeit its middle-class status.

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Figure 1: Self-assigned Strata

