



Obesity Policy Research Unit – Patient and Public Involvement Portfolio 2017-2022

Simon Russell, Jessica Packer and Russell Viner

Introduction

In this brief report we take a look at some of the Patient and Public Involvement (PPI) work conducted by the Obesity Policy Research Unit (OPRU) over the last few years. We provide some case studies of impactful work with young people and families, before giving an overview of a reflection session conducted with children and young people (CYP).

Introduction

The NIHR-funded OPRU conducts high quality and novel research to provide robust and cost-effective evidence to inform the thinking of the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and its partners. OPRU consists of four work streams with particular expertise in child and adolescent obesity, economic analysis, food systems and policy analysis, and the environment and behaviour change.



Child and adolescent
obesity



Economic analysis



CITY UNIVERSITY
LONDON

Food systems and policy
analysis



Environment and
behaviour change

OPRU Patient and Public Involvement 2017-2022

OPRU research

We provide evidence to meet policy objectives across various domains, in particular, the food environment and systems that drive obesity, in modifying behaviours that may lead to excess weight, in preventing and treating excess weight in children and adults and in addressing the consequences of obesity across the lifespan. We also have an important cross-cutting theme of better understanding inequalities in obesity and addressing the arising health disparities. Finally, we incorporate and embed core values of equality, diversity and inclusion in everything we do.

PPI

We believe that the voices of patients, the public and people with lived experience of obesity should be at the heart of our work and should inform and shape our research approach. From its inception in 2017, OPRU has conducted meaningful PPI work with young people and families in collaboration with the National Children's Bureau (NCB), who promote the wellbeing of children and young people and promote their active participation in research and the policies that affect them. More recently we have also developed a partnership with Obesity Voices and the Obesity Institute in order to represent the views of people with lived experience of obesity.

In this brief report, we demonstrate our PPI strategy in action by showcasing some highlights of our PPI activity through a range of thought-provoking projects with input from diverse representatives from the Young Research Advisor group (CYP aged 7-18) and the Families Research Advisory Group (parents and carers of CYP).

OPRU PPI work to date



| | |
|------|--|
| 2017 | Food marketing: What are you exposed to and how can we monitor it? |
| | Recognising excess weight in preschool children – A role playing exercise |
| 2018 | Wearing cameras to record exposure to marketing – is it safe? |
| | Consultation with parents to explore camera wearing for children |
| 2019 | Young people and advertising does it change how you think? |
| | How is COVID-19 shaping your family's relationship with food? |
| 2020 | Discussing the impact of food advertising on young people's dietary intake |
| | Co-creating an animation about advertising by and for young people |
| 2021 | Front of pack nutrition labels – an experiment to see if they work! |
| | Healthy weight interventions for young children – what more can we do? |
| 2022 | Food consumption during lockdown – a message for policymakers |
| | PPI work so far – a recap, reflections and how to communicate our findings |

Case study 1. Young people and advertising - does it change how you think?

In 2019, we presented research that looked into whether CYP identified when they were being advertised to and whether adverts created more positive attitudes to brands and products. The research was a systematic review of existing literature with meta-analysis, and we were interested in a range of unhealthy products in addition to food, such as nicotine products and alcohol.

The policy context was that many countries enact regulations that seek to protect children aged 12 years and younger from food marketing.

We found:

- That understanding of adverts increased with age but that there was no plateau at 12 years
- That advertising increased positive product and brand attitudes at all ages
- Understanding that something was an advert did not protect against its effects

PPI findings:

- CYP were surprised that advertising restrictions were self-regulated
 - CYP thought that advertising strongly influences behaviour, even with understanding about the persuasive intent
 - CYP supported a pre-watershed ban of television advertising of HFSS foods and an overall online pre-watershed ban for targeted sites (e.g., YouTube)
-

Case study 1. Young people and advertising - does it change how you think?

