

# Review of the child material deprivation items in the family resources survey

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## Introduction

The inclusion of new material deprivation questions from 2004/05 was based on quantitative research to determine the most reliable and valid indicators of deprivation among families with children. It was envisaged that this set of questions would need to be updated over time, to reflect changes in what people believe to be the necessities of life. This report provides evidence on which items (material goods, activities, access to services) are now regarded as essential in the UK. It draws on this evidence to propose changes to the overall set of indicators used to measure child poverty.

## Background

Consultations in 2002 provided support for using a measure of material deprivation to calculate poverty. Academic research identified a set of 21 questions that have been included on the Family Resources Survey (FRS) since 2004/05. This analysis and question selection was based on the most up to date data available at the time, including:

- the *Poverty and Social Exclusion (PSE) Survey 1999*, including an ONS Omnibus Survey (1999) with questions on perceptions of necessities;
- the *Families and Children Study (FACS)*, 1999-2002;
- the *British Household Panel Survey (BHPS)*, especially 2001 data (wave 10);
- literature from other countries, especially Ireland, where similar analysis had been conducted.

However, it is possible that attitudes towards the existing FRS questions may have changed, or that new questions may now better represent children's material deprivation. It is clear that such perceptions of essential items have changed over time, partly in response to changes in technology. Attitudes towards leisure activities and food intake may also change over time. It is the purpose of this research to track such trends.

This programme of work also fulfils the commitment to periodically review the items selected, established as part of the 2003 conclusions of the *Measuring Child Poverty* consultation.

## Research questions

There are two key overall research questions that this research project is designed to answer. First, what kinds of items (goods or activities) are regarded as necessities for families with children? Second, linked to this, for which items does an enforced absence (through lack of money) constitute deprivation?

The existing deprivation questions appear to be working well, but it was always envisaged that such a set of questions must be subject to periodic testing to ensure they continue to capture deprivation in an optimal way. There is, of course, a strong argument for continuity; however, the research may need to update the set of questions in line with any changes in perceptions of what is a necessity for families with children. It is worthless having a consistent time-series measure if what is being measured is no longer relevant, or has a new and different meaning.

The second key research aim is to ensure that any set of questions continues to be a good discriminator between deprived, and non-deprived, families with children. This analysis will draw on analysis of links

between lacking an item and measures of living standards, such as incomes. We already have good data on the existing questions through FRS, of course, but omnibus survey data will provide some information on any *new* questions proposed for future inclusion in the deprivation measure.

## Research methods

The overall research programme proceeded using three inter-connected elements. First, qualitative research (focus groups) with parents was used to examine contemporary views of necessities for families with children. This element was conducted by the Centre for Research in Social Policy (CRSP) at Loughborough University. Second, new questions were devised for an omnibus survey to test whether suggestions for items generated by stage one, and the existing child material deprivation items, were viewed as necessities by the general population. The fieldwork was conducted by ONS, with input from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), CRSP and the University of Birmingham to help develop those questions.

In the Omnibus survey, respondents were asked what items they regard as essential among families with children. And among families with children, respondents were also asked if they had each item, and if they did not, whether this was because they do not want it or could not afford it.

The final stage of the research, having analysed the results of the omnibus survey data, was to make recommendations for a final suite of questions to include on the FRS from 2010/11 onwards. It is this stage that is reported on here.

## Discussion

Overall, we may identify three different strategies to changing the set of questions. These are: No change; Minor change; and, Major change.

The *No change* option would emphasise the time-consistency of the measure, and propose no new questions and no questions to be removed.

This default path would maximise consistency with the existing series. However, we must challenge the benefits of consistency if the meaning and usefulness of those questions has changed. There are now questions included in the FRS which less than 40 per cent of the population now regard as necessary for families with children, and which are not supported by qualitative research. It was always envisaged that changes would be needed at regular, if lengthy, intervals. There is sufficient evidence to propose changes at this stage.

An approach of *Minor change* would imply changing perhaps two to six questions. This would ensure a high degree of consistency with past data – indeed it would always be possible to calculate measures based on the large number of questions that were retained – but would also ensure that the questions reflected standard thinking on deprivation indicators which requires them to have widespread support.

The final approach is that of *major change*. This would imply changing rather more questions, perhaps seven to eight or still more, on the grounds that these are no longer regarded as necessities and therefore should be dropped. However, this would reduce confidence in the consistency of the time-series of data. There are also fewer than this number that really justify themselves as appropriate replacements, and therefore the measure might run the risk of having fewer items if this route was adopted.

Therefore, overall the ‘minor change’ option is backed by the strongest evidence and is what is proposed by this report.

## Recommendations

Adopting a strategy of minor change then raises the question of which items to drop, and which new ones to include.

On the basis of the information presented here, we may strongly recommend that we remove the last two questions on parents. That is, having a hobby or leisure activity, and having friends or family around for a drink or meal at least once a month.

These have the weakest support, and only a minority believe them to be essential. The qualitative research was also sceptical about their value. The one week's holiday question continues to be very important within the measure – over a quarter of families were unable to afford this. It would interrupt the measure somewhat to remove it. The next two questions with proportions in the low-40s (children going swimming, shoes for parents) should also be considered as vulnerable to being removed with little to recommend their retention.

By contrast many of the new candidate questions attracted high levels of support as representing necessities. In particular there was very strong support for being able to keep up with bills, which over 90 per cent believed was essential. Enjoying almost as much support was for children to be eating fresh fruit and vegetables every day, and children having a warm winter coat. The question of fruit and vegetables also has strong face validity, and fills something of a gap towards diet-based questions. These three questions are straightforward to recommend, assuming that at least three questions are dropped.

Overall, the evidence supports making some minor changes to the questions asked in the FRS to measure material deprivation among families. It is something of a judgement call whether this should involve changing as few as two questions, or as many as four or five. Replacement questions should ideally tap into the same kinds of domains as those lost.

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