

Healthy eating, healthy learning

Understanding why young teenagers buy unhealthy food and drink beyond the school gate

A healthy, balanced diet is important for health and wellbeing and much time, money and energy has been spent in recent years on improving the quality of school meals for young people.

However research led by Professor Wendy Wills of the Food and Public Health Research Unit at the University of Hertfordshire, found that more than three quarters of 13-15 year olds still buy food or drink outside school at least twice a week, often favouring cheap, fast and less healthy food and drink options than are available in schools. Two thirds said they purchased food and drink from the school cafeteria either only once a week or never at all.

A deeper understanding of the factors that motivate these decisions is essential if policymakers are to devise bold and creative initiatives capable of tackling this major public health challenge. Whilst a broad package of measures is required to make progress overall, including pressing for changes to the food environment on our high streets, a stronger emphasis on transforming *school food environments* to reduce incentives to venture beyond the school gate is likely to have a bigger impact on a greater number of young people.



Key policy recommendations:

- We must accept the external food environment can only be controlled in a limited way; research showed the school food environment is more conducive to policy interventions, for the benefit of larger numbers of young people.
- A wholesale shift in food culture in schools is required through improving the food, service and the physical and social environment — this can be factored into planning and design decisions for new schools and academies.
- Schools can learn from local retailers in the way that they value young people; schools seem less likely to prioritise the building of relationships with young ‘customers’ than businesses but young people highly value these relationships.
- Spending time with friends is a *crucial* part of the lunch break; schools must address a common view among young people that the school dining environment is anti-social and a barrier to spending time with friends.
- Schools should encourage young people to champion the need for better food and drink at lunchtime and engage their peers in its importance.
- Outside of schools, policymakers should direct attention at reducing the consumption of sugar sweetened soft drinks and energy drinks; the study showed more than a quarter of young people bought sugar sweetened beverages and some relied on drinks for lunchtime energy rather than food.
- Socio-economically deprived areas should be prioritised. While 77% of young people purchased food or drink outside school at least twice a week, this exceeded 90% in the most deprived areas, where pupils often had more reason to ‘escape’ the school environment.
- 41% of those entitled to Free School Meals (FSM) bought something at lunchtime outside school; FSM does not necessarily relate to uptake of meals as it can be seen as stigmatising, further encouraging young people to ‘escape’ school at lunchtime.

Growing policy challenge

Parents exert a strong influence over what their children eat and drink at primary school. However, when these children move up to secondary school things change quickly. The social environment becomes of much greater value and, consequently, the food and drink environment both within the school and immediately surrounding it takes on a new importance for young people. During this period, 11 to 16 year olds are making food and drink choices that may shape life-long habits and carry with them lasting health consequences.

In recent years education and health authorities have launched several new initiatives aimed at increasing the availability of healthier food within schools. Progress has been made and now attention is also turning towards influencing the external environment in

school neighbourhoods. Research at the University of Hertfordshire has found that despite positive changes to food options within schools, a large proportion of young people are still turning their backs on the school canteen for fast food cafés beyond the school gate.

Given fast food outlets and convenience stores are commonly concentrated around schools, particularly in areas of relative socio-economic deprivation, understanding why young people buy food and drink outside of school is of prime importance. University of Hertfordshire research has set out to explore the factors underlying these purchasing decisions and to investigate how levels of socio-economic deprivation relate to young people’s behaviour.

Research evidence

Food Standards Scotland commissioned

research by the University of Hertfordshire to provide insights into food and drink purchasing by secondary school pupils who go ‘beyond the school gate’ at lunchtime.

A total of 651 young people between the ages of 13 and 15 participated in the study, across seven schools in areas of varying socio-economic deprivation. Researchers analysed the food environment in five local authority areas and interviewed 13 head teachers and kitchen supervisors, and 25 retailers. The findings are presented below.

Deprivation, respect and the social environment

According to the findings of the ‘Beyond the School Gate’ study, the school food environment interacted as a push or pull factor with the local food environment.

Beyond the School Gate: top ten findings



77%

bought food/drink outside school at least **twice a week**, rising to 90% in the most deprived areas

54%

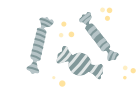
purchased food/drink outside school at lunchtime on day of questionnaire – this ranged from **23% in least deprived areas** to **66% in most deprived areas**

Most popular food outlets



Takeaways, chip shops or fast food

26%



Newsagents or sweet shops

25%



Supermarkets

23%

89% said going to the places their friends go to was an important factor

87% said proximity of outlets to the school was an important factor

Qualitative data suggests many young people were happy to go to outlets more than **800m** away from school to avoid queues, spend time with friends and visit specific outlets

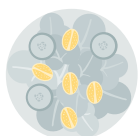
What food did young people purchase outside school?



