



Food Insecurity in Ireland

Impact on children and their parents



Foreword by Niall O'Connor,
ALDI Ireland Group Managing Director

The cost-of-living crisis is one of the most pressing issues we face as a society. It's clear from this research that this crisis is having a very negative effect on children and families across the country. More parents have skipped meals, borrowed money, and cut down on paying bills so they can feed their children. No child should go hungry, and no parent should have to sacrifice their well-being so that their children can eat.

With so many of the most vulnerable people in our society clearly struggling to put food on the table, essential services like those provided by Barnardos are critical. At ALDI, we are incredibly proud of the work we have done with Barnardos to tackle this issue, and we will continue to work together towards our shared goal of making food poverty history. As a family retailer, we have always championed access to affordable and nutritious food, and we always will. We will continue to shield customers as much as possible to provide the best prices for families across the country.

We recently extended our partnership with Barnardos Ireland for a further two years and have pledged to raise an additional €1 million in addition to the €1 million already raised through this partnership. We know that together with our customers, we can continue to make a substantial difference in tackling food poverty and supporting vulnerable families through this difficult time.



Foreword by Suzanne Connolly,
Barnardos CEO

The findings in this report align with Barnardos experience of working with vulnerable children and families in communities across Ireland. We see far too many families, often one parent families, really worried about being able to provide their children with enough food.

Parents tell us that they are often going without food themselves in order to provide food for their children, or else are having to rely on others to get the food for them. It is second nature for most parents to put their children first and make sacrifices for them. However, it is clear that this is taking an emotional and physical toll on parents across the country.

Hunger puts a child's emotional, physical and overall wellbeing at risk. As does living in a household where parents are constantly worried about food and therefore cannot focus as much on their children's needs.

We know that childhood lasts a lifetime. That is why we believe all children should be living in homes with sufficient food, where parents are confident their children and themselves will never have to go without food. Implementing the recommendations set out in this report would go some way to making that a reality in Ireland.



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Introduction

At Barnardos, we see first-hand the difficulties that many low-income parents face on a daily basis trying to provide themselves and their children with sufficient food. We know the damaging physical and mental health effects that going without food and/or constantly being worried about food can have on both parents and children.

Barnardos knows that a substantial proportion of the families we support can find providing their children with sufficient food challenging, often due to affordability and accessibility.

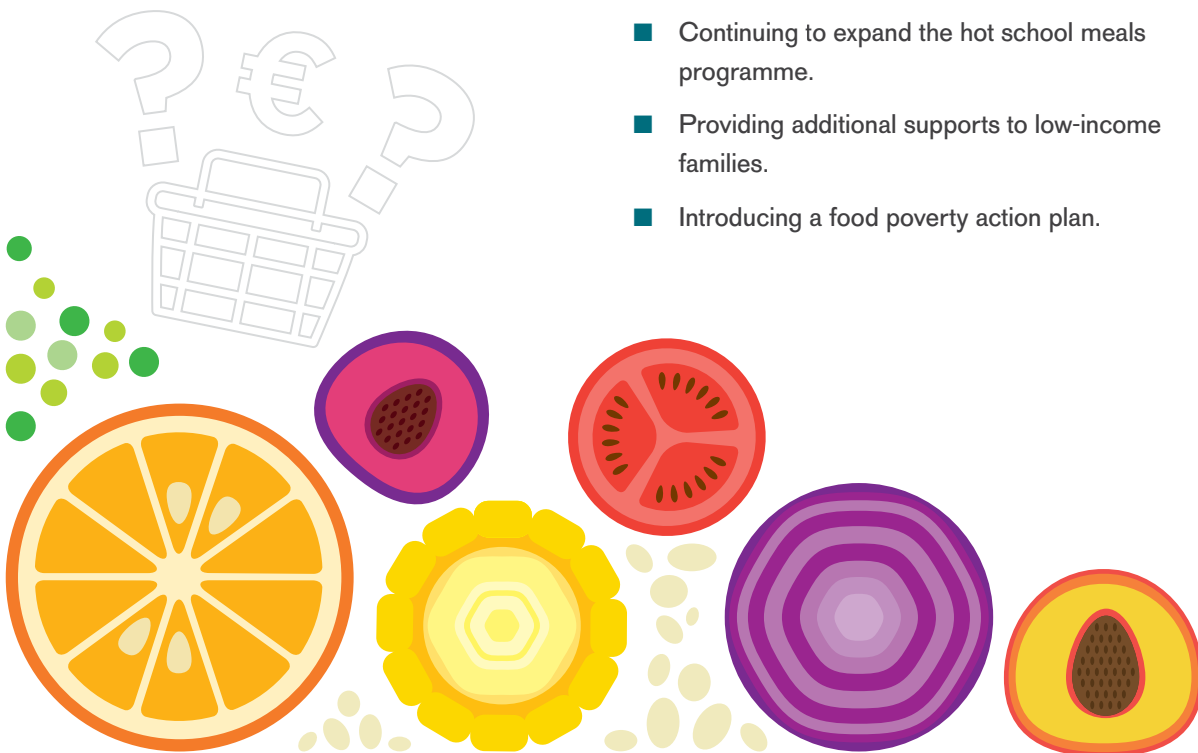
All children in Ireland should live in homes that have sufficient food available and where parents are not resorting to drastic measures to afford food. To tackle this issue, we partnered with ALDI Ireland to commission research into parents' experiences of providing their children with sufficient food over the past year. This survey builds on our joint 2022 study and explores the prevalence and impact of food poverty on vulnerable children and families with the aim of making a meaningful, positive impact. We hope these findings will inform future policies, curtail food insecurity among children and families in Ireland, and shine a light on an issue that affects too many people in our society.

