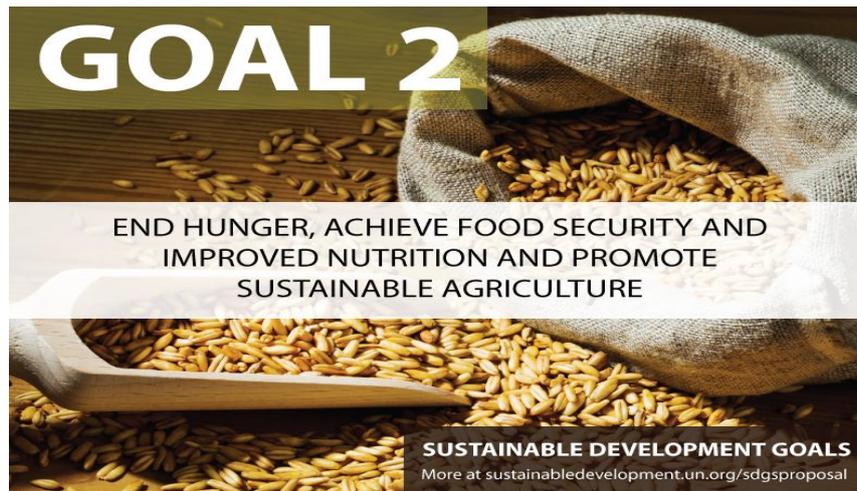


A Nutritious Diet Beyond the Reach of Many Low Income Families in Ireland



At this time of the year there is considerable media attention on the cost of going back to school. Uniforms, books and travel costs are major expenditure items for many households during the months of August and September. The challenge of meeting these seasonal costs is particularly daunting for families with low incomes. High expenditure in one area means low expenditure in others. The work of the VPSJ over the years has demonstrated that food is frequently regarded as a flexible element in a household's budget. It is a sad reality in the Ireland of today that one in five children go to bed or school hungry. The proposed Sustainable Development Goals (2015 – 2030), which world leaders will sign at the end of September and which are relevant to both developed and developing countries, identifies the ending of hunger as its second goal – 'End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition for all and promote sustainable agriculture'. Facts and figures point to the relevance of this Goal for Ireland.

This edition of Just.Now focuses on hunger in Ireland and on the cost of a minimum acceptable nutritious diet in Ireland.

The Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice consists of
The Society of St. Vincent de Paul, The Vincentian Congregation, The Daughters of Charity and The Sisters of the Holy Faith. *Working for social and economic change, tackling poverty and social exclusion*

Our Contact Details

Ozanam House
53 Mountjoy Square
Gardiner Street
Dublin 1

T: 01 8780425
vpj@eircom.net

www.justicematters.ie
www.budgeting.ie
www.vote.ie
www.misc.ie
www.livingwage.ie

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

INTRODUCTION

When we think of hunger, we often associate it with developing countries, but unfortunately hunger and food poverty is a reality in Ireland. 13.2% of the Irish population are experiencing food poverty. This is an increase from 10% in 2010. Food poverty is defined as the inability to have an adequate and nutritious diet due to issues of affordability or accessibility. It is measured by the percentage of individuals experiencing one or more of the following:

- Unable to afford a meal with meat, or vegetarian equivalent, every second day;
- Unable to afford a weekly roast dinner (or vegetarian equivalent); and
- Missing one substantial meal in the last fortnight due to lack of money

The VPSJ recently completed two research reports on the cost of a healthy diet. The first report focused on the cost of a healthy food basket for six household types in the Republic of Ireland, while the second was a pilot study examining the cost of a healthy food basket for two household types in Northern Ireland. This was the first time the VPSJ has been asked to participate in research in Northern Ireland. The research was carried out on behalf of *Safefood* and *the Food Standards Agency Northern Ireland*. This edition of JUST.NOW focuses on the findings of these two reports, and highlights that income affects the dietary choices that people make, and many low income households would in all likelihood struggle to afford a minimum essential food basket when other costs have to be met

ESTABLISHING THE FOOD BASKETS

The VPSJ use Consensual Budget Standards methodology to establish the cost of a Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL). This methodology is based on the use of focus groups with inputs from experts where necessary. The focus groups draw up 7 day menus, which are then tested by nutritionists to ensure they meet all the basic nutritional

requirements. The final menus provide the basis for the food baskets which are then priced in stores identified by the focus groups.

The menus represent what households need at a minimum level to have a nutritionally adequate and balanced diet, while also reflecting the behaviours and shopping patterns of ordinary members of the public.

REPUBLIC OF IRELAND RESEARCH

This research, using the VPSJ MESL data, examined the cost of a healthy food basket for six household types from 2006-2014.

