Sir David Norgrove

UK Statistics Authority

Via email: david.norgrove@statistics.gov.uk

29 June 2020

Dear Sir David,

**Child Poverty statistics**

I write in my capacity as chair of the End Child Poverty coalition, a coalition of civil society organisations working on UK child poverty issues.

I am concerned that the manner in which official child poverty statistics are used in high profile statements by government ministers is liable to mislead the public and undermine the integrity of official statistics.

I note that, replying to a complaint from Child Poverty Action Group that the then Prime Minister was cherry-picking which child poverty measures he was using, your accompanying note stated:

*“We do, however, feel that public debate would be enhanced if the Government indicated more clearly which measure or measures it places greatest weight on and that it was consistent in reporting progress against this measure. It is unhelpful if there is regular switching between what constitutes the key measure.” (*[*20 December, 2017)*](https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/2017-12-20-Letter-to-Lizzie-Flew-Child-poverty-measures-.pdf)

I am mindful that the Authority does not want to become a player or referee in a political debate. However, I believe recent statements (below) by the government warrant its intervention, especially given the very clear public interest reasons in having a debate on the economy and disadvantage that is grounded in evidence.

**Statement 1: “Actually there are 400,000 fewer children in poverty than there were in 2010.”** Prime Minister on BBC’s Andrew Marr show, 1 December, 2019 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/01121901.pdf>

This claim on a set-piece media interview during the election campaign was incorrect. When the PM made this announcement, the latest poverty figures were HBAI 2017/8. Even using the most favourable baseline year for the government, 2009/10, they showed child had risen by 400,000 (BHC) and 200,000 (AHC) on the headline relative child poverty figure. On absolute child poverty, the measures showed no change (BHC) and a small fall of 100,000 (AHC) – a historically weak performance. The material deprivation figures showed a fall of 100,000 (low income) and a rise of 200,000 for severe low income since 2010/11 – when the new suite of questions was introduced.

**Statement 2: “But I must say that I think he is completely wrong in what he says about poverty. Absolutely poverty and relative poverty have both declined under this Government and there are hundreds of thousands—I think 400,000—fewer families living in poverty now than there were in 2010.”** Prime Minister at PMQs, in response to a question about rising child poverty, 17 June 2020 <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2020-06-17/debates/D91FE96D-8668-4B3C-AC27-A9CE9E961015/Engagements>

In response to a question from the Leader of the Opposition about child poverty, in which the Social Mobility Commission claim that child poverty had risen by 600,000 since 2012 stated, the PM responded the figures quoted at him, including the Social Mobility Commission figure, were ‘completely wrong’ and, in addition, 400,000 fewer families in poverty now than in 2010. The latest available figures for child poverty, HBAI 2018/19, had been published in late March 2020.

The 600,000 rise in child poverty since 2012, which the Social Mobility Commission sources to HBAI 2018/19, is correct. Again, using the most favourable baseline year for the government, 2009/10, the official child poverty figures show child has risen by 200,000 (BHC) and 300,000 (AHC) on the headline relative child poverty figure. On absolute child poverty, the measures show a small fall of 100,000 (both BHC and AHC) – a weak performance compared to the sustained falls seen until the early 2000s. The material deprivation figures show a fall of 200,000 (low income) and a rise of 100,000 (severe low income) since 2010/11.

**Statement 3:** **“I am happy to point out to m’learned friend that actually, there are 100,000 fewer children in absolute poverty and 500,000 children falling below thresholds of low income and material deprivation.”** Prime Minister at PMQs, in response to him being invited to correct the record on his use of child poverty figures, 24 June 2020. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p4_ogQcSJUU> (11m 51 secs)

In response to a question from the Leader of the Opposition inviting him to correct his child poverty statement from 17 June, 2020, the Prime Minister’s reply did not withdraw his claim that the Social Mobility Commission’s statement that child poverty had risen by 600,000 since 2012 was ‘completely wrong’.

The Prime Minister instead spoke about the 100,000 fall in absolute child poverty and 500,000 children in material deprivation. The first claim is correct. The second is not. There are actually 1.5 million children classed as low income and materially deprived. It should be noted that the Hansard of this part of the debate has the PM saying “500,000 *fewer* children falling below thresholds of low income and material deprivation.” The Prime Minister did not use the word ‘fewer’, as the video footage of PMQs confirms. Had he said this, it would still have been inaccurate – the fall was 200,000 since 2010/11, when the new suite of questions was introduced.

The Daily Mirror journalist Dan Bloom tweeted that day:

*UPDATE: PM's Press Secretary unable immediately to say where he got his poverty stats. Told they're wrong, he says: “I don’t think that’s right, but I can try to dig out the source of the figures for you if you would like.” @Danbloom1* [*https://twitter.com/danbloom1/status/1275784084665532416?s=20*](https://twitter.com/danbloom1/status/1275784084665532416?s=20)

The child poverty debate is a matter of significant public interest. Even allowing for the cut and thrust of politics, especially at PMQs, it is misleading for the public and damaging to the integrity of official statistics if these figures are:

* Selectively used - with the Government not making clear which measure it is putting most weight on, and then reporting consistently on that measure;
* Dismissed as ‘completely wrong - when they are in fact accurate and opportunities to correct the record are not taken up;
* Inaccurately used – when there seems no basis in official statistics for some of the claims made on child poverty levels.

An understanding of what is happening to child poverty numbers is important for its own sake and to facilitate an informed discussion about levelling up, disadvantage and social mobility and the economy. How can we level up, for example, if decision-makers are disputing basic facts about the numbers of children left behind in poverty?

While it is expected – and right - that child poverty should be the subject of robust political debate, it cannot be right that official figures on something as fundamental as how many children are in poverty continue to be used selectively, inaccurately and, ultimately, misleadingly.

We would therefore welcome your intervention on these concerns.

Yours sincerely,

**Anna Feuchtwang**

**Chair, End Child Poverty coalition**