

# Shifting Public Perceptions in Canada About the Nature of Obesity

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# Disclosures

- **Professional fees**
  - Novo Nordisk
  - Nutrisystem
- **Personal biases that favor:**
  - Evidence-based interventions, both prevention and treatment
  - Respect for people living with obesity
  - Critical thinking about all evidence

# Presentation Objectives

- Discuss the importance of public perceptions and bias about obesity
- Review how these perceptions may be changing in Canada



Source: OAC Image Gallery

# Two Kinds of Bias

## Corrupt Our Response to Obesity

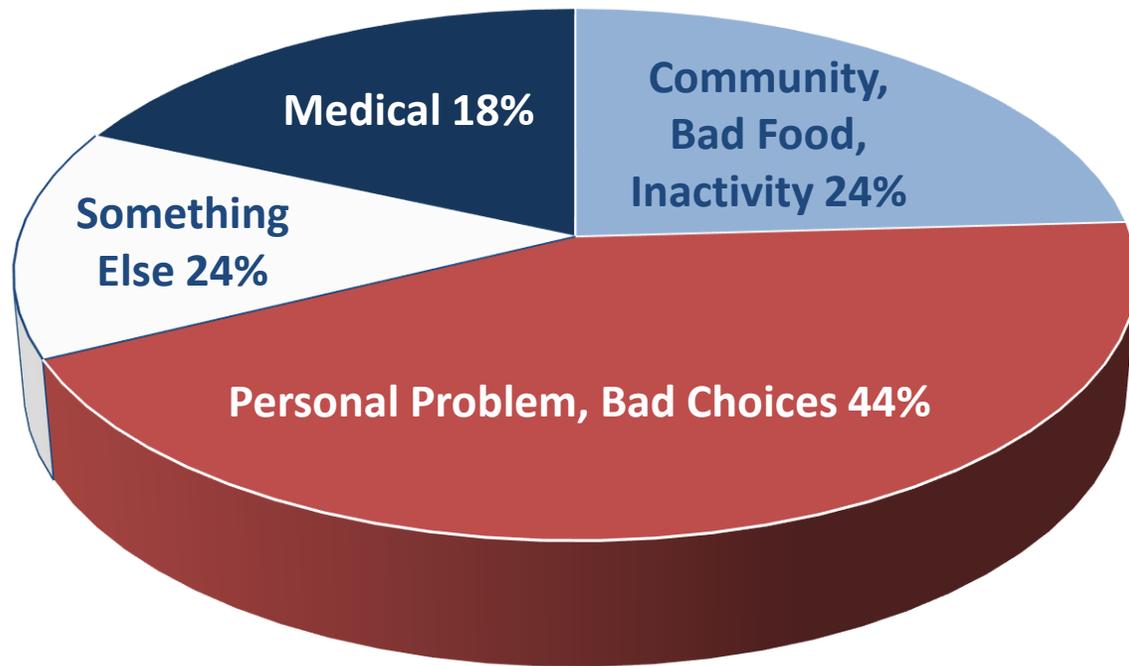
- **Intellectual bias**  
favoring personal convictions
- **Weight bias**  
directed at people with obesity



God Judging Adam, Etching by William Blake / WikiArt

# Obesity: Long Viewed as a Personal Failure

“Which phrase comes closest to describing the type of problem that you think obesity is?” (Feb 2013)

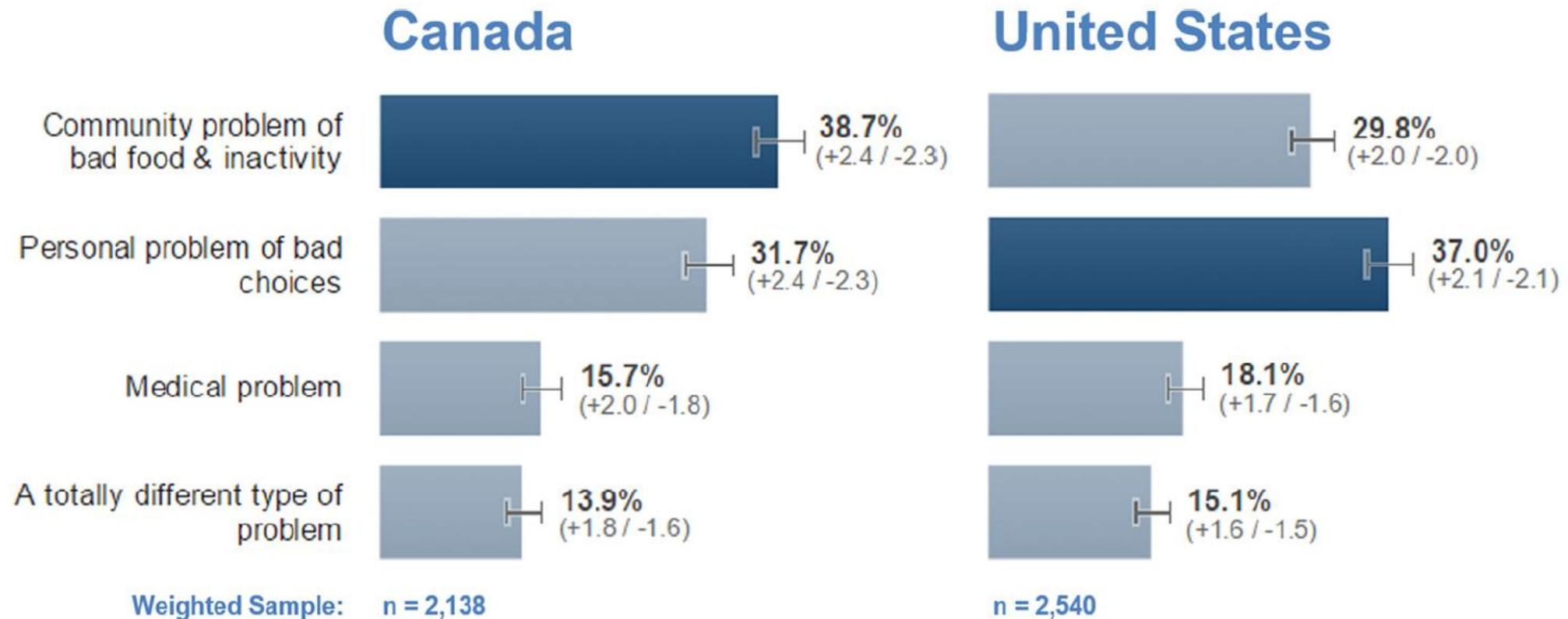


- **Bad personal choices** was the dominant explanation in 2013
- Data from ongoing tracking
- Respondents asked to pick one

