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**Child Benefits and Poverty: The Case of Russia[[1]](#footnote-1)**

Almost 25 years have passed since the beginning of market reforms in Russia. Like other post-soviet countries, in the early 1990s Russia faced a period of sharp decline in real households’ incomes. Then a gradual growth of population well-being began. However, income inequality has been rather deep throughout all those years. Poverty headcount is still higher than 10% on average and differs a lot between territories and socio-demographic groups. Russian poverty has certain specifics: high risk of poverty is particular to young working families with children.

In this paper we analyse the effectiveness of child benefits from two angles. Firstly, we consider those benefits as an additional source of income for families with children. Secondly, we evaluate their impact on poverty incidence. The study is based on pooled and panel household data from the Russia Longitudinal Monitoring Survey – Higher School of Economics (RLMS HSE), years 2003-2014 (about 20,000 observations). We model the influence of child benefits on (1) the risk (probability) of being poor, and (2) the level of a recipient’s average household income. We estimate 4 various econometric models. Other, controlled factors influencing recipients’ household incomes and risk of poverty include type of settlement, family structure, education and employment.

The results turn out robust and show positive, though rather small influence of child benefits over a household’s income and poverty risk. Overall, the study results reveal low effectiveness of child benefits in Russia and indicate a need for improved targeting.

Keywords: *child benefits; means-tested benefits; categorical benefits; poverty; household income; Russia*.

***Introduction***

Almost 25 years have passed since the beginning of market reforms in Russia. Like other post-soviet countries, in the early 1990s Russia faced a period of sharp decline in real households’ incomes. Then a gradual growth of population well-being began. However, income inequality was rather deep throughout all those years. Poverty headcount is still higher than 10% on average and differs a lot among territories and socio-demographic groups. Russian poverty has a distinctive quality: high risk of poverty is particular to young working families with children. According to the Russian Federal State Statistical Service (Rosstat), 34% of all Russian families had children under 16 years in 2014. At the same time, among poor families this share reached 63% (Rosstat 2015, P.32).

In Russia, as in many other countries, the system of social protection includes so-called child benefits (officially labeled “family and maternal benefits”). They are numerous and varied in type. Some of them are provided by the federal budget or Social Security Fund; they include prenatal and maternity benefits, lump-sum childbirth benefits and child care allowances for children under 1.5 years, etc. Others are paid by regional budgets, and among them is a nursing benefit for children over 1.5 years. This benefit can differ for single-mothers, multi-child families, children of military servants, children of fathers avoiding alimony payments, etc.

All the benefits paid by the federal budget or the Social Security Fund are categorical: households with children can be eligible regardless of their incomes. The level of child care allowances for children under 1.5 years differs according to the mother’s previous earnings, though it has a certain ceiling. Alternative to the federal benefits for children under 1.5, the regional nursing benefits for children over 1.5 are means-tested, so not all families with children are eligible. It should be noted that regional authorities not only choose the recipients according to the families’ incomes, but also set the size of the nursing benefit. Thus, the real values of the regional nursing benefits vary considerably across the country. For example, in 2013 the minimal size of a regional child benefit was equal to 90 rubles per month (in Altay Republic), while in Moscow its values ranged between 800 and 1600 rubles depending on the age of the child (Rosstat). Thus, the benefits can be more or less attractive for potential recipients, leading to inequality in take-up.

The share of Russian children under 16 receiving at least one type of benefit has significantly declined from 45% in 2007 to 33% in 2013 (Rosstat). On the one hand, this trend in overall caseload may reflect the households’ mean income growth. On the other hand, it may indicate the system’s inefficiency. While the poverty level in Russia has reduced from 13.3% to 10.8% during the same period (2007 to 2013), the share of families with children among poor households has grown from 49.8% to 64.0% (Rosstat).

