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International Support for Policies to Address Weight-Based Bullying & Discrimination

It remains legal to discriminate against people because of their body weight almost everywhere in the world. In the United States, there are no federal laws prohibiting weight discrimination, despite as many as 40% of American adults reporting they have been stigmatized or discriminated against because of their body weight. At the state level, Michigan is the only state that has passed a law making weight discrimination illegal. Outside of the US, weight stigma has been documented in many countries, but anti-discrimination policies that address this problem are absent.

New multinational research, however, suggests there is considerable public support to address this problem across different countries. According to a new study by researchers at the UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy and Health, support is especially strong for improving anti-bullying policies in schools to better protect youth from being bullied about their weight, and for passing laws that would make it illegal for employers to discriminate against employees because of their weight.

“Public support is a key catalyst for policy change and motivation for policymakers to take on legislation, but we know very little about public support for laws that could address weight discrimination and bullying outside of the US,” says Rebecca Puhl, lead author of the study and deputy director at the Rudd Center. “Across the six countries we studied, people view policy as an appropriate remedy to address societal weight-based mistreatment.”

To assess and compare international support for laws to prohibit weight discrimination and weight-based bullying, researchers partnered with WW International, Inc., the world’s leading commercial weight management program, to survey 13,996 of its members residing in Australia, Canada, France, Germany, the UK, and the US. Participants completed online surveys asking them how much they would support various laws and policies to address weight discrimination in adults and weight bullying in youth.

Key survey findings include:

- Policy support to address weight bullying in youth was consistently very high in each of the six countries. Specifically, 90-94% of participants in each country supported

strengthening school-based anti-bullying policies, and 83-95% supported improving anti-bullying laws to better protect youth from weight-based bullying.

- Across the six countries, policy support was highest for laws that would make it illegal for employers to refuse to hire people because of their weight (79% of participants).
- There was moderate support for broader workplace discrimination laws to prohibit weight discrimination in employment (61%) and for laws that would add body weight as a protected category in existing human rights legislation (57%).
- Support for policies was consistently lower in Germany and consistently higher in Canada and France. Country differences were particularly pronounced for support to extend disability protections to people with obesity (67% in France, 34% in Germany).

“Weight-based stigma is unjust, inhumane and unhelpful, and this study supports what we’ve witnessed firsthand - that there is a need for specific policies to address weight stigma globally,” says Gary Foster, PhD, co-author of the study and chief scientific officer at WW. “Such policies will help shift behaviors and social perspectives about body weight and in turn combat the many well demonstrated negative impacts of weight discrimination.”

Study findings, published in the journal *Obesity* and presented today at the 39th Annual Meeting of The Obesity Society, offer important insights about public support for policy makers who are interested in pursuing anti-discrimination legislation. Massachusetts will soon be considering legislation that, if passed, would make it the second state in the US to prohibit weight discrimination.

“The presence of policy support across countries in our study highlights the potential for collective policy action and can foster multinational policy discourse,” says Puhl. “Although legal systems vary from country to country, our findings offer a starting point for cross-country consensus building among policy makers and the sharing of knowledge and experience in anti-discrimination initiatives, which are typically siloed (or absent) within individual countries.”

Study authors also note that further policy research will be important to establish feasibility of viable policies and identify the most effective legal pathways for enacting legislation.

Study co-authors include Leah Lessard (University of Connecticut), Rebecca Pearl (University of Florida), Allison Grupski (WW), and Gary Foster (WW).

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