

Study shows public support for laws against weight discrimination

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A new multinational study shows public support for policies and laws against weight discrimination. Credit: UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity Photo

Government policies and laws against weight discrimination have broad public support in four nations where this form of bias is prevalent, according to a new multinational study by the Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity at the University of Connecticut.

The findings of the study, published Dec. 2 in the *Milbank Quarterly*, suggest that a key condition needed to foster policy change – strong [public support](#) – is present in the United States and three other countries surveyed.

"As these countries offer little or no protection for people who experience [weight discrimination](#), we hope that our findings will stimulate policy discourse about remedies to address these inequities on a broader level," says Rebecca Puhl, the study's lead author, professor in UConn's Department of Human Development and Family Studies, and deputy director of the Rudd Center.

Public support was strongest for workplace laws that would prohibit employers from discriminating against people based on their weight status, the study showed. Women and individuals with higher weight expressed the greatest support.

The study, which surveyed 2,866 adults in the United States, Canada, Iceland, and Australia, is the first to examine public support in multiple countries for government legal measures to address weight discrimination.

Specific findings include:

- At least two-thirds of adults across the four countries expressed support for laws that would make it illegal for employers to refuse to hire, assign lower wages, deny promotions, or terminate qualified employees because of body weight.
- Majorities of respondents in the U.S., Canada, and Australia expressed support for adding anti-weight discrimination measures to existing human rights laws.
- Proposed laws that received the least support were those that would consider obesity as a disability and extend disability protections to individuals with obesity.

"Weight discrimination is a social injustice and a public health issue that remains widespread," Puhl says. "Understanding the public mindset about this problem is critical to help identify what kinds of policy actions should be prioritized."

The study findings have practical implications for policy makers who may be debating legal measures to address weight discrimination in the U.S. Massachusetts lawmakers are currently considering a proposed state law that would prohibit weight-based discrimination. If adopted, Massachusetts would become the second state to adopt such a measure, following Michigan, which enacted its law in 1977.

The four-nation study was conducted between February and July 2013. The countries were selected for their comparable rates of adult overweight and obesity, as well as similarities in sociocultural values of thinness, parliamentary or congressional democracies, and other societal factors.

More information: REBECCA M. PUHL et al. Potential Policies and Laws to Prohibit Weight Discrimination: Public Views from 4

Countries, *Milbank Quarterly* (2015). DOI: [10.1111/1468-0009.12162](https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0009.12162)

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