The findings show that food poverty in families with children is worsening, and an increasingly large proportion of children are living in homes in which parents are:

- Regularly worried about having enough to feed their children.
- Skipping meals or going without food themselves to feed their children.
- Cutting down on household bills such as electricity and heat to make sure there is enough food.
- Resorting to food banks, relying on vouchers from voluntary organisations or packages from friends/family in order to provide their children with sufficient food.

The government must take action to ensure no child goes without sufficient food by:

- Continuing to expand the hot school meals programme.
- Providing additional supports to low-income families.
- Introducing a food poverty action plan.



Background

The Economic and Social Research Institute have developed a measure which defined food poverty as the inability to have an adequate and nutritious diet due to issues of affordability or accessibility.¹

Unfortunately, the data provided by this measure and other available statistics fail to investigate the impact of food poverty on children and families specifically. What is available is limited and dated, providing little detail.² There is a considerable gap in understanding food insecurity that children and families face in Ireland.³

Barnardos and ALDI decided to carry out research to fill this gap and gain a better understanding of the concerns that families have. In doing so, we were able to identify the steps that government could take to ensure children do not go without food or live in homes with parents who are constantly worrying about food.

We felt this research was particularly important to carry out given the cost of living crisis and the need to identify national problems as quickly as possible

so that solutions could be put in place. We were able to do this thanks to the support of ALDI.

In January 2022, Barnardos and ALDI commissioned a nationally representative survey to explore the depth of food insecurity among families in Ireland. This report is based on the findings of this survey, carried out in October 2022. It investigates if the issue has worsened and focuses on parents' ability to provide children with sufficient food, the steps they have to take to do so and their general worries and concerns about being able to do so. We compare results between the surveys throughout the report to determine whether or not things have improved for parents and children in relation to food insecurity over the course of last year.



1. 8.9% of the population experienced food poverty in 2021, with 6.2% of the population experiencing severe food deprivation. Statistics released in November 2022 show that 11.3% of one parent families and 2.9% of two parent families were unable to afford a roast once a week. Additionally, 4.5% of one parent families and 0.5% of two parent families were unable to afford a meal with meat, chicken or fish every second day.
2. The Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) in 2018 found that 19% of children reported going to school or to bed hungry because there was not enough food at home.
3. Research does suggest that, in Ireland, household composition is the strongest predictor of food poverty in Ireland, with the odds of being in food poverty increasing for households with more than two children and one parent households. 'Constructing a Food Poverty Indicator for Ireland using the Survey on Income and Living Conditions'.

