

# UK conservative think tank uses child poverty to further its agenda

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The Conservative-aligned think tank Policy Exchange has estimated that around 2.3 million children are left out of official poverty statistics, despite living in deprived circumstances.

The report issued has nothing to do with alleviating poverty. Rather the think tank, co-founded by Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove, is being used to further its supporters' right-wing agenda.

The report states that many indicators of social deprivation are left out of government measures of child poverty. These include spending time in care, squalid housing, poor-quality education and having parents with criminal convictions, unemployment or debt problems.

Its co-author insists that “the current measure of child poverty needs changing. Simply assessing whether a child is in poverty on the basis of household income fails to take into consideration a number of serious issues. It leads us to think we are improving outcomes for children when in fact they can still be living severely deprived lives.”

According to official figures, 3.6 million children in the UK—more than a quarter of the total number—live in relative poverty. These figures undoubtedly obscure the real depth of the crisis affecting children in Britain. Relative poverty—defined as homes where household income is below 60 percent of the average—is falling due to a drop in the median income. But the number living in absolute poverty has dramatically increased in recent decades and compares unfavourably to most developed countries.

If the report's poverty recommendations were adopted, the proportion of children growing up denied the necessary conditions required for good health and a standard level of education would reach 40 percent—an indictment of capitalism in twenty-first century Britain.

But the report's real objective is to argue that definitions of child poverty should be redefined away from the current focus on income levels. It blames “benefit entitlement” for “encouraging worklessness” among unemployed parents, and encouraging them to forsake household responsibility for that of the state.

Including social factors in addition to income “would allow the government to focus policy solutions on improving outcomes both now and in the future for deprived children rather than simply masking the problem with state hand outs that do nothing to get to the root of the poverty problem,” the report states.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions Ian Duncan Smith recently attacked the allocation of welfare provision based on “conventional” poverty statistics, stating, “I believe that we need to focus on life change so that families are able to sustain the improvement in their lives beyond government money.”

He laid the blame for child poverty on substance abuse and its exacerbation by state subsidies. In reality, only 7 percent of those dependent on benefits are drug users.

His remarks were roundly opposed by children's charities. Matthew Reed, chief executive of The Children's Society, said, “The vast majority of families in poverty are struggling because they can't afford the basics—not because they are wasting cash on drink and drugs.

“Every day parents are making harsh choices between heating their home, buying school shoes or putting a hot meal on the table.”

The position advanced by Ian Duncan Smith aims to discredit quantitative, scientific measures of social distress—which illuminate objective social processes rooted in a systemic crisis of the world market

economy. It is part of a move towards the moralising, quasi-religious and victim-blaming philosophy that characterised Victorian Britain.

It is a truism that the underlying causes of child poverty cannot be tackled by benefit payments. However, this argument is being presented as an effort to alleviate poverty when it is designed to legitimise an assault on welfare that includes slashing provision for the most vulnerable. The report follows the recent enforcement by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition of a below-inflation 1 percent cap on social security increments that will force an additional 200,000 youth into poverty.

Recent government cuts mean that 74 percent of local councils will be forced to reduce council tax subsidies for the poorest households. In some cases, bills could increase by £600 per annum.

In response to this situation, Save the Children, which usually works in developing countries, last year launched its first-ever appeal based on the plight of children in the UK.

The government is waging this offensive while mouthing support for the Child Poverty Act of 2010, introduced by the last Labour government and making the elimination of child poverty by 2020 a legal requirement. These poverty-reduction targets have not been met. Instead, a possible 800,000 will be driven into poverty by 2020 due to the government's austerity policies, according to a report by the Institute for Fiscal Studies.

Every index of poverty is worsening as food, rent and utility rates increase amid falling wages and rising unemployment. The Trussell Trust, the largest food bank provider, is setting up an average of three food banks each week. The number of food banks in the UK has doubled since 2010. Recent research by supermarket chain Tesco found that 1 in 10 people suffered food poverty last year.

Instances of charities and police officers reporting theft of basic food items are becoming more common, despite a drop in the overall shoplifting rate. One survey in Coventry found that nearly 50 percent of food bank users have been forced to steal food for themselves or their families.

The ruling elite is indifferent to the social crisis engulfing the mass of the population. A government source was quoted in the *Guardian* stating that "benefit

levels are set at a level where people can afford to eat. If people have short-term shortages, where they feel they need a bit of extra food, then of course food banks are the right place for that. But benefits are not set at such a low level that people can't eat."

The Trussell Trust estimated that around 130,000 people are dependent on food banks in the UK and predict this figure may double during the coming year.



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