



Food Insecurity in Ireland:

Impact on children and their parents

Contents

FOREWORD BY SUZANNE CONNOLLY	2
FOREWORD BY NIALL O’CONNOR	2
INTRODUCTION	4
BACKGROUND	5
METHODOLOGY	6
Providing children with sufficient food	6
Worrying about food	7
Attitudes towards food and meals	9
Barnardos’ practical support	10
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS	12



Foreword by Suzanne Connolly, Barnardos CEO

The findings in this report continue to 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 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 parents to put their children first and make sacrifices for them. However, it's clear that this is taking an emotional and physical toll on parents across the country.

Living in a household where parents are constantly worried about food and therefore cannot focus as much on their children's needs, puts children's social, emotional, physical and overall wellbeing at risk. Children have the right to live in homes with sufficient food, where parents are confident their children and themselves will never have to go without.

Implementing the recommendations set out in this report would go some way to making that a reality in Ireland. Because Childhood Lasts a Lifetime.



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

The ongoing challenge of the cost-of-living crisis remains a significant concern for Irish society. Despite some optimistic signs of improvement in inflation, this research indicates that it still continues to adversely impact children and families throughout the country.

Even 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.

At ALDI, we believe that nobody should have to choose between price, quality and healthy food.

As a leading family retailer, we have always championed access to affordable and nutritious food, and we always will. We will continue to stand shoulder to shoulder with families across the country to ensure we deliver the best prices on the market. The findings from this year's research show that significant challenges remain. We all have a part to play in helping to tackle them and we will be redoubling on our commitments to do so in 2024.

We're incredibly proud of the work we have done with Barnardos and remain as committed as ever to working towards our goal of making food poverty history. With so many of the most vulnerable people in our society clearly struggling to put food on the table, essential services like those Barnardos provide are critical.

At ALDI, we are committed to bringing healthier, affordable foods to more Irish families, which is reflected in our pledge have to 70% of our food sales coming from healthier products by 2025. We've now been working with Barnardos for over three years, supporting them by building awareness of their services, engaging staff and customers in activities and initiatives to support their work through the donation of significant funds.

To date, more than €1.5 million has been raised for our charity partner. We know that together with our customers, we can continue to make a substantial difference in tackling food insecurity and supporting vulnerable families through this difficult time.

About the partnership

The ALDI and Barnardos partnership started in October 2020. ALDI has supported Barnardos by raising significant funds, building awareness of Barnardos' services, engaging staff and customers in activities and initiatives to support Barnardos Early Years and Family Support Services. The Food Insecurity Research Project has been a significant part of the now 3 year ongoing partnership in order to raise public awareness of the growing challenge of food insecurity within a cost of living context where existing challenges were faced.



Introduction

At Barnardos, we see first-hand the difficulties that many parents on low incomes can face every day, trying to provide themselves and their children with sufficient nutritious food. A substantial proportion of the families we support can find providing their children with enough food to be challenging, often due to affordability and accessibility.

Over the past few years, we have seen both the scale of and intensity of this issue increase for our families, due to the cost of living crisis. More families have become affected and those already struggling are in dire strain.

Household finances have become increasingly stretched to the point of breaking, leading to increasing stress and anxiety for both parents and children.

Going without sufficient nutritious food can have a profoundly damaging effect on children's health and development. Being constantly worried about food can have a damaging effect on parents' wellbeing. Barnardos and ALDI believe that every child in Ireland should have access to sufficient nutritious food.

We believe that no parent should be forced to skip meals and cut down on essential to feed their own family. Supporting parents with these vulnerable circumstances are central to the shared goals of our partnership.

Barnardos' and ALDI commissioned the third national survey on parents' and care givers' lived experiences of trying to provide their children with sufficient food over the previous year. The results demonstrate the story of food insecurity for families across Ireland and help provide evidenced based solutions to alleviate that insecurity.

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

- Skipping, cutting back on or going without meals themselves to feed their children.
- Cutting down on absolute essentials such as clothing, electricity and heat to make sure there is enough food.
- Borrowing, resorting to food banks, relying on voluntary organisations, or friends/family to provide themselves and their children with sufficient food.

In line with the research and what Barnardos see on the ground, Barnardos call on the government to take action to ensure no child goes without sufficient food by:

- Expanding schools meal programme to secondary schools
- Pilot programme to address holiday/out of term hunger
- Provide additional supports to low-income families
- Introduce a food insecurity action plan

Background

Unfortunately, existing research, evidence and available statistics around food insecurity in Ireland fail to present specific detailed findings as it relates to children and families. What is available is limited and dated, providing little detail.^{1,2,3}

In 2020, Barnardos and ALDI saw the need to commence research to address the under explored area of food insecurity in Ireland. To better serve vulnerable children and families across Ireland, it is vital to listen to their experience to best understand the issues facing families in relation to food. The cost-of-living crisis in Ireland since 2022 has compounded the urgency for this research.