Methodology & Survey Findings

Barnardos, with the support of ALDI, commissioned Coyne Research to carry out a survey focused on food poverty.

A nationally representative survey was carried out⁴ amongst a sample of 1,000 adults aged 18+. The focus of the survey was families and children under 18. A total of 477 parents/guardians responded who had a child under 18. The results below are focused on this cohorts' views and responses.⁵

Providing children with sufficient food

The focus of the survey was to determine whether parents feel they can provide children with sufficient food. We wanted to understand how many children in Ireland are living in homes in which parents report they are struggling to provide children with enough food.

At some point over the past 12 months	January 2022	October 2022	Change (%)
Parent skipped meal or reduced portion so your children can eat enough	24%	29%	Up 21%
Felt you have not had enough food to feed your children	15%	19%	Up 27%
Been regularly unable to afford meat or vegetarian meal as often as you would like	10%	16%	Up 60%
Borrowed money to feed child	15%	16%	Up 7%
Used a food bank	4%	10%	Up 150%
Can't provide their children with nutritious food	17%	25%	Up 47%

Alarming, 19% of parents stated that over the past 12 months they had at some point felt they did not have enough food to feed their children, up from 15% in January 2022.

- More than one in seven parents (16%) said that they were regularly unable to afford a main meal for their family/children with meat/vegetarian equivalent, up from 10% in the previous survey.
- Twenty-nine percent of parents said they had skipped meals or reduced portion sizes so that their children would have enough to eat, an increase from 24% in January 2022. Similarly, 39% of parents always/mostly/occasionally feed children above/instead of themselves, compared to 28% in January 2022.

- Sixteen percent of parents said they borrowed money to feed their children, a slight increase from 15%. One in ten parents (10%) said they had used food banks over the previous 12 months, more than double the number in the previous survey (4%).
- Three in four (75%) parents felt that they could provide their children with sufficiently nutritious food. Twenty-five percent said that they could not, up from 17% in the previous survey findings.

Having sufficient food is an absolute essential for children. Insufficient nutrition can be damaging to their health and physical development. It is also clear the importance of external supports in providing sufficient food to many family households across the country.

4. All fieldwork was conducted between the 20th October – 1st November 2022.

5. For the purpose of brevity, the term parents is used in relation to results for parents and guardians combined.



Reduced spending and going without

Parents reduced spending on following items to afford food costs	January 2022	October 2022	Change (%)
Clothes	36%	43%	Up 19%
Parents' leisure/hobbies	40%	43%	Up 8%
Household bills	26%	25%	Down 4%
Children's activities	15%	21%	Up 40%
Transport costs	15%	19%	Up 27%
Medical costs	17%	17%	No change
Have never cut down to afford food costs	49%	36%	Down 27%

Providing children with sufficient food is an absolute priority for parents. In making it a priority, many parents don't have sufficient income to provide other essential items for themselves and their children.

Parents were asked about what areas they have had to reduce spending on in order to afford food costs over the past 12 months.

- Almost half (43%) said they have had to cut down on clothes, up from 36% in January 2022.
- More than one in five (21%) parents said they have had to cut back on their children's activities, an increase from 15% in January.

- 25% said they had to prioritise food over other household bills such as gas and electricity.
- Only one-third (36%) of parents said they did not have to cut down in any of these areas, compared to almost half (49%) in the previous survey findings.
- Almost half of parents surveyed (47%) said that inflation has had a negative impact on the pressure to afford food, with almost one in five (17%) saying it had a very negative impact.

Worrying about food

All children in Ireland should have access to sufficient food. Additionally, children should not be living in homes in which parents are routinely worried about providing their children with enough food.

Parents worrying about providing children with sufficient food	January 2022	October 2022
Always worried	6%	13%
Sometimes worried	19%	29%
Never worried	46%	30%

- Thirteen percent of parents said they were always worried about being able to provide their children with enough food, more than double the figure from January 2022 (6%).
- A further 29% said they sometimes or occasionally worried about being able to provide their children with sufficient food, a significant increase from the previous figure (19%).
- Only 30% of parents said that they never worried about the issue, down considerably from 46% in January 2022.

