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**Social exclusion of blind persons during the Covid-19 pandemic**  
**in Liepāja**

**Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began at the end of 2019 and continued on an ever-widening scale around the world, has caused profound changes in public life. The spread of this virus has affected all aspects of life - health care, economy, social interaction and emotional well-being (Villeruša, 2020).

Unwanted social exclusion and injustice have widened during the pandemic. The restrictive measures and the inability to carry out daily activities have affected various population groups, including people with disabilities, the poor and people from less privileged communities. Thus, the pandemic has increased social inequality and revealed existing systemic problems (Oborenko, 2022).

Blindness is a condition in which individuals have no or significantly reduced visual function. This can affect an individual's ability to perceive visual information and perform daily activities that rely on vision. Because of this physical limitation, blind persons often face many challenges that affect their daily life and social participation (Saldābola, 2014).

One of the most significant problems faced by blind people is social exclusion. Social exclusion refers to a situation where individuals or groups are excluded from society or limited in their opportunities to participate in social life. It can manifest itself in different ways in relation to blindness (Dobelniece, 2022).

**Research object:** social integration of blind people.

**Research topic:** marginalization and social isolation experienced by blind people during the Covid-19 pandemic.

**Research objective:** to investigate the exclusion and social isolation of blind persons during the Covid-19 pandemic, focusing on their impact on their quality of life and well-being.

**Research hypothesis:** During the Covid-19 pandemic, blind people did not face increased exclusion and social isolation, which did not negatively affect their emotional well-being, social communication and quality of life, it was confirmed.

**Research tasks:**

1. To explore theoretical sources of scientific literature on the concept of exclusion of blind people, the concept of Covid-19, studies on how the Covid-19 pandemic affected exclusion in different groups of society.
2. Develop a research methodology that includes an interview with a blind person to obtain information about their experiences, limitations, social integration and emotional well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic.
3. Analyze and interpret data, perform qualitative data analysis in order to evaluate the experience and exclusion of blind people during the pandemic. Identify the main factors contributing to exclusion, as well as their impact on their social integration and emotional state.
4. Collect and analyze the data obtained in the study, perform data processing, draw conclusions.

**Research base:** Society of the Blind in Liepāja.

**Research participant:** Māris Ceirulis, Chairman of the Board of the Liepāja Society for the Blind.

**Theoretical basis of the research:** SS Senjana, V. Rogas- Vailzas, I. Ozolas, E. Apines, M. Gori, S. Dobelnieces, K. Druvaskalnas etc. authors' theoretical insights.

**Research methods:**

1. Theoretical research methods – research and analysis of scientific literature.
2. Empirical research methods – interview, analysis of scientific literature, compilation of results, data analysis and interpretation.

**Public attitudes and stereotypes about blind people**

Blindness is a condition in which a person's eyes are unable to perceive visual information or distinguish objects in the environment. Blindness can be caused by a variety of factors, including eye disease, trauma, heredity, or other health problems. Blindness can be complete, when a person does not perceive any visual information, or partial, when a person is able to perceive some objects or light signals (Bļugers, 1984).

Visually impaired people are people who were once sighted but have lost their sight for various reasons, such as eye disease, trauma, or other factors. Loss of vision can be complete or partial, depending on the cause and conditions that cause it (Blugers, 1984).

Society's attitudes and stereotypes about blind people are a complex and sometimes controversial topic. Although there are many who treat blind people with respect and understanding, there are also people who are influenced by stereotypes accepted by society, as a result of which blind people face discrimination and limited opportunities (Babik & Gardner, 2021).

One of the common stereotypes about blind people is that they are completely dependent on others and cannot be independent. This stereotype is misleading because the blind man's lack of sight did not affect his ability to be independent or successful. Although blind people are dependent on their fellow humans, many of them have developed their skills to the point of self-sufficiency. Most blind people learn to adapt and develop alternative skills, such as using special techniques and technology, to help them overcome everyday challenges (Blindness, Myths and Facts, (n.d.)).