“Probably something aimed at parents [would be effective] - if parents can be reassured that it's healthy for children, combined with children seeing the brand as 'cool', then they will be more likely to provide it”

“I also think we need to do something about the problem of junk food advertising aimed at children on buses and social media and I think that supermarkets also have a role to play in encouraging their customers to buy healthier foods”

“I think that marketing that... involves celebrities on social media plays a big impact on what people consume as it's usually very engaging and appealing”

Impact

We incorporated the PPI work into conference presentations and policy briefing papers.

The work was impactful and provided a key piece of evidence in support of the pre-watershed ban of unhealthy foods.

Case study 2. Co-creating an animation about advertising by and for young people

In 2020, we ran two interactive sessions with CYP that presented four pieces of research (all systematic reviews) about advertising unhealthy food to children. The first session was to present the work and the second was to co-create an animation that represented CYP's views of the research and policy implications.

The research presented included:

- Quantifying the impact of advertising on children's immediate food consumption
- Children and teenager's understanding and attitudes towards unhealthy product advertising (Case Study 1)
- Two reviews exploring the impact of characters and celebrities on children's dietary outcomes

We found:

- That exposure to unhealthy food advertising on TV and advergames increases immediate calorie consumption in children (58 calories per 4.4 minutes of advertising)
 - That understanding of adverts increased with age and adverts increased attitudes toward products and brands
 - That use of characters and celebrities in unhealthy food marketing significantly increased preference or consumption of the marketed product
-

Case study 2. Co-creating an animation about advertising by and for young people

The work was discussed with CYP who said they were aware that they were advertised to a lot but were surprised at how invasive and pervasive advertising could be. The CYP felt strongly about promoting a positive body image, both socially and in the media.

“We think that as a society we need to be more open about obesity. It’s a public health issue, not a vanity issue”

“Parents, schools, and other people who work with children all have a role to play in removing the stigma around weight and making it part of everyday conversation”

“Weight and obesity: such concepts are not discussed enough, just silently judged”

“The media and advertising often represent people as fit, young and overtly attractive. These are unrealistic images of how people in our society actually look”

Impact

This work resulted in an animation by and for CYP (watch [here](#)), which provided further evidence to support of the pre-watershed ban of unhealthy food and drinks.

Case study 3. How is COVID-19 shaping your family's relationship with food?

In 2020 and 2022, we conducted two sessions with parents and carers about a research project that sought to assess the impact of Covid-19 lockdowns on families' food habits.

The first session was to inform the approach and the second was to discuss findings and policy implications.



We found:

- That changes brought about by lockdowns led to healthier habits for some families and less healthy habits for other families
- That households' ability to make changes that were beneficial for both nutrition and wellbeing was determined by the availability of resources (i.e., finances, time and social support systems)

Case study 3. How is COVID-19 shaping your family's relationship with food?

The project was discussed with parents:

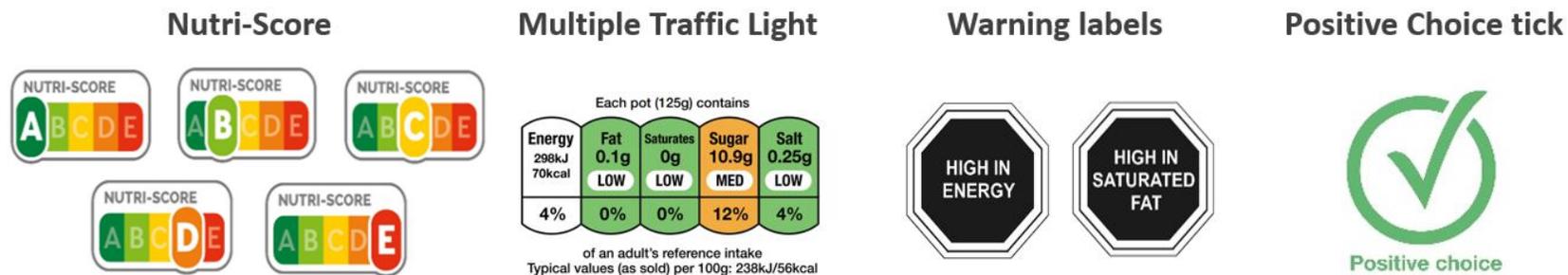
- The first session was impactful in terms of informing the recruitment and the data collection approach in order to be more inclusive
- The second session informed briefing papers sent to policy makers, ensuring that the language and messages were grounded in peoples lived experience

