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Study Shows Self-Directed Weight Stigma is Prevalent in U.S. Adults

Hartford, Conn. – Negative stereotypes and biases against people with obesity are widespread and this weight stigma can be harmful for physical and emotional health.

Distinct from experiencing weight stigma, many individuals who are targets of bias also internalize the stigma directed towards them, blaming themselves for the stigma and unfair treatment they experience because of their weight. Internalized weight bias has been linked to concerning health consequences, but little is known about the prevalence of this self-directed stigma – until now.

A new study by the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at the University of Connecticut shows that internalized weight bias is prevalent among U.S. women and men, with high levels of internalized weight stigma in approximately 1 in 5 adults in the general population and as many as 52 percent of adults with obesity.

“Our findings indicate that internalized weight bias is common in the general population, and present among individuals across a range of body weights. Adults with high levels of weight bias internalization are more likely to be white, have a higher body-mass index, lower education and income, and be actively trying to lose weight,” said Rebecca Puhl, Deputy Director of the UConn Rudd Center, Professor of Human Development and Family Studies at the University of Connecticut, and the study’s lead author. “Furthermore, people with high levels of internalization had experienced considerable weight stigma in their lives, especially being teased or treated unfairly by others because of their weight,” Puhl said.

The study, published today in the journal *Obesity*, involves a comprehensive analysis and comparison of internalized weight bias across three groups of American adults: 2,529 adults from a diverse national survey panel; 515 adults from a national online data collection service; and 456 members of the Obesity Action Coalition who have struggled with their weight.

The 3,504 participants completed online surveys between July 2015 and October 2016. In all three samples, participants answered questions about their demographic characteristics, weight status and dieting behavior, and history of experiencing weight stigma. They also answered questions about internalizing weight bias - the extent to which

they blame themselves for stigma, apply negative weight-based stereotypes to themselves, and negatively judge themselves due to their body weight.

The key findings of the study include:

- At least 44 percent of adults across all three samples reported average levels of weight bias internalization.
- Among adults with the highest levels of weight bias internalization, 72 percent were women, supporting other studies showing an increased vulnerability among women compared to men.
- 84% of adults with a high level of weight bias internalization reported a history of experiencing weight stigma.
- Blacks and Latinos had lower levels of weight bias internalization compared to Whites.
- Among adults with a high level of weight bias internalization, 86 percent were currently trying to lose weight, 78 percent reported being teased, and 58 percent reported being treated unfairly because of their weight.
- In contrast, much smaller percentages of people with low internalization were currently trying to lose weight (21 percent), or reported being teased (17 percent) or treated unfairly (7 percent) because of their weight.

“This study provides an initial foundation to better understand the characteristics of individuals likely to internalize weight bias,” Puhl said. “With so many people vulnerable to self-stigma, there is a clear need to implement strategies to support individuals who not only experience weight stigma but also internalize these negative experiences.”

Support for this research was provided by the Rudd Foundation.

Study co-authors include Mary Himmelstein at the UConn Rudd Center and Diane Quinn, Professor in the Department of Psychological Sciences at UConn.

About the UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity

The Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity at the University of Connecticut is a distinguished multi-disciplinary policy research center dedicated to promoting solutions to childhood obesity, poor diet, and weight bias through research and policy. The Rudd Center is a leader in building broad-based consensus to change diet and activity patterns by conducting research and educating policy makers and the public. For more information, visit www.uconnruddcenter.org or follow us on Twitter at www.twitter.com/uconnruddcenter or on Facebook at www.facebook.com/uconnruddcenter.