



# **Community attitudes on protecting children from unhealthy food marketing**

**NSW Community Survey on Cancer Prevention 2022**

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## Key Findings

- ❖ Over 70% of the NSW community is concerned about *all* forms of unhealthy food marketing to children and this concern has increased since 2019.
- ❖ Over 80% of the community were concerned about marketing techniques using celebrities, sportspeople or cartoon characters and unhealthy food advertisements on TV at times when children watch TV.
- ❖ There is strong community support for restrictions on unhealthy food advertising to children (70%)
- ❖ Over 60% support restrictions on unhealthy food advertising on government-owned property.

## Why is Cancer Council NSW interested in food marketing to children?

In NSW, almost 1 in 4 children (5-16 years) live with overweight or obesity.<sup>1</sup> Overweight children are more likely to become overweight adults.<sup>2</sup> Obesity is a risk factor for many cancers, including cancers of the bowel, kidney, oesophagus, pancreas, endometrium and breast (post-menopause).<sup>3</sup> Food marketing influences children's food preferences, the foods they ask their parents for, and ultimately the food they eat.<sup>4</sup> Reducing children's exposure to unhealthy food marketing is recognised as an important action to address the increase in obesity rates and the related health effects.<sup>5</sup>

## How was the research conducted?

The Online Research Unit, an Australian survey panel provider, was engaged to recruit a representative sample of NSW adults to participate in the NSW Community Survey on Cancer Prevention. Between 11th February and 10th March 2022, 3,021 NSW residents aged 18 years and older completed the online survey. The final survey sample was rake weighted to ensure the sample was representative of the NSW adult population (18 years of age or greater). Statistical testing established whether the responses of subgroups were statistically significant. The University of Sydney Human Research Ethics provided approval for the research (HREC number 2021/848).

Cancer Council previously conducted the survey in 2013, 2016 and 2019. A comprehensive review of other population health surveys (e.g., NSW Population Health Survey) and similar studies undertaken by Cancer Council South Australia and Cancer Institute NSW informed the original 2013 survey questions. Each subsequent iteration of the survey retained key questions from previous versions to enable comparisons, removed/revised previous questions that were no longer relevant and included new questions to collect contemporary data.

In 2022, all participants received questions on knowledge of key cancer risk factors and their broader health consequences, ease of attaining products known to increase or decrease risk of cancer or weight gain (e.g., alcohol, fresh fruits, and vegetables), COVID-19 health behaviour changes and demographics. Participants were randomly allocated to answer questions from two of the four following cancer risk topics: sun protection practices, tobacco, nutrition and food policy issues and alcohol.

There were 1,515 respondents allocated to the nutrition and food policy issues section of the survey in 2022 and 1,613 respondents in 2019. This report focuses on the responses to

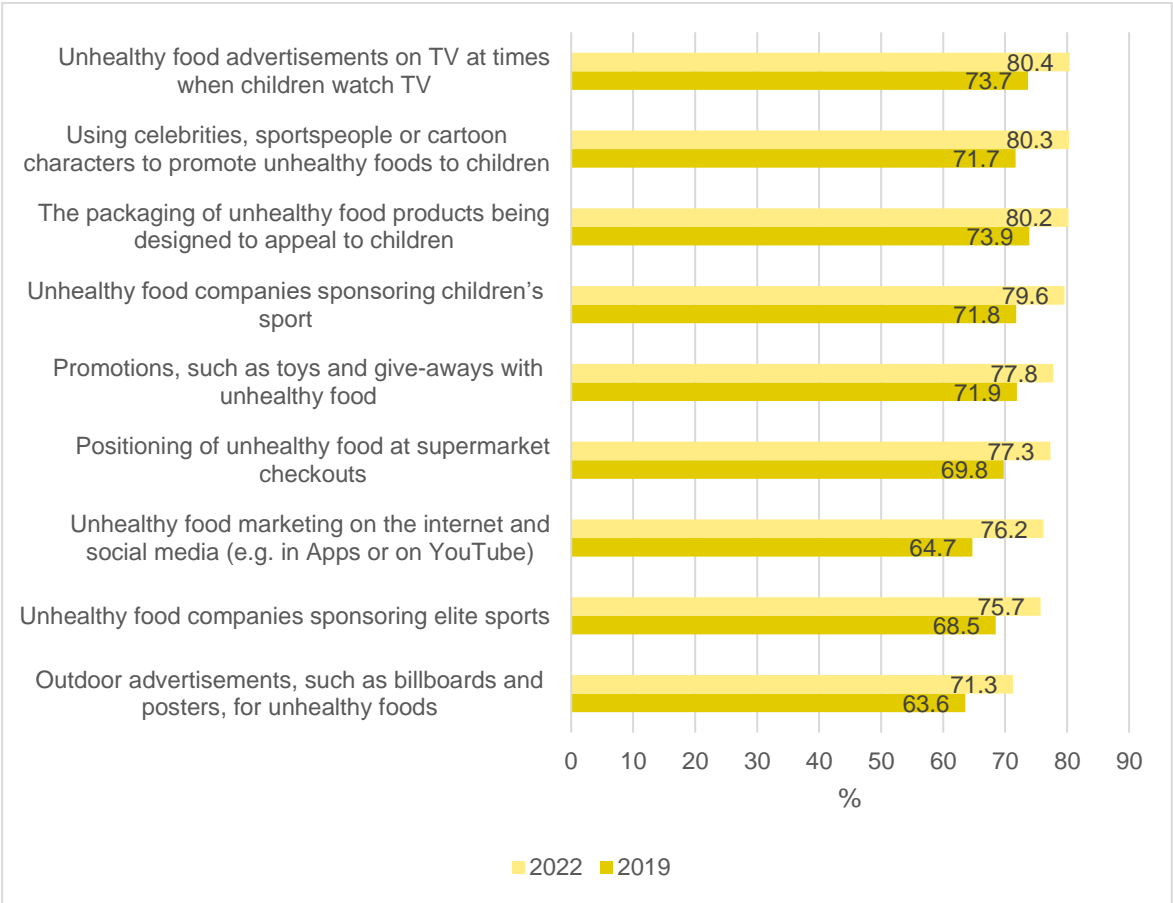
questions related to what the government can do to protect children from unhealthy food and drink marketing and hence address rates of overweight and obesity.

