

---

## Demand Side of Obesity: Socioeconomic and Racial Groups<sup>1</sup>

Obesity is increasingly recognized as a public health problem in the United States and many other countries. Most of the research and public policy recommendations focus on the “supply” side of obesity: the increasing availability of cheap, unhealthy food and the decline of exercise. While this is certainly an important part of the phenomenon, at least in the U.S., it is not the whole picture. It is also important to note that changes in obesity prevalence are not the same across socioeconomic cohorts and racial groups. Furthermore, the variance in trends suggests that some cohorts may be much more receptive and responsive to certain public health messages than others. Utilizing well being surveys, it is possible to better explain the variance in obesity incidence across socioeconomic cohorts in America and Russia with a focus on the role of social norms.

### Research

In the U.S., obesity is largely a poor people’s problem with it being more the norm to be obese if one is poor than if one is rich. Interestingly, while the higher weight norm does not seem to mitigate the well being costs for the poor in general, it does seem to do so across races, with poor whites having higher obesity-related well being costs than blacks or Hispanics. Furthermore, the well beings costs stem from stigma rather than from health related causes, as they are likely to be higher for those in higher status professions.

In Russia, being overweight seems to be a sign of prosperity rather than a sign of poor health. There does not appear to be any stigma effect; in fact, obesity in Russia is correlated with a number of positive traits, such as happiness and higher perceived status. Obesity is most prevalent at the highest and lowest rungs of the economic ladder; respectively, professionals and other high status occupations, and

**“In the U.S., obesity is largely a poor people’s problem with it being more the norm to be obese if one is poor than if one is rich.”**

---

<sup>1</sup> This Fact Sheet is adapted from Carol Graham and Andrew Felton, “Variance in Obesity across Based Explanation Using Happiness Surveys.” Center on Social and Economic Dynamics Work Available at <http://www.brookings.edu/dynamics.aspx>

farmers. Norms are not the same across gender lines in Russia. Obese men are more likely to report having higher status, to have a higher paying job, and to be happier. Obese women, meanwhile, are also more likely to report higher status and to be wealthier than average, but are not, however, happier. One explanation for this discrepancy in happiness is that obese men are not happy because they are obese, but rather that obesity has accompanied their new prosperity, which is what makes them happier. Obese women, who are disproportionately unemployed and possibly married to the wealthy obese men, have shared in the benefits of prosperity, but perhaps not in the satisfaction, or happiness that came from attaining it.

## Conclusion

The extent of obesity in both countries, and the very clear health consequences and costs associated with it, calls for better public health responses. In the U.S., different socioeconomic and racial cohorts are most likely responding to public health messages differently. Those in higher status professions are more likely to be aware of and responsive to public health messages about obesity than are the obese respondents at the lower end of the economic scale. In Russia, the lack of stigma associated with obesity suggests that there is little awareness of its negative health consequences. It seems that there is a great deal of room for more general messages about the dangers of obesity, although perhaps directed more towards the wealthy than towards the poor.

These findings have implications for public health policy in the U.S. and possibly in Russia. Current policy focuses too much on the narrow technical causes of obesity and does not take into account changing norms and expectations across socioeconomic cohorts, cultures, and countries.

**“There does not appear to be any stigma effect; in fact, obesity in Russia is correlated with a number of positive traits, such as higher happiness and perceived status.”**