

## Study examines wage disparity among obese workers in China

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New research that analyzes economic disparity among obese Chinese adults shows that there is no wage disparity for obese women in China, but there is pay inequality among obese men.

Women in China make less on average than men, but the study results showed no disparity in wages because of body weight. Results of the study for men showed increasing wage disparities by occupation when gaining weight.

The study, "The Obesity Pay Gap: Gender, Body Size, and Wage Inequalities: A Longitudinal Study of Chinese Adults, 1991-2009," which will be presented at the 109th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, shows that obese manual laborers especially earn less money in China.

For example, results showed that overweight professional workers made from 18.5 to 41.5 percent more than overweight manual laborers. The study was conducted by Chih-Chien Huang, who graduated recently from Arizona State University with a doctoral degree in sociology, and professor Jennie Kronenfeld of ASU's T. Denny Sanford School of Social and Family Dynamics.

"Traditional perspectives that hold that female plumpness is a symbol of fertility and beauty are giving way to Western ideals, such as fashion concepts, that idealize thin body types as the country becomes increasingly urbanized. China has also been undergoing rapidly rising

[obesity rates](#) since the late 1980s," Huang said. Changing societal relationships also influence China as the country shifts to a market-based economy that fosters interpersonal relationships with customers and colleagues as privately-owned industries increase, according to the paper.

Researchers had hypothesized that wage penalties would be found for women, in part because of changing ideals and workplace structure. However, they found that Chinese male manual laborers who were obese experienced wage disparities. Obese workers who were not in manual jobs did not have a pay penalty, due to the belief among many Chinese men that corpulence is considered a symbol of status and wealth, according to the researchers.

"Past studies on obesity's effects on wages suggest that there is negative association between body size and economic well-being in women, but past research on economic disparity among men has been mixed with some researchers stating that there is no association among men and body weight. Others suggest that wages may differ according to the jobs that are performed," Kronenfeld said.

Data for the study was taken from the China Health and Nutrition Survey, an ongoing longitudinal project that began in 1989 that includes data on health, nutrition and socioeconomic indicators. A subsample used for the study included 6,901 men and 5,103 women between the ages of 18-55 who were surveyed from 1991 to 2009.

Occupations were grouped by interactions in the workplace for the study in these categories: professional employees who have a higher level of interaction with colleagues, such as doctors, teachers and actors; service workers who also have many interactions with colleagues or customers, such as office staffers, housekeepers, cooks and police officers; and manual laborers who require minimal interaction, such as farmers, hunters and laborers.

Manual laborers fared the worst in the study regarding wage disparity, with obese professional workers making 18.5 to 41.5 percent more than manual laborers, overweight professionals earning 9.3 to 13.9 percent more and overweight service workers making 9.3 to 11.8 percent more than manual laborers.

Because obesity affects quality of life, sick leave and workplace productivity, there is an urgent need to understand the underlying mechanism by which social factors contribute to rapidly growing obesity rates. Once causes are understood, effective intervention strategies can be developed to lessen the high economic burden of obesity in the developing world, according to the researchers.

Provided by Arizona State University

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