

Axing the child poverty measure is wrong, says Danny Dorling

David Cameron says he is worried about the poorest in society but clearly does not want a redistribution of the opportunities that the rich have expropriated from the poor over the past three decades

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Frank Field has cast doubt on the mathematical workings of the Europe-wide poverty targets. Photograph: Frank Baron for the Guardian

Frank Field, appointed by David Cameron to lead an independent review of [poverty](#) and life chances in the UK, has cast doubt on the mathematical workings and achievability of the Europe-wide poverty targets, which all aim to reduce the number of households living below three-fifths of median incomes in each country and, in Britain, to ensure that no [children](#) grow up in such households by 2020.

The median net household income in Britain is £21,000, and 60% of that is £12,700 a year, or £244 a week. After housing costs, that figure falls to £206 a week for a family, or £29 a day.

In January, European Union researchers announced that 23% of children in the UK lived in a household in poverty, and that the UK ranked seventh worst out of 27 EU countries by the measure Field would like to abolish. Only in poorer countries, such as Romania and Bulgaria, are a higher proportion of children living in poverty.

In Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Germany, France and 12 other countries, the child poverty figure is as low as one in 10. One non-EU country, Norway, all but abolished child poverty by this measure as long ago as 2003.

In Britain, the latest official estimates of households living in poverty – the ones Field has been charged with redefining – show that (after paying for housing) just under 2 million pensioners, almost 4 million children and almost 8 million adults of working age still live in poverty. In that year (2009), however, pensioner poverty fell by 200,000 elderly people and child poverty by 100,000 children, showing that success in reducing poverty was possible.

Field suggests that, in concentrating on money, we are not "defining poverty in the most sensible way". Yet, when you are trying to feed, clothe, wash, transport, shoe and educate a family on pennies, your mind does focus on money.

If I were advising him on his review, I would suggest he start by looking at what George Bush enacted in his last days in office as president of the United States. He signed into law an extension of unemployment benefits. Despite his political instincts for "tough love" of the poor, and despite the US's precarious financial position, full unemployment benefits were extended by another seven weeks across the country and by as much as 20 weeks in those states where unemployment rates were highest. When unemployment is high and rising, you raise benefits because it is clear there are many more people looking for work than there are jobs. Even Bush got this.

Barack Obama went further and significantly raised taxes on the rich to pay for increased benefits for what Americans call "struggling Americans", "Americans with disabilities", "American children" and "elderly Americans", to remind themselves that others are like them.

Cameron says he is worried about "deep poverty", about the poorest in society. But he clearly does not want a redistribution of the money, the land, the work, the educational resources and the "opportunities" that the rich have expropriated from the poor over the past three decades.

The welfare secretary, Iain Duncan Smith, also wants to "address deep-seated poverty". We are back again to Victorian concern for the poorest of all, but not for poverty in general. We are back to basics.

- Danny Dorling is professor of geography at Sheffield University. His most recent book is *Injustice: Why Social Inequality Persists*, published by Policy Press.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/joepublic/2010/jun/16/axing-child-poverty-measure-wrong>