

Briefing: Empty plates and cold homes: What it's like to grow up in poverty in 2024

Briefing | 11 September 2024

Summary

- A warm home and food on the table are essential for a child's health, wellbeing and development, but with energy bills set to rise by 10% in October 2024 and food prices now 27% higher than two years ago, the coming months are likely to be very challenging for many families.
- New YouGov polling of 2063 parents on behalf of Barnardo's found 1 in 4 parents (25%) struggled to provide sufficient food for their child in the last 12 months, up from 1 in 5 parents (20%) in October 2022. We estimate this is affecting **3.4 million children**.
- Barnardo's found that many families frequently had to choose between heating their homes and feeding their children, a choice no parent should have to make.
- Children supported by Barnardo's going hungry and living in cold homes were experiencing illnesses including respiratory conditions, poor mental health and feeling too hungry or tired to concentrate at school.
- Barnardo's welcomes the new UK Government's commitment to a Child Poverty Strategy, and the formation of a new Ministerial Task force, but urgent and early action to address child poverty is needed.

Key findings from Barnardo's new research on food and fuel poverty:



New YouGov polling of 2063 reveals that **1 in 4 parents (25%) struggled to provide sufficient food for their child in the last 12 months**, up from 1 in 5 parents (20%) in October 2022. We estimate this means there are now **3.4 million children** in the UK with parents who are struggling to provide sufficient food for them. **This is three times the population of Birmingham.**

In the last 12 months:

- 33% of parents have cut back on energy bills (e.g. gas, water and electric) to save money, up 2% from February 2023. We estimate this affects **4.6 million children**, seven times the population of Glasgow.¹
- 47% of parents have cut back on food costs to save money, up 1% from February 2023. We estimate this affects **6.5 million children in the UK**, more than the population of Denmark.²
- 8% of parents made use of a local food bank(s), up 2% from February 2023. We estimate this affects **over 1 million children**, twice the population of Liverpool.³

¹ 32.77% of parents in Barnardo's YouGov poll in August 2024 said they had reduced spending on household energy bills (e.g. gas, water and electric) in order to save money. This was used to estimate the number of children affected as set out in the Annex. Population of Glasgow is 635,130: Glasgow City Council (2024), '[Population and Projections](#)'

² 46.51% of parents in Barnardo's YouGov poll in August 2024 said they had reduced spending on food costs in order to save money. This was used to estimate the number of children affected as set out in the Annex. Denmark population is 5.9 million: European Union (2024), '[Facts and figures on life in the European Union](#)'

³ 7.74% of parents in Barnardo's YouGov poll in August 2024 said they had made use of a local food bank(s) in the previous 12 months as a direct result of the current cost of living situation. This was used to estimate the number of children affected as set out in the Annex. Population of Liverpool is 486,100: Office for National Statistics (2022), '[How the population changed in Liverpool: Census 2021](#)'

What does growing up cold and hungry mean for the children and young people we support?

116 practitioners at Barnardo's shared their insight for the report. Many supported families who were having to choose between heating and eating. These challenges are often interlinked, with fuel poverty leading to difficulties in cooking meals, and contributing to food insecurity.

"[There was] no money, despite working, it didn't cover the bills, so it was heat or eat for them."

Anna (name changed),
Barnardo's Practitioner in
Scotland

Recommendations

1. **End the 'sibling penalty':** end the two-child limit in the social security system which affects children who have two or more brothers or sisters. Ending the 'sibling penalty' is one of the most cost-effective means of lifting children out of poverty. It would lift 490,000 children out of poverty at a cost of £1.7bn.
2. **Save our local safety net:** develop a long-term scheme and funding settlement for local crisis support after the Household Support Fund ends in March 2025.
3. **Implement an Essentials Guarantee:** introduce a protected minimum floor in Universal Credit to ensure families facing hardship do not go without essentials like food and fuel. 3.9 million families with children would benefit from the policy.
4. **Extend free school meals:** extend free school meals ('FSMs') to all primary school children in England. Ensuring that every child at primary school gets at least one, nutritious, healthy and filling meal a day.
5. **Address holiday hunger:** set out plans to address holiday after the Holiday Activities and Food Programme ends in March 2025, including efforts to increase uptake & extend eligibility.



Action you can take

You can consider tabling one or more of the following Parliamentary Questions:

1. Will the Government meet with Barnardo's to discuss its new report 'Empty Plates and Cold Homes' which highlights how poverty affects families' ability to afford food and fuel.
2. Given the recent welcome extension to the Household Support Fund, will the Government commit to delivering a long-term funding settlement and strategy for local crisis support when the extension ends in March 2025?
3. Will the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions ensure that ending the two-child limit in Universal Credit is a key focus of the Government's new Child Poverty Taskforce?
4. Will the Government set out plans to address holiday hunger before the Holiday Activities and Food Programme ends in March 2025 and will the Government consider extending eligibility of the scheme?

About Barnardo's

At Barnardo's, our purpose is clear - changing childhoods and changing lives, so that children, young people, and families are safe, happy, healthy, and hopeful. Last year, we provided essential support to over 373,200 children, young people, parents and carers through more than 800 services and partnerships across the UK. For over 150 years, we've been here for the children and young people who need us most – bringing love, care and hope into their lives and giving them a place where they feel they belong. For more information contact Ali Cooper, Senior Policy Advisor on Child Poverty, Alistair.cooper@barnardos.org.uk