

# SOCIAL INEQUALITY IN THE US AND CANADA

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## Abstract

In 1949 in his inaugural address Harry Truman claimed that «more than half the people in the world are living in conditions approaching misery. For the first time in history, humanity possesses the knowledge and skill to relieve the suffering of those people». However, the problem is still pressing regardless of ambitious expectations and attempts made by the global community to reduce poverty. According to the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs survey, about 1,2 billion people in the world are still living in extreme poverty despite the significant progress of humanity in combating this social phenomenon. It would be reasonable to assume that poor and developing states should follow the lead of the developed USA and Canada, but according to surveys, the issues of poverty and social inequality are high on the agenda in these countries.

The article aims to study poverty as well as the approaches used by Washington and Ottawa to resolve internal social contradictions concerning increased social inequality and the plights of the poor. Apart from that, the article concentrates on the history and transformations of the approaches, used by the governments of these states to reduce poverty and improve living standards. The author concludes that the issue remains unresolved regardless of the efforts made by authorities of abovementioned states and it requires a comprehensive approach from the global community.

## Keywords

problem of poverty; social inequality; the USA, Canada, world economy

One of the most persistent problems that the international community deals with continues to be poverty. As a phenomenon, it appeared in the time of primitive communal system, and it accompanies the entire human history. Poverty holds both socio-economic, and political threats because it can seriously destabilize the internal political and, indirectly, the international situation. Acute problems of social inequality are fraught with the increase of level of tension in society, the rise in crime, the increase of mortality, social losses and economic instability.

The poverty problem is a pressing issue not only for developing countries, but also for developed market economies, the United States and Canada inclusive. This highlights the complexity of fighting this socio-economic phe-

nomenon. The incapacity of a majority of states, including the leaders of the present-day world, to eradicate poverty has made it a problem common to all humanity, turning it into one of pressure points of the world agenda.

## 1

It is customary to describe **poverty** as *wretched insufficiency of property valuables, goods, money available to a person, family, region, state for normal life and vital functions*<sup>1</sup>. It is projected onto the economy, social relations, politics, culture; it directly exerts influence on such basic characteristics of a person as his health and education level. As a rule, several approaches are used to define poverty. From the economic point of view poverty is a condition of hardship associated

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<sup>1</sup>*Borisov A. Bolshoi ekonomicheskyy slovar'* {The Big Economic Dictionary}. Moscow.: KnizhnyMir. 2003.

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with low levels of income and consumption of an individual or a household. In the case of a comprehensive approach, poverty is viewed in a more wide context and treated as the absence or limited access to resources determining the quality of life of an individual [Ivanov et al. 2010].

One of the factors deepening the poverty problem at the present stage is globalization. Globalization, as it is nowadays, fashioning the world into apparent integrity, does not eliminate and blur out its self-contradictions. On the contrary, it heightens and peaks contradictions. *Growing interdependence is turning into increasing mutual vulnerability*. The global danger of the world being split into zones of prosperity and poverty is that poverty becomes tightly interweaved with other global threats and risks, such as illegal migration, terrorism and crime, acting as a breeding ground for the latter. The resulting social tension makes the leaders of the poorest countries search for internal and external enemies, thus creating a proneness to socio-political conflicts, which in the case of the poorest regions of the world prompts, as a rule, the escalation of regional conflicts and international political conflicts. Thus, internal socioeconomic problems are linked with the world-political agenda.

For developed countries global poverty poses a problem in yet more respects. First of all, it concerns the increase of incidence of diseases across the population: hunger and insufficient sanitary conditions cause the break-out of infectious and epidemic diseases. Lack of sufficient level of education and culture, living in slums and anti-social criminal environment, in its turn, create favorable conditions for instability and increase the violence potential.

Two main approaches are put forward in the literature to describe reasons for the appearance and reproduction of poverty as a social phenomenon.

First, the *cultural approach* is based on the definition of poverty culture. It is that a special value code peculiar to the environment of the poor based on submissiveness, fatalism, inability to create one's own future and life. This culture is transmitted to an individual in the process of primary socialization from one generation to another, thus leading to the '*inheritance*' of poverty. The other cultural description is connected with substantiation of dependency culture meaning. If in the theories of poverty culture the poor themselves are considered as a source of their own problems, then in the concepts of dependency cultures the state with its programs of social security becomes such a source. It is assumed that just these programs create poverty as the poor stop relying on themselves and become parasites at the expense of the society [Social exclusion 1997].

