

Discussion Paper.

School sites and unhealthy food outlets

The importance of good nutrition for children is universally accepted as a way to nourish their growth, learning and play. Schools are an important setting to foster and role model healthy eating. Western Australian (WA) schools deliver a wide range of actions to enable and promote healthy eating such as classroom teaching, healthy food in canteens, school gardens and in class Crunch&Sip® breaks to increase vegetable and water consumption. A child's right to good health does not stop at the school gate.

The surrounding environment impacts the health and wellbeing of children attending the school. Connected and safe paths provide opportunity to walk or cycle to school and co-located or nearby facilities provide convenient access for places to connect and play.

The potential for WA schools to have a positive influence on children's health and wellbeing is **undermined when they have unhealthy food outlets in high volumes and in close proximity.**

Perth schools are surrounded by unhealthy food outlets

WA-based research led by Professor Gina Trapp involved identifying all the unhealthy food outlets around Perth schools. Using data from 2018-2019 it was found that all Perth schools, on average, have two unhealthy food outlets within 400m (see Figure 1). Secondary schools are higher, with an average of three unhealthy food outlets within 400m (see Table 1).



Figure 1 : All schools average number of unhealthy food outlets within 400m (2), 800m (6) and 1km (8).

	Primary Schools	Secondary Schools
Average number of unhealthy food outlets within:		
» 400m	2	3
» 800m	5	9
» 1km	7	13
Percentage of schools with an unhealthy food outlet within 1km	85%	97%

Table 1. Unhealthy food outlets around primary and secondary schools.

Specific to top four* unhealthy food outlets, 11 per cent of all Perth schools have at least one within just 400m, and 32 per cent of all schools have at least one within 800m¹, higher for secondary schools at 40 per cent within 800m.

The outlets surrounding schools are a frequent source of unhealthy food purchases for Perth school children

- Research has found almost half (40 per cent) of Perth secondary school children purchase unhealthy foods from outlets near their school at least weekly¹ (five per cent purchased them daily).
- The frequency of purchases was significantly associated with the availability of top four* fast-food outlet even at distances up to 1km away¹.

*Top four unhealthy food outlets provided on page 2.

Perth school boundaries and commute networks are wallpapered by unhealthy food and drink advertising

- Outdoor advertising near Perth schools constitutes a frequent and significant contribution to children's exposure to unhealthy food and drink advertising.
- An audit¹ conducted within 500m of Perth schools found, on average:
 - » Primary schools – had 25 food and drink ads
 - » Secondary schools – had 22 food and drink ads
 - » K-12 schools – had 41 food and drink ads.
- Almost half of all advertisements (44 per cent) along Perth school commute routes are for food and drinks, most of which is for unhealthy food (80 per cent)².
- Perth school children see between nine and 70 outdoor unhealthy food advertisements commuting to school each day².



74 per cent

of ads were for unhealthy foods: with fast-food, sugary drinks and alcohol being the most advertised products and brands¹.

The location, density and outdoor advertising of fast-food outlets widens health inequalities

- Schools in areas of low socio-economic status (SES) have significantly higher frequency of unhealthy food outlets (all unhealthy food outlets and top four*) within 400m and 1km, compared with schools located in high SES areas¹.
- Perth schools located in areas of low SES had a higher proportion of total outdoor food advertisements, unhealthy food advertisements and alcohol advertisements within 250m of schools¹.

Unhealthy food outlets are those which sell food and drinks in snack bars, convenience stores, quick-service restaurants and drive-through windows, served immediately, can be eaten without cutlery and taken away e.g. fast-food chains, ice-cream and donut shops. The foods and drinks are often over-sized, highly-processed and packed full of added sugar, salt and fat.

* The top four fast-food chains dominate the market. This research grouped McDonald's, Hungry Jacks, KFC and Subway. In 2018, collectively these chains spent over \$11 million just in WA on TV, outdoor and cinema advertising – not including social and digital media, and sponsorships. (Advertising spend in 2018, same year outlets audited).