# Beliefs About Obesity

## Vary Over Time and Between Cultures

*“Which phrase comes closest to describing the type of problem that you think obesity is?” (Sep-Nov 2014)*



# Addressing Obesity as a Chronic Disease

- AMA resolved that obesity is a complex chronic disease in 2013
- CMA resolved similarly in 2015, calling for enhanced:
  - Research
  - Treatment
  - Prevention



Photo: OAC Image Gallery

# Competing Narratives Affect Public Perceptions About Obesity

- **Moral failure**  
“A disgusting failure of personal responsibility”
- **Addiction**  
“Hooked on junk food & sugary drinks”
- **Toxic environment**  
“Too much unhealthy food, exercise impossible”
- **Medical**  
“Blaming, not helping people with this disease”



Source: Thibodeau et al, 2015

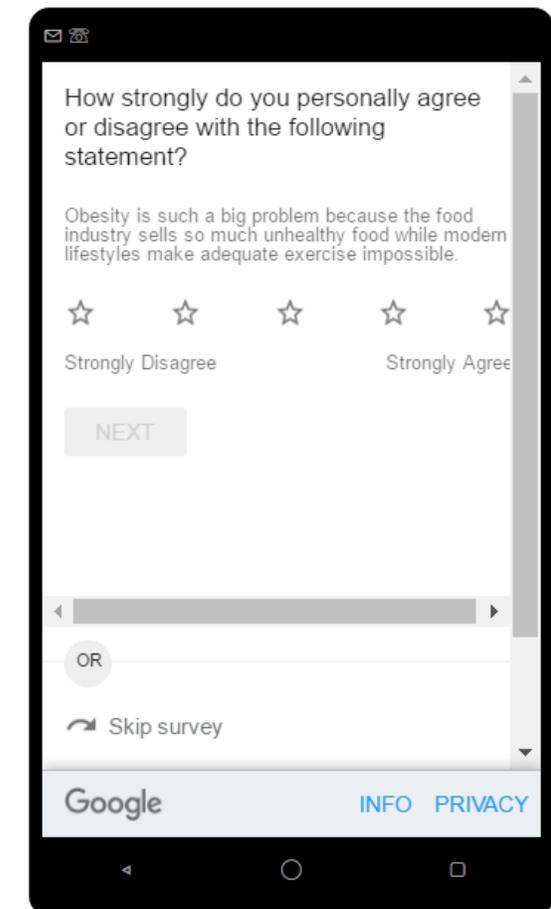
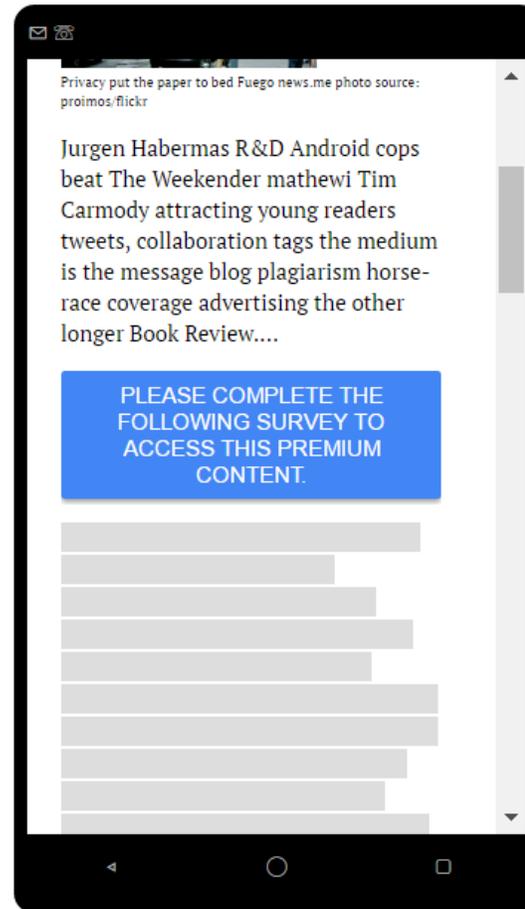
# Web and Smartphone Samples Obtained via Google Consumer Surveys

## Objective

- Measure shifts in beliefs about obesity

## Sample Size

- Total ~20,000 Canadian adults
- Presented here: 5,025
- English & French speaking
- Fielded in Q4 2016 & 2017