Followers of *structural approach* associate the appearance of poverty with such peculiarities of the society as social stratification and economical inequality<sup>2</sup>. Structural poverty, as viewed by many researchers, is an obligatory element of capitalist society. It possesses even economic usefulness, because the poor population stratum becomes not only a sore for society but also a source of manpower<sup>3</sup>.

There are three basic approaches of describing the level of poverty which are widely used in the world practice:

*absolute poverty*, based on establishing a minimal list of needs and size of resources required to meet them;

*relative poverty*, based on a ratio of measures of social welfare and level of material security prevailing in a particular state. According to this approach poor people are those whose income does not exceed a certain amount of mean income countrywide [Townsend 1954]; and

*subjective poverty*, based on estimates of financial standing and standard of living performed by respondents themselves. The sub-

<sup>2</sup>Coudouel A, Hentschel J., Wodon Q. Poverty Measurement and Analysis. World Bank [Electronic Resource]. URL: [http://povlibrary.worldbank.org/files/11026\\_data\\_ru.pdf](http://povlibrary.worldbank.org/files/11026_data_ru.pdf)

<sup>3</sup>Poverty Problem in Russian Federation. Publication 11. 2009. Information-analytical materials of the State Duma of the Russian Federation [Electronic resource]. URL: <http://iam.duma.gov.ru/node/8/45The08/15098>

jective concept presupposes drawing the poverty line based on a study of a population's perception of the volume of resources required for meeting minimal needs.

To assess and measure the level of poverty several income criteria proposed by the World Bank can be used. The most useful of them is USD 1.25 (as per purchasing power parity) a day per person. This is the threshold of absolute poverty or poorness in which about 1.4 billion people are living at present. The other criterion used by World Bank experts is USD 2 a day per person<sup>4</sup>. These criteria were several times criticized as unreasonably low since they correspond to the national poverty line only in some of the poorest countries of the world.

According to UN data, in 2014 about 1,2 billion people in the world lived only on USD 1.25 per day<sup>5</sup>. In spite of the difference in the living standards in the countries of the world, all societies face, one way or another, the problem of poverty. Even the US and Canada, both among the most prospering states in the world, consume billions of dollars for social programs to get an enormous number of people out of endless circle of poverty.

## 2

Problems of poverty and social inequality emerged at the dawn of the formation of the American state, and throughout the course of the USA's history the White House has strived to solve this problem by different ways. Thus, early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, according to the legislation then applicable, cities and municipal centers were required to take care on their own of the poor. Help to the poor in this case is rendered by local elite and public authorities in the form of food products, firewood, clothes or small money. However, the industrialization process accelerated in the 1820's and the increase of migrants flow added to the poverty problem in American states. The Government had to take new measures for poverty alleviation.

Closer to the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the American policy course shifted from granting benefits towards attempts to teach the representatives of the lowest tier of the society the way of avoiding poverty. Various public and charity organizations started to collect under their covers the representatives of the poor with the aim of controlling their actions and forcing them to labor. Moreover, for the purpose of withdrawing poor minors from rough conditions the American Children's Aid Society launched a program within which boys from poor urban quarters were sent outside the cities to the agricultural West. In addition to these measures some public associations addressed socially prominent Americans with an appeal to perform before an audience and share with people the lessons of survival and success in American realities. Leaders of the United States were trying to help the poor not only by organizing donations, but by nourishing them socially, engraining in them the ethics and culture of the growing middle class [Lewis 1965].