***Literature Review***

Social protection issues have been investigated in numerous research papers. In particular, child benefits’ effects on poverty were revealed in papers by Arcanjo et al., 2013; Jäntti, Danziger, 1994; Tamborini, Cupito, 2012; Van Lancker et al., 2015; and Van Lancker, Van Mechelen, 2014. Jäntti and Danziger, as well as Van Lancker and co-authors, focus on targeting issues. They analyse families’ probability of receiving a child benefit and its influence on child poverty (Jäntti, Danziger, 1994; Van Lancker et al., 2015). Bradshaw and Van Lancker compare the efficiency of categorical benefits allocated to all families with children (universal benefits) and means-tested benefits for poor families with children (Bradshaw, 2012; Van Lancker et al., 2015).

In Russia, the changes in policy on child benefits provision which occurred in 1997 motivated scholars to analyse their effects. Denisova and co-authors examine whether the introduction of means-testing schemes in the regions has improved targeting of child benefits, but ultimately get ambiguous conclusions (Denisova et al., 2000). Notten and Gassmann analyse the impacts of child benefits in 1999-2000, when means-tested schemes became widespread in Russian regions. According to their results, “Both inclusion and exclusion errors are considerable, and although the poverty reduction impact has improved marginally since the reforms, its effect on child poverty has been small” (Notten and Gassmann, 2008, p. 260).

According to the research by Ovcharova and co-authors, the type of child benefit is important with regard to poverty reduction. Social security benefits (such as prenatal and maternity benefits, as well as child care allowances for children under 1.5 years) can be more efficient in mitigating poverty than social assistance benefits (such as nursing benefits for children over 1.5 years) (Ovcharova et al., 2010).

Popova has evaluated child benefits’ efficiency using a microsimulation model. Her work shows that “…currently, this benefit has a poor targeting performance and varies across regions of Russia in terms of design and generosity, which raises serious equity concerns” (Popova, 2013, p. 122). The author is convinced that “redirecting these resources to the poor – by means of better targeting and raising the benefit amounts – brings about significant improvements in overall and child poverty indicators even at the current level of spending” (*ibid.*). Her results confirm that the impact of the program design on poverty is smaller than that of the level of spending. Popova concludes that “the best outcomes for children are achieved by applying the mix of universal and means-tested child benefits” (Popova, 2014, p. 1).

In this paper, we use the most recent data to analyse the effectiveness of child benefits from two angles. Firstly, we consider those benefits as an additional source of income for families with children. Secondly, we evaluate their impact on poverty incidence.

***Data and Methods***

This study is based on pooled and panel household data from the Russia Longitudinal Monitoring Survey – Higher School of Economics (RLMS-HSE).[[2]](#footnote-2) This is a nationally representative survey; the data have been collected since 1992. The RLMS-HSE survey satisfies all the standards for the ethical treatment of participants.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In our study, we use the data from years 2003-2014. We have chosen this particular period because, until the year 2003, the survey questionnaire included only one question on child allowance which, moreover, gave no detailed information on various types of benefits. Since 2003, the data show sums of benefits for children under 1.5 years and over 1.5 years separately.

The whole sample of 12 years consists of 55,786 observations (households). Among them, there are 20,145 observations representing families with children under 16 years (on average, 1,679 households in every wave). From this point onward we analyse only families with children.

We consider two aggregated types of benefits: (A) all benefits for children under 1.5 years, including care allowances for children under 1.5 years, and (B) all benefits for children over 1.5 years, including nursing benefits for children over 1.5 years that are most widespread in Russia today. The type A benefits are universal (categorical), with some of them being lump-sums and most of the others positively correlating with the mother’s previous earnings, though the latter have a ceiling. These benefits are set at the federal level. In contrast, the type B benefits are paid by regional (local) budgets and are mostly means-tested. The type B benefits’ values differ between regions depending on their budget incomes. Nevertheless, on average type B benefits are 4 times smaller than type A benefits. As our data show, the average share of the type A benefits in recipients’ household incomes recently has reached 15%, while the average share of the type B benefits was about 5%.

