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Letters

## Manipulating measures of poverty

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'The significant progress made by the previous government in reducing child poverty by a third will be undone by present policies and trends'. Photograph: Christopher Furlong/Getty

It is not just a "handful of academics" (as the DWP claims) who question the way the government is trying to redefine poverty (Ministers accused of downplaying income in measure of child poverty, 15 February). No academic I have spoken to thinks it is a good idea. More importantly, any objective observer acknowledges that the significant progress made by the previous government in reducing child poverty by a third will be undone by present policies and trends. Labour fell short of its ambitious income-poverty targets and did not resolve some underlying issues such as educational inequalities (although it did make some inroads there). That is no reason either to say that income is unimportant, or to deny the indisputable evidence that children are damaged by growing up in the material hardship that results from low family income.

**Donald Hirsch**

*Director, Centre for research in social policy, Loughborough University*

- As I feel very strongly about the rising numbers of children living in poverty I decided to contribute to the consultation document on measuring child poverty produced by the education department and the DWP. I expected that I would be given an opportunity to express my position, which is: retain the current measures of child poverty; continue to publish data showing how its policies are affecting incomes as it does in the Households Below Average Income report; account against the measures set out in the Child Poverty Act 2020.

Filling in the consultation document took two hours and left me angry and frustrated. The questions and tick-boxes gave me no opportunity to voice these legitimate views and so I had to use the comment boxes for all 32 questions to challenge the assumptions of the questions and narrowness of the options. I am not an academic but I have filled in enough questionnaires in my life to know when I am being manipulated.

**Jean Goodrick**

*Cambridge*

- The DWP's attempt to dismiss the group that wrote to the Guardian (Letters, 15 February) as "a handful of academics" provided an early morning laugh, given that its own officials are admitting that views very similar to the letter are emerging in responses to the consultation from right across the academic community. It is all the more important that these and other responses be made publicly available so the government's own summary of the views can be subject to scrutiny.

A government that appears increasingly seriously addicted to demonising people in poverty, especially when they are receiving benefits, needs to pay more serious attention to an urgent warning that they are moving into evidence-free policies that are very likely to do a great deal of harm.

**Emeritus Professor Adrian Sinfield**

*University of Edinburgh*

- While it may be right to question the feasibility of the government's proposed new measure of child poverty ([Letters](#), 15 February), it is in turn questionable to cling to the present income measure. Under the existing definition, children in a household with an income below 60% of the national median equivalised disposable income are defined as being in poverty. This measure (which measures family poverty, not child poverty) was decided upon by the European commission and has at least two faults: the choice of 60% is arbitrary, as [Prof Donald Hirsch, among others, has confirmed](#); and whatever the percentage chosen it will still be just a measure of inequality, not poverty. Those are two separate abstractions with different remedies.

**Paul Ashton**

*St Leonards-on-Sea, East Sussex*

- The DWP's aim is to avoid counting by the one thing – lack of enough money for decent living – which distinguishes poverty from all the other evils and deprivations shared across the whole population, even the rich. Poverty causes or exacerbates many of them, though there is simply no evidence of a link with addiction, however strongly Mr Duncan Smith and the rest of the uninformed public believe there is. The DWP's sole aim is to sell the policy announced in parliament on 21 January. It is trying to confuse the public between counting (which needs a clear and methodologically defensible tool) and describing (which doesn't).

**Professor John Veit-Wilson**

*Newcastle University*

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