

**Call for Evidence for the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission**

Name: **Representatives of the [British Sociological Association](#) (BSA).**

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Are you responding as an individual or representing your organisation?

Representatives of the [British Sociological Association](#).

The BSA is the professional organization representing sociologists in Britain. This response has been written by members with particular knowledge and expertise in the areas of: children and families; youth; and education; and include the significance of broader social issues including inequality and poverty.

NB: For brevity, we have included hyperlinks in the text to the research cited.

May we contact you if we have follow-up questions? Yes

May we quote from your response publicly? Yes

## Questions

Please reply only to those questions which are relevant to you or your organisation

**Overall assessment:** The UK Government has been implementing its Child Poverty and Social Mobility strategies. What progress has it made to date in tackling child poverty and improving social mobility? What are the top three strengths and weaknesses of its approach?

### On Child Poverty:

In February, [the BSA responded](#) to the government's consultation on 'Measuring Child Poverty'. As we wrote in that response, while we welcome the government's stated commitment to tackling child poverty, we question the current government's rationale for changing the way that child poverty is measured. We have concerns that the pursuit of new measures indicated by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions is likely to increase the number of children and families in poverty.

Again, we call on the Commission and the government more broadly 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/>). In addition, the LSE's recent assessment of the impact of Labour's Social Policy on reducing inequalities, including child poverty ([Lupton et al. 2013](#)), provides significant findings on the effectiveness of previous policies and (amount and focus of) previous public spending which should usefully inform current and future government agendas.

We are extremely concerned that the issue of income inequality is being lost as a central focus of the government's strategies to tackle child poverty. We feel that the government risks losing 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 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.

The 'Child Rights Impact Assessment' conducted by the Office of the Children's Commissioner ([June 2013](#)) provides further evidence to support our concerns. Assessing the impact of tax, tax credit and welfare benefit changes and of changes

to spending on public services implemented (or scheduled to be implemented) between May 2010 and April 2015, the analysis shows that families with children have been hit hardest by recent government policy in these areas, particularly those in vulnerable groups (low income families, lone parents and families with disabled children). The report warns that levels of child poverty are expected to rise significantly over the next few years: from 2.3 million children living in poverty in the UK in 2010-11 to 3 million in 2015 (2013: p5). The potential for such an increase has arguably been made greater since the recent announcements in the Chancellor's government-wide spending review (June 2013) including the decision to make the unemployed wait seven days before claiming benefits. As the [Child Poverty Action Group](#) have stated, this will push more families and children into poverty.

The BSA are also concerned that the government's welfare reform and child poverty agendas risk under acknowledging the structural roots of poverty while simultaneously conflating causes, consequences and symptoms. 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](#)). We are concerned that the government's pursuit of new ways for measuring child poverty 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 the government's agendas for addressing child poverty is measured appear to prioritise child poverty as a strategic rather than a social and moral issue. These tend to deflect attention away from children who are suffering in the here and now focus instead on future outcomes, on the basis of now discredited theories that deprivation is 'transmitted' through the generations of problem or 'troubled families'. More significantly, such an approach 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. This would require greater investment in tangible family support rather than education focused Early Intervention programs – currently pursued by the government – which seek to target parenting practices as a long term solution to poverty. Given the expressed commitment of the government to tackle the roots of child poverty it is important to note the absence of UK based evidence suggesting parenting interventions can address deeply engrained social inequalities. On the contrary recent studies using data from the Millennium Cohort Study demonstrate the overwhelming significance of income and maternal education to children's outcomes above and beyond parenting styles ([Dickerson and Popli 2012](#), [Hartas 2011](#), [Hartas 2012](#), [Sullivan et al 2013](#)).

Finally, we are also alarmed by the focus on family stability in the government's agendas to reduce child poverty. A focus on 'stability' judged by the marital or living status of parents is unhelpful and tells us very little about child poverty. In fact, research by the Institute for Fiscal Studies demonstrates that marriage itself does not have any effect on a child's social and cognitive development ([Crawford et al., 2011](#)). 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. The 'Child Rights Impact Assessment' conducted by the Office of the Children's Commissioner ([June 2013](#)) clearly states that 'changes to subsidies for childcare through the tax credit and benefits system have been regressive and have had a significant negative impact on the lowest earning families' (2013: 7).

