

A response from the British Sociological Association (BSA) to the government's 'Measuring child poverty: A consultation on better measures of child poverty'

The [British Sociological Association](#) is the professional organisation representing sociologists in Britain. This response has been written by members with particular knowledge in the area of families and relationships. Our collective research expertise spans the wide variety of families and households containing children and young people, and our specialisms include the significance of broader social issues including inequality and poverty.

We welcome the government's stated commitment to tackling child poverty and the opportunity to respond to their proposals for developing new ways of measuring child poverty. In this response we begin by outlining our general concerns about the issues raised in the consultation. We then provide additional comments on the specific areas proposed.

Overall statement:

At a general level, we question the current government's rationale for changing the way that child poverty is measured and call on the government to re-visit sociological work in this area which has provided important insights into how child poverty should be understood, measured and addressed through social and economic policies and interventions. This work has, among other things, highlighted the importance of increasing income and improving material living conditions of families; emphasised the structural reasons for the persistence of poverty; and called for a whole life cycle rather than partial approach to addressing child poverty which supports families in the long term. In particular, we refer to the detailed and rigorous analysis of the government measures of poverty and social exclusion conducted by colleagues at the University of Bristol, Heriot-Watt University, The Open University, Queen's University Belfast, University of Glasgow and the University of York (see: <http://www.poverty.ac.uk/>).

We agree that better and more nuanced policy approaches to poverty and social exclusion should be developed. We also agree that the interlinked and mutually reinforcing characteristics of deprivation must be better understood and addressed. However, we are concerned to ensure that the issue of income inequality remains to the fore and is not decentred in the process. The new dimensions proposed as part of this consultation risk under acknowledging the structural roots of poverty while simultaneously conflating causes, consequences and symptoms. We argue, in relation to the proposed new dimensions, that it is important to continue to address these issues separately and avoid conflating them in one single measure.

There may be many different factors that are correlated with poverty but any attempt to identify causality must recognise their multidirectional nature and the extent to which these compound each other as potential causes and symptoms. Much sociological work has been done on the topic of 'social exclusion' in an effort to pursue a holistic and broader approach to child poverty which attends to compounding forms of disadvantage. On the basis of this work, new measures and conceptualisations have already been mapped out with the intention of capturing the multi-dimensional nature of (child) poverty (see, Levitas et al., 2007 <http://www.bris.ac.uk/poverty/downloads/socialexclusion/multidimensional.pdf>). We are

concerned that the current proposals will lead to a 'reinventing of the wheel' which, at a time of austerity and restricted public finances, is particularly unnecessary.

We are also troubled by the way these proposals appear to prioritise child poverty as a strategic rather than a social and moral issue. Many of the suggested new measures deflect attention away from children who are suffering in the here and now focus instead on future outcomes, on the basis that deprivation is transmitted through the generations. We wish to point out that theories built on the notion of inherited 'cultures of poverty' remain completely unsubstantiated, despite a sustained research focus seeking to prove this hypothesis (see [Gordon 2011](#) for further discussion). More significantly, the approach proposed in this consultation appears to imply that suffering and hardship endured by children only matters if it can be shown to have long-term implications. We would instead stress the moral case for protecting children (and their families) as a vulnerable group from the privations of existing poverty.

Comments on specific measures proposed:

Income and material deprivation

While we welcome the government's proposal to look at multiple dimensions of child poverty, we stress the importance of retaining a clear and independent measure of income in and of its self, and raise our concern that the significance of income will be neglected in formulating new measures. The 'root cause' of poverty is first and foremost lack of income. Attempts to amalgamate dimensions of social exclusion into a revised measure of poverty, risk underestimating the core significance of socio-economic factors and may even encourage a misrepresentation of low income as merely one symptom of poverty rather than its cause.

There may be various 'root causes' of lack of income and while some of these are recognised in the other proposed measures, it remains crucial not to lose sight of the primary significance of household income levels in any agenda to monitor and reduce child poverty. Research shows that raised income levels, including increases in Child Benefit and child tax credits has a positive impact on children's lives ([Aldridge et al, 2011](#); [Child Poverty Action Group](#)). We are therefore concerned that the current changes to family tax credits and child benefits will militate against attempts to reduce child poverty. In addition, assessments of income must properly take into account the impact of rising costs affecting family outgoings such as energy bills and food, as well as the rising costs of privately rented accommodation.