Another common stereotype is that blind people are weaker or less able to perform various activities or work in certain professions. In fact, blindness in itself does not limit a person's abilities or skills. Blind people are able to successfully work, study, take care of themselves and contribute in various industries and professions. Although they may need additional access to information or adjustments in the work environment, this does not affect their potential or skills (Fraser, Beeman, Southall & Wittich, 2019).

Society's attitude towards blind people can depend on the level of education, culture and experience. Sometimes it stems from a lack of understanding and ignorance of the causes and effects of blindness. It is important to educate society about blindness, promote empathy and understanding that blindness is not an obstacle to a full life or cooperation (Silverman, 2017).

In order to change these stereotypes and improve the attitude towards blind people, it is necessary to carry out a wide dissemination of information, and to give more opportunities to blind people to participate in various social activities, to get education, thereby promoting employment. Public support is also essential to promote equal opportunities and prevent discrimination, which could affect the quality of life and well-being of blind people (Misāne, 2017).

The main goal is to create an inclusive society where blind people are respected and involved in all areas of life, where they are provided with adequate opportunities and resources to realize their potential and participate in public life without restrictions or discrimination.

### **Society's attitude towards blind people is affected by Covid-19**

Social exclusion and distancing are related but distinct concepts that describe people's withdrawal from society. Social exclusion is social isolation or rejection that leads to loneliness and feelings of worthlessness. Distancing is purposeful provision of physical distance to prevent the spread of diseases (Dobelniece, 2022).

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected society's attitude towards blindness, sometimes promoting positive changes, but also creating new problems and challenges.

The pandemic and the restrictions that come with it have brought about changes in people's daily lives and interactions. Blind people often rely on relatives, friends or community support to carry out their daily activities. Restrictive measures such as isolation significantly affected their daily peer support, which created additional difficulties and inequalities (Covid-19 containment measures, 2023).

In addition, the introduction of remote learning and working arrangements during the pandemic created an even wider gap between society and blind people. Employers often did not support the possibility of adapting the work environment for remote work due to the provision of necessary assistive devices for blind people (Latisheva, 2021).

It is important to address this issue and ensure that an adequate support system for blind people is maintained in the event of a repeat pandemic. This includes access to information, health care, social support, education, as well as adapted work opportunities that would help maintain contact with the surrounding community. Also, various information campaigns about blind people and their needs can help reduce stereotypes in society and increase awareness of blindness (Parker, & Alfaro, 2021).

In general, the Covid-19 pandemic has created both positive and negative public attitudes towards blindness. In order to promote public awareness of

blindness, it is necessary to continue public education to prevent inequality, discrimination, and create empathy for blindness and its challenges.

### **Stereotypes and perceptions of blindness under the influence of Covid-19**

Blindness has been highlighted, which can be both positive and negative, and reflect different perceptions and understanding of society. Some of the positive perceptions accepted in society include a respectful attitude towards blindness. For example, blind people may be greatly appreciated by society for their ability to adapt and show perseverance in the face of change and adversity. There is also admiration for their ability to use alternative methods and technology to help them overcome challenges. These positive perceptions promote public support and understanding of the lives of blind people (Stevens, 2003).

However, the majority are negative stereotypes and perceptions that cause problems and promote discrimination in society. Most people believe that blindness is a sign of failure and a manifestation of human limitations. Such perceptions and stereotypes in society only lead to a lack of compassion and contribute to the marginalization of blind people. For example, one of the most characteristic stereotypes accepted in society is that blind people are completely dependent on the help of other people. Such stereotypes create barriers and reluctance to participate in public life among blind people (Ulldemolins, Lansingh, Valencia, Carter & Eckert, 2012).