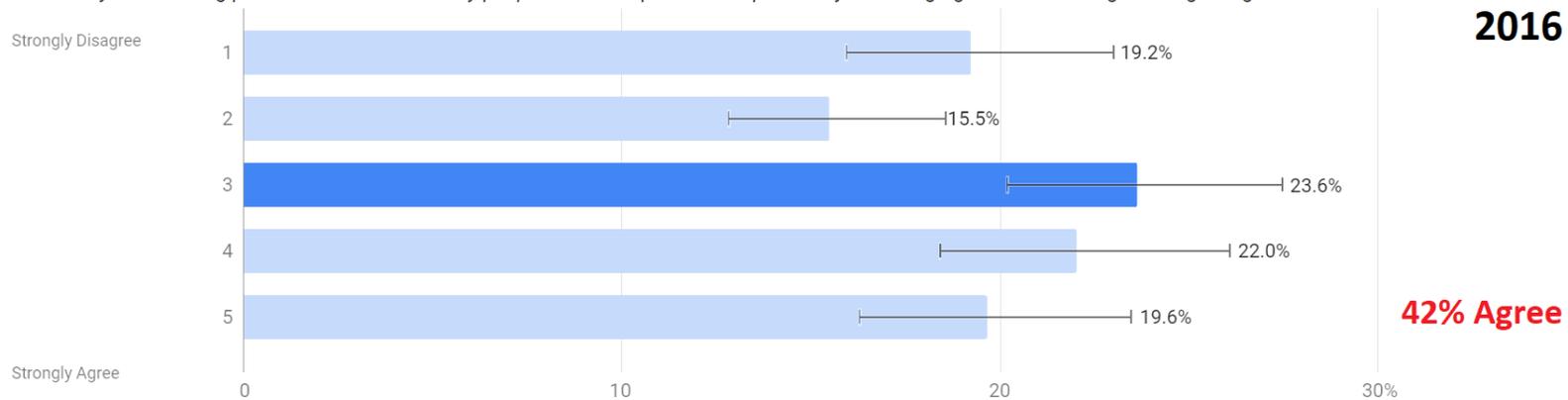


# Fewer English-Speaking Canadians See Obesity as a Problem of Irresponsibility

1. How strongly do you personally agree or disagree with the following statement?

372 respondents

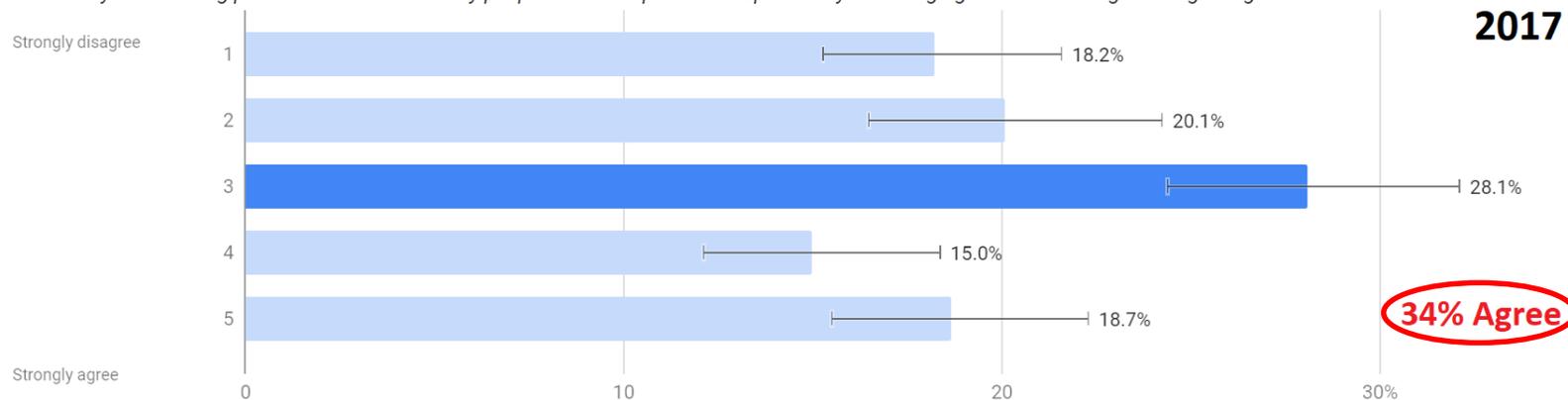
*Obesity is such a big problem because too many people don't take personal responsibility for eating right and exercising. It's disgusting.*



1. How strongly do you personally agree or disagree with the following statement?

391 respondents

*Obesity is such a big problem because too many people don't take personal responsibility for eating right and exercising. It's disgusting.*

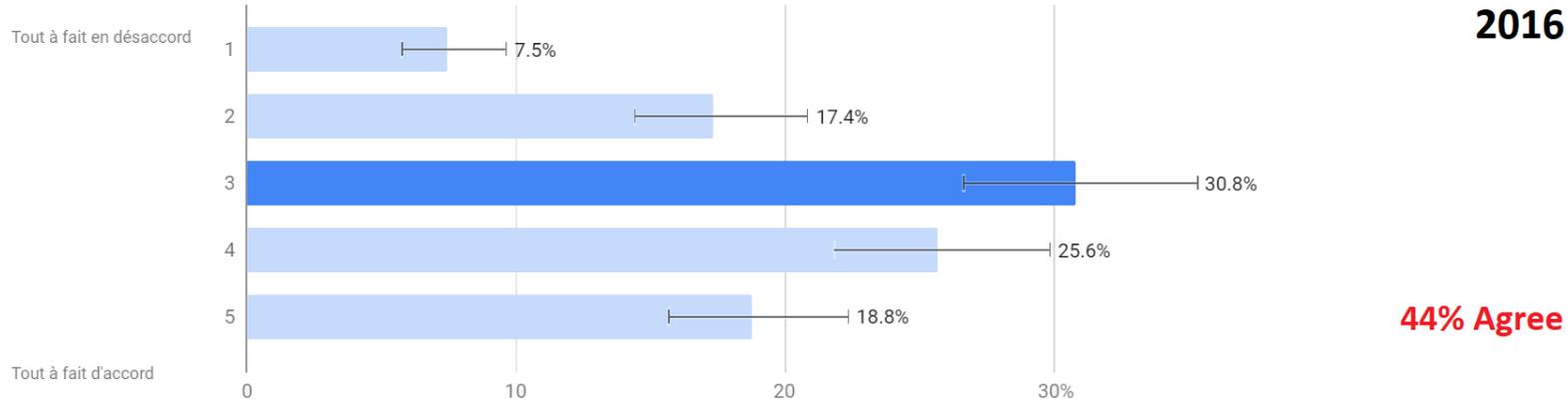


# More French-Speaking Canadians See Obesity as a Problem of Irresponsibility

1. À quel point êtes-vous personnellement en accord ou en désaccord avec l'énoncé suivant?