We analyse descriptive statistical data with an aim to reveal existing variations in characteristics of households that receive child benefits and households that get no benefits. Then we use econometric analysis to model the influence of child benefits of both types on (1) the risk (probability) of being poor, and (2) the level of a recipient’s average household income.

***Descriptive Statistics***

First of all, we aggregate our data to see how the absolute and relative values of benefits of both types changed during the observed period. Figure 1 shows the dynamics of average A and B child benefit values from 2003 to 2014, in constant prices.

Fig. 1. Average values of child benefits A and B (in rubles, 2014 prices)

The average value of type B benefits demonstrates a gradual growth. At the same time, the value of type A benefits (for children under 1.5 years) increases at a fast pace. Similar dynamics can be observed in the average and median shares of benefits in household incomes (Figures 2 and 3).

Fig. 2. Average share of child benefits in household-recipients incomes, %

Fig.3. Median share of child benefits in household-recipients incomes, %

In 2014, the average share of benefit A in households’ incomes reached 15.4%, and the median share reached 10.5%. In the same year, benefit B accounted on average for 4.5% of households incomes; for one half of the recipients the share of benefit B constituted less than 1.3% of their incomes, making this form of assistance almost negligible.

In 2007, one can observe a sharp increase in benefit A’s absolute value, as well as a spike in its share of households’ income. The most significant benefit in group A is a care allowance for children under 1.5 years that depends proportionally on the mother’s previous earnings. So, first of all it is necessary to find out whether the income growth causes the observed increase in benefits. However, as Figure 4 shows, the average per capita household income changed in 2006-2007 rather gradually.

Fig. 4. Average household per capita real income (in rubles, 2014 prices)

The reason for the benefit A growth is institutional in nature: in 2007, the amendments to Federal law No. 81 of 19 May 1995 ‘On state benefits for citizens with children’ were adopted. The ceiling for prenatal and maternity benefits was augmented from 16,125 rubles to 23,400 rubles per month. The level of child care allowance for children under 1.5 years was set to range between 1,500 rubles and 6,000 rubles per month instead of the previous universal sum of 700 rubles. So the real value of type A benefits has changed dramatically, thus making these allowances a substantial part of household incomes.

Figure 5 demonstrates the dynamics of the share of household-recipients of child benefits among all the households with children.

Fig. 5. Household – recipients of child benefits as share of all households with children, %

While the share of recipients of type A benefits has been more or less stable over 12 years (presumably, it depends mostly on the share of small children among all families with children), the share of recipients of type B benefits has been declining gradually from 50% in 2003 to 25% in 2014. From Figures 4 and 5 one could suppose that the share of type B benefit recipients is negatively correlated with households’ incomes. Firstly, fewer and fewer households can pass a regional means-test necessary for eligibility. Secondly, the higher the family income, the lower the probability that a family will apply for child benefits because of time and moral costs.

Further, let us consider separately the characteristics of the two groups of families: household-recipients of child benefits and households which do not get child benefits. Table 1 shows the differences between the indicators characterizing the incomes and household composition of families receiving child benefits and those that do not get benefits. In the first part of the table we compare characteristics of the families that get at least one benefit for children to the families with children that get no benefits at all. In the second part, the indicators of the families receiving type A benefits are compared to those of families that do not get type A benefits (regardless of type B benefit receipt). The third part of the table is identical to the second one, but includes only recipients of type B benefits (regardless of type A benefits). According to the t-test results, for all the indicators chosen significant differences were confirmed at the 1% confidence level.