In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the problem of poverty reduction became the main issue of debates of representatives of industrialized North and the slaves-owing South. The Republicans viewed the idea of American freedom in that everyone could pass the way from poverty towards wealth and freedom, and considered slavery to be a roadblock on the way to this freedom. The Confederates, in their turn, stated that they have no poverty-relating problems and that the slave-owing formation was saving the region from poverty, crime and revolutionary sentiments. After the end of Civil War, the South became the poorest part of the United States, where the population resisted the debts, suffered from low cotton prices and postwar devastation. Consequently, great masses of population started to migrate to other parts of the country. To try to solve the problem of the growing number of migrants, local police stations allowed the 'wanderers' to stay overnight at their stations. In the 1880's

<sup>4</sup>Indicators. The World Bank [Electronic resource]. URL: <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator>

<sup>5</sup>Millennium Development Goals Report 2014. United Nations [Electronic resource]. URL: <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/2014%20MDG%20report/MDG%202014%20English%20web.pdf>

about 600,000 people used this opportunity [Jones 1992]. However, charity organizations continued to insist on approaches which could re-educate the poor and help them in the longer term. The Society of Charity Organizations, created in 1877, acted under a slogan 'not a benefactor, but a friend'. It included women volunteers who tried to teach the poor about cleanness and the economy.

On the background of internal economic and social stratification in the USA after the Great Depression the country experienced the devastation of thousands of American agricultural commodity producers and workers of industrial enterprises. To solve the problems of unemployment and poverty, the Hoover and Roosevelt Administrations started to engage people in public work, create various programs

and labor camps providing for partial employment. For years after the Depression more than two million people were working in the created system and received an allowance amounting to USD 30 a week. Such a measure helped to partially mitigate the aftereffects of the industrial crisis and reduce the level of social tension.

According to the allegations of the White House representatives the number of people living below the poverty line decreased in the United States from 25.8% in 1967 down to 16% in 2012, which amounts to about 49.7 mln Americans, 13.4 mln of which are children<sup>6</sup>.

It is interesting to note that the most favorable situation is observed in the North-East and Middle West of the USA, the number of poor there is lower than the national average. The worst situation is with the population of South and West regions where a high poverty concentration is observed. It should be noted that the most troublesome states are those, where the great number of immigrants, involved in low-wage work in services sector, live (Florida, California, Louisiana, Mississippi.)

The majority of immigrants come to the US from Mexico, former USSR countries, the Caribbean, Latin America and Africa. The Lack of knowledge of English language, un-

*Table 1*  
Level of poverty in the US as per selective categories

Categories	Level of poverty, %	
	1959	2012
Population at large	25.8	16.0
With elementary education (age from 25 to 64 years)	25.3	35.8
With secondary education (age from 25 to 64 years)	.10.2	17,5
With university degree (age from 25 to 64 years)	6.7	5.9
Younger than 18	26.8	18.0
From 65 and elder	36.9	14.8
Women	24.9	16.7
Afro-Americans	57.8	25.8
Latin-Americans	40.5	27.8
Asian	–	16.7
American Indians/Aleuts	–	30.3
White men	19.5	10.7
Immigrants	23.0	25.4
Invalids (age from 18 to 64 years old)	–	26.5

Source: CEA calculations based on 1960 Census and U.S. Census Bureau<sup>7</sup>

*Table 2*  
Level of poverty in some American states in 2012

Name of State	Level of poverty, %
California	13.2
Mississippi	20.1
Lousiana	18.3
New-Jersey	6.8
New York	14.5
New Mexico	17.8
Texas	16.2
Florida	11.1

Source: Geographically Adjusted Poverty Rates Revised Tables 2012

<sup>6</sup>The War on poverty 50 years later: a progress report. January 2014. The Council of Economic Advisers. The White House [Electronic resource]. URL: [https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/50th\\_anniversary\\_cea\\_report\\_-\\_final\\_post\\_embargo.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/50th_anniversary_cea_report_-_final_post_embargo.pdf)

<sup>7</sup>The War on poverty 50 years later: a progress report. January 2014. The Council of Economic Advisers. The White House [Электронный ресурс]. URL: [https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/50th\\_anniversary\\_cea\\_report\\_-\\_final\\_post\\_embargo.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/50th_anniversary_cea_report_-_final_post_embargo.pdf)

willingness to adapt to the religion, national and cultural traditions of the American lifestyle result in that those people live detached from the world and incapable of being integrated into the America's public life to a full extent [Venkatetesh 2000].