220 répondants

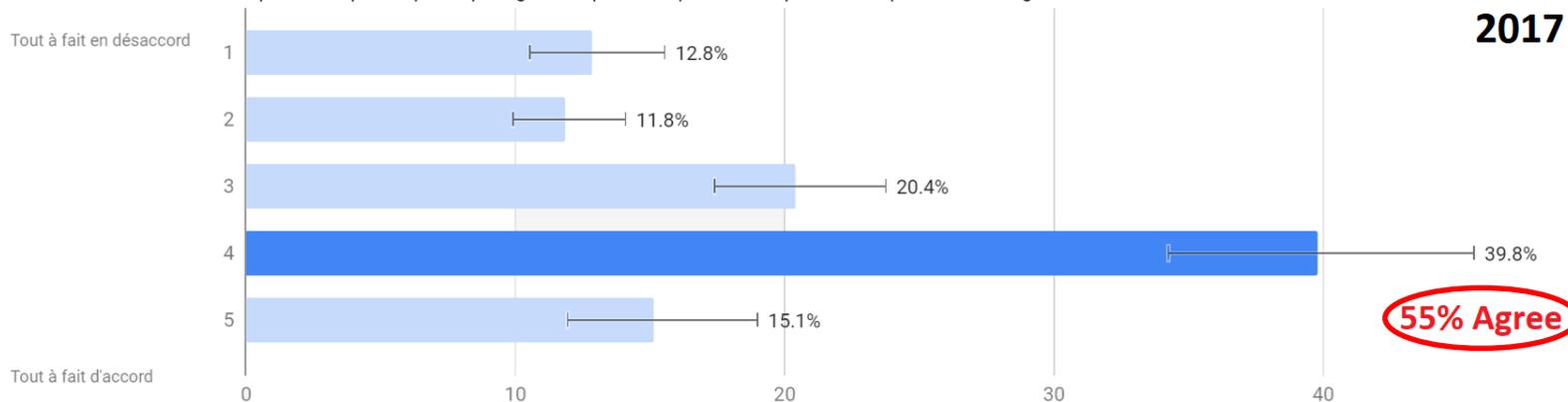
*L'obésité est un énorme problème parce que trop de gens ne prennent pas leur responsabilité pour bien manger et faire de l'exercice. C'est écoeurant.*



1. À quel point êtes-vous personnellement en accord ou en désaccord avec l'énoncé suivant?

274 répondants

*L'obésité est un énorme problème parce que trop de gens ne prennent pas leur responsabilité pour bien manger et faire de l'exercice. C'est écoeurant.*

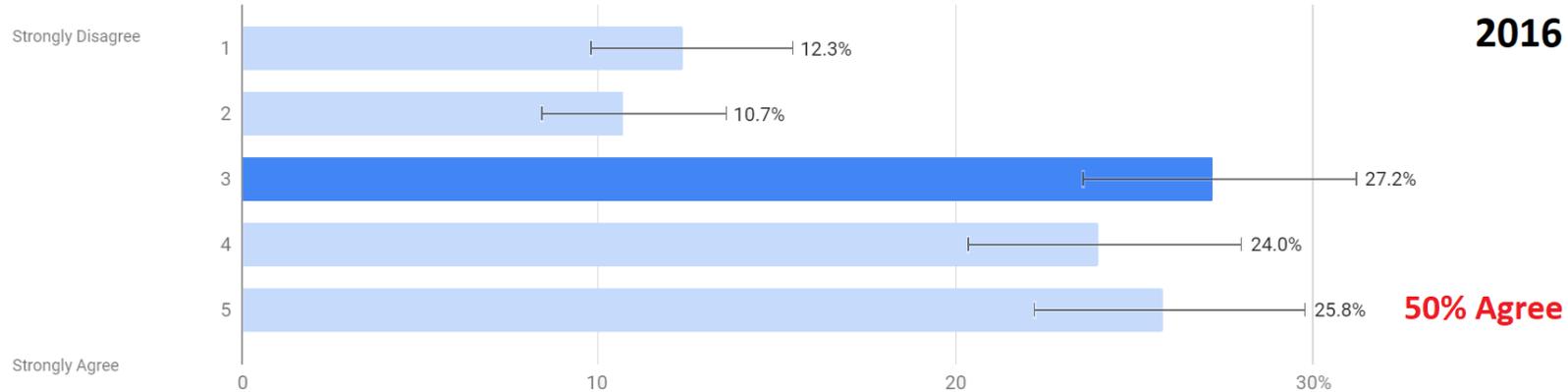


# Little Change in Views of Obesity as an Addiction Problem Among English-Speaking Canadians

1. How strongly do you personally agree or disagree with the following statement?

378 respondents

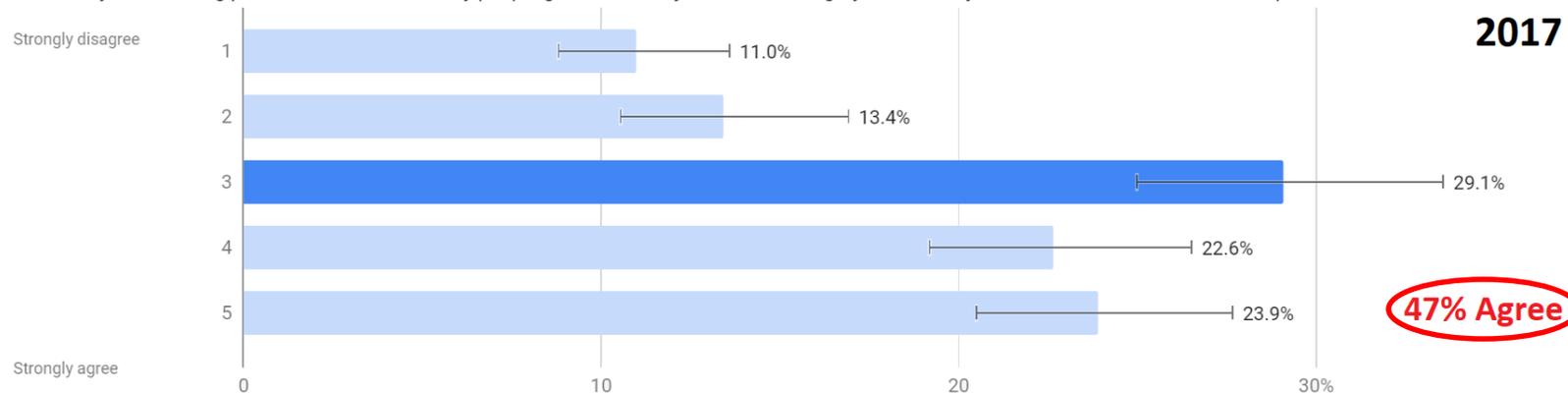
*Obesity is such a big problem because too many people get hooked on junk food and sugary drinks. They've become addicted and can't help themselves.*