With all the above in mind, in January 2022, Barnardos and ALDI commissioned a national representative survey to explore the depth of food insecurity among families in Ireland. We repeated the survey in October 2022 to see if trends were developing.

This report, is based on findings of a third food insecurity research survey, carried out in November 2023. It investigates if the issues identified in previous years have worsened, focusing on parents' ability to provide children with sufficient food, the steps they have had to take to do so and their general worries and concerns.

At Barnardos, we see first-hand the difficulties that many parents on low incomes can face

every day, trying to provide themselves and their children with sufficient nutritious food. A substantial proportion of the families we support can find providing their children with enough food to be challenging, often due to affordability and accessibility.



1. The Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) in 2018 found that 19% of children reported ever going to school or to bed hungry because there was not enough food at home.
2. 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 being higher 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'
3. The Economic and Social Research Institute developed a measure which defined food poverty as the inability to have an adequate and nutritious diet due to issues of affordability or accessibility 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.
4. All fieldwork was conducted in November 2023.

Methodology

Coyne Research was commissioned to carry out the survey focused on food insecurity. A nationally representative survey was carried out amongst a sample of 1,000 adults aged 18+. The focus of the survey was families and children under 18. A total of 465 parents/guardians who had a child in their care under 18 responded. The results below are focused on this cohort's views and responses.⁵



Providing children with sufficient food

The results from November 2023 are substantially worse than 12 previous months. It is clear that more parents are going without, and families are increasingly reliant on external supports in order to provide sufficient food.

At some point over the past 12 months	January 2022	October 2022	November 2023
Parent skipped meal or reduced portion	19%	29%	41%
Felt not enough food to feed your children	12%	19%	26%
Regularly unable to afford meat or vegetarian meal as often as you would like	9%	16%	18%
Borrowed money to feed child	11%	16%	24%
Used a food bank	3%	10%	12%

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

- Alarming, more than one quarter (26%) 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 19% in 2022.
 - Over two in five parents (41%) said they had skipped meals or reduced portion sizes so that their children would have enough to eat, a significant increase from 29% in October 2022. Similarly, almost half (46%) of parents always/mostly/occasionally feed children over themselves, compared to 39% in October 2022.
 - Almost one in five parents (18%) said that they had been regularly unable to afford a main meal for their family/children with meat/vegetarian equivalent as often as they would like, up from 16% in the previous survey.
 - One quarter of parents (24%) said they borrowed money to feed their children, an increase from 16%. One in eight parents (12%) said they had used food banks over the previous 12 months, an increase from the previous survey (10%).
 - Three in four (78%) parents felt that they could provide their children with sufficiently nutritious food. 22% percent said that they could not, down from 25% in the previous survey findings.
 - Almost one in five (19%) said they received meals from friends always/mostly/occasionally compared to one quarter (24%) last year.
- Almost half of parents surveyed (45%) said that inflation had had a negative impact on pressures to afford food (a slight reduction from 48%). More than one in five (20%) said it had a very negative impact, a slight increase from 18%.

Worrying about food

Parents should not be routinely worrying about being unable to provide their children with enough food. Unfortunately, a substantial proportion reported doing so, with similar figures to last year.

Parents worrying about providing children with sufficient food	January 2022	October 2022	November 2023
Always worried	5%	13%	12%
Sometimes worried	14%	29%	33%
Never worried	50%	30%	29%

- 12% of parents said they always worried about being able to provide their children with enough food, a slight decrease from October 2022 (13%).
- A further one third of parents (33%) said they sometimes or occasionally worry about being able to provide their children with sufficient food, a slight increase from the 2022 figure (29%).
- 29% of parents said that they never worried about the issue, down slightly from 30% in October 2022.

Of those who are worried about food	October 2022	November 2023	Year on Year % Change
Concerned about the future and being able to provide children with sufficient food	50%	40%	-10%
Afraid to ask for help	15%	17%	+2%
Embarrassed	19%	25%	+6%
Feel guilty	21%	26%	+5%
Frustrated	28%	36%	+8%
Stressed	43%	50%	+7%

Of the 71% of parents (328) who stated that they are worried about food, two in four (40%) said that they are concerned about the future and being able to provide their children with sufficient food, a decrease from 50%. Half (50%) report being stressed in relation to the issue with increasing numbers saying they are feeling guilty, embarrassed, afraid to ask for help and frustrated.

Just under half (45%) of parents said that rising household bills is their biggest worry about being able to provide food - down from just over half (51%). Almost one third (32%) said it was the increasing price of groceries, a significant increase from one fifth (21%) last year.





Attitudes towards food and meals

Although the primary barrier most parents face providing their children with sufficient healthy and nutritious food is financial, several other issues were identified in the survey. For example, over one quarter of parents (26%) said they don't have time to cook. A similar proportion (23%) said that they don't know enough about fresh food and cooking to feel confident cooking for their children.