## What did we find?

### Concern about the ways unhealthy food and drinks are marketed to children.

Over 70% of the community reported feeling ‘very concerned’ or ‘somewhat concerned’ about all aspects of unhealthy food marketing in the survey (Figure 1). The percentage was over 80% for marketing techniques using celebrities, sportspeople or cartoon characters and unhealthy food advertisements on TV at times when children watch TV. The proportion of respondents feeling ‘very concerned’ or ‘somewhat concerned’ was significantly higher in 2022 compared to 2019 for all marketing methods, with differences of between six percentage points (promotions, such as toys and give-aways with unhealthy food) and twelve percentage points (unhealthy food marketing on the internet and social media) between the years.

**Figure 1. Percentage of community who are very or somewhat concerned about different forms of unhealthy food and drink marketing (n=1515)**

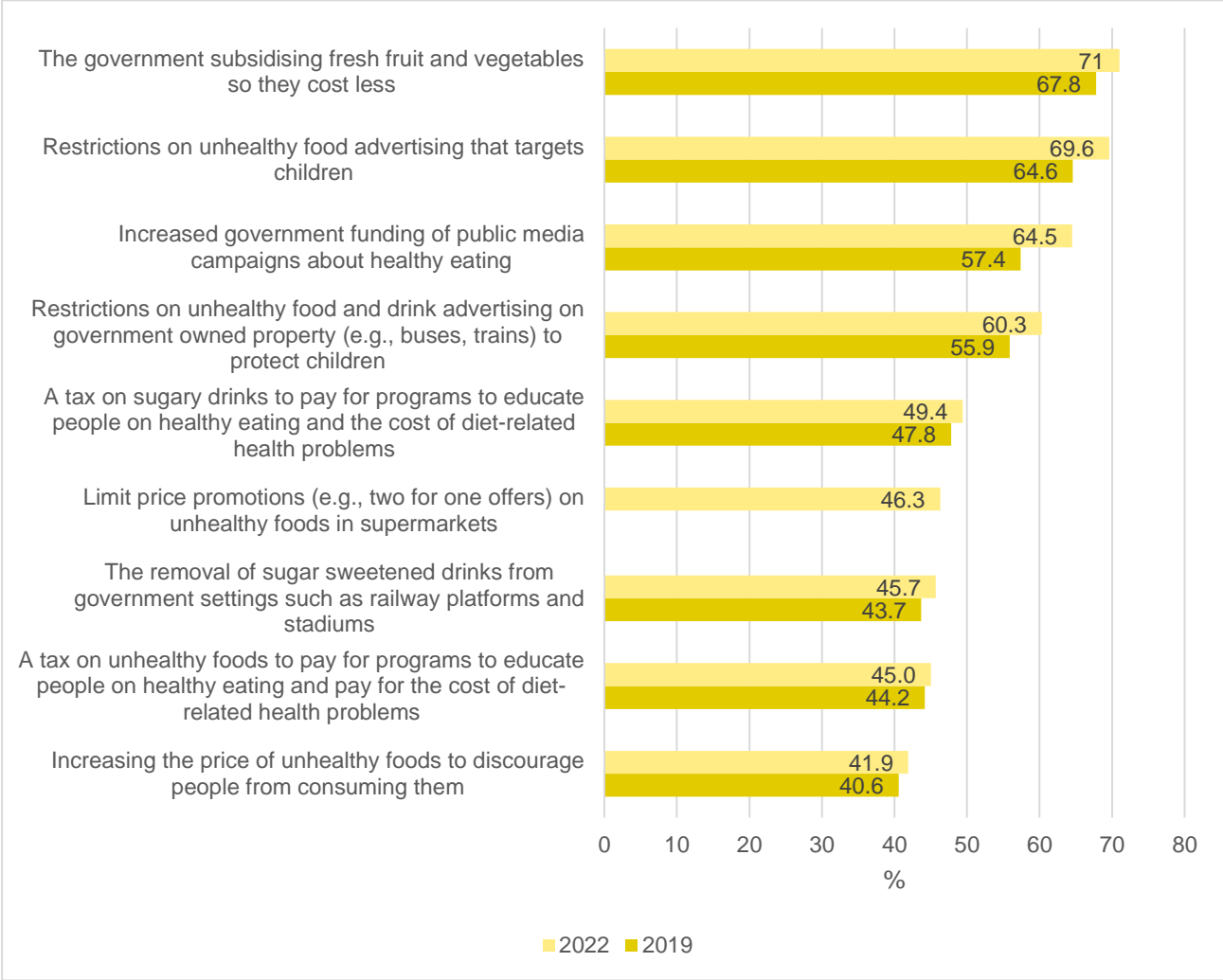