26% chips



4.2% fruit



1.7% salad

74%

said service was important; qualitative data showed the rapport between young people and retailers was important



28% purchased sugar sweetened beverages; of those who reported buying a drink, **34%** purchased an energy drink

£1.98

Many retailers discounted their prices for young people at lunchtime; the median reported spend on food and drink outside school was **£1.98** while the average cost of a school meal is **£2.35**.

“If adults come into our shop they’ll just wait in the queue behind the children, they’re all customers after all, whether they’re children or adults...and I think the children see that and they think: ‘Well we’re not getting shoved aside in here.’”

Takeaway employee

This relationship was underpinned by deprivation and how this manifested within the school and also within the local physical and social environment.

Young people at two of the most deprived schools often wanted to escape the school environment, where some did not feel welcome in the cafeteria. This pushed them into the local food environment, where they had a wide choice of food outlets to choose from and where they had good rapport with retailers who offered them a discount to shop at their stores.

Young people at schools located in more socio-economically mixed areas were forced to choose between modern outlets with higher prices and a wider range of food and drink outlets, where they perceived they were offered better value and lower prices, but which were very often run down. Retailers in more affluent areas were often more wary and less respectful of young people purchasing food and drink at lunchtime (limiting the number of schoolchildren who could enter at one time, for example).

Spending time with friends was often seen as *essential* by young people and this informed where they spent the lunch break, with the place (location and customer service) being more important than the food or drink on offer. The external food environment was usually perceived as somewhere that young people wanted to spend time with their friends. Schools, by contrast, were sometimes viewed as anti-social, with the school dining environment seen as a barrier to spending time with friends.

The notion of *respect* also played a

leading role. According to the young people, some schools are not welcoming places and many wished to escape at lunchtime into a local food environment where retailers, in deprived areas especially, respected young people and valued their custom. In effect, young people are empowered in the commercial marketplace and become autonomous consumers — even those from deprived neighbourhoods.

The way forward

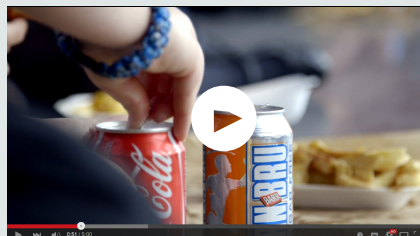
A recent study by the British Medical Association on healthier diets for children and young people argues for a ‘strong regulatory framework’ to restrict ‘commercial influences on people’s dietary behaviour’. At the local level it calls for better regulation of the in-store retail environment and power for local authorities to restrict the future clustering of fast food outlets.

While a strong regulatory environment is necessary it is not sufficient to address the problem of unhealthy eating among young people in and around school. We need to be very careful in assuming that the problem is simply a matter of reducing the number of fast food outlets, convenience and independent stores that are located close to schools.

While policy interventions relating to

In or Out — A Slice of What we Eat

Watch our short film that follows young people as they go ‘beyond the school gate’ to buy food and drink at lunchtime.



“Young people are empowered in the commercial marketplace and become autonomous consumers — even those from deprived neighbourhoods.”

Professor Wendy Wills

the food environment beyond the school gate are likely to have a limited impact, improvements made to the food environment within schools could potentially benefit a much larger proportion of younger people. Policymakers should work towards a wholesale and long-term shift in food culture in schools through improving

the food, service and the physical and social environment.

Schools can learn from local retailers in the way they show respect to young people; schools have less incentive to build relationships with young ‘customers’ than businesses do but young people highly value (and benefit from) these relationships. Engaging young people to decide what changes they wish to see is very important. Our research showed that young people often feel they are denied the right to participate and to be heard in school, in relation to the food environment.

The effectiveness of interventions may be enhanced if decision makers develop a more nuanced understanding of the underlying motivations that shape young people’s food choices. Research by University of Hertfordshire has shown that young people are adept at seeking out ways to circumvent restrictions if the school and the neighbourhood around the school fail to meet their complex food and drink needs. Therefore young people’s views need to be taken into account when interventions are planned. The studies also suggest that support from head teachers, school catering staff and contractors providing food to schools is critical to affect real change to the overall food environment within and beyond schools.



Professor Wendy Wills

Food and Public Health Research Unit

Professor Wendy Wills leads the Food and Public Health Research Unit at the Centre for Research in Primary and Community Care, University of Hertfordshire.

She works at the interface of social science and public health in relation to food, eating, weight/obesity and health. She is leading a programme of research that is making a key contribution to our understanding of the UK food system by identifying some of the challenges within the system and how they influence the food choices of potentially vulnerable groups, including younger and older people.

She has directed several major research grants, including for the ESRC and the Food Standards Agency. She led the Food Standards Scotland study into the food and drink purchasing habits of young people beyond the school gate. The full report is [here](#), the related open access paper in the Cambridge Journal of Education is [here](#) and the related short film is [here](#). She has co-authored a Food Research Collaboration briefing paper on school neighbourhoods and young people’s food choices, which can be accessed [here](#).

To discuss this research area – and related policy questions – further, please contact **Wendy Wills** at

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