

Australians with obesity unfairly blamed amid 'lazy' stigma

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Simplistic stereotypes of Australians living with obesity blame the individual and fail to consider the complex causes, according to a blueprint that seeks to overhaul the way the nation deals with obesity.

The new paper, published today in *Public Health Research & Practice*, sets out a pathway for Australia's public health system to address the injustice faced by people living with obesity in schools, workplaces, in healthcare and their [personal lives](#), as well as on social media.

Lead author Dr. Blake Lawrence, from the Curtin School of Population Health, said people were constantly bombarded with messages that our health is tied to our weight, with slim considered healthy and people with higher weight deemed unhealthy.

"People living with obesity are dehumanized, stereotyped as lazy or gluttonous and the subjects of ridicule when we now understand that long-term weight change is not as simple as just adopting a healthier diet or doing more physical activity," Dr. Lawrence said.

"The simplistic misconception that obesity is caused solely by factors within a person's control has the unintended consequence of exacerbating their [health issues](#) by lowering their motivation to exercise, increasing their chances of binge eating and forcing them to avoid healthcare altogether due to weight stigma."

"This limited public health approach ignores the genetic, psychological, environmental, economic and social causes of obesity and overlooks the changed biology of people living with obesity."

Co-author and NHMRC Early Career Fellow Dr. Briony Hill, from Monash University's School of Public Health and Preventive Medicine, said the need to address personal biases against those living in larger bodies was a whole of society issue.

"Addressing personal biases against people living in larger bodies, whether known or unknown, is the collective responsibility of society and not just limited to those providing healthcare," Dr. Hill said.

"Our friends, family, colleagues and patients deserve respect, regardless of body size."

Dr. Lawrence said there was an urgent need to address weight stigma within [public health policies](#), among public health researchers and across media and social media portrayals.

"We are constantly shown a skewed portrayal of weight and health through fad diets, influencers, [social media](#) and the perception that being slim is the only indicator of health," Dr. Lawrence said.

"This perpetuates weight stigma and misleads people living with obesity to believe they cannot benefit from specialized and non-stigmatizing medical support to improve their health."

"We are calling on Australia's leading public health authorities to take the lead by committing to reducing weight stigma across all sectors of society and challenging the conventional emphasis on personal responsibility. Weight stigma is a blight on public health practice and policy. Although there will be challenges, it is time for serious and concerted action to address this insidious social injustice issue."

The research recommended public health researchers engage with people living with obesity, public health practitioners promote weight-inclusive policies and new [public health](#) campaigns to help change the public perception of [obesity](#) and [weight stigma](#).

More information: Blake Lawrence et al, Weight stigma in Australia: a public health call to action, *Public Health Research & Practice* (2022). [DOI: 10.17061/phrp3232224](https://doi.org/10.17061/phrp3232224)

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