In addition, the pandemic and related restrictions affected access to support resources and assistance for blind people, resulting in excessive reticence or isolation among blind people. There was also a prevailing perception in society that blind people were more at risk and less protected against the spread of the virus. In addition, the support system introduced during the pandemic was not accessible or adapted to blind people, causing them additional difficulties and inequality in society (Gori, Bertoni, Mazzoni, Freddi, Amadeo, 2022).

By using the information provided to the community and improving the support system, we can develop understanding and respect that would eventually create a more accepting, supportive society.

Negative perceptions and stereotypes about blind people accepted in society during the pandemic had a strong impact on this group of society and created

unnecessary restrictions for them, as well as reinforced the already existing exclusion in society.

Another common stereotype is that blind people do not feel changes in their environment. This stereotype is based on the assumption that blind people do not matter in the changes of the surrounding environment, they do not feel social distancing or other restrictions anyway. However, this is a very wrong idea because due to blindness, people, like the rest of society, experience changes in their daily lives and are exposed to the risk associated with the spread of a pandemic (Gori, et al., 2022).

Another common stereotype is that blind people are intellectually limited. This is a completely unfounded stereotype, because blindness does not refer to a lack of cognitive abilities. Blindness does not affect a person - they are still able to actively participate in various social events, function in the work environment, and receive education. During the pandemic, it would have been important to avoid such stereotypes to ensure that people with blindness are considered as full participants in society (Gori, Bertonati, Mazzoni, Freddi, Amadeo 2022).

Stereotypes and perceptions of blindness during the pandemic created unnecessary barriers and contributed to the social exclusion of blind people. It would be important to provide information about the restrictions of the pandemic to blind persons, as well as to provide appropriate support so that they can fully participate in public life.

### **Covid-19: definition and characteristics**

On December 31, 2019, an outbreak of pneumonia caused by an unknown infection was identified in the city of Wuhan, China. On January 7, 2020, the cause of the pneumonia outbreak was identified - a new coronavirus that originated from bats, overcoming the species barrier and gaining the ability to spread between people. Later, the disease caused by the new coronavirus was named Covid-19. Within a month, the Covid-19 epidemic spread to other parts of China and cases were reported in several countries around the world. On January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization announced that the outbreak of Covid-19 is an international public health emergency (Druvaskalns, 2020).

Covid-19, or coronavirus disease 2019, is an acute viral infection caused by the subtle coronavirus SARS-CoV-2. It is one of the major public health threats

that has spread worldwide, causing health problems and death in many countries (SPKC, 2022).

Covid-19 has had a huge impact on society. Health care systems were overwhelmed and the number of deaths from the disease increased worldwide. Various restrictive measures, such as social distancing, travel restrictions and country closures, were put in place to reduce the spread of the virus (SPKC, 2022).

Vaccination has become an essential tool in the fight against the pandemic. Various vaccines have been developed and widely distributed around the world to provide protection against the virus and reduce the severity of the disease (Kīvīte-Urtāne, 2021).

The Covid-19 pandemic has also had economic consequences, leading to job losses, business closures and economic instability. In addition, it has affected social life, travel restrictions and caused many people an emotional burden due to isolation (Covid-19 impact on the economy: €100 billion support to save jobs, 2020).

Generally speaking, the Covid-19 pandemic has caused dramatic changes in everyday life and emphasized the need for mutual solidarity, observance of precautionary measures and scientific research development in order to reduce the impact of the disease and restore normal life (Roga - Vailza, Ozola, Apine, 2021).