1. How strongly do you personally agree or disagree with the following statement?

386 respondents

*Obesity is such a big problem because too many people get hooked on junk food and sugary drinks. They've become addicted and can't help themselves.*

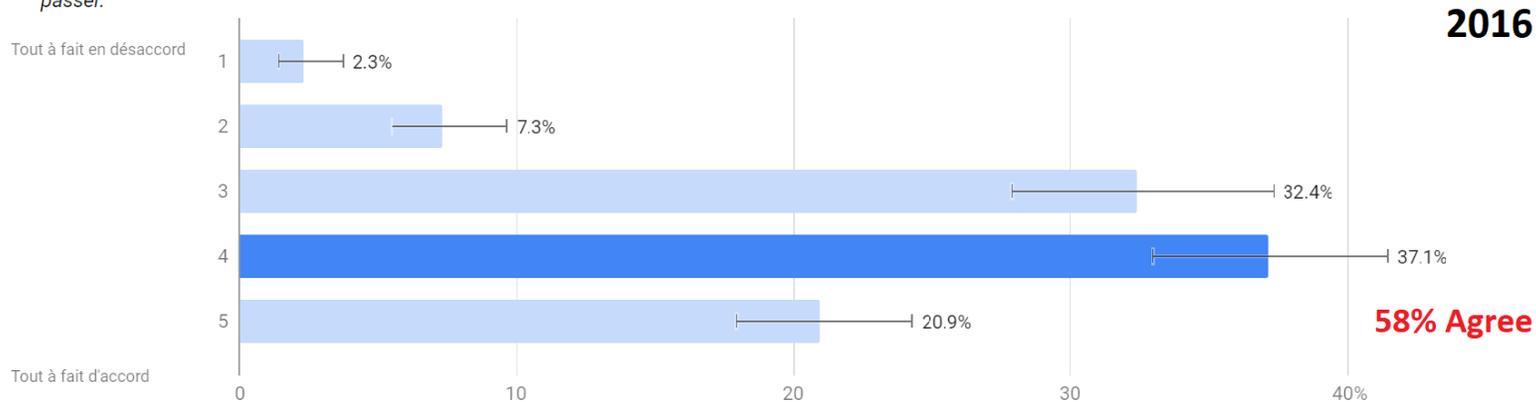


# Similar Views of Obesity as an Addiction Problem Among French-Speaking Canadians

1. À quel point êtes-vous personnellement en accord ou en désaccord avec l'énoncé suivant?

230 répondants

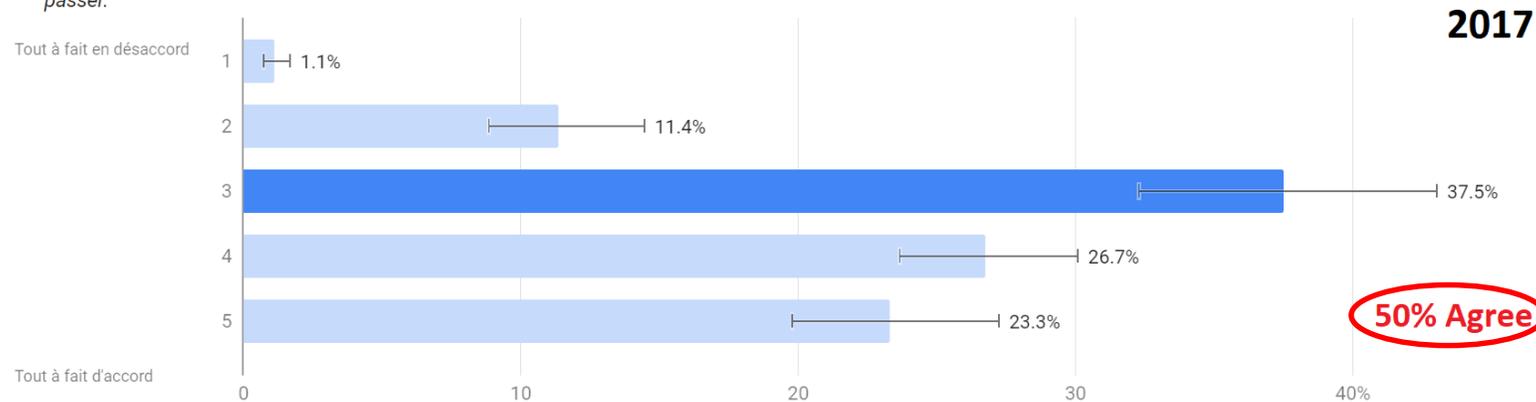
*L'obésité est un énorme problème parce que trop de gens sont devenus à croc à la malbouffe et aux boissons sucrées. Ils sont devenus dépendants et ne peuvent plus s'en passer.*



1. À quel point êtes-vous personnellement en accord ou en désaccord avec l'énoncé suivant?

265 répondants

*L'obésité est un énorme problème parce que trop de gens sont devenus à croc à la malbouffe et aux boissons sucrées. Ils sont devenus dépendants et ne peuvent plus s'en passer.*

