

Is the food industry conspiring to make you fat?

August 10 2017, by Sara Fl Kirk And Jessie-Lee Mcisaac



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

The scent of baked goods wafts towards you as the supermarket doors glide open. Your stomach rumbles and your mouth waters at the sight and smell of so much food.

Approximately [40,000 products](#) are available in an average North

American supermarket. Despite your best intentions, you succumb to the deals and offers that you don't really need. Hey, why not get two bags of chips for the price of one? Before you know it, your shopping cart is full and that chocolate bar you grabbed at the checkout is in your mouth.

One bar won't hurt, right?

If this sounds familiar, you're not alone. It is now widely accepted that we are living in a [food environment](#) that does not value health. This "[obesogenic environment](#)" does not provide a set of rules to ensure easy and equitable access to healthy, affordable food. And evidence is mounting that some foods, particularly those high in fat, salt and sugar, are not easy to resist.

Food addiction actually [shares common brain activity with alcohol addiction](#). And these high-fat, high-sugar foods also tend to be cheap and readily available, and strongly linked with [chronic disease](#).

This unhealthy food culture permeates society, something we have explored through [research](#) at Dalhousie University. Our current [food environment](#) sets us up for healthy food choice failure. Yet when we overeat and weight gain ensues, society is there to dole out [blame and shame](#) for our "crime."

Is this entrapment?

Blame and shame for unhealthy behaviours occur because obesity is often framed as an issue of [personal responsibility](#). In this narrative, we alone are responsible for what goes into our mouths. If we gain weight, it is a result of gluttony, sloth and a lack of willpower.

Any attempts to restructure our food environments so they are more supportive of health are often criticized as denying [freedom of choice](#).

Initiatives such as taxes on sugary drinks, for example, are referred to as the actions of a "[nanny state](#)." Food manufacturers and retailers seem particularly fond of this argument. They actively promote a belief that the global obesity crisis results primarily from lack of exercise ("energy-out") and deliberately minimize the impact of over-eating processed foods and drinks ("[energy-in](#).")

But what if we reframe the debate over personal choice and collective responsibility by thinking of our modern food environment in the same way as the legal defence of [criminal entrapment](#)?

Criminal entrapment occurs when [law enforcement](#) sets people up to commit a crime they may not otherwise commit, then punishes them for it. A successful entrapment case requires the defendant to prove [three things](#):

1. The idea of committing the crime came from [law enforcement officers](#), rather than the defendant.
2. The law enforcement officers induced the person to commit the crime, using coercive or persuasive tactics.
3. The defendant was not ready

and willing to commit this type of crime before being induced to do so.

Food environment vs you

Let's explore what it looks like if the [food industry](#) is put into the role of law enforcement, and the defendant is you—a member of society trying to make healthy food choices. The food industry heavily markets unhealthy food products, [particularly to children](#), inducing over-consumption (the crime). Unfortunately, their business model often depends on it.

Food marketing frequently uses persuasive tactics to tempt you to eat (and overeat) their products. Examples include [supersizing, meal deals, buy-one-get-one-free offers and priority product placement](#).

You find yourself in an environment that undermines healthy eating, and instead pushes energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods. These are cheap to buy, heavily promoted and, let's face it, often very tasty. The food industry has spent a great deal of money working out what pushes your buttons when it comes to flavour and taste.

Faced with all this temptation, you duly commit the crime of over-consumption (the trap), often unaware of the environmental cues and manipulations to which you have been exposed. In this example, all three components outlined above are present:

1. The idea of committing the "crime" of over-consumption came from the food industry, rather than you.
2. The food industry induced you to commit the crime of over-consumption using persuasive tactics.
3. As you tried to make [healthy food choices](#), you weren't ready and willing to commit this [crime](#) before being induced to do so.

Let's reframe the food debate

Of course, not everyone is going to fall victim to this "environmental entrapment." But we have enough evidence to know that —while people are aware of the dangers of over-consuming energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods —healthy eating is not easy. Our modern food [environment](#) is not reflective of [current recommendations](#) for good health, or for protecting ourselves against diseases such as cancer. Nor is it supportive of health within populations that are most at risk, like children or those experiencing [food insecurity](#).

Can reframing the issue around environmental entrapment help to mobilize public support for healthier food environments?

If nothing else, it may start a conversation about the quality of our food supply, and the tactics that the [food](#) industry uses to undermine our abilities to eat in ways that lessen the burden of chronic diseases.

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