

The Growing Gap Between Explicit and Implicit Bias

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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

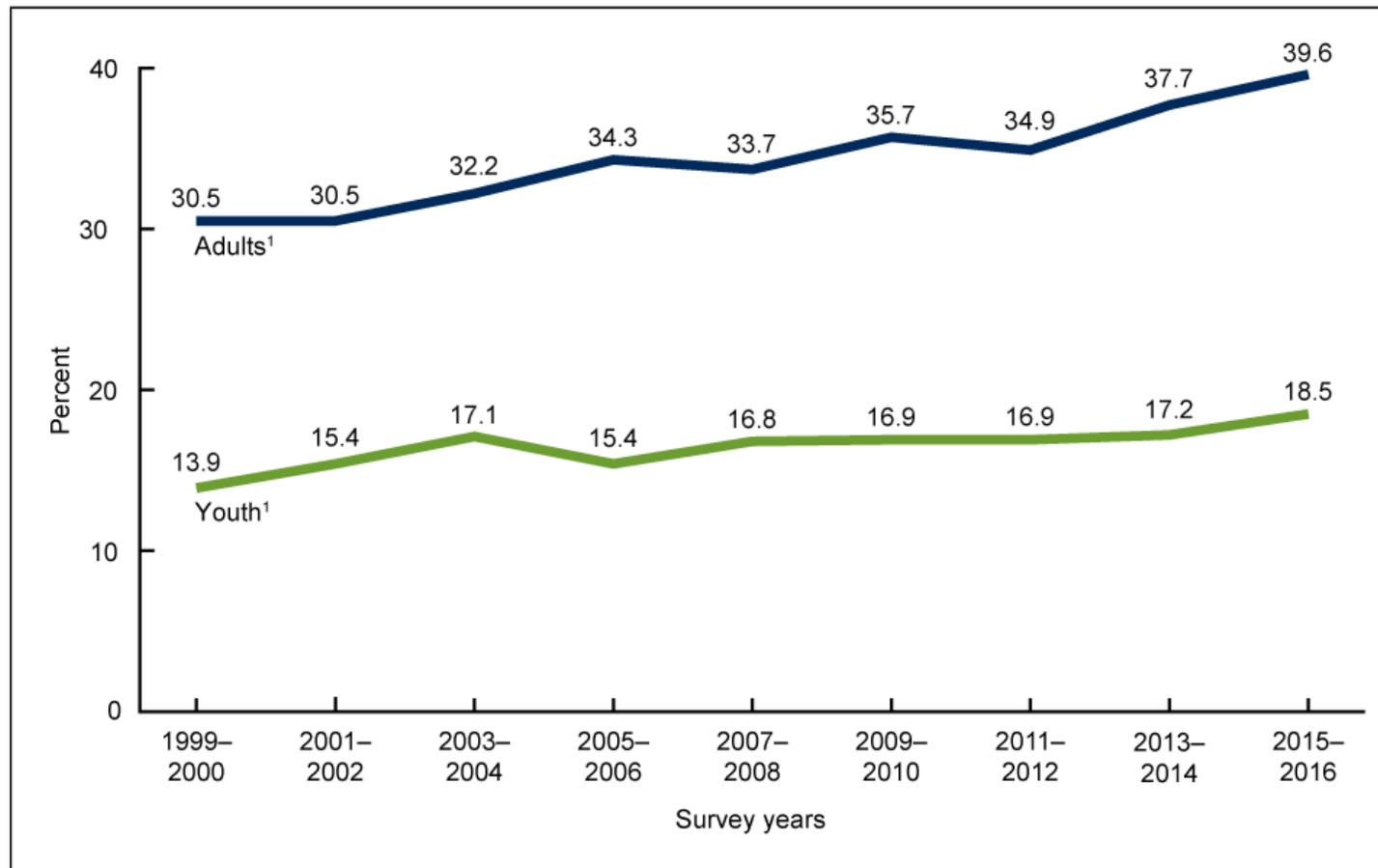
- Describe the growing gap between explicit and implicit bias
- Discuss ways it blocks our progress



Source: Pawel Loj / flickr

Why Is It That Obesity Trends Have Not Turned Around?

Figure 5. Trends in obesity prevalence among adults aged 20 and over (age adjusted) and youth aged 2–19 years: United States, 1999–2000 through 2015–2016



¹Significant increasing linear trend from 1999–2000 through 2015–2016.

NOTES: All estimates for adults are age adjusted by the direct method to the 2000 U.S. census population using the age groups 20–39, 40–59, and 60 and over. Access data table for Figure 5 at: https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db288_table.pdf#5.

SOURCE: NCHS, National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, 1999–2016.