Worklessness

We recognise the need to attend to parental employment levels and we endorse government initiatives to support families seeking work. However, work does not provide a guaranteed route out of poverty with over half of children living in poverty having parents who are in employment ([Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2012](#)). We are concerned that a focus on worklessness as a measure of child poverty can hide high and growing number of families experiencing in-work poverty ([Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2012](#); [Child Poverty Action Group](#); [Aldridge et al, 2011](#); [Shildrick et al, 2012](#)). Research shows that there are only a small minority of intergenerational workless households. A focus on worklessness is also problematic as it fosters public misconceptions about the nature of poverty through reproducing ideas of the deserving and undeserving poor whereas research clearly indicates that unemployment does not reflect an unwillingness to work ([Shildrick et al, 2012](#)).

We argue that measures of child poverty need to take into account the availability of local and accessible employment opportunities for the living wage that are available to parents; and that attempts to reduce child poverty must recognise and address the insufficient levels of income families – in and out of work - receive through welfare benefits and the impact of increasingly unaffordable childcare on family resources and parental capacity to enter employment.

Furthermore there should be recognition of the variable direction of causality at play here through an acknowledgement that poverty may also limit or damage employment opportunities.

Unmanageable debt

This is important to include as a general measure of social exclusion, but through an acknowledgement that a commitment to the living wage and adequate welfare benefits would considerably reduce over reliance on debt. There is also much that could be done in legislating to avoid companies levying unreasonable and extortionate interest rates. At a more general level there needs to be recognition of debt as an essential resource in contemporary society rather than an evaluation of the moral decision making of the debtor.

Poor housing

Poor housing and rising rates of family homelessness are a clear and devastating consequence of child poverty and should be more carefully measured and monitored, rather than collapsed into a general measure of child poverty.

Parental skill level

The reference to 'parental skill' is somewhat confusing since it is specified in relation to the employment skills of a parent rather than as the term usually implies, an evaluation of the quality of their parenting practices. Employability shares many similarities with the suggested dimensions of 'worklessness' and 'access to quality education', in that while often associated with poverty it cannot be regarded as constituting a measure of it. It would, however, be useful to measure individual educational qualifications, skills and work experience and the amount and standard of paid work available (number of jobs, pay level, hours of work) within a commutable region, and examine this in relation to levels of employment and measures of poverty

We are pleased attempts to evaluate and use parental skill level in proposed measures of child poverty have been abandoned. A general assumption that parents in poverty are 'bad parents' is unsubstantiated and unhelpful. Parenting is a socially and culturally embedded practice founded on values and is not amenable to objective measurement as a skill. Any focus on parental skill level obscures the struggle that many people face to parent as well as they would like in the context of increasing hardship (lack of money to pursue educational opportunities, having to work long hours etc.); and can lead to a focus on parents as 'hard to reach' rather than attending to which services parents themselves want and need.

While we see no veracity in any attempted measurement of parental skill level we are aware of an urgent need to establish a more general measure of the resources available to parents, including access to services, specialist support and affordable childcare.

Access to quality education

Again, we agree that access to education is a vitally important issue but also contend that this deserves to be addressed separately and in its own right, rather than just as a general measure of poverty. Access to quality education cannot be meaningfully converted into a measure of child poverty, but poor achievement is often a symptom of lack of family income and adequate resources.

Family stability

We are somewhat perplexed by the inclusion of this as a proposed measure. A focus on 'stability' judged by the marital or living status of parents is unhelpful and tells us very little about child poverty. While lone parent families may be more likely to suffer financial hardship child poverty in this instance relates directly to insufficient benefits, lack of employment opportunities and affordable childcare rather than family structure.

Parental health

Again it is important to recognise the complexity and inter-relation between parental health and child poverty: poor parental health may be strongly correlated with poverty in that those who fall ill may struggle to manage on insufficient benefits. Also those in poverty often suffer poor health as a result of their hardship. We are also concerned that the proposed measures only focus on parental health and not that of the child. Child health and particularly child disability is a clear risk factor for poverty because of lack of support for parents and access to resources necessary resources.

Yours sincerely

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