### Attitudes to measures to support healthy eating

The survey asked if respondents were in favour of, or opposed to, a range of ways to support healthy eating. There was highest support for subsidising fresh fruit and vegetables so they cost less (71%), 65% support for increased government funding of public media campaigns about healthy eating (a significant increase from 2019) and support for food marketing

restrictions -- on unhealthy food advertising that targets children (70%) and on government owned property such as buses and trains (60%) (Figure 2). Policies involving pricing, although lower, still ranged from 41-49% support. Between 18% and 29% of participants indicating that they neither support nor oppose the policies.

**Figure 2: Percentage of community who support or strongly support government policies to support healthy eating (n=1515)**



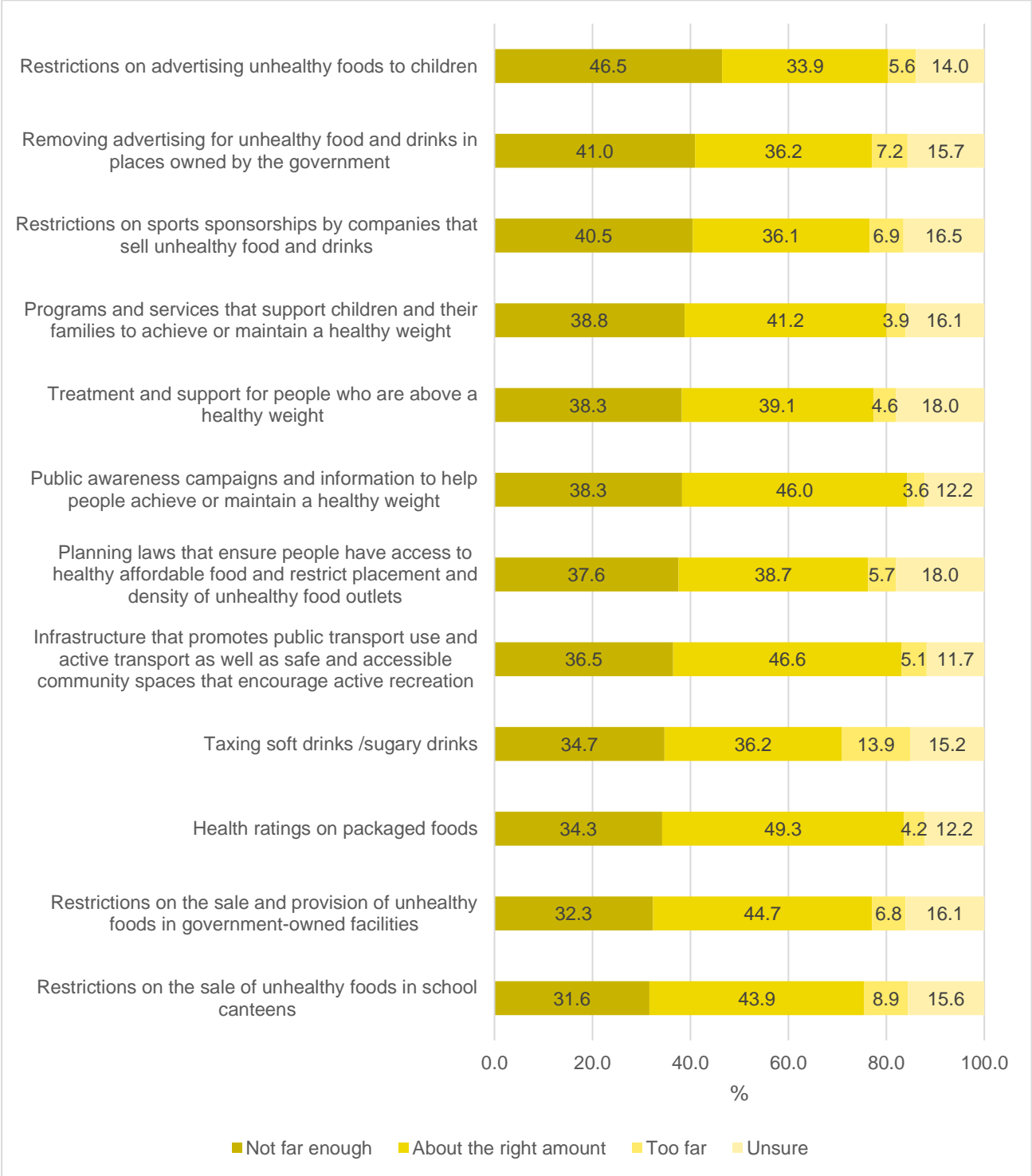
**Attitudes to NSW government response to regulation**