Table 1 Food as a percentage of social Welfare Income for Six Household Types in the Republic of Ireland in 2014

Household type	Cost of Food	Social Welfare Income	% of Income on Food
Two Parents & Two Children (3 & 10)	€125.19	€434.32	28.82%
Two Parents & Two Children (10 & 15)	€150.37	€438.17	34.32%
One Parent & Two Children (3 & 10)	€96.22	€319.52	30.11%
Female Pensioner Living Alone*	€62.59	€255.94	24.45%
Pensioner Couple†	€82.41	€465.84	17.69%
Single Adult Male	€57.05	€188.00	30.35%

One of the key findings of the research is that low income households would need to spend a considerable proportion of their income in order to be able to afford the food baskets.

For example, and as illustrated in Table 1, a two parent household with two children (age 10 & 15) would have to spend 34.32% of their social welfare income on the food basket alone in 2014.

FOOD POVERTY IN IRELAND



13.2% of the population are experiencing food poverty

(Social Inclusion Monitor 2013, Published by the Department of Social Protection (2015))

1 in 5 children go to school or bed hungry

(Health Behaviour in School Aged Children 2010, published in 2012 by NUI Galway and the Department of Health)

The experience of the VPSJ is that spending on food tends to be one of the least important considerations when low income households are dealing with competing demands on an inadequate income. As a consequence, low income households tend to consume less nutritionally-balanced diets, and suffer from higher rates of diet-related chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease and obesity. Based on the findings of this research it appears that many low income households in the Republic of Ireland would struggle to allocate the expenditure necessary for healthy eating.

NORTHERN IRELAND RESEARCH

The VPSJ conducted a pilot study to establish the cost of a healthy food basket for two household types in Northern Ireland. The two households under consideration in the study were:

- Two Parents and Two Children, 3 & 10
- Female Pensioner Living Alone

Focus groups were established in three different areas in Northern Ireland to draw up menus for the two household types. The menus were then sent to nutritionists for evaluation. The focus groups regarded the final menus as varied, balanced and realistic in terms of their own eating habits and choices. They praised the approach as it reflected their own lived experience and the menus were based on their own food choices. The final menus were converted to shopping lists and priced in stores identified by focus groups.

Table 2 Food as a percentage of Social Welfare Income for Two Household Types in Northern Ireland in 2014

Household type	Cost of Food	Social Welfare Income	% of Income on Food
Two Parents & Two Children (3 & 10)	£119.17	£338.23	35.23%
Female Pensioner Living Alone [‡]	£59.11	£163.69	36.11%

Table 2 demonstrates the high proportion of income required to afford the food baskets. In the discussions with focus groups, participants highlighted that food is often regarded as a flexible component of a household's budget and so the amount spent on food is what is left over after other bills such as gas and electricity have been paid. As a consequence, families may end up buying cheaper processed foods that are high in salt, sugar and calories, but are nutritionally inadequate. As a participant in one of the family focus groups stated:

'Families on benefits could not afford to spend this much on food per week'

Given the very high proportion of income required for a healthy food basket, it is not surprising that between April 2014 and April 2015 over 17,000 people in Northern Ireland received food from the Trussell Trust, an organisation that provides emergency food and support for people in crisis[§]

Food Poverty is more than just what people can and cannot afford to eat. It is also a form of social exclusion in that it can limit people's social interactions as they avoid having friends or family to visit because they simply cannot afford it. It can cause humiliation and distress.

It is hoped that the research by the VPSJ on the cost of a healthy food basket will draw attention to the adequacy of social welfare rates and the struggle of low income households to afford a healthy diet.

Gráinne Weld, VPSJ

* Social Welfare Income based on the Non Contributory Pension

† Social Welfare Income based on Contributory Pension & Qualified Adult Payment

§ <http://www.trusselltrust.org/stats>. Accessed 13th August 2015.

FOOD POVERTY IN IRELAND



Food Prices in Ireland are 17% higher than the EU Average

(Comparative Price Levels of Consumer Goods and Services, Eurostat, 2015).

In 2012 SVP spent over 22 million on food and cash assistance

Reflection

As world leaders prepare to gather at the end of September in the UN to confirm their commitment to achieving the 'Sustainable Goals 2015 – 2030'

We Pray - Heavenly Father, grace us with the gift of discernment to see your presence in our world – its beauty and fragility and especially- in your people. May we respond to the needs of our time by living simply, living sustainably and living in solidarity with all who struggle with poverty and injustice. May we all, people and leaders, recognise the launch of new global sustainability goals as an opportunity to renew our commitment to promote a world in which creation is honoured and the common good of all people becomes both a personal goal and a universal goal.

Universal - Sustainable Development Goals 2015 -2030

- Goal 1** End poverty in all its forms everywhere
- Goal 2** End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture
- Goal 3** Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
- Goal 4** Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all
- Goal 5** Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls *
- Goal 6** Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
- Goal 7** Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all
- Goal 8** Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all
- Goal 9** Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation
- Goal 10** Reduce inequality within and among countries
- Goal 11** Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
- Goal 12** Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
- Goal 13** Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts**
- Goal 14** Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
- Goal 15** Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss
- Goal 16** Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels
- Goal 17** Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development

* This Goal includes the target of eliminating the trafficking of human beings for sexual and or labour exploitation.

** Acknowledging that the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change is the primary international, intergovernmental forum for negotiating the global response to climate change.