"I think that supermarkets are exploiting customers. Both my local Tesco Express and Sainsbury's have snacks, sweet drinks and crisps at the entry door, and I have to walk further into the stores to reach the fruit and veg; for convenience, it's easier to purchase the less healthy foods, especially if you're a school student out at lunchtime"

"We need to address underlying issues such as the lack of affordable nutritious food. The issue of food deserts is interesting and one that I think could be explored more; these are areas with limited access to cheap fresh food"

Case study 4. Front of pack nutrition labels – an experiment to see if they work!

In 2021, we ran an online randomised control trial to see which front of pack nutrition label was the most effective in informing participants about the healthiness of food products. In addition to a no label control we included the following labels:



We found that

- All labels improved participants' ability to correctly rank products
- Some labels improved ability more, in particular Nutri-Score (used in France) and Multiple traffic light (used in the UK)

Case study 4. Front of pack nutrition labels – an experiment to see if they work!

Later in 2021, we conducted a similar mini-experiment with CYP, followed by a discussion about front of pack label use and policy implications. Results of the mini-experiment with CYP were similar to the larger experiment with adults. We found that CYP preferred Nutri-Score and Multiple traffic light because of the colours, the familiarity and trust with Multiple traffic light; and the ease of understanding, particularly of Nutri-Score, saying it would be helpful for people with lower nutritional knowledge.

CYP thought that labels should be mandatory in the UK and discussed the possibility of creating a new label that combined the best elements of Nutri-Score and Multiple traffic light

“I am very interested in what type of food I eat but I think that it is very hard to read how much sugar and fat is in the food and drinks that I have”

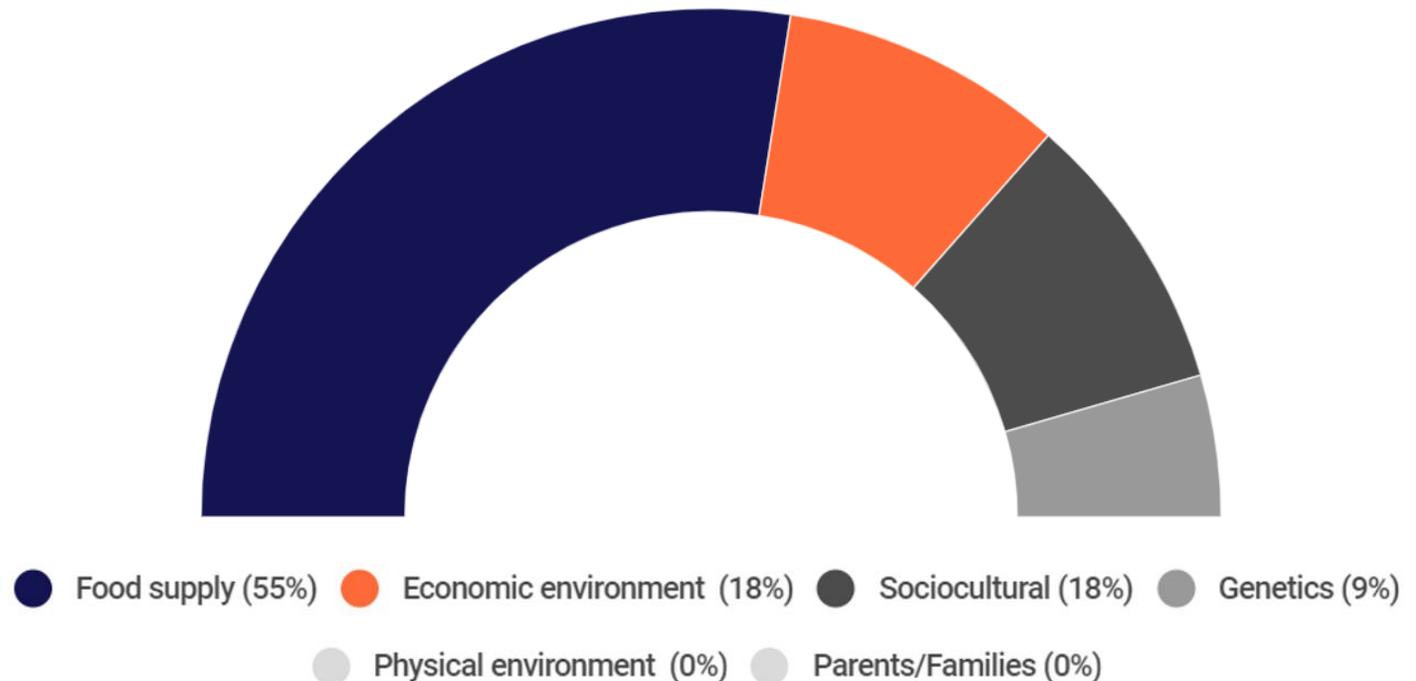
“I would like to see child friendly labels on things like juices and other soft drinks for children... I was really shocked when I saw that the smoothie that I'd brought to have with my lunch had something like 250 calories in it!”