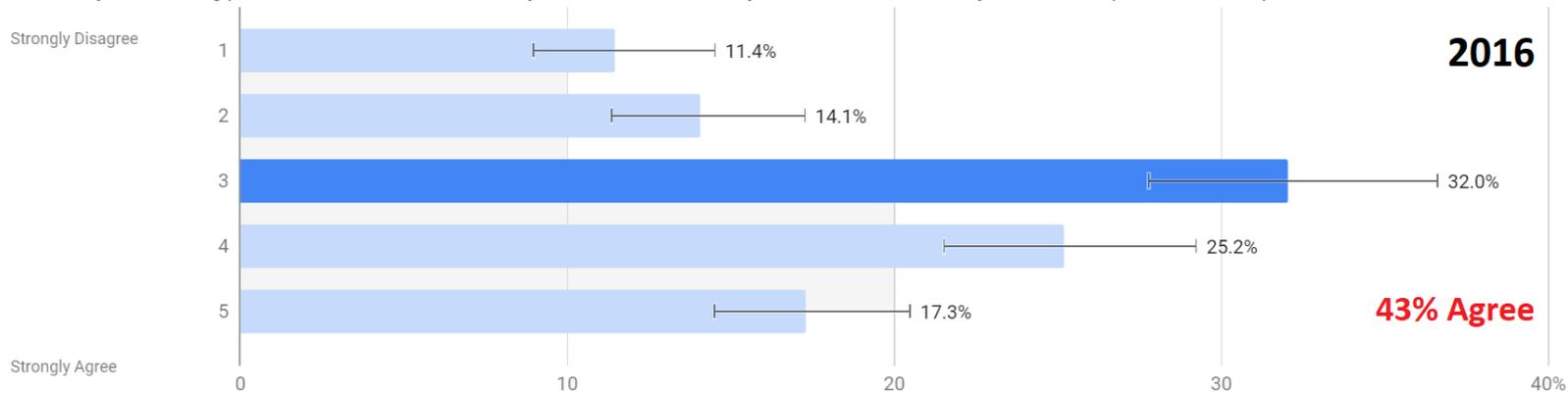


# Stronger Agreement Obesity Is an Environment Problem Among English-Speaking Canadians

1. How strongly do you personally agree or disagree with the following statement?

363 respondents

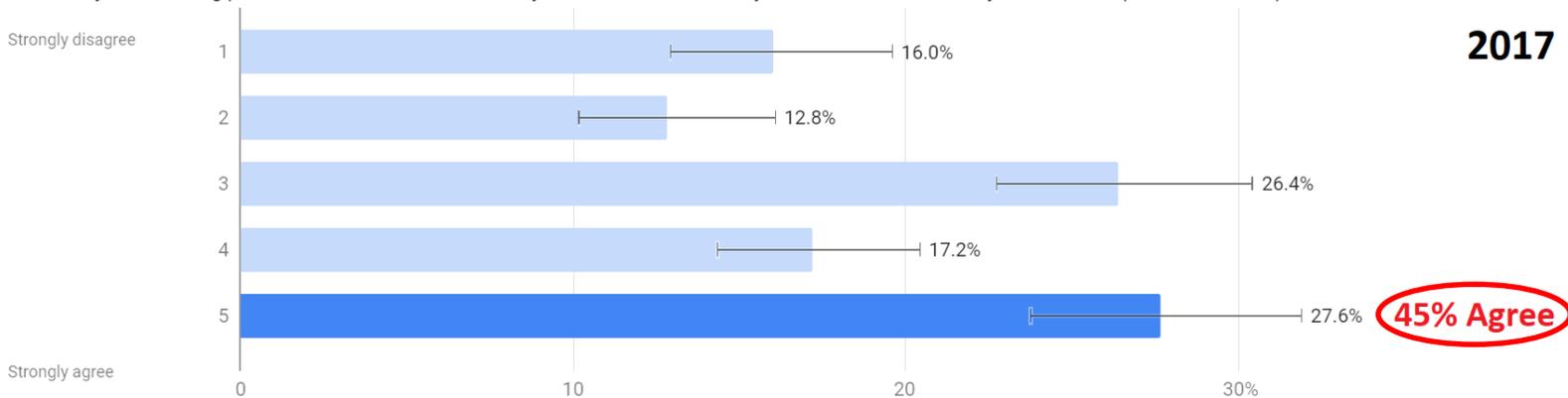
*Obesity is such a big problem because the food industry sells so much unhealthy food while modern lifestyles make adequate exercise impossible.*



1. How strongly do you personally agree or disagree with the following statement?

391 respondents

*Obesity is such a big problem because the food industry sells so much unhealthy food while modern lifestyles make adequate exercise impossible.*

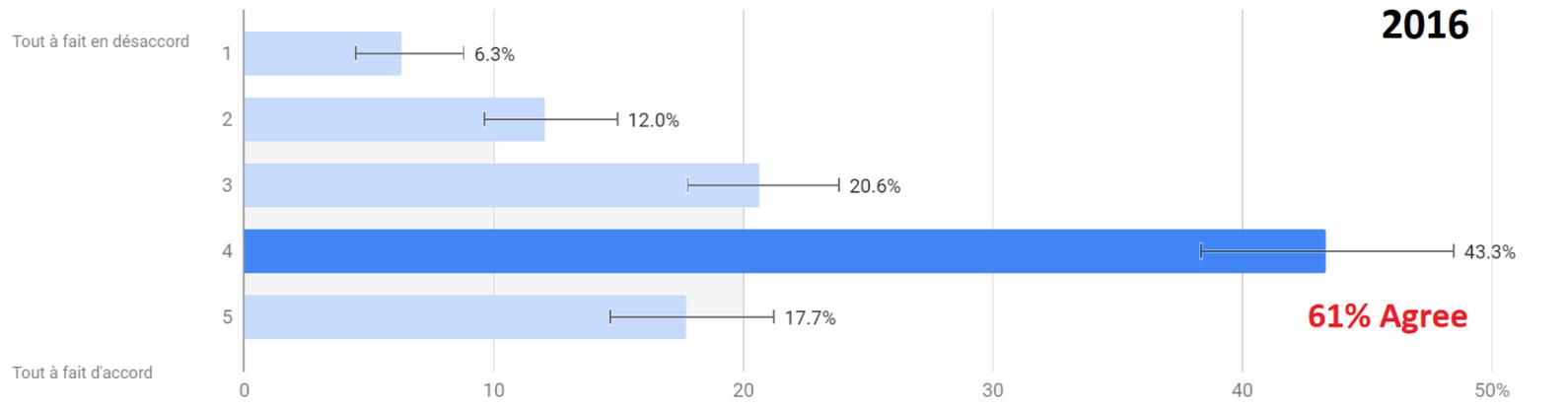


# Trending to Less Agreement Among French Canadians About the Obesogenic Environment

1. À quel point êtes-vous personnellement en accord ou en désaccord avec l'énoncé suivant?

