



## Sugar-Sweetened Beverages Fact Sheet: Avoiding Weight Bias in Portrayals of Overweight and Obese People in Media Campaigns

*As coalitions plan their media campaigns to pass sugar-sweetened beverage (SSB) taxes, it is important to avoid stigmatizing the people that taxes are trying to help. Negative and disparaging images of obese persons in the media contribute to the discrimination overweight and obese people experience in everyday life, the workplace, educational institutions, health care facilities and other settings. This fact sheet describes weight bias, and offers guidelines for avoiding it in SSB media campaigns.*

### What is weight bias?

Weight bias refers to negative attitudes and stereotypes toward individuals who are overweight and obese, and often leads to unfair treatment and discrimination. Weight bias has both immediate and long-term consequences. It leads to adverse emotional and physical health outcomes, and results in discrimination in employment, barriers in education, biased attitudes from health care professionals, and stigma in interpersonal relationships. Weight bias can impair emotional well-being, leading to depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. It can also lead to unhealthy behaviors that exacerbate obesity, as those who are stigmatized often resort to unhealthy eating patterns and avoidance of physical activity, and are more likely to drop out of weight loss treatment programs.

### Weight bias in the media

Studies show that the media is an especially pervasive source of stigmatization against obese people. A recent Rudd Center study found that 72% of photographs paired with online news stories about obesity were stigmatizing toward obese individuals.<sup>1</sup> News photographs tend to portray obese individuals from unflattering angles (e.g. with only their abdomens or lower bodies shown) and engaging in stereotypical behaviors (e.g. eating unhealthy foods). These images are degrading and dehumanizing.

### Avoiding weight bias in SSB media campaigns

The Rudd Center has created an **image gallery** with a collection of professional photographs that portray obese individuals in positive and non-stereotypical ways. The images may be used free of charge and can be found on the Rudd Center website, [www.yaleruddcenter.org/press/image\\_gallery\\_intro.aspx](http://www.yaleruddcenter.org/press/image_gallery_intro.aspx). **We encourage state and local SSB consumption-reduction and tax campaigns to follow these guidelines and use the images from the gallery in media campaigns.**

In addition, the following set of **guidelines** will help ensure that all persons, regardless of their body weight, are represented equitably and accurately, and that obesity prevention campaigns of all sorts do not use stigmatizing and pejorative portrayals of overweight and obese persons in order to communicate their messages. The guidelines apply to a broad range of media including print, broadcast journalism, film, internet, and advertising. Below is a partial list; for the complete guidelines, refer to our website, [www.yaleruddcenter.org](http://www.yaleruddcenter.org).

## **Guidelines**

### ***Respect diversity and avoid stereotypes***

- Present the diversity of overweight and obese people: ages, varied appearances and ethnic backgrounds.
- Portray overweight and obese people as individuals who have professions, expertise, authority, and skills in a range of activities and settings.

### ***Use appropriate language and terminology***

- Consider whether the descriptors used for body weight could be offensive to obese persons, and how this language will be interpreted by the intended audience.
- Use appropriate, non-biased descriptive terms for body weight. Examples include referring to obesity or body weight scientifically with Body Mass Index (BMI) descriptors, and using terms like “weight” rather than “weight problem,” “morbidly obese,” or other similar descriptors. While using the words “fat” or “fatness” might be encouraged by individuals who identify with the Fat Acceptance movement, these terms can be offensive to others.
- Avoid using language which implies moral judgments of, or character flaws in, this population.

### ***Use appropriate pictures and images of obese persons (See Rudd Center Image Gallery)***

- Use appropriate photographs, videos, and images that portray obese persons
  - engaging in diverse activities, roles, careers, and lifestyle behaviors
  - in appropriate-fitting clothing and with a well-kept appearance.
- Avoid using pejorative pictures that
  - depict obese persons engaging in stereotypical behaviors (e.g., eating junk food, engaging in sedentary behavior)
  - depict obese persons in scantily clad clothing or looking disheveled
  - place unnecessary emphasis on excess weight or that isolate obese persons’ body parts (e.g. abdomens or buttocks). This includes pictures of obese individuals from the neck down, or with face blocked for anonymity.

### ***When selecting an image, video, or photograph of an obese person, consider the following questions:***

- Does the image imply or reinforce negative stereotypes?
- Does the image portray an obese person in a respectful, dignified manner?
- Can an alternative photo or image convey the same message and eliminate possible bias?
- Who might be offended, and why?
- What are the possible consequences of publishing the image?

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<sup>i</sup> Heuer, C. et al. (in press). Stigmatizing obese persons on the Web: A visual content analysis of images in online reports of obesity. *Journal of Health Communication*.