Important/very important	October 2022	November 2023	Year on Year % Change
Whether food is healthy/nutritious	81%	88%	+7%
Whether or not it will fill my child	78%	82%	+4%
Available budget	68%	71%	+3%
What they will eat/want to eat	65%	73%	+8%
Ease of preparation	63%	58%	-5%

14% percent of parents agreed that they don't cook from scratch, with almost one in ten parents (9%) saying they don't have the facilities to cook. Twenty-two percent agreed it is difficult to get hold of fresh fruit and vegetables.

Parents were asked what the most important factors were in making decisions around food for their families. There appears to have been a slight increase in healthy decisions.

- Almost nine in ten (88%) said whether the food was healthy/nutritious was important.
- More than four in five (82%) said whether it would fill their children was also important.
- The budget available was also an important factor to 1 in 7 over half of parents (78%).

- Additionally, we asked parents various questions about their attitudes towards meals.
- More than three in four (76%) parents said they always or mostly ate a main meal together.
- A similar percentage said they always or mostly cooked from scratch (83%) and they always or mostly included include fruit or veg (82%).
- More than 9 in 10 parents (94%) said that they aimed to give their children some fresh fruit and veg daily, while 92% aim to have mostly home cooked meals.

Barnardos' practical support

Across our services in Barnardos, our project workers provide practical support and relief to families in our services wherever possible. This can very often be related to food, when staff become aware families are struggling financially and are at risk of going without, particularly at certain points in the year.



Barnardos support families by providing food parcels, basic necessities and vouchers for families in need. Over the past two years, Barnardos have seen an increase in the number of families proactively asking for help through food vouchers.

In addition to this every year, across our seven nationwide Early Years Services, Barnardos provides over 50,000 nutritious meals to children most of these hot dinners. Additionally, through our Early Bird Breakfast Clubs and Afterschool Service in Limerick, Barnardos provides 24,000 meals each year, to some 260 pupils from Monday to Friday.

The ALDI partnership supports these initiatives with Early Years, Breakfast Clubs and Afterschool Clubs all key recipients of the funding raised through the partnership with Barnardos.

Finally, the Department for Social Protection Support for the Most Deprived programme (SMD – formerly FEAD) 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. Barnardos estimate that some €100,000 worth of food is distributed to our service users per annum, with thousands of families directly benefitting.

Conclusion and recommendations

The results of the survey demonstrate that an increasing number of children are living in households in which parents are struggling to provide them with sufficient food. More parents are being forced to cut back on essentials or relying on others to ensure their families have adequate nutrition. A significant number continue to regularly worry about the issue.



1. Continue progress of rolling out hot school meals programme within schools

There has been considerable progress made in terms of provision of free school meals within schools across the country over the last number of years. Further expand the hot school meals programme to secondary schools.



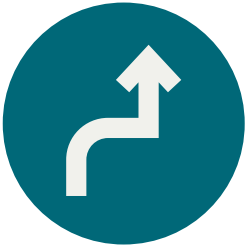
2. Pilot out of term time/weekend provision

Parents reliant on school meal programmes can find holiday periods extremely difficult. The government should pilot a programme looking at utilising existing local infrastructure to provide meals or food directly to families during those periods. This should be developed with and shaped by the views and experiences of families who are currently facing issues around food insecurity.



3. Provide additional supports to families on low incomes.

Families most at risk of food insecurity are on low, fixed incomes, often reliant on social welfare payments supports. The best way to better protect children in those families from food insecurity is increasing targeted supports in Budget 2025, in particular increasing the Increase for a Qualified Child payment (IQC) in line with inflation. The modest increases to the IQC over the past two years will not have matched even the increases in cost to provide children with food let alone other essentials.



4. Food insecurity action plan

The Working Group on food insecurity must set out a timeline for the development of a Government Action Plan on food insecurity. This should set out specific targets for reducing the number children and families experiencing food insecurity and the actions to achieve those reductions.



5. Additional needs payments

Families with children who apply for additional needs payment due to inability to provide children and families 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 long periods of time for a decision, during which children are going without essentials. This is unacceptable in relation to food.

Thank You

Barnardos would like to take this opportunity to thank ALDI for its support in facilitating the survey. We hope this report provides insight into the challenges faced by vulnerable families across Ireland around food insecurity.



About Barnardos

Barnardos has worked with vulnerable children and families providing practical, social and emotional support for over 60 years. Barnardos supports children all across Ireland who have been affected by traumatic life events such as abuse, parental mental health, neglect, separation, bereavement and addiction. Last year we supported 20,000+ vulnerable children and families. 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**

About ALDI Ireland

ALDI Ireland is a leading grocery retailer and is deeply involved in the local communities in which it operates. Operating a network of 161 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 value. This research shows the tangible ongoing impact of food insecurity as a prevalent issue in Ireland. As a front-line supermarket, we have always championed access to affordable and nutritious food for all families and will seek to further tackle this issue through our partnership with Barnardos. Throughout 2024, we will continue to shield our customers to provide the lowest possible prices for families across the country.



Barnardos,
Christchurch Square,
Dublin 8.

Tel: +35314530355
Email: info@barnardos.ie
www.barnardos.ie