New questions in 2022 measured respondents’ attitudes to NSW government regulations aimed at reducing rates of obesity.

In response to the question “In general, do you think the NSW government has too much, too little, or about the right amount of government regulation and policies in place to help reduce the rate of obesity?” 44% considered the government has done *too little*, while just under a third (30%) considered the government regulations to be *about the right amount* and almost a quarter of respondents (23%) said they were *unsure*, which may suggest a lack of knowledge about what these regulations are. Only 4% of participants said the amount of government regulation was *too much*.

Respondents were then presented a range of policy options and asked, “Do you think the NSW government is going too far, not far enough or has about the right amount of involvement in helping the people of NSW achieve or maintain a healthy lifestyle?”.

**Figure 3: Community response to the question “do you think the NSW government is going too far, not far enough or has about the right amount of involvement in helping the people of NSW achieve or maintain a healthy lifestyle?” (n=1515)**



The issues on which the largest number of people believed the government is ‘not going far enough’ were restrictions on advertising unhealthy foods to children (47%), removing

advertising for unhealthy food and drinks in places owned by the government (41%), and restrictions on sports sponsorships by companies that sell unhealthy food and drinks (41%). For each of these issues more respondents felt that the government was 'not going far enough' compared to those who felt the government restrictions were 'just the right amount'. Some respondents may have been confused by this question as many of these regulatory responses are the responsibility of the federal government rather than the NSW government or both levels of government are involved. For example, the NSW government has less input into policies such as taxes, joint input with the federal government into food labelling such as mandating the Health Star Rating, and full responsibility for initiatives such as removing advertising from state government property.

## What does this mean?

Almost one in four school children in NSW live with overweight or obesity<sup>1</sup> and the heavy marketing of unhealthy foods to children has been recognised to effect children's food preferences, choices and short-term food consumption.<sup>6</sup> The NSW Community Survey on Cancer Prevention found that 70% of the NSW community support restrictions on unhealthy food advertising to children and over 60% support restrictions on unhealthy food advertising on government-owned property. The survey found that more than 70% of the community were concerned about *all* forms of unhealthy food advertising mentioned in the survey and this had significantly increased since 2019. Over 80% were concerned about marketing techniques using celebrities, sportspeople or cartoon characters and unhealthy food advertisements on TV at times when children watch TV.

In 2009 the food industry introduced voluntary codes on marketing to children, and the Australian Association of National Advertisers has recently updated its code to incorporate these food industry codes. Research has shown that these codes do not reduce children's exposure to unhealthy food marketing.<sup>7, 8</sup> We have looked at complaints about the Australian codes over six years and identified the loopholes that allow children to be exposed to unhealthy food marketing.<sup>9</sup> The industry codes do not follow best practice. Best practice regulations would be mandatory and government-led, define children as those up to 18 years old, cover all forms of marketing and define marketing as that which children are exposed to.<sup>9</sup> We are calling for comprehensive regulation using the Health Council nutrition criteria developed by Australian governments to identify foods that should not be advertised to children.<sup>10</sup>

There is a role for all levels of government to ensure that children receive the correct messages about healthy eating and governments protect them from unhealthy marketing. In response to the strong community concern about unhealthy food marketing to children and to reduce the negative impact of unhealthy food marketing on the populations' diet, governments should act to restrict all forms of unhealthy food marketing to children.

## References

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