



# **An environmental scan of food advertising on Sydney buses in February 2022**

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## Summary

Food marketing influences children's food preferences and their eating habits. When children are out and about, they are vulnerable to both conscious and unconscious influences of unhealthy food advertising.

The recently released National Obesity Strategy identifies unhealthy food advertising on government owned and operated property as an effective action.

Unhealthy food advertisements dominate food advertisements on public transport in NSW.

State government commitment to stop unhealthy food advertising on public transport would improve the food environment and support the government programs that address poor diet and obesity rates by reflecting the healthy messaging in these programs.

## Findings and Solutions

Eighty-three percent of food advertisements were for unhealthy foods and drinks.

Almost one third of the food advertisements were for sugar sweetened drinks (mainly frozen drinks) and over forty percent were for fast food such as burgers, fried chicken and pies.

These findings are similar to Cancer Council NSW surveys in 2018 and a study showing that about 80% of advertisements at Sydney train stations are for discretionary foods.<sup>1</sup>

State government action to remove junk food advertising from state-owned property including on public transport would reduce NSW children's exposure to unhealthy messages and help them develop healthy eating habits for life.

## Methods

This project monitored ads on buses that stopped at five busy bus interchanges in suburban Sydney in February 2022: Hornsby, Chatswood, Rouse Hill, Epping, and Parramatta.

Although a convenience sample, these transport hubs in Sydney have large numbers of school-aged child commuters.

Details about advertisements on sides and rear of buses were documented. The content of food advertisements was coded using two systems for profiling food; the guide developed by the Council of Australian Government<sup>2</sup>, now the Health Council, and The Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) developed nutrient profiling scoring criterion (NPSC); used for determining the eligibility of foods to carry health claims on the label.<sup>3</sup> The NPSC has been incorporated by the advertising and food industry to determine foods they can advertise under the codes they developed, Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA) Food & Beverages Advertising Code and the Outdoor Media Association Health and Wellbeing Policy.

The Health Council guide was developed by national, state and territory governments for voluntary use by governments in Australia. It defines food and drink categories not recommended for promotion and is consistent with the healthy eating recommendations outlined in the Australian Dietary Guidelines.<sup>4</sup> Research shows this guide is more effective and easier to administer than other nutrition criteria.<sup>5</sup> Results shown are using the Health Council guideline to determine eligibility to be advertised.

# Childhood obesity and the power of advertising

Food marketing influences children's food preferences, encourages purchase requests and ultimately influences food consumption.<sup>6-8</sup> Currently 19.3% of NSW children aged 5-16 years are overweight or obese<sup>9</sup> and a high proportion will go on to become overweight adults,<sup>10</sup> increasing their risk of 13 different types of cancer.<sup>11</sup> Only 1 in 20 NSW children eat the recommended amount of vegetables daily, 1 in 2 children eat an unhealthy snack every day and 45% are regularly drinking sweetened beverages.<sup>12</sup> Over 35% of Australian children's energy intake comes from discretionary foods, those not recommended as part of a healthy diet.<sup>13</sup>

The recently released National Obesity Strategy identifies unhealthy food advertising on government owned and operated property as an effective action.<sup>14</sup> Restricting unhealthy food promotion in areas controlled and managed by NSW government was identified to be one of the most achievable actions according to a report on government initiatives to tackle obesity.<sup>15</sup>

## Key findings

### The majority of food advertisements are for unhealthy food

A total of 603 advertisements were identified. Of those, 157 were for food (26%), 14 for alcohol and the rest for non-food items. Among the food advertisements 83.4% were for unhealthy foods. Forty-two percent of the food advertisements were for fast food, such as burgers, fried chicken and pies. Twenty-nine percent of food advertisements were for sugar sweetened drinks such as frozen drinks. See Figure 1.

The advertisements that were for healthier options and able to be advertised according to the Health Council guide included advertisements for ingredients, meals that didn't include fried/coated meat, fruit, vegetables and fish.

Many of these buses are taking school children to school. We found a bus marked specifically as a school bus with pie ads on it. Examples of advertisements are in Figure 2-4.

### Previous CCNSW surveys

A 2018 study of 53 routes to school via bus, train or walking, found 32% of advertisements were for foods or beverages and of those 75% promoted unhealthy products. Depending on travel mode, children could be exposed to between 1.7 to 7.3 advertisements for unhealthy foods on each trip to school.<sup>16</sup> Over a year, children would be exposed to more than 2800 discretionary food advertisements if travelling on trains and 1000 discretionary food advertisements if travelling on buses to and from school.

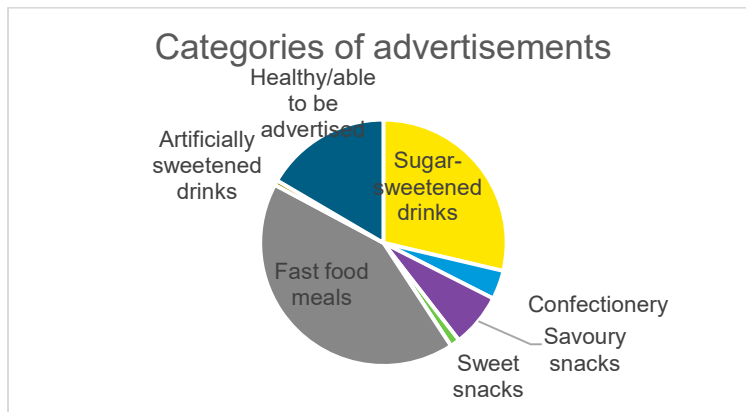
An environmental scan of six major train stations and buses around those stations in February 2018 found 82% of food advertisements were for unhealthy foods<sup>17</sup> and an audit of 90 buses on school bus routes to suburban Sydney primary and secondary schools in November 2018 found 72% of food and drink advertisements were promoting unhealthy products.<sup>18</sup>

### Observations on using the NPSC

The NPSC criteria was adopted for the Australian grocery market for the nutrition, health and related claims standard and has not been tested on fast food or tested for its relevance for the purpose of differentiating foods suitable to advertise to children. In fact, it allows foods such as chips and some fast food products to be advertised.

In this study we found it more lenient than the Health Council guide, classifying 75% of food advertisements as unhealthy. In this study sample burritos, fried chicken dishes and a burger passed NPSC profiling but not the Health Council guide.

## Appendix



**Figure 1:** Proportion of Health Council guide food categories advertised on buses



**Figure 2:** a school bus



**Figure 3:** Some buses had multiple advertisements



**Figure 4:** Sugary drink ads

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