Table 1

Average characteristics of household-recipients of child benefits and households which do not get child benefits (results of t-test)

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Indicators | Indicator’s value for household-recipients of child benefits | Indicator’s value for households with children which do not get benefits | Difference between household-recipients and those that do not get benefits | Number of observations |
| I. All child benefits (A+B) | | | | |
| Average per capita household income, rublesa) | 10153.78 | 14507.69 | -4353.91 | 19771 |
| Average total household income, rublesb) | 42278.01 | 53781.56 | -11503.55 | 19771 |
| Average share of employed members in household, % | 39.05 | 45.69 | -6.64 | 20139 |
| Average share of children in household, % | 38.49 | 35.25 | 3.24 | 20145 |
| Average share of pensioners in household, % | 7.38 | 8.85 | -1.47 | 20145 |
| II. Benefits for children under 1.5 (benefits A) | | | | |
| Average per capita household income, rublesa) | 11444.09 | 12830.72 | -1386.63 | 19771 |
| Average total household income, rublesb) | 51828.51 | 48777.15 | 3051.36 | 19771 |
| Average share of employed members in household, % | 41.32 | 43.16 | -1.84 | 20139 |
| Average share of children in household, % | 38.21 | 36.41 | 1.8 | 20145 |
| Average share of pensioners in household, % | 5.9 | 8.47 | -2.57 | 20145 |
| III. Benefits for children over 1.5 (benefits B) | | | | |
| Average per capita household income, rublesa) | 9736.36 | 14338.72 | -4602.36 | 19771 |
| Average total household income, rublesb) | 40331.91 | 53795.98 | -13464.07 | 19771 |
| Average share of employed members in household, % | 38.01 | 45.66 | -7.65 | 20139 |
| Average share of children in household, % | 39.2 | 35.16 | 4.04 | 20145 |
| Average share of pensioners in household, % | 7.55 | 8.63 | -1.08 | 20145 |

Calculations based on 2003-2014 RLMS-HSE pooled data.

a), b) – in constant 2014 prices.

The household-recipients of child benefits have, on average, lower incomes than the families that do not get benefits. Apart from this, one can note the difference in household composition. The families without benefits are characterized by a larger fraction of employed persons and pensioners, as well as a small share of children. This explains their relatively high per capita incomes.

Table 2 shows the division of households between those who get or do not get child benefits in relation to certain characteristics such as poverty, type of settlement, household composition, and mother’s and father’s education. Based on χ2 coefficient, we can define statistically significant correlations between categorical variables. Here we test a number of hypotheses on the lack of correlation between child benefit receipt and the mentioned indicators.

Table 2

Correlation between households’ characteristics and child benefit receipt (results of χ2-test), %

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Indicator | Families who get benefits | Families who get no benefits |
| **All child benefits (A+B)** | **40.47** | **59.53** |
| **Poverty\*\*\*** |  |  |
| Non-poor households | 32.88 | 67.12 |
| Poor households | 58.56 | 41.44 |
| **Type of settlement\*\*\*** |  |  |
| Regional centre | 31.81 | 68.19 |
| City (not a regional centre) | 37.54 | 62.46 |
| Small town | 39.22 | 60.78 |
| Village | 56.69 | 43.31 |
| **Household’s composition\*\*\*** |  |  |
| Two-parent family | 40.47 | 59.53 |
| Single mother (also with other relatives) | 42.31 | 57.69 |
| Single father (also with other relatives) | 30.59 | 69.41 |
| Other types | 36.45 | 63.55 |
| **Mother’s education\*\*\*** |  |  |
| Mother has university degree | 44.53 | 55.47 |
| Mother has no university degree | 30.89 | 69.11 |
| **Father’s education\*\*\*** |  |  |
| Father has university degree | 42.45 | 57.55 |
| Father has no university degree | 30.3 | 69.7 |