Key aspects that characterize Covid-19:

1. At-risk groups: The elderly and people with chronic health problems, such as heart disease, diabetes or lung disease, are at greater risk of developing a more severe form of Covid-19, or even dying from it. However, the virus can also affect young and healthy people;
2. Symptoms: The most common symptoms are fever, cough and shortness of breath. Other signs - fatigue, muscle pain, headache, cold, sore throat, loss of smell or taste. Symptoms can be mild or severe, depending on the patient's age and existing health problems;
3. Course of illness: Most people who contract Covid-19 have mild to moderate symptoms that resemble the flu or a cold. However, patients, especially seniors with pre-existing health problems, can develop a more

severe form of the disease, which includes pneumonia and can even lead to death;

4. Transmission: SARS-CoV-2 spreads from person to person primarily through the respiratory tract, through contact with an infected person or contact with infected surfaces. Its spread is rapid;
5. Restrictive measures: To reduce the spread of the virus, countries have implemented various restrictive measures, such as social distancing, travel restrictions, leaving residence without reason, wearing masks and hand hygiene. These measures have helped to limit the spread of the virus in many countries;
6. Vaccination: Vaccination has proven to be an effective tool in the fight against Covid-19. Various vaccines have been developed and used around the world to reduce the symptoms caused by the disease and reduce its spread. Vaccination is recommended for all who can, it helps to protect both the individual and society as a whole;
7. Impact on society: Covid-19 has had a wide impact on society. It has led to overburdened healthcare systems, economic crisis, job losses and social isolation. It has also highlighted the need for global cooperation and improved preparation for possible future pandemics (Information on Covid-19, 2023).

In summary, Covid-19 is a severe viral infection that has caused a worldwide pandemic. To limit its spread, it is important to follow preventive measures and get vaccinated. Covid-19 is a serious public health threat that requires universal responsibility and mutual support to mitigate its effects and achieve a global recovery.

### **Promotion of social integration of blind persons**

Promoting social integration is a broad and important concept that refers to the process by which people from different social groups and with different life experiences are brought together and involved in community life, creating mutual connections, respect and understanding. This topic is extremely relevant in today's society, where globalization, migration and various social, economic



and political processes create new challenges and opportunities for social integration (Roga, Vailza, Ozola, Apine, 2021).

Promoting social inclusion is an important means of ensuring equality, justice and opportunities for all individuals, regardless of their social origin, ethnicity, gender, religious beliefs or physical or mental abilities. It aims to create a society in which individuals can fully participate, be active participants and feel accepted (Rawal, 2008).

Promoting social integration starts with understanding and respecting diversity. It includes education and information about different cultures, religions and ways of life, promoting awareness and eliminating stereotypes. This can be achieved through both education and mass media participation.

In addition, the promotion of social integration also includes employment equality. This means that equal opportunities in education, labor market and career development must be ensured for all individuals, regardless of their social situation or place of residence. This may require appropriate policy measures, such as employment programs, training and the provision of social services (Rawal, 2008).

Promoting social inclusion also includes human rights, security and social justice. Its purpose is to prevent discrimination and inequality in society by promoting equal opportunities and rights for all individuals. Society's understanding of equality and justice may require legal regulation (Howard, 1995).

Promoting social integration is a complex and multifaceted process that requires both individual and collective efforts. As a result, society becomes more diverse, but at the same time stronger and richer in opportunities. It promotes both individual and community development, creating an open, inclusive and respectful society (Howard, 1995).

Promoting the social integration of blind people is an essential aspect of modern society, where it is important to ensure equal opportunities for all, regardless of their physical or mental abilities. Blindness is a condition that creates challenges for a person in everyday life, however, with appropriate support and resources, blind people can actively participate in public life, improving their personality and engaging in various social activities (Senjam, 2020).

Promoting social integration of blind people includes several aspects. First, it is essential to ensure access to education and training. This means that there must be specially adapted curricula that take into account the needs of blind people. Also, available materials and technologies that provide support in the learning process should be provided. In addition, it is important to promote the availability of information by providing information dissemination methods such as Braille, audio and computer aids (Senjam, 2020).

The second important aspect is informing the public and promoting awareness about blindness. This includes education about the causes of blindness and limitations of abilities, thus not contributing to the formation of stereotypes and negative assumptions in society (Khan, Abbas & Khan, 2023).