Of those who are worried about food	October 2022
Concerned about the future and being able to provide children with sufficient food	50% (34% in January 2022)
Afraid to ask for help	15%
Embarrassed	19%
Feel guilty	21%
Stressed	43%

Of the 70% of parents (329) who stated that they are worried about food:

- Half (50%) said that they are concerned about the future and being able to provide their children with sufficient food, up from 34% the previous year.
- 15% said they are afraid to ask for help, 19% are embarrassed and 21% feel guilty.
- 51% said that rising household bills is the biggest worry about being able to provide food, while 21% said it was the increasing price of groceries.

Attitudes towards food and meals

The findings suggest a substantial proportion of parents find it difficult to provide their children with sufficiently nutritious food due to income deficits. However, there are further barriers in addition to income.

A significant proportion of parents (28%) said they don't have time to cook and 27% said that they don't know enough about fresh food and cooking to feel confident. 20% of parents agreed that they don't cook from scratch, with 17%, almost one in five parents, saying they don't have the facilities to cook. Twenty-four percent agreed it is difficult to get hold of fresh fruit and vegetables.

Important/very important	Important/very important
Whether food is healthy/nutritious	81%
Whether or not it will fill my child	78%
Available budget	68%
What they will eat/want to eat	65%
Ease of preparation	63%

In our survey, we asked parents what the most important factors were in making decisions around food.

Over four in five (81%) said whether the food was healthy/nutritious was important.

- More than three-quarters (78%) said whether it would fill their children was also important.
- The budget available was also an important factor for two thirds of parents (68%).

Additionally, we asked parents various questions about their attitudes towards meals.

- More than three in four (76%) of parents said they always or mostly ate a main meal together.
- A similar percentage said they always or mostly cooked from scratch (77%) and they always or mostly included fruit/veg (75%).
- Almost 9 in 10 parents (89%) said that they aimed to give their children some fresh fruit and veg daily, while 88% aimed to have mostly home-cooked meals.



Parents that Barnardos support

Over the course of the past few months, we held in-depth discussions with ten parents that we support, as well as holding two focus groups on the issue of family food insecurity. Several parents stated that their children might have gone hungry, but for the intervention of Barnardos and others.

“ Shouldn't have to rely on family for food, that's how bad it has got. ”

“ Only for food voucher couldn't have gotten children's food. ”

Parents we support in Barnardos said that they would always prioritise their children when it comes to food. Many have become so accustomed to this it didn't seem like a sacrifice at all, just part and parcel of being a parent. They demonstrated the efforts they were willing to make to ensure that their children did not go without sufficient food.

The cost of living crisis/inflation has had a big impact on the ability of many of the families Barnardos supports to afford food.

Many parents using Barnardos' services that we spoke to said that food worries were almost constant. Parents we spoke to mentioned they were constantly worrying about having enough money to provide for their children, particularly around food. One parent suggested that this was because unlike other bills, it isn't something you can put to the back of your mind, as children need to eat so frequently. This means the stress is almost always there.

“ There are weeks where I have to live off trash just so our kids have fruit and veg. I'll go without before my children go without. If their food comes up to €90 then I have €10. ”

“ Coming up to a Tuesday and Wednesday, money is getting tight. I'll just have a sandwich. Once my kids are happy I don't care. ”

“ Weeks there I had to decide do I pay for food or put money on electricity. Robbing Peter to pay Paul. ”

“ All the small increases add up. I have five growing children and they are constantly hungry, no filling them. So, it's made things harder. ”



“ Constantly worried about it, although that might be because constantly having to think about it.”

“ When I’m shopping now for food I’m almost panicking about making my money stretch that bit more.”

We know from our work, that children nearly always pick up on parental concerns within the home. It can have a damaging impact on them, leading to anxiety themselves. Additionally, many of the parents that we support are facing additional adversities, which could involve parental separation, child routine issues, and poor mental health. The time and energy being spent on food worries are taking away their ability to focus on these other issues. The constant stress can ultimately prove damaging to their poor mental health.

