

# UNDER PRESSURE

## NEW EVIDENCE ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S BROADCAST MARKETING EXPOSURE IN THE UK

MARCH 2018

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overweight and obesity is the UK's biggest cause of cancer after smoking and is associated with thousands of cancer cases a year<sup>1</sup>. The largest number of weight-linked cancer cases are breast, bowel and womb<sup>1</sup>. Modelling studies estimate that if current obesity trends continue, there will be 670,000 obesity-associated cancers between 2015 and 2035, costing the NHS £2.5 billion/year extra<sup>2</sup>.

Youth obesity poses a specific problem. Prevalence is holding steady at an alarmingly high level, and an obese child is around five times more likely to become an obese adult<sup>3</sup>. Explanations in the research literature are as diverse as genetics, increased calorie intake and lower levels of exercise<sup>4-8</sup>. Of those, increasing calorie consumption is thought to be the more substantial factor in explaining how obesity has risen to current levels in just a few decades<sup>4,6,9</sup>.

This brings the environmental variables linked to increased calorie consumption into sharp focus. For one, the link between high fat, salt and sugar (HFSS) food marketing and consumption is clear from both experimental studies<sup>10,11</sup> and systematic reviews<sup>12</sup>. There is still doubt about whether regulations of both broadcast and non-broadcast advertising are sufficient to reduce its impact on children and young people (CYPs).

This research – a UK-wide quantitative survey of 3,348 people aged 11-19 – evaluates whether there is a need for policy makers in 2018 to further regulate marketing.

## KEY FINDINGS

### 1. EXTRA HFSS ADS PREDICTS EXTRA HFSS EATING

Seeing just one extra broadcast advert per week predicted a large amount of HFSS eating

and drinking (around 60 HFSS items more/year). We estimate this at almost 350 calories/week (18,000/year). 'Added value' advertising - such as celebrity endorsements, sponsorship and competitions - were also correlated to HFSS eating. Broadcast regulations have not been updated since 2008, but this evidence suggests marketing restrictions are as necessary now as they were then.

### 2. YOUNG PEOPLE ARE UNDER HUGE PRESSURE TO HAVE UNHEALTHY DIETS

When asked, young people said they felt pressured to eat unhealthily. Agreement was over 40% across all demographics, and as high as 52% amongst people with obesity. Disagreement was between 25% and 30%.

There was also substantial engagement with brands that produce HFSS products. 80% of the ten food and drink brands young people recalled most frequently have at least one HFSS product in their top sellers. This indicates the imbalance between healthy and unhealthily messaging and young peoples' need for further support.

### 3. HFSS CONSUMPTION WAS AT HARMFUL LEVELS AMONGST THE YOUTH POPULATION

On average, young people reported eating 30 HFSS items per week, but only 16 portions of fruit or vegetables. The estimated calorie intake from this many HFSS products is approximately 6,300 calories/week – 30-40% of a young person's weekly guideline amount<sup>13</sup>. More deprived young people had significantly worse diets than young people from more affluent backgrounds. Such high levels of HFSS consumption help to justify population-level policy interventions such as marketing restrictions. These would support healthy choices, especially by those most reliant on unhealthy foods, such as young people from more deprived communities.

Seeing one extra  
broadcast HFSS  
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### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

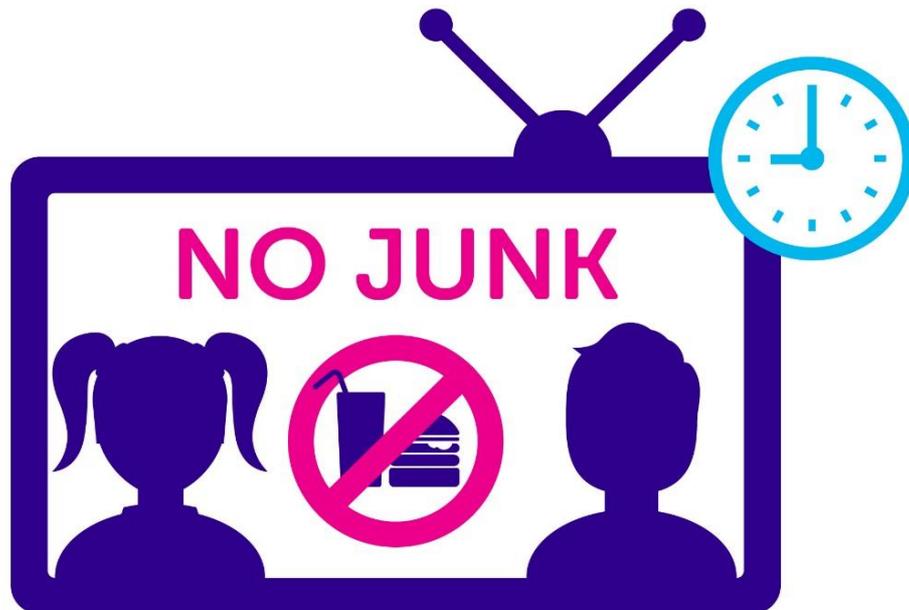
Diet is poor across the UK. HFSS products make up a large amount of young people's consumption and are a regular part of their daily diets. Over the 12 HFSS product categories used in this study (which are not exhaustive) this intake would be likely to lead to substantially worse weight outcomes.

Therefore, population level interventions are clearly justified. These should target the most prevalent environmental factors linked to calorie consumption - to ensure sustainable harm reduction. In this case, the variable found to have the most influence was broadcast marketing.

A 9pm watershed on TV advert content would be the most effective mechanism to reduce HFSS eating. It would mean stricter protections on the shows that children and young people watch the most<sup>14,15</sup>. 'On-demand' television and, to a lesser extent, radio should be included in the scope of any such update. Given that young people also felt pressure to have HFSS-heavy diets, this would have the added benefit of providing a vulnerable group much needed support to make healthy choices.

Whilst a comprehensive approach to obesity will be necessary, this evidence supports the case for including marketing restrictions in that approach as a point of urgency.

## LET'S EASE THE PRESSURE ON YOUNG PEOPLE



TIME FOR JUNK FOOD AD RESTRICTIONS BEFORE 9PM

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