

The Truth about Poverty Statistics: Why the Government Needs to Do Better

Misleading statements and false claims are not new territories in political point-scoring. They rouse in people what [Kahneman](#) refers to as the ‘System 1’ mode of thought, primarily based on emotions and instincts. Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s recent statements on child poverty go beyond cultivating misunderstanding amongst the general public: they instil a widespread sense of faith and optimism on false grounds tantamount to political propaganda.

On 1 December 2019, Prime Minister Boris Johnson made a statement on BBC’s Andrew Marr show that there are **“400,000 fewer children in poverty than there were in 2010.”** which was deduced as incorrect on the basis of the official poverty statistics that the Department of Work and Pensions published for 2017/18. As mentioned in the [Office of Statistics Regulation’s](#) (OSR) recent blog, the number of children in poverty has increased by 100,000 in absolute poverty AHC¹ and by 600,000 in relative poverty AHC since 2010. This is indicative of a considerable increase in households with children that lack the financial means to meet their basic needs.

On 17 June 2020 at PMQs, the Prime Minister asserted the poverty figures cited by the Social Mobility Commission to be ‘completely wrong’. However, the statistics provided by the Social Mobility Commission, which were sourced from HBAI², were correct. These misguided statements were brought to notice, and the Prime Minister was invited to make a correction at PMQs on 24 June 2020. However, the response carried another imprecise statement partially embedded in truth. The Prime Minister did not withdraw his claim that figures from the Social Mobility Commission were wrong but instead stated that **“there are 100,000 fewer children in absolute poverty and 500,000 children falling below thresholds of low income and material deprivation.”** The former stands to be true whereas the latter escalates the true figure by 300,000.

As a response to the complaint sent by the End Child Poverty coalition on the matter, the Office of Statistics Regulation confirmed to derive the same conclusion on the inaccuracy of figures used. As a response, they have merely posted a blog titled ‘The trouble with measuring poverty’ which mentions statistics that can be used to derive the aforementioned conclusions and emphasizes on the importance of context in poverty statistics and the complexities involved in measuring poverty. Given that the matter is of significant public interest, this seems to be a severely inadequate regulatory response.

The inaccurate use of these statistics suggests the ignorance of the government in realising the underlying figures concerning development. It raises further questions on the effectiveness of poverty alleviation policies. On a grander scale, the absence of a regulatory response leaves the public in dark. It inculcates a sense of good faith in the government based on the notion that the authority is working towards and achieving goals of societal welfare. This false impression concerning the matter is due to their faith in the authenticity of the government to report on and respond to realities surrounding poverty trends. Indeed, there is [evidence](#) to suggest that there has been an increasing depth of poverty over

¹ After Housing Cost

² Household Before Average Income statistics

the last decade, as well as considerable changes in those most affected by it. The general public deserves to know the detailed truth concerning the performance of their elected government and the effectiveness of policies intended (or otherwise) to alleviate poverty.

In these prevailing times of uncertainty, where the pandemic and global political instability have thoroughly marred economic growth and development, we cannot let the government deceive us with manipulated statistics to get the better of our support. Therefore, it is crucial for these misleading practices to be called out on to prevent the emotional element of populism from resting on the misrepresentation of trends in economic development and societal welfare.

– *Siddharth Thakkar*
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