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Food and drink purchases outside of school across the school day in Scotland: who is purchasing food and drink and where are they buying it from?

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The 2010 Survey of Diet Among Children in Scotland⁽¹⁾ included a module to explore food and drink purchases by children outside of school across the school day: (i) on the way to school or on the way home from school (ii) at breaktime/free periods and (iii) at lunchtimes. Purchases only included food or drink bought by the child and not items bought for them by other people.

For primary school children (7–11 y), all questions were asked as part of an interview, but for secondary school children (12–16 y) the questions were split between an interview and a self-completion questionnaire (SCQ). 564 primary school children and 653 secondary school children completed the module and the data were checked for consistency between the interview and SCQ questions. The analyses only included those with consistent information (see Table).

Sixteen percent of all primary school children and 42% of all secondary school children in the survey reported that they sometimes purchased food or drinks on the way to or from school. Of those children who said that they had access to places selling food (i.e. walked/cycled past places selling food or drink), 49% of primary and 69% of secondary school children sometimes bought food or drink items. There was no difference in the percentage of secondary school children who reported purchasing foods or drinks by sex or by school year, but primary school boys were significantly more likely to make purchases than girls, and older primary school children were more likely to make purchases than younger children. Children from more deprived areas were significantly more likely to purchase food or drink on the way to or from school. This may be because children from more deprived areas had more access to places selling food ($p < 0.001$).

Table. Percentage of children reporting that they sometimes purchased food or drinks

	All	Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation quintile					<i>p</i> -value for association
		5 th (least deprived)	4 th	3 rd	2 nd	1 st (most deprived)	
Primary school							
To/from school (<i>n</i> = 532)	15.5	9.5	12.4	14.2	18.2	23.2	0.025
Secondary school							
To/from school (<i>n</i> = 468)	42.1	36.9	36.9	34.1	41.7	57.4	0.018
Breaktime (<i>n</i> = 594)	18.0	13.5	17.3	20.7	20.7	19.6	0.556
Lunchtime (<i>n</i> = 612)	62.6	52.0	60.5	62.5	63.2	76.0	0.011

Note: only children with consistent information between interview and SCQ were included in the analysis

Sixty three percent of secondary school children purchased food or drink outside of school at lunchtime. The place from which they reported most frequently buying food or drinks at lunchtime was supermarkets, very few purchased food or drinks from burger, chip or ice-cream vans. Confectionery, non-diet soft drinks and sandwiches were items most commonly purchased at lunchtime. The findings of the survey suggest that efforts to improve what children buy at lunchtimes will need to consider the wider food retail environment not just fast food outlets.

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1. Masson LF, Bromley C, Macdiarmid JI *et al.* (2012) Survey of diet among children in Scotland. http://foodbase.org.uk/results.php?f_report_id=777 (accessed 9.10.2012)