Comment on **Been Counters**  Brian Easton Listener 22\(^{nd}\) March 2014

Dear Editor,

While Brian Easton correctly argues the miscalculation of household income data by Treasury and Statistics New Zealand has a very small effect on measured inequality, this unfortunate blunder has had a very significant effect on measured child poverty.

Most poverty researchers in New Zealand regard the 50% after housing costs poverty line income as a very bleak standard of living indeed. For the last 3 years we have been misled into thinking the problem was less awful than it actually was, and still is.

Another 30,000 children have been found under this line. So instead of 175,000 children the reality is 205,000 children or a 17% increase.
But it is worse than this, most low income families who fall under the poverty lines of whatever measure, now fall much further when the correct figures are used. That picture reflects the true increased depth of poverty. No wonder there is so much evidence of family distress in food banks and social services.

The so-called error has been dismissed by the government which argues that no child has been made any worse off by this mistake. That is not the point.

In 2007, the Ministry of Social Development was concerned enough to bring to the government’s attention the numbers of Families falling below the 40% poverty line. The suppressed document “Pockets of significant hardship and poverty” was eventually released under the Official Information Act and is on the Ministry of Social Development’s website.
In it, is it suggested that the newly introduced Working for Families needed to change to prevent the numbers of families who were described as having ‘nothing in reserve’ getting worse. Tragically, that message was ignored. How many more children and their parents fall below that pitiful 40% line today and why is no politician demanding answers. At very least an urgent commission of inquiry is needed into the state of our children in low income families, especially those on benefits, who are denied a significant amount of weekly tax-funded child assistance.

Such an inquiry will find is that even the corrected figures overstate the position of some families who not only pay large rents but also have major debts to WINZ and loan sharks to service.

Yours sincerely
Susan St John