Third, accessibility of the environment is essential for blind people to move freely and participate in social activities. This means that public places such as streets, public transport, shopping malls and cultural institutions should provide suitable signage, tactile guides, barriers and other adaptations that facilitate the movement of blind people (Khan, Abbas, Khan, 2023).

Promoting the social integration of blind persons requires mutual cooperation with representatives of various sectors, such as educational institutions, social care services, employers and public institutions. In addition, involvement is also required on the part of blind people themselves, such as membership of associations, organizations and support groups that provide joint activities and mutual support.

### **3.1 The role of blind support organizations during the Covid-19 pandemic**

Blind people's support organizations made a significant contribution during the pandemic by providing help, support and resources to this specific group of society. Given the limitations of blindness or visual impairment, these organizations have been necessary to ensure their needs and well-being (Senjam, 2020).

One of the main tasks of such organizations during the pandemic was to provide practical help and resources. Due to isolation, this included delivery services to provide food, medicine and essential hygiene items to blind individuals. Organizations also provided information and resources on safety measures related to the pandemic to help blind people stay healthy and safe (Senjam, 2020).

In addition, another important task of organizations was to provide emotional support to blind persons. The pandemic and isolation measures caused psychological stress and feelings of isolation. In this context, organizations provided emotional support by offering telephone or online counseling, remote group discussions or emotional support sessions. It helped blind people to maintain communication, understand their emotions and get the necessary support (Senjam, 2020).

The blind also played a role in providing information and education. They provided updated information on the spread of Covid-19, safety measures and specific needs. They also included education on how to comply with health restrictions - remote work, social distancing and hygiene requirements (Khan, Abbas, Khan, 2023).

The organizations played an important role in promoting access to digital technologies and tools to support blind people. Although the pandemic created many restrictions, digital technology became an essential tool in communication, doing work and receiving services. Organizations provided assistance to blind people by providing digital training, technical support, and customized programs or devices that enabled them to be active participants in the digital environment (Khan, Abbas, Khan, 2023).

In general, support organizations for blind people were essential during the pandemic. The activities of organizations were very important to ensure the needs of blind people, reduce social exclusion and promote their well-being during and after the pandemic (Khan, Abbas, Khan, 2023).

### **3.2 The role of community support for blind people during the Covid-19 pandemic**

The pandemic that hit the countries of the world created significant challenges for everyone, but certainly one of the most vulnerable groups is blind people. During the difficult time of the pandemic, community support became an integral role in helping blind people survive and adapt to the limitations of the pandemic (Senjam, 2020).

Some examples of community support. Please note that these examples are general and may vary depending on the country or region where support is provided:

1. Volunteers: provided support to blind people even during the

pandemic. Although Covid-19 restrictions and social distancing rules limited face-to-face contact, many volunteers organized assistance remotely or carried out safe activities to help blind people cope with the challenges of the pandemic;

2. Family members, friends and neighbors: were able to support by offering their help, providing emotional and physical support to relatives and neighbors who lost their sight during the pandemic. They helped with shopping, food delivery, visits to doctors and specialists or simply providing social contact and communication;
3. Local businesses: A small number of local businesses provided support by offering special services or offers to blind people. For example, cafes and grocery stores organized special ordering and delivery services to provide basic meals and necessary food products;
4. Teachers and educational institutions: adapted the teaching process to support blind pupils or students. This included the provision of tailored learning materials, individual support and technical assistance to ensure equal educational opportunity;
5. Medics: Provided essential assistance to blind individuals by providing health care, testing and vaccination for Covid-19. Their activities focused on accessible, high-quality and safe health care for blind people;
6. Social workers and psychologists: offered psychological support, counseling and support to blind people (Senjam, 2020).

In general, both individually and organized, various groups and professionals did essential work to support blind people during the pandemic, providing them with the help they needed and alleviating the difficulties they faced. Such an example of showing solidarity and cooperation is very important and motivating.

