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## Ministers accused of downplaying income in measure of child poverty

- Money is central factor, experts say [in letter to Guardian](#)
- Duncan Smith has argued other measures are significant

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The Guardian, Thursday 14 February 2013 21.11 GMT



The government's new definition of child poverty reads like it was 'plagiarised from a right-wing thinktank tract', according to one expert in the field. Photograph: Christopher Furlong/Getty Images

The government's desire to alter the official definition of child poverty risks deliberately downplaying the importance of money just as a series of government policies will reduce the incomes of poor families, a group of senior academics [warn in a letter to the Guardian](#).

A consultation on how to measure child poverty more accurately that was launched last November, seeking input from charities and experts into "better measures of child poverty", comes to an end on Friday. The government believes that a wider definition of what constitutes poverty [will give a better picture of what it means to "grow up experiencing deep disadvantage"](#).

The letter, signed by some of the country's leading academics in this field, agrees that in addition to the current measures used to count the number of children living in poverty, it would be "helpful to track what is happening to the factors that lead to poverty and the barriers to children's life chances".

But they warn: "It does not make sense to combine all of these into a single measure. To do so would open up the government to the accusation that it aims to dilute the importance of income in monitoring the extent of 'poverty' at precisely the time that many of its policies will be reducing the real incomes of poor families."

Professor Jonathan Bradshaw, the lead consultant on the UK's contribution to Unicef's Child Well-Being report, said he believed that the government was "trying to move the goalposts" at a time when child poverty was increasing rapidly.

He described the consultation document as the worst paper setting down government policy direction he had ever read, questioned whether it was written by civil servants and said it read more like it had been "plagiarised from a right-wing thinktank tract".

He said civil servants had been working for the past 40 years on developing accurate poverty measures, but the document had ignored previous work by the department on the subject as well as ignoring work by academics in the field. The new approach would not work because it attempted to "combine all sorts of things that are the consequence of poverty or may be even be the causes of poverty, but are not a measure of child poverty".

Another signatory, Professor John Hills of the LSE, said there was widespread support for the idea of looking more broadly at what causes poverty, but warned against trying to compress social factors, such as whether a child's parents are divorced, unemployed or unwell, into the measure of a family's income.

The result would be confusing and would have the effect of masking rising numbers of people in poverty, he said. By "putting these apples and pears together in a way that downplays the actual resources that families on low incomes have got, the suspicion would be that that is happening because we expect those numbers may go in the wrong direction in the next few years," he said.

In a speech to launch the consultation, Iain Duncan Smith, the work and pensions secretary, [outlined his theory that other factors aside from money caused poverty](#), highlighting his concern about children growing up in "dysfunctional families".

He argued: "It cannot be right that experiences so vital to childhood, like seeing a parent go out to work or growing up in a stable family, are not reflected in our understanding of child poverty." He was critical of the Labour government's focus on "income as the significant cause and solution".

Responding to the letter, the DWP said: "Despite a staggering £150bn being poured into benefits and tax credits over the last decade, the previous government missed its own child poverty targets. It's disappointing that a handful of academics are backing the current approach to tackling child poverty, which has failed far too many children in this country."

Several children's charities expressed concern about the direction of government policy on Thursday. Enver Solomon of the [National Children's Bureau](#) said the government should "urgently review" its approach to child poverty and look at methods used successfully elsewhere in the world to tackle the problem.

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