Reflection session: Causes of Obesity

In 2022, we ran a session to discuss case studies 1-4 with CYP and to reflect on some of the PPI work conducted by OPRU. We provided an overview of relevant projects, the associated PPI sessions and the policy impacts that our work helped to evidence.

Causes of Obesity

We first asked CYP what they thought was the main cause of obesity. A majority of 55% said they thought food supply was the main cause, followed by the economic environment and sociocultural factors.



Reflection session: Responsibility

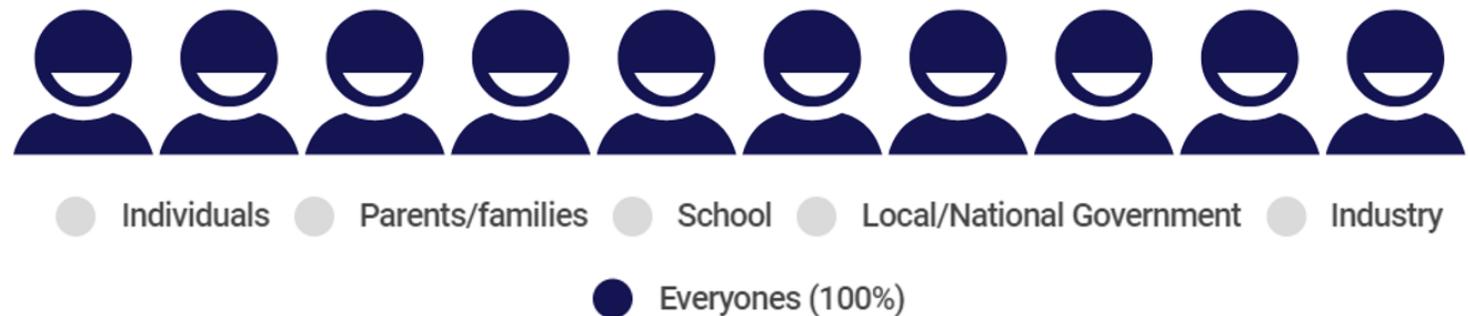
"The content of food is important (e.g., salt, sugar) more so than portion sizes"

"Having the time and money to cook / provide healthy food...there will always be unhealthy foods on the market, so it's then about choice - which is impacted by the economic environment"

"Fast food [is often] preying on cultural ideas such as Fish and chips Friday, which becomes the norm"

Responsibility

We then asked CYP whose responsibility they thought it was to ensure children maintained a healthy weight. 100% of CYP said it was a shared responsibility! The CYP added that, for some, the responsibility is greater than for others