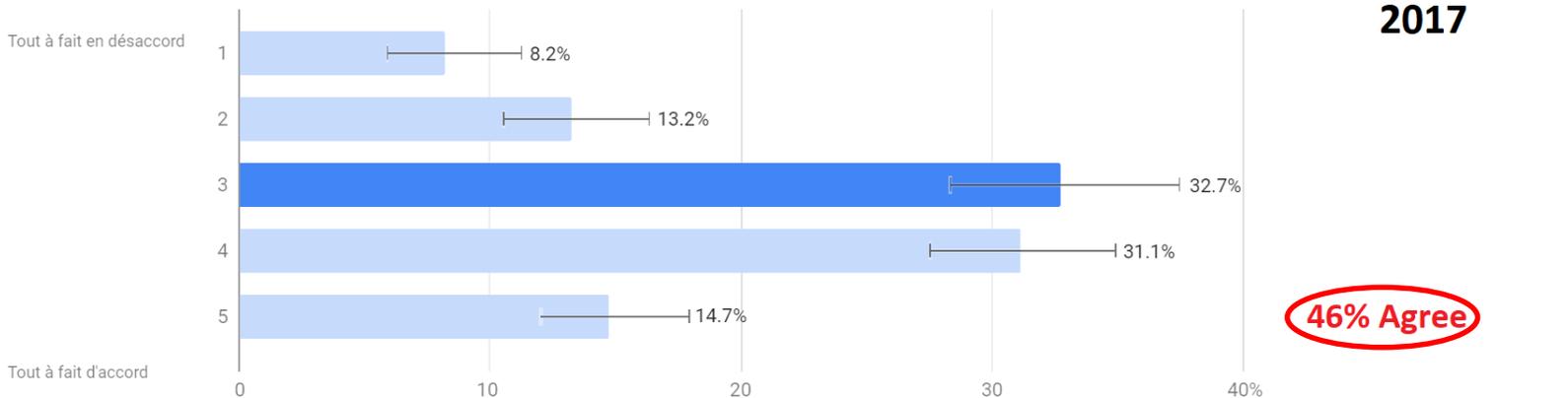
218 respondents

*L'obésité est un énorme problème parce que l'industrie agroalimentaire vend trop de malbouffe tandis que le style de vie moderne rend impossible de faire adéquatement de l'exercice.*



256 respondents

*L'obésité est un énorme problème parce que l'industrie agroalimentaire vend trop de malbouffe tandis que le style de vie moderne rend impossible de faire adéquatement de l'exercice.*

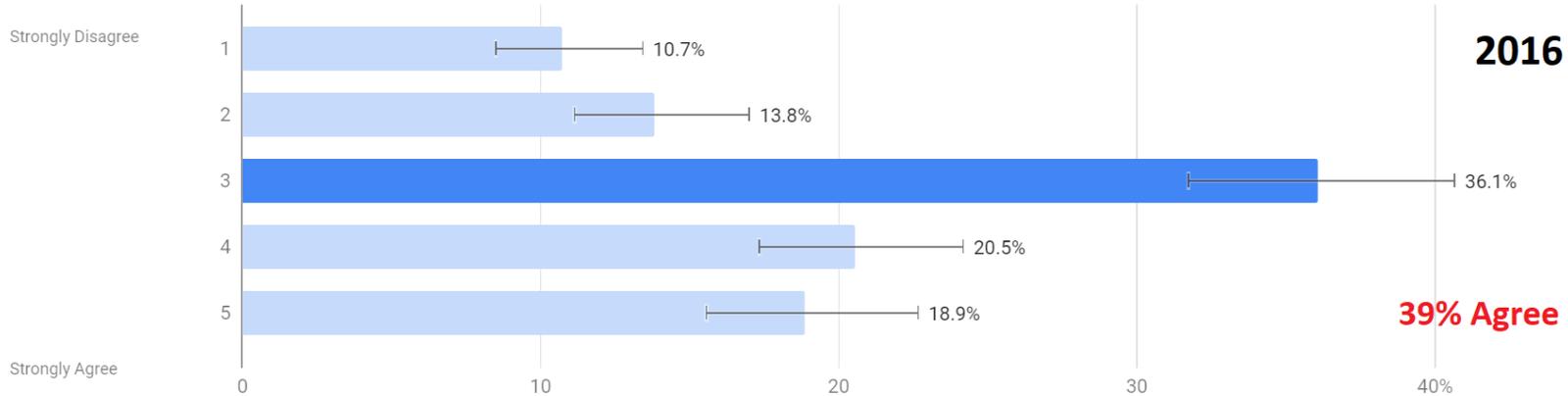


# One Third of English-Speaking Canadians Agree Obesity Is a Medical Problem

1. How strongly do you personally agree or disagree with the following statement?

372 respondents

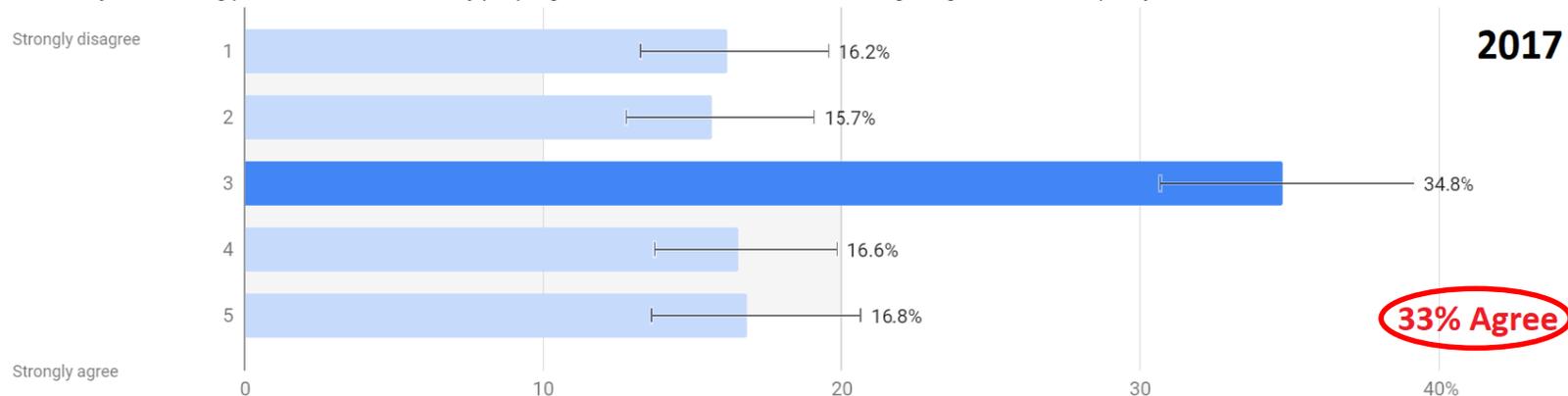
*Obesity is such a big problem because too many people get blamed for this disease instead of getting the medical help they need.*