On January 8<sup>th</sup>, 1964 the USA President Lyndon Johnson proclaimed the beginning of an 'uncompromising war against poverty', and presented the initiatives directed to improve education, health care, labor market and providing access for the poor to the economical resources of the country. The White House representatives claim that despite there being much work to do ahead, during previous decades they succeeded in implementing many of these programs and achieved significant success in reducing the level of poverty. Further steps for the situation improvement and ensuring economic security of the United States in order to prevent a million of working Americans falling below the poverty line were taken by the Obama Administration during the global economic crisis.

The 'War against poverty' turned out to be very expensive. The United States paid for this USD 20 trillion within fifty years. As variously estimated, expenses per one poor citizen amount from USD 9,000 to 17,000 per year, including dozens of aid programs: from financial aid to aid with food products, subsidized residential property and special classes of vocational training. Opponents of this strategy of combating poverty say that the strategy did not achieve the objectives stated by Johnson 50 years ago. Indeed, the President stated that expenses for the 'war against poverty' in prospect would become investments into the American economy. There is no denying that a reduction of the level of poverty by 9.8% within more than 50 years (see Table 1) did not justify the investment of such extensive financial resources. Moreover, owing to liberal allowance for a certain swath of population, a psychology of dependents appeared with these programs:

people stopped to see the value of labor activity, because the state liberally sponsored them.

One more problem hindering the full-scale implementation of the state strategy of poverty reduction, remains the American system of income distribution in the country. As a result, with the creation at the United Nations of the 'society of proprietors' the process of income redistribution got to go 'from bottom to top', but not 'from top to bottom'. Creation of the most favored nation treatment for industrial magnates and bankers in the USA in 2013 resulted in an unprecedented redistribution of income and wealth in favor of the elite. Eventually, 1% of wealthy Americans received 22% of the national income in 2013, 0,1% – 11%, and corporate income of big American business was 11% of GDP, an amount that had no precedence in the United States history. In addition, despite the fact that America is still considered as a country of huge economic potential, only half of the total number of poor Americans received a minimal amount of income within a twenty-year period<sup>8</sup>.

### 3

Though Canada is considered to be one of the most socially favorable states, about 9% of its population lives in poverty. The majority of those staying 'beyond' are lone mothers and First Nations (indigenous population) of this North American state. As a rule, poor Canadians are divided into two groups, i.e., 'working poor' (those having a job), and 'poor people under social service', i.e., those who depends, mainly, on state support. Since 1960 a plurality of social programs aimed at the reduction of the level of poverty inside the country, were adopted, including increase of pensions and employment insurance<sup>9</sup>.

Full-fledged steps in poverty reduction were started in Canada in the 1960's, when poverty turned to be one of the most pressing problems faced by Canadian society. In that period the Government was mainly focused on scandal-

<sup>8</sup>Abramsky S. America's shameful poverty stats // The Nation. October 7, 2013 [Electronic resource]. URL: <http://www.thenation.com/article/176242/americas-shameful-poverty-stats>

<sup>9</sup>Statistics Canada [Electronic resource]. URL: <http://www5.statcan.gc.ca/subject-sujet/theme-theme.action?pid=3868&lang=eng&more=0&MM>

ous conditions of living of the First Nations and pensioners, and on high level social inequality in various regions. Such deliberate attention to the problem of poverty was in total contradiction with the formed in the postwar period notion of allegedly achieved public prosperity.

In this connection, with in the background the proclaimed in the United States in 1964 'war against poverty', Canadian experts commenced investigating the reasons for this social phenomenon, and developing the method of combating it. In 1965 the Privy Council of the Queen for Canada established a group tasked to develop cooperation of the center with the regions for combating poverty. In the same year a student movement named 'Company of Young Canadians' was organized, it dealt with the mobilization of population funds rendering help to the poor. Despite that, this movement was dismantled later. It became an ancestor for the great number of federal governmental programs launched in the 1970's-1980's and aimed at creating jobs and reducing the level of poverty in the country.

