

NZ children see more than 40 ads for unhealthy products each day

September 12 2019, by Tim Chambers



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

Unhealthy products—including junk food, alcohol and gambling—are leading causes of cancer, obesity, diabetes, mental illness and [many social harms](#). In New Zealand, alcohol alone contributes to an [estimated 800 deaths](#) and costs the economy approximately [NZ\\$7.85 billion each year](#).

Two comprehensive reports, published by the [Law Commission in 2010](#) and the [Ministerial Forum on Advertising and Sponsorship in 2014](#), have recommended a complete overhaul of alcohol marketing regulations. But successive governments have failed to act.

The lack of government action in the face of a broken regulatory system is a major concern, particularly given children's unprecedented exposure to and normalization of advertising of unhealthy products.

Failure of industry self-regulation

In most countries, including New Zealand, marketing for individual unhealthy products is self-regulated by the industry (with the notable exception of tobacco). The industry sets, monitors and enforces their own marketing codes.

Such systems are [hopelessly ineffective](#), particularly at protecting children. Our recent research showed New Zealand children were exposed to an average of 46 ads for unhealthy products every day (27 [junk food](#), 12 [alcohol](#), and seven [gambling ads](#)). Exposure was measured by 168 children wearing automated cameras that captured images every seven seconds every waking hour for four days.

Children were frequently exposed to unhealthy marketing near schools and in supermarkets, and at times were they should be protected under the self-regulatory codes. Sports sponsorship was a key mechanism used by unhealthy product companies, which undermined their own self-regulatory codes and was a major contributor to children's overall exposure.

From marketing to consumption

Of course, adults can consume alcohol, [junk food](#) and gamble at low-risk levels. But there is always potential for misuse of unhealthy products because they are inherently addictive, with proven [links to adverse outcomes](#). For example, New Zealand is the [third most obese nation in the OECD](#), with [poor diets as the leading causal factor](#). These products are a risk to [health](#) and the government has an obligation to ensure citizens' rights to good health.

There is strong [evidence](#) of the [negative health impacts of marketing](#) across a [range of unhealthy products](#). Consequently, marketing is recognized as a [key driver of consumption](#) and contributor to the overall health burden.

How are governments dealing with this? In short, they aren't. One might think that regulating unhealthy products marketing might be fairly complex, but the policy recommendations for dealing with a wide range of products are remarkably similar and straightforward.

For example, there are common recommendations on banning sports sponsorship of unhealthy products. This has the support of some athletes, including AFL star [Easton Wood](#) who said he would take a pay cut to rid the AFL of gambling sponsors.

Why the reluctance on regulating unhealthy products? Companies selling unhealthy products have acquired a critical mass of expertise in challenging meaningful health regulation.

Collaborative industries

[Research](#) has shown how individual unhealthy product companies adopt the same tactics to disrupt, distort and deflect meaningful regulation.

For example, tobacco and alcohol companies have produced public

relation campaigns that stress the importance of individual accountability and education. But how many consumers are aware that drinking a bottle of wine a week has the [same cancer risk](#) as smoking ten cigarettes for women and five for men? Or even how many calories are in their drink? This situation stacks the odds heavily against policymakers and consumers attempting to live healthier lives.

Another problem is that policymakers and government departments often work on different unhealthy products, which fractures the collective effort for better health. For example, alcohol is managed by the ministry of justice, gambling by the ministry of internal affairs and tobacco and diet by the ministry of health.

A solution may lie in the government's recently announced [Public Services Act](#), which will see the creation of interdepartmental executive boards tasked with specific jobs like reducing child poverty or improving mental health. An executive board on unhealthy products could streamline the policymaking process and, most importantly, reduce and prevent the social and health costs of unhealthy products.

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