1. How strongly do you personally agree or disagree with the following statement?

374 respondents

*Obesity is such a big problem because too many people get blamed for this disease instead of getting the medical help they need.*

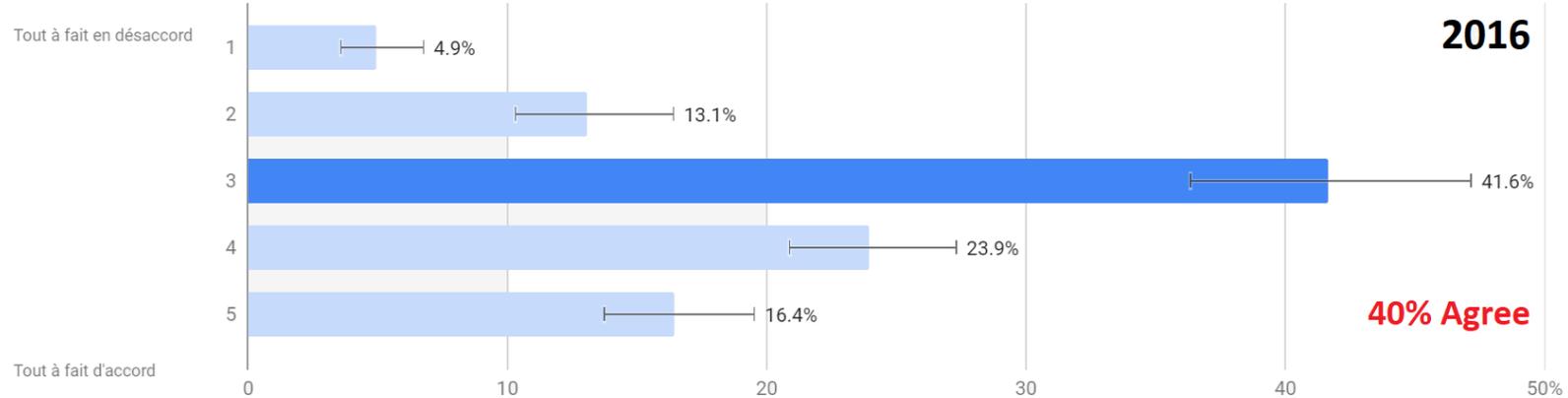


# More French Canadians Agree Obesity Is a Medical Problem

1. À quel point êtes-vous personnellement en accord ou en désaccord avec l'énoncé suivant?

250 répondants

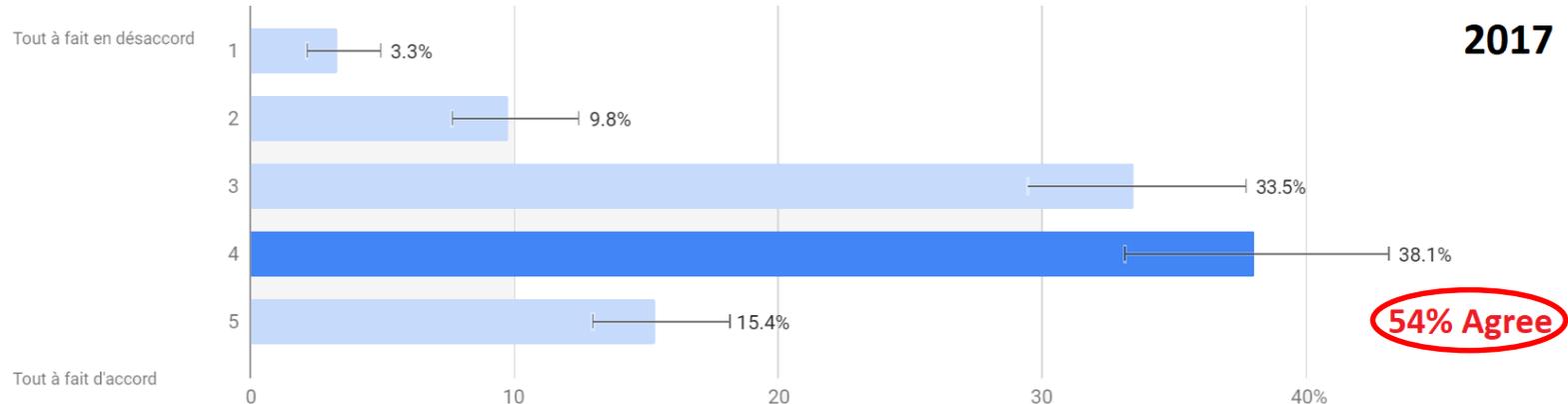
*L'obésité est un énorme problème parce que trop de gens sont blâmés pour cette maladie, plutôt que de recevoir l'aide médicale dont ils ont besoin.*



1. À quel point êtes-vous personnellement en accord ou en désaccord avec l'énoncé suivant?

285 répondants

*L'obésité est un énorme problème parce que trop de gens sont blâmés pour cette maladie, plutôt que de recevoir l'aide médicale dont ils ont besoin.*



# Public Understanding of Obesity Continues to Evolve

- Significant differences, French vs English-speaking Canadians
- French view:
  - More of a medical problem
- English view:
  - Less irresponsibility
  - More environmental factors



*In the Kitchen, photograph © Obesity Action Coalition / OAC Image Gallery*

# Implications

- Big gaps remain in public understanding of obesity
- Note that explicit attitudes can hide implicit bias
- Continued tracking will be valuable



Source: Pawel Loj / flickr

# More Information

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