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**Mannheim, 7 October 2024**

## Press Release

### **The Health and Social Consequences of Obesity Depend on Where You Live**

**Obesity can have serious social, socio-economic and health consequences. A new study shows that the problems are less serious for people who live in areas where obesity is common.**

A research team led by Dr. Jana Berkessel from the Mannheim Centre for European Social Research (MZES) at the University of Mannheim investigated the influence of the regional and cultural context on the consequences of obesity. The researchers collected archival data from more than 3.4 million people from the US and the UK. The authors of the study found out that the negative consequences for those affected are less severe in regions with high obesity rates which could partly be attributed to less stigmatization. The results of the study were published in the US journal *Psychological Science* this week.

Previous research has shown that obese people are more likely to be unemployed, have fewer friends, and have poorer physical and mental health. They also experience prejudice and discrimination. "We asked ourselves whether these disadvantages are more pronounced in some cultural contexts than in others," says Berkessel. Their study shows that the consequences of obesity depend on where people live: In regions with low obesity rates, those affected are more likely to be unemployed compared to those living in areas with high obesity rates. Their health is also less stable.

"It is quite easily imaginable that persons with obesity in regions with low obesity rates stick out much more, and therefore will have very different social experiences on an everyday basis," explains Berkessel. Her research focuses on the effects of social contexts on our well-being. "Our results suggest that at least some of the negative consequences of obesity appear to be socially constructed and can therefore be reduced," she summarizes.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the incidence of obesity has almost tripled worldwide between 1975 and 2021. In the US alone, the health costs caused by obesity amount to around 147 billion dollars a year. However, obesity rates vary greatly between countries and regions: In some parts of the US, more than 50 percent of the population lives with obesity, while in other regions the obesity rate is five percent.

For their study, the researchers examined three large data sets of people living in the US and the UK. Those data included information on participants' weight, height, and area of residence, as well as social, health, and economic outcomes. Obesity rates in the US were particularly high in the Midwest, the South, and along parts of the East Coast, and below average in New England, Florida, and the Western states like California. In the UK, the Central and Northern parts of the country were particularly affected. The lowest rates were found in the nation's southern region, including London.

The research team also analyzed the participants' attitudes towards weight. They found that obesity bias was the lowest in areas with high obesity rates. This could explain why people with obesity living in these areas are less likely to be single and report better health than comparable people in regions with low obesity rates.

The co-authors of the publication are Professor Dr. Jochen E. Gebauer from the University of Mannheim, Professor Dr. Tobias Ebert from the University of St. Gallen, and Professor Dr. Peter J. Rentfrow from the University of Cambridge.

*On the Unequal Burden of Obesity: Obesity's Adverse Consequences are Contingent on Regional Obesity Prevalence.* <https://doi.org/10.1177/09567976241265037>.

You can find an expert video on the study on YouTube [here](#).

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