Reflection session: Advertising & Marketing

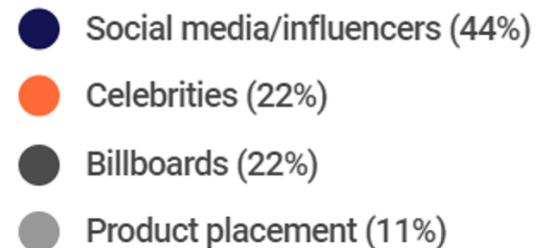
“It's unfair to put the burden onto children themselves”

“Although everyone has a role, some have a larger responsibility, such as parents and schools who spend more time with children/young people”

“Parents are probably the best vector, given that they are buying and perhaps cooking the food...they are the primary caregiver”

Advertising & Marketing

We asked CYP what they thought was the most effective format of marketing or advertising. The biggest proportion (44%) said social media and influencers. CYP then discussed various factors that they thought impacted on the effectiveness of marketing including the type and tactics.



Reflection session: Advertising & Marketing

"I find that billboards are more effective because I find that when an advert comes on, they have reviewed what I was doing so that would make me less likely to use that product"

"Social media influence is more effective because it feels a lot more personalised and one-on-one – [it] can be a lot more naturalistic than other advertising"

We asked the CYP if they thought marketing affected them and how they chose and consumed food. Most CYP thought that advertising didn't really affect them.

"I do not think that marketing effects what I buy. I am my own person and I chose what I want to eat based on what tastes good, so an advert is isn't going to change my choice"

Reflection session: Advertising & Marketing

All but one of the young people agreed that more should be done to regulate the marketing of food.

“I definitely feel that junk food advertising should be banned during the daytime, and celebrities should be forced to notify audiences that they’re about to do an advert”

“I think that children need to be taught about healthy eating and the importance of this. Instead of unhealthy food adverts maybe [healthier foods] should be advertised”

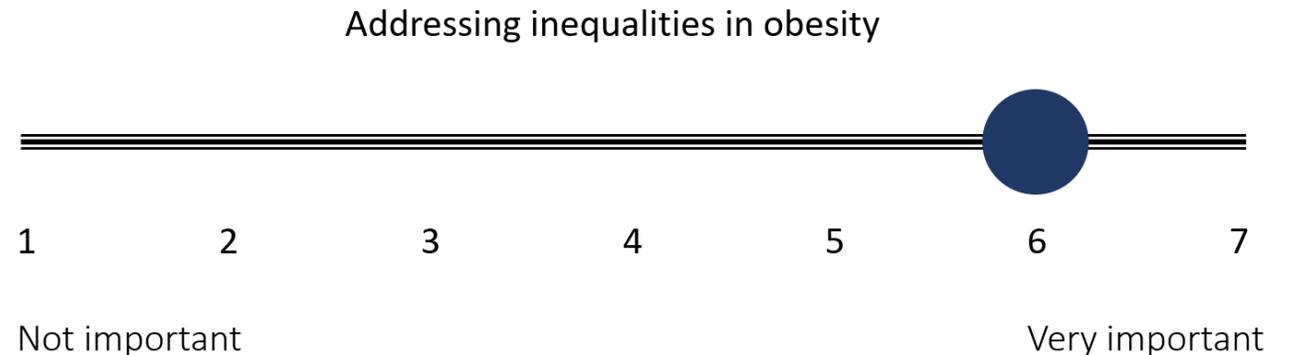
“The ideal situation would be to have industry completely regulated”

“I don't think stopping advertising is going to stop anything – it doesn't solve people walking past takeaways and wanting one”

Reflection session: Inequalities in obesity

CYP were asked how important they thought it was to address inequalities in obesity. On a scale from 1 (not very important) to 7 (very important), the group average was 6, indicating CYP think reducing inequalities in obesity is very important!

We asked what would be the most effective way to reduce inequalities in obesity? Some of the group said to try and make society fairer, while others suggested intervening on risk factors would be the best approach.



“To make society fairer I think that healthy food and non-healthy food should be priced the same”

“We should focus on intervening on risk factors so that they don't spiral”

“Can be a risk of singling out people; for example, a sentiment of: ‘they're trying to make me have healthy foods at school because they think I'm fat’, which can create resentment.”