## **Interview**

**The aim of the empirical study:** to investigate the marginalization and social isolation of blind persons during the Covid-19 pandemic in Liepāja, focusing on their impact on their quality of life and well-being.

### **The tasks of the empirical study:**

1. To explore theoretical sources of scientific literature on the concept of exclusion of blind people, the concept of Covid-19, studies on how the Covid-19 pandemic affected exclusion in different groups of society.
2. Develop a research methodology that includes interviewing a blind person to obtain information about their experiences, limitations, social integration and emotional well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic.
3. Analyze the obtained data, perform qualitative data analysis to evaluate the experience and exclusion of blind people during the pandemic. Identify the main factors contributing to exclusion, as well as their impact on their social integration and emotional state.

### **Time of empirical research:**

From this year From May 25 to June 8, interview data obtained and analyzed during the research were collected.

### **Empirical research methods:**

1. Theoretical research methods – research and analysis of scientific literature.
2. Empirical research methods – interview, analysis of scientific literature, compilation of interview results, data analysis.

**Empirical research base:** Liepāja Society for the Blind.

**Participant of the empirical study:** Māris Ceirulis, Chairman of the Board of the Blind Society of Liepāja.

#### 4.1 Description of the empirical study

**Date:** June 25, 2023.

**Time:** 11:00 am.

**City:** Liepāja.

**Place:** Society of the Blind in Liepāja.

**Address:** Ganību street 197/205.

**Interviewee:** Māris Ceirulis, chairman of the board of Liepāja Blind Association.

**Interviewers:** Zanda Manfelde , Ilze Brūna, Ieva Jansone.

The research was conducted on an unstructured (open), personal and individual interview with the interviewee.

The interview is based on and is based on three main questions, which provide an

opportunity for the Chairman of the Board of the Blind Society of Liepāja, Māris

Ceirulis, to tell his opinion about the social exclusion and isolation of blind people

during the Covid-19 pandemic in Liepāja, without creating any restrictions and obstacles for him, as well as the prescribed interview during the period of time to

create the free structure of the interview.

##### **Question no. 1**

**Interviewers:** How did blind people experience social exclusion and isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic in Liepāja?

**Maris Ceirulis:** *The pandemic was a difficult time for everyone, a confusing time for everyone. The blind persons divided into two fronts, those who tried to perceive everything with logic and calmness and the other part who were overcome by panic. The influence of mass media (TV, radio, internet) created a kind of chaos, especially since many were scared with various punishments and sanctions (dismissal, fines) and it created even more anxiety among people.*

*People had a choice and everyone chooses, there were those who stubbornly resisted the pressure created by the society and those who protected themselves and their loved ones and were guided by the standards set and adopted by the state. I myself chose this time of the pandemic to continue working, I felt that people needed support and I provided it. Happened interpersonally communication both closely and remotely. Many conversations took place over the phone and much was discussed and prayed in the church (Christian Mission of Soul Care), which is also located in the same building. I believe that the social exclusion of a blind person was felt less strongly, because the daily life of a blind person is based on a kind of social isolation and stereotypes. Blind people are more adaptable to change.*

## **Question no. 2**

**Interviewers:** What support was provided to blind persons during the Covid-19 pandemic in Liepāja?

**Maris Ceirulis:** *If we talk about support, then I cannot please you. Not much support was given. NVA provided financial support for the purchase of disinfectants and face masks for each employee, a total of 7 official employees of the association were purchased. I myself maintained continuous contact with the municipality (Social Services and Liepāja City Council), which also allowed me to support the blind persons and not only until the last moment, as well as my parishioners and colleagues and clients in the "Garden of Soul Refreshment".*

