The Unequal Burden of Obesity

People struggling with obesity face numerous social and health challenges, but a new study suggests these difficulties may be less severe in areas where obesity is more common. The study is published in Psychological Science.

The researchers analysed data from over 3.4 million people in the U.S. and the U.K. They found that the negative medical and psychological effects of obesity tend to be less pronounced when individuals feel less conspicuous due to the high prevalence of obesity in their region. This suggests that some of the adverse consequences of obesity are socially constructed and can be reduced.

Obesity poses significant personal and societal costs. The World Health Organization reports that global obesity rates nearly tripled between 1975 and 2021, and in the U.S. alone, obesity-related healthcare expenses total about $147 billion annually. Individuals with obesity are more likely to face unemployment, have fewer friends, and experience poorer physical and mental health compared to those without obesity. They also often encounter prejudice and discrimination.

However, obesity rates vary significantly by region. In some parts of the U.S., about half the population lives with obesity, while in other regions, obesity rates are as low as 5%. Study researchers hypothesised that the negative effects of obesity differ depending on how common it is in a given area.

The researchers analysed three large datasets from thousands of U.S. counties and hundreds of U.K. districts, examining participants' BMI, residence, and social, health, and economic outcomes. A BMI of 30 or higher defined obesity, with a healthy BMI typically ranging from 18.5 to 24.9.

In the U.S., obesity rates were higher than average in the Midwest, South, and parts of the East Coast, and lower in New England, Florida, and the Western states. In the U.K., obesity rates were highest in Central and Northern regions, particularly Southern Wales, and lowest in the southern part of the country, including London.

The study revealed that participants with obesity generally experienced more relationship, economic, and health disadvantages than those without obesity. However, individuals living in low-obesity regions were more likely to be unemployed and report poor health than those in high-obesity areas.

The researchers also analysed U.S. data on weight bias and found that areas with higher obesity rates tended to have lower levels of weight bias. This might explain why people with obesity in those regions were less likely to be single and reported better health compared to those in areas with more weight discrimination.

Despite these regional differences, the researchers concluded that public health efforts should continue to prioritise reducing obesity due to its health risks.

Source: Psychological Science
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