### **On Social Mobility:**

In the section below on education, we note that widening participation in higher education will not necessarily drive social mobility. We would also like to draw attention to sociological work on the apparent decline of social mobility in the latter part of the twentieth century. [John Goldthorpe \(2012\)](#) challenges this consensus view by distinguishing between absolute and relative social mobility. Absolute mobility is a result of changing class structures, for example the middle class becoming larger. Relative mobility is the chance that someone from a particular background will end up in a different destination class. Goldthorpe's research shows that rates of absolute mobility may have leveled, but relative rates have remained generally constant since the Second World War.

Any government agenda must recognize that education is limited in its ability to drive social mobility from this alternative perspective as it is changes to occupational and class structures that are responsible. Given that recent research by [Brown, Lauder and Ashton \(2011\)](#) suggests that the global labour market is congested with well educated, low-cost workers, there is little 'room' for young people to progress. As we discuss in greater detail below, we would argue that policies that focus on *individual* interventions, for example raising aspirations among young people to 'aim higher', are limited as they do not address the structural realities that young people are faced with (an overview of such opportunity structures can be found in the work of [Ken Roberts 2009](#) and some of these challenges are discussed in further detail in the sections below).

Any policies that aim to improve relative social mobility need to be prepared for increases in *downward* mobility; this is the fact of a truly meritocratic system. However, middle class strategies to ensure the reproduction of advantage from one generation to the next are well documented in sociological research, even in less affluent times (e.g. [Devine 2004](#)). Moreover, a focus on encouraging social mobility draws attention from the pressing concerns of widening inequalities. Results from the recent widely publicised [BBC Great British Class Survey](#) suggest a continuing polarisation of the UK class structure, for example. We would agree with Professor Goldthorpe that any government with the serious goal of creating a more open and

fluid society will need to reduce class inequalities.

**Work:** Looking ahead, how successful is the UK Government likely to prove in its ambition of 'supporting families to achieve financial independence' and why? We are particularly interested in progress on reducing the level of in-work poverty and worklessness.

We endorse government initiatives to support families seeking work and achieving financial independent as part of their agendas to reduce child poverty. 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 very concerned about the government's focus on 'intergenerational cultureless of worklessness' across its strategies and wish to point out that theories built on the notion of inherited 'cultures of poverty' and 'worklessness' remain completely unsubstantiated (see [Gordon 2011](#) for further discussion). Research shows that there are only a small minority of intergenerational workless households, and unemployment does not reflect an unwillingness to work ([Shildrick et al, 2012](#)). The government's claim that children brought up in homes without working parents 'inherit' low aspirations (Child Poverty Strategy, p15) is completely unsubstantiated by research (see also 'Education' section below). 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. Recent research showing a hardening of public attitudes to welfare and an increased likelihood of members of the public to explain poverty through reference to individual characteristics rather than societal issues ([Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2013](#)) indicates the damaging effects of the circulation of these myths.

In-work poverty must be prioritized in the government's agendas. We are particularly concerned that an overwhelming focus on 'worklessness' within current government policy initiatives hides the high and growing number of families experiencing in-work poverty, including those stuck in cycles of low-pay, no-pay employment ([Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2012](#); [Child Poverty Action Group; Aldridge et al, 2011](#); [Shildrick et al, 2012](#)).

In addition, we argue that attention needs to be paid to the availability of local and accessible employment opportunities for the living wage that are available to parents; and that attempts to reduce child poverty and support social mobility must 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.

We are concerned by the increasing use of zero hours contracts, which has risen from 0.5% of the workforce in 2006 to 0.7% in 2012. Research by the [Resolution Foundation](#) (2013) shows that these contracts are disproportionately used in employment of low paid workers, and often these workers are forced to accept a

working week of fewer paid hours than they wish to work. This type of precarious employment has particular consequences for young people and families, and must be considered in any agenda to tackle child poverty and social mobility. These contracts adversely affect young people (37% of those employed on such contracts are aged 16 to 24). The insecurity of the total hours worked and the variability of the hours has an adverse impact on family life. It makes it difficult for families to plan their budgets and to organise childcare. We are particularly concerned that the required flexibility inherent in these contracts impacts negatively on female employment.

**Education:** Looking ahead, how successful is the UK Government likely to prove in its ambition of closing attainment gaps by social background and why? We are particularly interested in the progress being made in the early years and to help young people make a smooth transition into the labour market (i.e. 14-19 year olds).

Access to quality education is a vitally important issue in supporting young people's transitions from education to work, and social and economic wellbeing. However we are concerned that the government's current reforms largely signal a backward direction rather than progress in this area.