*I must admit that I used masks and disinfectants very rarely during this period, especially masks. I was guided more by the situation and I can say that the regulations of the Minister's cabinet (Epidemiological safety measures to limit the spread of the Covid-19 infection) also provided that in certain cases and situations persons with certain diagnoses and the disabilities could not wear masks, especially since in this case blind persons have difficulty moving in society and we do not always know or will be informed about the existing place and space. There were persons who very insistently emphasized and used the use of these protective means and there were persons who used them only in very necessary cases. Although public places (shops, schools, etc.) were not adapted for blind people and everyone had to make do as a teacher.*

*It must be said that a lot of support was provided by the public, in which voluntary companions and assistants were brought up to date, although*

*municipal and state social services and regulations provide for companions and assistants for blind persons (Rules on assistant, companion and care services for persons with disabilities), many people came to the rescue from the outside. Neighbors, friends, work colleagues. The pandemic took a lot from people, but it also gave something in return. Peer support. People were protected and this reduced stereotypes and allowed for interpersonal interaction.*

*I can also mention the participation of the church as one of the most important supports. It was an important and integral part of my and other people's daily life. It strengthened and gave me motivation to move forward.*

### **Question no. 3**

**Interviewers:** How did social exclusion and isolation affect blind people during the post-pandemic period?

**Maris Ceirulis:** *Now that the pandemic has subsided, everything can be judged from the outside, people are starting to return to their usual rhythm. There are still people in our society who are cautious and feel the post-pandemic consequences, but I must say that the blind people I meet day by day have adapted faster than people without visual impairment. I think it is related to the fact that each of our days is related to adaptation and a kind of social exclusion and isolation to which we have to adapt. Some more and others less. I will say that the impact on social exclusion and isolation during the post-pandemic period is not very noticeable. There are people who lost their jobs during the pandemic, but most have either found other jobs or created other sources of income. I myself lost one of my jobs of 20 years just because I refused to get vaccinated, but God had other plans for me and I trust that.*

## **4.2 Research results**

The results obtained during the research were collected and data analysis was carried out. Based on an unstructured (open), personal and individual interview with the interviewee, we can be guided by the answers to the three questions, which allowed us to evaluate and confirm the proposed research hypothesis. Māris Ceirulis, chairman of the board of Liepāja Blind Society, as an interviewee, could evaluate the social exclusion and isolation of blind persons



as the chairman of this society, who has contact with both blind persons and their families and fellow human beings.

The first question evaluated the feelings of blind people during the Covid-19 pandemic in Liepāja, where it can be concluded that blind people, depending on the influence of society, were divided into two groups - those who felt disturbed, isolated and rejected by the chaos, as well as those who were able to adapt and be rational. The media both alarmed and informed blind people. The choice had to be made individually for each person. According to Māris Ceirulis, blind people adapted more easily to the changes that affected the world health and welfare system, this is because blind people adapt every day, breaking stereotypes and overcoming social exclusion and isolation in their own way.

The second question brought up the types of support for blind persons during the Covid-19 pandemic in Liepāja. Financial support was provided for the purchase of disinfectants and face masks sponsored by the NVA and the calculation was based on the number of employees. Cooperation and communication between the municipality and the Society of the Blind of Liepāja took place mostly remotely. No additional aids were issued for blind persons, which would have been desirable (booklets in braille, helpline, other technical services). Also, public places were not adapted for blind persons, so that persons could disinfect their hands and use face masks according to the epidemiological safety requirements. There was a lot of support from the public on the issue of companions and assistants, where people were much more supportive of blind people. Friends, colleagues and other volunteers helped to provide not only moral support, but also help with daily activities such as visits to shops, banks, pharmacies and other types of activities. It brought people closer together and prevented not only blind persons, but also persons without visual impairments from becoming socially excluded and from seeking comfort in isolation. The support and prayers of the church, which gave comfort and support to many people during the pandemic, should also be mentioned as an important point of the interview. People turned to faith and spiritual values.