Reflection session: Treatment or prevention?

Asked whether they thought prevention or treatment was the most effective approach, most children suggested both, but acknowledged particular benefits of prevention.

“Preventative measures are far easier and cheaper to put into place than to deal with the consequences of these problems”

“Clearly prevention is ideal. Encouraging healthy living, exercise, cooking etc.”

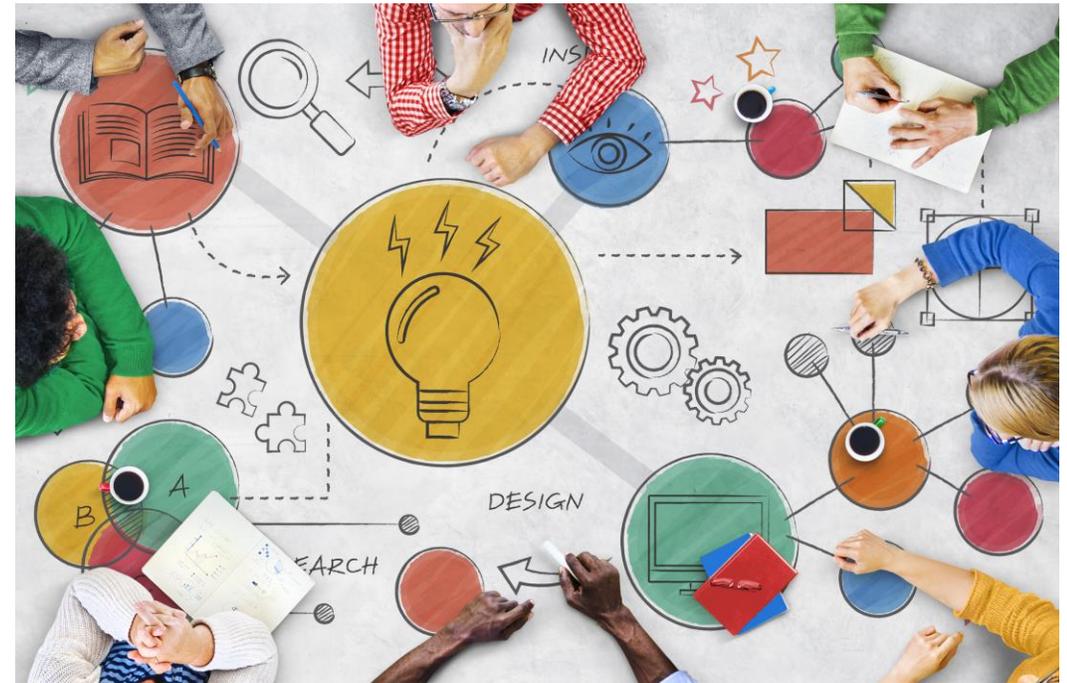


“The government choice to push back regulation changes does not seem to be justified”



Consistent themes from CYP

- CYP were surprised at the pervasive nature of food marketing
- CYP thought that social media and influencers were playing an increasingly important role in food marketing
- CYP want more regulation of industry in terms of:
 - Food production
 - Food labelling
 - Marketing
- CYP want supermarkets to promote healthy foods and make them more accessible and affordable
- CYP want to eat what tastes good and often don't think they are impacted by marketing
- CYP recognise the pervasive stigma of living with obesity and want social change



For more information:

Dr Simon Russell – s.russell@ucl.ac.uk

Jessica Packer – jessica.packer@ucl.ac.uk

Prof Russell Viner – r.viner@ucl.ac.uk

NIHR Policy Research Unit in Obesity
Population, Policy and Practice Research and Teaching Department
UCL Great Ormond Street Institute of Child Health
Faculty of Population Health Sciences
30 Guilford Street
London
WC1N 1EH
Tel: 0207 905 2110 (ext 42110)
<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/obesity-policy-research-unit/>

The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the NHS, the National Institute for Health Research, the Department of Health and Social Care or its arm's length bodies, and other Government Departments.