Parents we support repeatedly tell staff that their food purchasing decisions are driven by their budget. Parents are reporting that they are planning meals further in advance than they were in the past, deciding what exactly they are going to eat at every meal and only buying the items needed for those meals. They would like to buy their child the odd luxury item but they know that just is not possible at the moment.

“ Food wise, oh my god. Before summer holidays, could do food shop for under €100. Now it’s €150.”

“ I’d always have had a few extra things in the freezer. That’s all gone now, I have to live week to week with food at the moment.”

“ Really having to shop around and look for deals now, it takes time but is worth the saving.”

We know that some of the families we support do not have appropriate cooking facilities within their homes. This is an acute issue for families living in emergency accommodation. Frequently those families will not have fridges, ovens or even microwaves, particularly those living in hotels.



Barnardos' practical support

Across our services at Barnardos, we are always conscious of the fact that parents might be struggling to provide their children with sufficient food due to poverty / lack of financial security. As a result, our staff will always try and provide practical relief where possible, particularly in our family support services. This might involve purchasing food directly for families, particularly at certain points throughout the year, but relief is most often provided through food vouchers.

Over the past year, we have seen more families proactively asking for help through food vouchers than ever before. In fact, some parents who we have previously worked with have called back into services looking for vouchers, aware from previous engagements that we provided them to families who were struggling.

In addition to this, every year across our seven nationwide Early Years centres, Barnardos provides over 50,000 nutritious meals to children. The vast majority of these are hot dinners. Furthermore, through our Early Years Breakfast Clubs and Afterschool Service in Limerick, Barnardos provides 24,000 meals each year, to some 260 pupils from Monday to Friday each week.

Finally, FoodCloud operates the Department for Social Protection's Support for the Most Deprived programme (SMD – formerly FEAD) and each quarter provides pallets of dried food goods to 20 Barnardos services nationwide. These are mostly distributed as food parcels to families, including dry and tinned food. We estimate that some €100,000 worth of food is thus distributed to our service users per annum, with thousands of families directly benefitting. Working with partners and private funders we also receive retail and food voucher as well as funds for food that can be directed towards families most in need.

Conclusion and recommendations

Unfortunately, the results suggest that a significant proportion of children are living in households that are extremely strained with providing sufficient food, and parents are having to go without other essentials to provide it.

It is clear that there is a considerable proportion of parents in Ireland who are concerned about providing their children with sufficient food and are being forced to take relatively drastic action to make sure they get it.

It is also clear that over the course of the ten months between the first and second survey things have not improved.

More needs to be done to make sure children are not going without food and are not going without other necessities as a result of the provision of food. Action needs to be taken to support parents who are constantly worried about the issue and follow through on the government's commitment to ensure no child goes hungry. Barnardos believe these should include:

1.

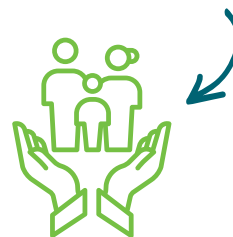
Continued progress in rolling out hot school meals programme within schools



There has been considerable progress made in terms of free school meals within schools across the country over the last number of years. The government should: further expand the hot school meals programme to allow all interested schools to partake in the scheme, so long as they have the local infrastructure to do so; allocate funding to establish a Small Grants Scheme to improve school infrastructure so that appropriate facilities are ensured for school food provision and ensure plans for all new school builds include provision for dining and catering facilities.

2.

Provide additional supports to low-income families



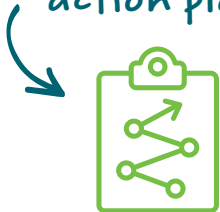
The once-off measures announced in Budget 2023 provided some protection against the cost of living crisis and making sure families had sufficient food for their children over the past few months. However, those measures were short-term and there is a considerable risk that they will have wear off. The government must monitor the situation carefully and speak directly to low-income families.