In 1968 the Ministry of Statistics of Canada published the results of a study of the level of income of Canadians, which became a capstone for further introduction of agreed standards of determining and measuring low income. In the same year, the Economic Council of Canada bewildered the society by using new methods of calculation for estimating the wealth level in the country. According to the obtained results 27% of population were living beyond the poverty line. Owing largely to the study performed, in 1968 a special committee of the Canada Senate for poverty issues headed by David Kroll (a Canadian lawyer and famous politician) commenced parliamentary hearings and carried out some studies aimed at working out efficient measures to improve the situation. The Special Committee Report published in 1971 confirmed much of what the Economic Council had warned about, and made a proposal to launch a program of guaranteed annual income which was to become an efficient measure for reducing poverty.

The other influential committee set up at the same period of time and headed by Claude

Castonge (famous Canadian politician, teacher and businessman) also published a report laying emphasis mostly on a large scale study of problems of social security system in Quebec. It defended (in addition to proposals relating to the issues of health care, population employment and social service) the project of launching the program of guaranteed annual income.

The concern about the social situation which arose in Canadian society in the 1960's led to the enactment of some legislative initiatives aimed at reduction of poverty. Negotiations started in 1964 between the federal Government and provinces, ended with the adoption of pension plans based on the admission that the existed system did not meet social demands, and it did not provide enough support to those, who worked throughout their life at low-wage jobs. With this in view, a program of guaranteed income supplement aimed at supporting the poor was launched.

One more initiative in combating poverty which appeared was the 'Plan of Aid to Canada' enacted in 1966, which was comprehensive social security program, replacing a number of different federal and regional programs adopted yet in 1927. The 'Plan of Aid' entailed providing financial support not only to unemployed and disabled citizens, but also to other representatives of the poor, including the working poor. Moreover, this Plan included a wide range of measures on rendering social support, i.e., commissioning children's day care centers, organization of family counseling and child protection services.

It should be noted that the legislative initiatives enacted in the 1970's-1980's in Canada were generally marginal improvements of earlier implemented programs. In 1971 amendments were made to the Unemployment Insurance Act with the purpose of providing protection to disabled and unemployed citizens. The tax credit enacted in 1978, paid out for a child, facilitated the increase of the large family allowance. However, the plan of launching the program of guaranteed annual income failed. This was caused by significant reduction of the budget items aimed at rendering financial support and providing social security for

*Table 3*  
Dynamics of level of poverty in Canada  
as per selective categories

Categories	Level of poverty, %		
	1981	1996	2010
Population at large	11.6	15.2	9.0
Housholds	—	—	—
Families	8.8	12.0	5.9
Before age of 65 years	8.8	13.0	6.3
After age of 65 years	9.6	3.0	3.2
Individuals	35.5	36.1	26.9
Before age of 65 years	29.8	40.4	31.3
After age of 65 years	49.7	25.4	14.3
Before age of 65 years	12.6	18.4	8.2
Age of 18-64 years	9.8	15.0	10.1
After age of 65 years	21.0	9.7	5.3
Men	9.9	14.2	8.7
Women	13.3	16.2	9.3
Jabonies	12.6	32.8	17.6
Indigenous peoples	—	28.8	15.2
Invalids	—	—	13.6

Source: *Poverty Trends Scorecard Canada 2012*<sup>11</sup>

the poor by the 1980's. In the 1990's these reductions continued<sup>10</sup>.

In 2013 the Ministry of Statistics of Canada informed that 9% of population had in 2010 a low income, which is 6.2% lower than in 1996. According to the Report of Canadian Center of Political Alternatives published in 2013 the highest level of poverty, when compared with all the rest of residents of the country, is demonstrated by the representatives of the First Nations and recently arrived immigrants.

In Canadian provinces the level of poverty is very variable thus reflecting various economic realities in different corners of the country. Over the past decade there has been visible progress in the sphere of poverty eradication and reduction in such provinces as Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island,

*Table 4*  
Dynamics of poverty level in selective Canadian Provinces

Provinces	Level of poverty, %		
	1981	1996	2010
Alberta	8.0	14.8	6.8
British Columbia	10.9	15.2	11
Quebec	14.3	18.0	10.0
Manitoba	14.2	15.8	9.2
New Scotland	12.1	13.4	7.7
New-Brunswick	15.0	12.0	5.5
Newfoundland and Labrador	13.3	15.4	6.5
Ontario	10.0	14.0	8.8
Prince Edward Island	12.0	8.6	3.9
Saskatchewan	12.2	13.0	6.4

Source: *Caryl Arundel and Associates*<sup>12</sup>

Saskatchewan and Quebec. However, it significantly slowed down due to the economic crisis which broke out in 2008. In some provinces the level of poverty spiked in 2009 and 2010, and up till now the Canadian Government cannot handle this situation.

