

## On-site food provision in early childhood education services in Victoria, Australia

S. Park<sup>1</sup>, M. Zheng<sup>1</sup>, K. Lacy<sup>1</sup>, K. Campbell<sup>1</sup> and P. Love<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition (IPAN), School of Exercise and Nutrition Sciences (SENS), Deakin University, Geelong, Vic., Australia*

Early childhood is a critical stage for growth and development. In Australia, approximately 1.3 million children attend approved early childhood education (ECE), with 50% enrolled in centre-based services for an average of 30-hours, 3-days/week.<sup>(1)</sup> It is recommended that 50–60% of a child's dietary intake be met while attending centre-based services<sup>(2)</sup>; therefore, these services have the potential for wide-reaching impact on the development of healthy dietary behaviours. There is no single data set available in Australia regarding food provision type (offered on-site v. brought from home) for Australian centre-based services. This study aimed to identify Victorian services offering on-site food provision and associations with service characteristics (location, management type, level of social disadvantage and the child enrolment capacity). Data were extracted from the Australian Child Care Finder<sup>(3)</sup> and Australian Children Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA)<sup>(4)</sup> websites for all Victorian centre-based services. Logistic regression was conducted to assess whether services offering on-site meal provision differed by geographic location (metro v. inner/outer regional), service management type (for-profit v. not-for-profit), Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) score (categorized as low, medium and high), and child enrolment capacity (number of children). Data extraction identified 1802 Victorian centre-based services, of which 80.7% were metropolitan centres ( $n = 1440$ ) and 66.0% were private for-profit type ( $n = 1189$ ). Nearly three-quarters of services were in areas of low ( $n = 500$ , 28.6%) or medium ( $n = 756$ , 43.3%) social disadvantage. The mean child enrolment capacity for Victorian centre-based services was 90 children ( $n = 90.1$  SD = 40.4). Of these services, nearly two-thirds ( $n = 1068$ , 59.3%) of centre-based services in Victoria offered on-site food provision, with the majority in metropolitan location ( $n = 877$ , 83.1%), private for-profit type ( $n = 771$ , 72.2%) and in the areas of low ( $n = 295$ , 28.6%) and medium ( $n = 447$ , 43.4%) social disadvantage. The mean child enrolment capacity for services offering on-site food provision was 91 children ( $n = 91.4$ , SD = 40.4). Centres with metropolitan location (OR = 1.33,  $p < 0.05$ ) or for-profit service type (OR = 1.92,  $p < 0.001$ ) were more likely to offer on-site food provision. No associations were found between level of social disadvantage (OR = 0.99,  $p > 0.05$ ) or child enrolment capacity (OR = 1.00,  $p > 0.05$ ). Findings suggest that the majority of Victorian ECE services offer on-site food provision, located in metropolitan locations with private, for-profit, management. The study findings provide valuable insights for the design of future ECE dietary interventions.

### References

1. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2021) Childcare and early childhood education [Internet]. Available from: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/childcare-and-early-childhood-education>
2. Healthy Eating Advisory Service (2014) Menu planning guidelines for long day care [Internet]. Available from: <https://heas.health.vic.gov.au/early-childhood-services/menu-planning/long-day-care/guidelines>
3. Department of Education and Training (2020) Child care finder [Internet]. Available from: <https://www.childcarefinder.gov.au/>
4. Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority (2022) NQF snapshot: Q1 2022. Available from: <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-05/NQF%20Snapshot%20Q1%202022%20FINAL.pdf>