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Indicator | Families who get benefits | Families who get no benefits |
| **Benefits for children under 1,5 (A)** | **8.38** | **91.62** |
| **Poverty\*\*\*** |  |  |
| Non-poor households | 7.57 | 92.43 |
| Poor households | 10.55 | 89.45 |
| **Type of settlement \*** |  |  |
| Regional centre | 8.41 | 91.59 |
| City (not a regional centre) | 8.28 | 91.72 |
| Small town | 6.52 | 93.48 |
| Village | 8.89 | 91.11 |
| **Household’s composition \*\*\*** |  |  |
| Two-parent family | 9.17 | 90.83 |
| Single mother (also with other relatives) | 5.33 | 94.67 |
| Single father (also with other relatives) | 1.37 | 98.63 |
| Other types | 11 | 89 |
| **Mother’s education** |  |  |
| Mother has university degree | 8.2 | 91.8 |
| Mother has no university degree | 8.82 | 91.18 |
| **Father’s education \*\*** |  |  |
| Father has university degree | 8.21 | 91.79 |
| Father has no university degree | 9.26 | 90.74 |
| **Benefits for children over 1,5 (B)** | **34.68** | **65.32** |
| **Poverty\*\*\*** |  |  |
| Non-poor households | 27.11 | 72.89 |
| Poor households | 52.41 | 47.59 |
| **Type of settlement \*\*\*** |  |  |
| Regional centre | 25.13 | 74.87 |
| City (not a regional centre) | 31.49 | 68.51 |
| Small town | 34.05 | 65.95 |
| Village | 52.37 | 47.63 |
| **Household’s composition\*\*\*** |  |  |
| Two-parent family | 33.98 | 66.02 |
| Single mother (also with other relatives) | 38.29 | 61.71 |
| Single father (also with other relatives) | 29.22 | 70.78 |
| Other types | 31.54 | 68.46 |
| **Mother’s education \*\*\*** |  |  |
| Mother has university degree | 39.27 | 60.73 |
| Mother has no university degree | 23.86 | 76.14 |
| **Father’s education \*\*\*** |  |  |
| Father has university degree | 36.97 | 63.03 |
| Father has no university degree | 22.93 | 77.07 |

Correlation between variables was confirmed and is

\*- significant at 10%-level

\*\*- significant at 5%-level

\*\*\*- significant at 1%-level

From this table one can conclude that, among villagers, there are more child benefit recipients than among city and town inhabitants. Type A benefits are more frequent among two-parent families, while type B benefits are highly represented in single-mother households. Mother’s and father’s university education levels are negatively correlated with child benefit receipt.

Table 2 also illustrates the evident gaps and leaks in the system of child benefits (corresponding figures are highlighted). Namely, 33% of all non-poor households get benefits, while 41.4% of poor households get no benefits. From 100% of all families with children, 22% are non-poor recipients of child benefits and 13% are poor families without benefits. Thus, the leaks observed in the child benefit system in Russia exceed the gaps.

Overall, the average values reveal certain correlations between incomes, poverty indicators and other household characteristics. This gives us a possibility to build the models of child benefits’ influence on households’ incomes and poverty.

***Regression Analysis***

We model the influence of child benefit types A and B on (1) the risk (probability) of being poor, and (2) the level of a recipient’s average household income. We estimate four various econometric models (a pooled logistic model and a panel logistic model with random effects for probability of poverty; a pooled OLS model and a panel linear regression with random effects for average household income). Other, controlled factors influencing recipients’ household incomes and the risk of poverty include type of settlement, family structure, education and employment.