The third question focused on social exclusion and isolation in the post-pandemic period for blind persons. It can be concluded that Māris Ceirulis, as the Chairman of the Board of the Liepāja Association of the Blind, has observed that blind persons are more resistant, especially that blind persons have to experience social exclusion and isolation much more often than people who do

not have visual impairments, which are unfortunately based on stereotypes and prejudices. Although the time of the pandemic affected blind persons both financially and socially (job loss, death, etc.), blind persons were able to adapt much more successfully back to public and social life.

#### **4.2.1. Other studies**

In several parts of the world, research was conducted on the social exclusion of blind people during the Covid-19 pandemic. In May 2020 in the United Kingdom, the Royal National Institute for the Blind (Royal National Institute of Blind People) conducted the following study

(How the lockdown is affecting blind and partially sighted people), who emphasized that social distancing is almost impossible for many blind and partially sighted people. Due to the poor awareness and poor adaptation of public places to deaf persons during the Covid-19 pandemic, many people felt social exclusion and isolated themselves from society (Gori, Bertonati, Mazzoni, Freddi & Amadeo, 2022).

Also in Italy, a study ( The impact of COVID-19 on the everyday life of blind and sighted individuals) conducted by the Italian Institute of Technology (Italian Institute of Technology) on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the daily lives of blind and sighted people, the results showed that changes in habits and isolation during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic had different effects on sighted and blind people and that tailored interventions are needed to help blind people in their daily activities ( RNIB, 2020).

In Germany, the Institute of Anthropomatics and Robotics, the Karlsruhe Institute of Technology and the Visually Impaired Training Center (Institute for Anthropomatics and Robotics, Karlsruhe Institute of Technology and Study Centre for the Visually Impaired) conducted research (Helping the Blind to Get through COVID-19: Social Distancing Assistant Using Real-Time Semantic Segmentation on RGB-D Video), which helped to adapt and overcome social exclusion for blind persons during the Covid-19 pandemic using the latest technology as an assistant (glasses system with an RGB-D camera that combines stereo matching and pattern projection for dense depth assessment). The research resulted in positive feedback from blind people (Martinez, Yang, Constantinescu, Stiefelhagen, 2020).

In Hungary, Faculty of Special Education, Eotvos Department of Education and Rehabilitation of Lorand University - For persons with visual impairments (Faculty of Special Needs Education, Department of Education and Rehabilitation of Individual With Visual Impairment, Eotvos Lorand University) conducted a study on social exclusion and measures that affected the daily life of blind and partially sighted persons during the Covid-19 pandemic in Hungary (Experiences of individual with blindness or visual impairment during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in Hungary). The answers and results provided by the respondents indicated the negative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic both in terms of purchasing essential goods and access to remote studies and work (Gombas, Csakvari, 2021).

## **Conclusions**

1. Blindness does not limit people's abilities, but stereotypes and societal attitudes can create limitations.
2. Covid-19 has caused a global pandemic, causing severe health problems, economic instability and social isolation. To limit its spread and mitigate the consequences, it is essential to follow preventive measures and get vaccinated, ensuring global responsibility and mutual support for all countries.
3. Promoting the social integration of blind people requires the involvement of support organizations and society. During the Covid-19 period, the support of support organizations and society has significantly contributed to the inclusion of blind people. Shared support is a crucial factor for integration and prosperity.
4. During the Covid-19 pandemic, blind people in Liepāja were divided into two groups. The first, which succumbed to public and media pressure, and the second, which perceived the existing situation rationally.
5. The possibility of support for blind persons from the municipality was small, but the support and help of fellow citizens, the Liepāja Blind Society and the parish was greater and left a positive, noticeable impression on the lives of blind persons.
6. Blind people adapted faster during the post-pandemic period than

people without visual impairment, because the everyday life of blind people is based on inclusion and adaptation, as well as on overcoming stereotypes and prejudices.

7. The research hypothesis that during the Covid-19 pandemic blind persons did not face increased exclusion and social isolation, which did not negatively affect their emotional well-being, social communication and quality of life, was confirmed.

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