While we welcome a commitment by government to decrease attainment gap and increase numbers of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds entering higher education, we are concerned with some of the ways in which this has been pursued. In particular, we do not find that the reproduction of 'low aspiration' discourse within government policy is helpful to supporting its social mobility agenda. The focus on low aspirations ignores a substantial body of evidence which shows young people from working-class families – and their parents – hold high aspirations for education (see for example: [Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2012](#); [Evans and Roberts 2012](#); and emerging findings from the [Economic and Social Research Council project](#) on young people's classed and gendered aspirations by researchers and Brunel and Manchester Metropolitan University).

This focus on 'aspirations deficits' also takes attention away from other more significant structural reasons for the persistence of educational underachievement and constrained access to, and 'success' within, higher education among working-class young people. This includes: institutional admissions practices (see for example Boliver's (2013) work here on the lower chance of admission among state school pupils at elite universities); social class segregation in access to school provision; and other institutional barriers, cultures and practices through which young people feel excluded, alienated and experience a sense of worthlessness within the education system (see for example the body of work by [Diane Reay](#)). Research continues to show the need for schools to do more to create environments that are respectful of working-class culture.

A focus on 'raising aspirations' elides the significant impact of rising university fees as well as family poverty on young people's capacity to proceed to higher education. With a decrease in employment opportunities for school leavers many young people

see higher education as an alternative to unemployment (albeit an expensive one). The sharp increase in tuition fees in higher education does not align with the government's (and indeed universities') rhetoric on widening participation in Higher Education. As many studies have shown, and continue to show, universities (and in particular elite institutions) are failing to reach their widening participation targets. There is claim to a desire to increase the participation of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds but an unwillingness to adopt policies that would make this goal achievable. Universities appear to be stuck on the idea of 'creaming off' only the high achieving of disadvantaged youth, concerned that reducing offers for some young people would adversely affect their rankings in national and international league tables. There is a failure to recognise that through disadvantage working-class young people need to work harder and demonstrate immense resilience in order to achieve comparable results to their privileged counterparts. Evidence from the organisation [Supporting Professionalism in Admissions](#) shows that when young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are given lower offers at admission they still achieve as highly as their middle-class peers on the degree course.

The impact of the new fee regime on higher education participation is yet to be truly seen, however statistics suggest fall in numbers of mature and part time students ([HEFCE 2013](#); [OFFA 2013](#)), modes of study which tend to attract students from more disadvantaged backgrounds – for example those who are coming to higher education through non-traditional / non-linear routes; those can only fund higher education by working part- or full- time; and those with childcare responsibilities. There is a need for government and individual universities to track their participation rates in order to monitor this situation and to implement early interventions if participation rates further decline.

The adverse impact of rising fees on participation of underrepresented and disadvantaged groups within higher education is deeply worrying as many universities (particularly the Russell Group) already fail to meet their WP targets. [OFFA](#) are monitoring this situation and we welcome the increase in WP resources that many institutions have committed to as part of their access agreement. However, we raise concerns about the lack of explicit penalties for institutions that fail to actually meet their WP targets. The idea of incurring insecure and substantial amounts of debt remains a significant barrier to access for disadvantaged groups. Evidence from the [Paired Peers project](#) (Bristol University and University of the West of England) shows that maintenance loans do not often cover the basic costs of university accommodation leaving students in a deficit situation from the outset of their studies and more could be done in terms of financial support for these groups.

It is vital to recognise that increasing participation of disadvantaged groups in higher education will not in itself lead to increased social mobility. The [Paired Peers project](#) (Bristol University and University of the West of England) shows that even when working-class young people access university and achieve at the same level as their privileged peers, inequality is maintained through the 'student experience'.

University is not an even playing field and the privileged classes are able to maintain their advantage through costly CV building activities such as expensive extra-curricular activities and unpaid internships while their working-class counterparts are more likely to need to engage in paid work to simply make ends meet (see also discussion below). This raises the question of what universities could do in order to support these students. Indeed, Milburn, in his [report on social mobility](#) focused on the fortunes of undergraduates from disadvantaged backgrounds, noting that 'the question of what happens to students once they leave university and their ability to succeed in their chosen career is all too often ignored in considerations about what universities can do to enhance social mobility' (p6). We welcome this recognition and believe that policies are needed to ensure that universities meet both their widening participation targets and support the needs of WP students through the course of their studies to enable them to compete on an even playing field with their privileged peers.