Table 3

Results of econometric models’ estimation

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Dependent variables | Poverty probability | | Logarithm of average household income (rubles per month)[[4]](#footnote-4) | |
|  | Pooled logistic model | Panel logistic model with random effects | Pooled OLS model | Panel linear regression with random effects |
| Independent variables |  |  |  |  |
| Benefits for children under 1.5 (benefit A, in rubles per month)1 | -0.00001 | -0.00002\* | 0.00001\*\*\* | 0.00001\*\*\* |
| Benefits for children over 1.5 (benefit B, in rubles per month)1 | -0.00003\*\* | -0.00005\*\*\* | 0.00002\*\*\* | 0.00002\*\*\* |
| *Type of settlement (compared to regional center):* |  |  |  |  |
| City | 0.376\*\*\* | 0.495\*\*\* | -0.164\*\*\* | -0.167\*\*\* |
| Small town | 0.812\*\*\* | 1.041\*\*\* | -0.297\*\*\* | -0.283\*\*\* |
| Village | 1.076\*\*\* | 1.446\*\*\* | -0.468\*\*\* | -0.464\*\*\* |
| *Household’s composition (compared to two-parent family):* |  |  |  |  |
| Single mother (also with other relatives) | 0.275\*\*\* | 0.239\*\*\* | -0.007 | 0.037 |
| Single father (also with other relatives) | 0.087 | 0.193 | 0.057 | 0.058 |
| Other types | 0.004 | -0.025 | 0.011 | 0.047 |
| *Parents’ education* |  |  |  |  |
| Mother has university degree | -0.746\*\*\* | -0.840\*\*\* | 0.277\*\*\* | 0.232\*\*\* |
| Father has university degree | -0.346\*\*\* | -0.442\*\*\* | 0.172\*\*\* | 0.162\*\*\* |
| *Household’s composition* |  |  |  |  |
| Average share of employed members | -2.51\*\*\* | -3.174\*\*\* | 0.869\*\*\* | 0.745\*\*\* |
| Average share of children | 0.394\*\*\* | 0.477\*\* | -0.154\*\*\* | -0.29\*\*\* |
| Average share of pensioners | -2.486\*\*\* | -3.217\*\*\* | 0.475\*\*\* | 0.43\*\*\* |
| Constant | 0.058 | -0.035 | 8.84\*\*\* | 8.959\*\*\* |
| Number of observations | 19765 | 19765 | 19742 | 19742 |
| Test statistics | LR chi2(13) = 3239.4 Prob > chi2 = 0.0000 | Wald chi2(13) = 1357.5  Prob > chi2 = 0.0000 | F(13, 19728) = 314.39  Prob> F = 0.0000 | Wald chi2(13) = 1772.96  Prob> chi2 = 0.0000 |
| R2 | Pseudo R2 = 0.1299 |  | R2 = 0.17, R2adj = 0.17 | R2 = 0.17 |

\*- significant at 10%-level

\*\*- significant at 5%-level

\*\*\*- significant at 1%-level

Among the 20,145 observations in our sample, only 19,765 households have provided information on their incomes. So, the subsample for the poverty probability models consisted of 19,765 observations. To model the households’ incomes in logarithms we had to reduce this subsample because 23 households reported zero income. The households’ incomes and the child benefits received by households in different years were all estimated in 2014 prices, in rubles. In case a household did not get any benefit, the size of the benefit was set equal to zero.

***Results and Conclusions***

The results turn out robust and positive, though with little influence of both types of child benefits on a household’s income. Both types of benefits – the benefit for children under 1.5 years (type A) and for children over 1.5 years (type B) – decrease a household’s probability of being poor, other things being equal, but the effect is very small. The models’ coefficient estimates show that the factors other than child benefits are the most important determinants of poverty. Among them are the type of settlement, the family members’ employment statuses, single motherhood, and mother’s and father’s educational level. Also, the presence of pensioners in a household provides certain hedges against poverty.

Overall, the study results reveal low effectiveness of child benefits in Russia. The role of child benefits in supporting families’ incomes is still rather negligible, even after the benefits for small children were increased in 2007. Despite the elements of means-testing introduced for regional child benefits, the whole system of child allowances in Russia is quite complex and ineffective in terms of vertical and horizontal equity. It needs better targeting for reaching the poorest households.

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1. This study is a part of the research project “Social Protection: Target Groups and Priorities”, financed by the Basic Research Program of the NRU Higher School of Economics in 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Russia Longitudinal Monitoring Survey – Higher School of Economics (RLMS-HSE) is conducted by the Higher School of Economics and ZAO “Demoscope”, together with the Carolina Population Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the Institute of Sociology at the Russian Academy of Sciences. The RLMS-HSE is a household-based, nationally representative survey, and its individual questionnaires collect rich information on respondents’ well-being and other personal characteristics. <http://www.hse.ru/org/hse/rlms> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It was approved by the Institutional Review Boards of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, No. 96-0478 Monitoring the Social Safety Net in Russia, renewal approved 06/02/2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In 2014 prices. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)