In the short term, additional once-off measures should be introduced to ensure families can provide their children with sufficient food if it is clear they are still struggling as a result of the cost of living crisis, particularly lone parent families. The government should focus on families at greatest risk, in particular lone parent families. In the longer term, the government should seek to increase the rate of the Qualified Child payment to better protect families from food poverty. The €2 rate increase in Budget 2023 did not go anywhere near far enough to cover increasing costs.



3.

Food poverty action plan



We appreciate the work that Joe O'Brien, Minister of State for Community Development, Integration & Charities, has undertaken around the issue of food poverty over the past few years and the work of the Working Group that he has set up to try and help tackle the issue. We understand there is ongoing work to develop research on the drivers of food poverty in two case study areas.

The Working Group, alongside the soon to be established Child Poverty and Wellbeing Unit in the Taoiseach's Office, should use the findings of this survey to inform a Government Action Plan on food poverty that will set out specific targets for reducing the number of children and families achieving food poverty. In addition, actions should be identified to implement this Plan and achieve the desired outcomes.

4.

Cooking facilities



All families, regardless of accommodation, should have access to appropriate cooking facilities. The government should make sure that existing regulations in relation to the provision of cooking facilities for private landlords, local authorities and housing bodies are routinely enforced, particularly in relation to families living in emergency accommodation.

5.

Additional needs payments



Families with children who apply for an additional needs payment due to an inability to provide children with sufficient food should receive a decision and if successful, a payment within a maximum of 48 hours.

Families who apply for an additional needs' payment are often waiting for long periods of time for a decision, during which children are going without essentials. This is unacceptable in relation to food.

Thank You

We would like to take this opportunity to thank ALDI for its support in facilitating the survey and also you the reader for taking the time to learn from the survey and Barnardos current real experiences.

We hope this report provides insight in to the challenges faced by vulnerable families across Ireland around food insecurity and how you may be able to support those affected through your role in the community.



About ALDI Ireland

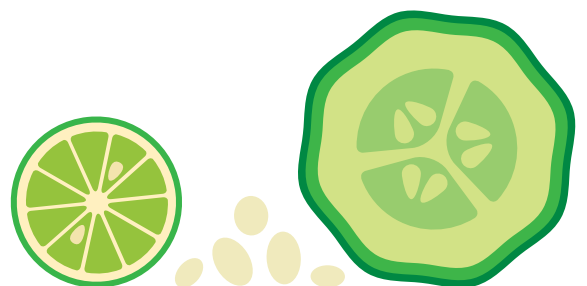
ALDI Ireland is a leading discount supermarket and is deeply involved in the local communities in which it operates. Operating a network of 156 stores across Ireland, ALDI works closely with its 330 Irish food and drink suppliers to offer an excellent shopping experience to its customers, providing exceptional quality at unbeatable prices.

This research shows the tangible ongoing impact of food poverty as a prevalent issue in Ireland. An issue further exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis. As a front-line supermarket, we have always championed access to affordable and nutritious food for all Irish families and will seek to further tackle this issue with Barnardos over the next two years. We will continue to shield our customers as much as possible to provide the best prices for families across the country.

About the partnership

Barnardos and ALDI launched their partnership journey in October 2020, with the aim of helping Ireland's most vulnerable children, and to help support Barnardos' vital work in our projects across Ireland.

As partners we have raised significant funds for Barnardos services and highlighted some of the challenges facing families across Ireland. This survey builds on that foundation and those goals as part of ALDI's commitment to support Barnardos work for a further 2 years.



About Barnardos

As Ireland's leading children's charity, helping vulnerable children since the 1960's, Barnardos' work with vulnerable children and families to provide practical, social and emotional support. Barnardos supports children and families all across Ireland who have been affected by traumatic life events such as abuse, parental mental health, neglect, separation, bereavement and addiction. Our core purpose remains the same; 'to help the most vulnerable children in society achieve their full potential – regardless of their family circumstances, their gender, race or disability' – Because Childhood Lasts a Lifetime.



Barnardos,
Christchurch Square,
Dublin 8.

Tel: +353 1 453 0355
Email: info@barnardos.ie
www.barnardos.ie