Children are exposed to unhealthy food and drink marketing in all parts of their daily lives and are vulnerable to the impacts of unhealthy food environments. The evidence is unequivocal that the food marketing and outlets to which children are exposed alters their food preferences, choice, purchases and intake³.

Reform of the WA planning framework is required to enable health to be considered in land-use decisions, particularly for unhealthy food outlets around schools

The WA Government has identified changes to planning laws to limit unhealthy food outlets and to support access to healthy food options, including near schools as a strategy to transition to a sustainable health system and address the increasing social, health, and economic costs of rising rates of children and adults who have overweight and obesity⁴. The WA Department of Health recently published an [evidence review](#) on Food, built environment and obesity, which demonstrated the need for urgent action to prevent the worsening of harmful locations and densities of unhealthy food outlets⁵.

Unhealthy-food outlets next to schools does not meet community expectations

Development applications for new fast-food outlets near schools receive repeated objections from community, public health bodies and school staff, however these efforts fail as the WA planning framework is unable to take community health and community consultation as determining considerations for land-use deliberations.

“Take-away outlets this close to a school is a disgrace.”

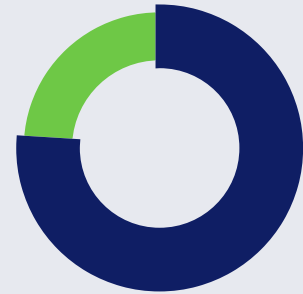
**M. Roberts,
Resident,
City of Gosnells⁷**

“Putting outlets [unhealthy food outlets] such as these directly between proposed schools and sports complex is callous and money grabbing especially when council purports to encourage healthy lifestyle for children.”

R. Donovan, Resident, City of Gosnells⁷

76 per cent

of ALL Western Australians support ‘Restricting new junk food and take away outlets near schools’⁶.



Cancer Council WA is working with Professor Gina Trapp and the Food Environments Team at Edith Cowan University to establish robust local evidence on the detrimental impact of unhealthy food outlets near schools. This research aims to bolster support for reforms in the WA planning framework to prioritise community health in land-use decisions. By working with schools and local communities in areas where unhealthy food outlets have been approved to be built, the research will evaluate their impact on dietary intake, the prevalence of outdoor food advertising, and community perceptions concerning local amenities, satisfaction with the local food supply, safety and traffic due to these unhealthy food developments.

As a united community of researchers, professionals, parents and schools we can advocate for supportive planning regulations that impose controls on the location of unhealthy food outlets. This collective effort will ensure these outlets undergo thorough scrutiny regarding their potential harm to children’s health and overall community wellbeing.

Please get in touch to discuss ObesityPolicy@cancerwa.asn.au

¹ Trapp G, Hooper P. Junk-Food Filled Neighbourhoods.; 2020.

² Trapp G, Hooper P, Thornton LE, et al. Exposure to unhealthy food and beverage advertising during the school commute in Australia. J Epidemiol Community Health (1978). 2021;75(12):1232-1235. doi:10.1136/jech-2021-217032

³ World Health Organisation. PROTECTING CHILDREN FROM THE HARMFUL IMPACT OF FOOD MARKETING: POLICY BRIEF.; 2022.

⁴ Department of Health WA. Sustainable Health Review. (2019). Sustainable Health Review: Final Report to the Western Australian Government.; 2019.

⁵ Department of Health WA. Evidence Brief: Food, Built Environments and Obesity.; 2022.

⁶ Godwin R, Jun Y, Chen M, Morley B, Dixon H, Wakefield M. Evaluation of the Western Australian LiveLighter® Campaign: Aug-Sep 2021.

⁷ Government of WA. Metro East Joint Development Assessment Panel Agenda MEJDAP/181 City of Gosnells.; 2018. Public consultation on a 24/7 drive-through fast-food outlet within a residential area.