In 2010 the lowest level of poverty was observed in the Prince Edward Island Province (3.9%), then followed New-Brunswick (5.5%), Saskatchewan (6.4%) and Newfoundland and Labrador (6.5%). The reason was, to a large extent, the explosive growth of economy of the western part of the country, as well as a change of demographic structure, namely, the 'aging' of the population (close-knit, consolidated families very seldom face a problem of poverty, compared to young ones.) In addition, it should be noted that in the 2000's a number of Poverty Reduction Strategies aimed primarily at helping young families were adopted and implemented in such provinces as Quebec and Newfoundland and Labrador.

In 2008, the comparative study of the social situation in Canada and other developed democracies made it possible for OECD experts

<sup>10</sup>Poverty. The Canadian Encyclopedia [Electronic resource]. URL: <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/poverty>

<sup>11</sup>Poverty Trends Scorecard Canada 2012. Citizens for Public Justice [Electronic resource]. URL: <http://www.cpj.ca/files/docs/poverty-trends-scorecard.pdf>

<sup>12</sup>Caryl Arundel and Associates. How are Canadians Really Doing? A Closer Look at Select Groups. 2012. Canadian Institute of Wellbeing [Electronic resource]. URL: [http://ciw.ca/reports/en/History/ACloserLookAtSelectGroups\\_FullReport.pdf](http://ciw.ca/reports/en/History/ACloserLookAtSelectGroups_FullReport.pdf)

to conclude that after two decades of lowering the level of poverty and inequality in the country, it has rapidly increased for 10 years in a row. 'For 10 years in a row the level of poverty (first of all, citizens living on half median income) increased among all age groups by 2–3%'. The OECD Report also states that for aged people this indicator is 6%, whereas among children it reaches 15%. Additionally, it is underlined in the report that the more well-off section of society of Canada is richer even when compared with its counterpart in other developed countries, and the standard of living of the poor and middle class is higher than in other country-members of the OECD<sup>13</sup>.

It must be emphasized that in accordance with the study of the processes of social mobility in the country, poverty remains a temporary problem for about 60% of the poor, while for the remaining 40% this problem is insolvable even over a number of years. As a rule, the process of poverty alleviation takes a longer period of time for lone mothers, invalids, recently arrived immigrants, and persons with a low level of education [Ross 2000].

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Despite active attempts of the leaders of North American countries to lower the level of poverty in their countries, there was no significant rise of the welfare of the population of both countries. In the United States the expenses for implementation of the 'war against

poverty' program did not show good results; many of poor citizens started to use it as a way to refuse labor activity, and the benefits allocation system functions in such a way that one social class enriches at the expense of the other class. Moreover, up to now Ottawa and Washington cannot solve the dilemma of unequal distribution of income, because of which one segment of the people continues enriching, while the others become poorer. The immigration problem and effects of the grave economic crisis of 2008 are particularly relevant. Based on the analysis performed, it may be reasonable to conclude that the problem of poverty cannot be solved by any country alone, even by such socially and economically powerful countries, as Canada and the United States.

Poverty is a world-scale problem. And only joint efforts of the international society aimed at stabilization of social and economic situation in the least wealthy regions of the world, can effectively react against this threat. It is worth remembering that the methods for solving this problem should be comprehensive and they should involve not only economic but also the political and socio-cultural aspects of the matter. The world political establishment should become acutely aware of the increased global interdependence of the participants of the modern international system, and take all necessary measures to lower the level of poverty and improve the living conditions of the poor.

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<sup>13</sup>Growing Unequal: Income Distribution and Poverty in OECD Countries, 2008. OECD [Electronic resource]. URL: <http://www.oecd.org/els/soc/41527936.pdf>