**Contribution of employers:** What progress is being made by the professions and employers in delivering fairer access to professional careers (for example, in widening graduate recruitment, paying internships, using fairer selection techniques, expanding non-graduate recruitment and so on)?

Recent statistics show that youth unemployment remains remarkably high ([ONS 2013](#)), including graduate un/under employment where latest figures show that nearly one in 10 students are believed to be unemployed six months after graduating from UK universities in 2012 ([HESA, 2013](#)). Research suggests that in this context, where credentials are no longer enough, access to work experience and internship opportunities is proving increasingly important where a third of graduate positions are taken by young people who have already had work experience with the employer ([High Flyers 2013](#)).

However, as noted above, research shows that inequalities are maintained through the 'student experience' where more privileged students are able to maintain their advantage through costly CV building activities which support entry into graduate employment. Both the [Paired Peers project](#) (Bristol University and University of the West of England) and research funded by the *Equality Challenge Unit* (Allen et al., [2010](#); [2012](#)) reveals how 'non-traditional' students (including working-class students and those with caring responsibilities) face financial and time constraints on their capacity to engage in these increasingly essential 'CV-enhancing' internships and work placements.

The increasing significance of work experience to graduate employability is likely to have a particularly negative impact on women and student parents, with a knock on effect on their children's well-being. Parents' participation in education and in good employment are vital to reducing child poverty and enhancing their and their children's current and future economic and social wellbeing. However, barriers to employability activities, alongside the unequal impact of current welfare reform and public spending cuts on women ([Women's Budget Group 2012/3](#); [NUS 2012](#)), raise significant concerns. For student parents, financial constraints, limited geographical



mobility, childcare commitments, and the withdrawal of university-provided childcare ([Moreau & Kerner 2012](#)) mean that they are less likely to be able to participate in these vital employability activities. Further, undertaking paid placements may negatively affect how benefits and tax credits are calculated ([NUS 2009](#)).

While we welcome the government's recognition of the role of these practices in limiting equal access to the professions within its social mobility strategy, we support calls made by the Association of Graduate Recruiters and the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services ([May 2013](#)) that a stronger approach is needed to ensure that employers deliver fair access to these opportunities. We urge the government to place a greater duty on employers across all sectors to ensure that both recruitment practices and policies for paid employment and work placements/internships are fair and transparent in all respects, including open advertisement of opportunities; adherence to minimum wage requirements for placements; ensuring that students and graduate employees are not asked to work long hours which exclude those with childcare responsibilities; and that employers do not restrict recruitment to a few elite universities (as revealed by Milburn at a [recent Westminster forum](#)).

The government has spent a great deal of energy considering the ways that educational reform might promote social mobility and combat poverty. However, such supply side initiatives cannot in and of themselves provide the conditions required to achieve these goals. As Ewart Keep has noted on numerous occasions, incentives to learn need to be fully developed and opportunities to acquire skills must have a corresponding set of rewards. Here, the role of employers is crucial, yet they are left out of the equation ([Keep, 2012](#)). We concur here with Keep and Mayhew who declare that "public debate needs to be initiated that goes beyond skills as a cure-all and encompasses questions about pay, quality of work and employee relations." (2010: 573). This is yet to be the case. More attention needs to be given to evidence showing the lack of value of low level vocational qualifications (e.g. [Roberts 2012](#)) and the barriers to progression - and consequently the chance of social mobility that many people in such jobs are afforded.

The government has also hailed apprenticeships as being a key driver in achieving their aspirations for social mobility and child poverty. To date there seems to be little attention given to the variability of provision across and within sectors. Fuller and Unwin ([2012](#)) have exposed systemic barriers to progression built into the structure of education and training in England, with the reality of opportunity for those on level 3 apprentices to transition into HE appearing to be fraught with unrecognised difficulty. These issues highlight an essential issue (already outlined in this response): employment cannot be guaranteed through enhancing education profiles, and beyond that employment should not be seen as a success measure given the numbers experiencing in work poverty, limitations to progression etc.

**The local picture:** The Commission is seeking a more robust and evidence-based picture of the cumulative impact of changes at a local level likely to influence child poverty and social mobility (e.g. employment support, early years, libraries, youth services, housing). What is happening to levels of need and provision and how well are services adapting?

n/a

**The nations:** What are the distinctive challenges of Scotland and Wales in tackling poverty and improving social mobility and what progress are the Scottish and Welsh Governments making?

n/a?

Any other comments

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Please return this form by **Friday 5 July 2013**

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