The Honorable Nita Lowey
Chairwoman
Committee on Appropriations
United States House of Representatives
H-307, The Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Kay Granger
Ranking Member
Committee on Appropriations
United States House of Representatives
1016 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Mike Quigley
Chairman
Appropriations Subcommittee on Financial Services and General Government
United States House of Representatives
2000 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Tom Graves
Ranking Member
Appropriations Subcommittee on Financial Services and General Government
United States House of Representatives
1016 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairwoman Lowey, Chairman Quigley, Ranking Member Granger, and Ranking Member Graves,

We, the undersigned organizations, are writing to thank you for including language in the House Fiscal Year 2020 Financial Services and General Government appropriations bill that would bar any use of federal funds to implement the Administration's recent proposal to adjust the Official Poverty Measure (OPM) calculated by the U.S. Census Bureau. We ask you to oppose any amendments that would seek to remove this language from the measure as the appropriations process continues.

As organizations dedicated to improving the well-being of our nation's children, we strongly oppose this proposal, which could underestimate the number of children and families living in poverty and jeopardize their eligibility for programs that support healthy child development. With child poverty rates 62 percent higher than adults and child development relying heavily on access to government programs, our nation's children and youth stand to be the biggest losers if this change is enacted.

The Office of Management and Budget issued a request for comment on May 7 on a proposal to adjust the Official Poverty Measure by changing the rate of inflation used to calculate the poverty threshold each year. Accurately indexing the poverty threshold to inflation is critical to ensuring that it fully accounts for rising prices that weaken the power of the dollar. That being said, a switch from the current indicator to one that underestimates the rate of inflation could result in an artificially low estimate of the number of children and families who fall below the official poverty line. If this proposal comes to fruition, millions of children could lose access to healthcare, nutritious food, early education, heating assistance, and other critical resources.

A family's eligibility for several critical assistance programs depends on their income in relation to the poverty threshold as determined by the OPM, so the changes in this proposal could cause millions to lose access to programs that depend on Department of Health and Human Services guidelines to determined eligibility. Programs that would be affected include, but are not limited to: Parts of Medicaid, Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), Head Start, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs, Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), and Legal Services for the Poor through the Legal Services Corporation.

The poverty threshold as it is currently calculated is not artificially high; in fact, evidence shows that the opposite is true. A recent study from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine confirms what we know to be true: child poverty remains high in the U.S. and there is a direct and causal link between poverty and negative outcomes for a child's healthy development. The current poverty level stands at just $24,858 a year for a family of four with two children. However, according to the Basic Needs Budget Calculator created by the National Center for Children in Poverty, a family of four with two children living in Washington, D.C. needs an annual income of $72,297 a year to meet basic needs, which is nearly three times the poverty threshold. Therefore, any adjustments to the OPM should seek to correct, rather than exacerbate, the existing formula's deficiencies.

While the majority of poor and low-income households with children have at least one parent who is working, low wages combined with skyrocketing rents and the high costs of everyday goods mean parents still struggle to make ends meet. On top of this, past data has suggested that families in poverty actually experience inflation at higher rates than families with higher socioeconomic status due to constraints they face in substituting lower priced goods.

The administration's regulatory track record is one of seeking technical and substantive changes that would reduce the ability of low-income and immigrant families to access important supports like SNAP and Medicaid. Should the administration seek to lower the measure of inflation associated with poverty threshold adjustment, it too would result in families losing supports for which they ought to be eligible.

Child advocates are therefore very concerned that the administration's interest in altering the OPM reflects a desire to use a lower measure of inflation to decrease the poverty threshold and subsequently reduce eligibility for programs that support children's health, nutrition, educational achievement, and more. Thank you for taking steps to protect children from disproportionate harm by prohibiting the use of funds to change the OPM in the FY 20 Financial Services and General Government spending bill. We urge you to preserve that language moving forward in order to safeguard the development and well-being of our children and future.

Thank you for your efforts to block this harmful proposal.

Sincerely,

First Focus Campaign for Children
AASA, The School Superintendents Association
Alliance for Strong Families and Communities
American Psychological Association
Association of Educational Service Agencies
Association of School Business Officials International (ASBO)
Bread for the World
Child Care Aware of America
Child Labor Coalition
Child Welfare League of America
Children's Defense Fund
Citizens' Committee for Children of New York, Inc.
Families USA
March of Dimes
Mental Health America

National Association for Family, School and Community Engagement (NAFSCE)
National Diaper Bank Network
National WIC Association
Nurse-Family Partnership
Partnership for America's Children
Public Advocacy for Kids
Save the Children Action Network
The National Early Childhood Program Accreditation (NECPA)
Voices for Progress
Young Center for Immigrant Children's Rights