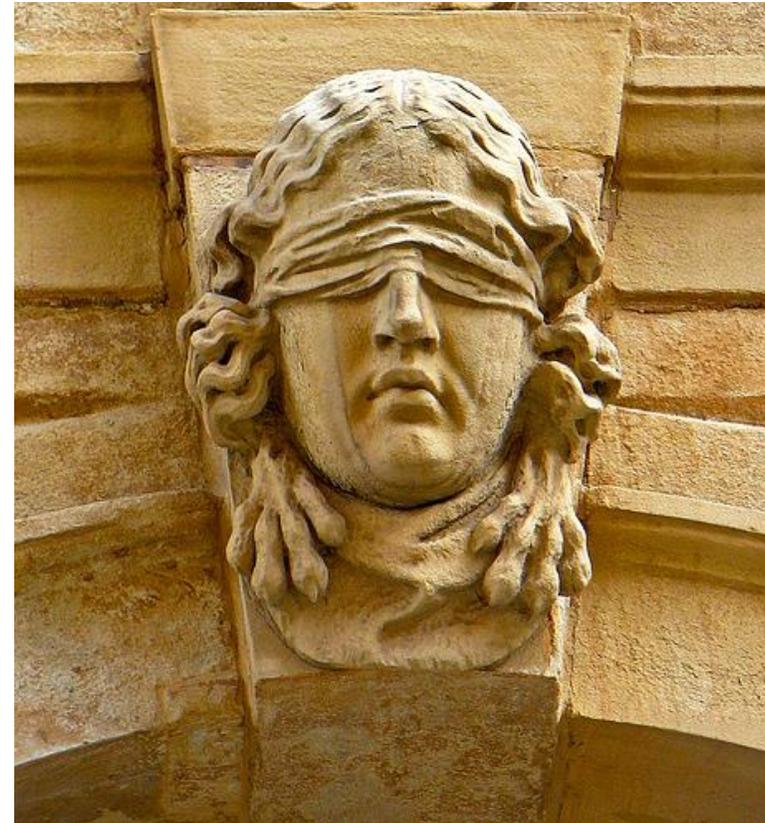
After Three Decades of Hard Work, Why Does Obesity Keep Growing?

Bottom Line: Bias Is the Biggest Reason

Bias Comes from Selective Blindness to Facts

Bias is an inclination or outlook to present or hold a **partial perspective**, often accompanied by a **refusal to consider** the possible merits of **alternative points of view**. Biases are learned implicitly within cultural contexts. People may develop biases toward or **against** an **individual**, an ethnic **group**, a nation, a religion, a social class, a political party, theoretical **paradigms** and **ideologies** within academic domains, or a species.

– Adapted from
Psychology: Contemporary Perspectives
Paul Okami



Two Kinds of Bias

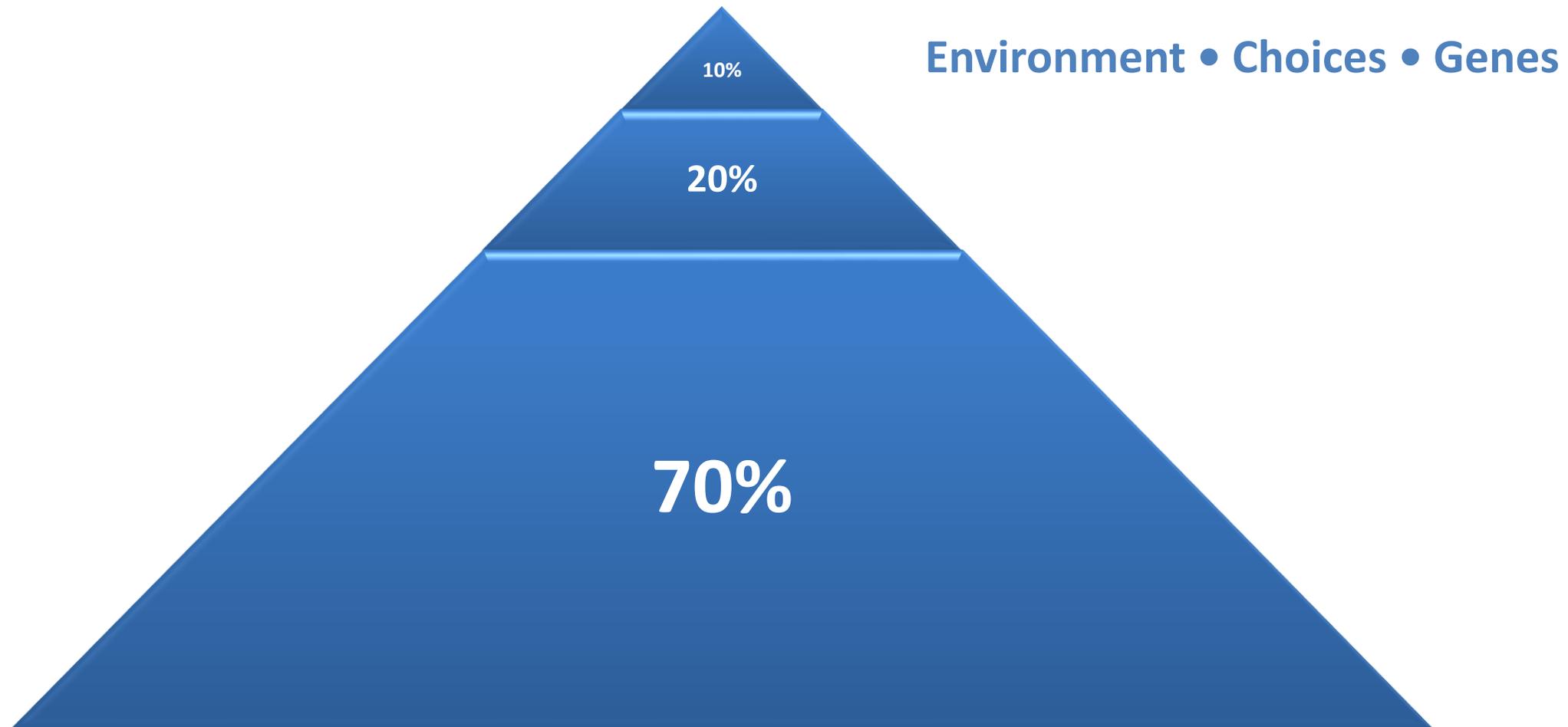
Corrupt Our Response to Obesity

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



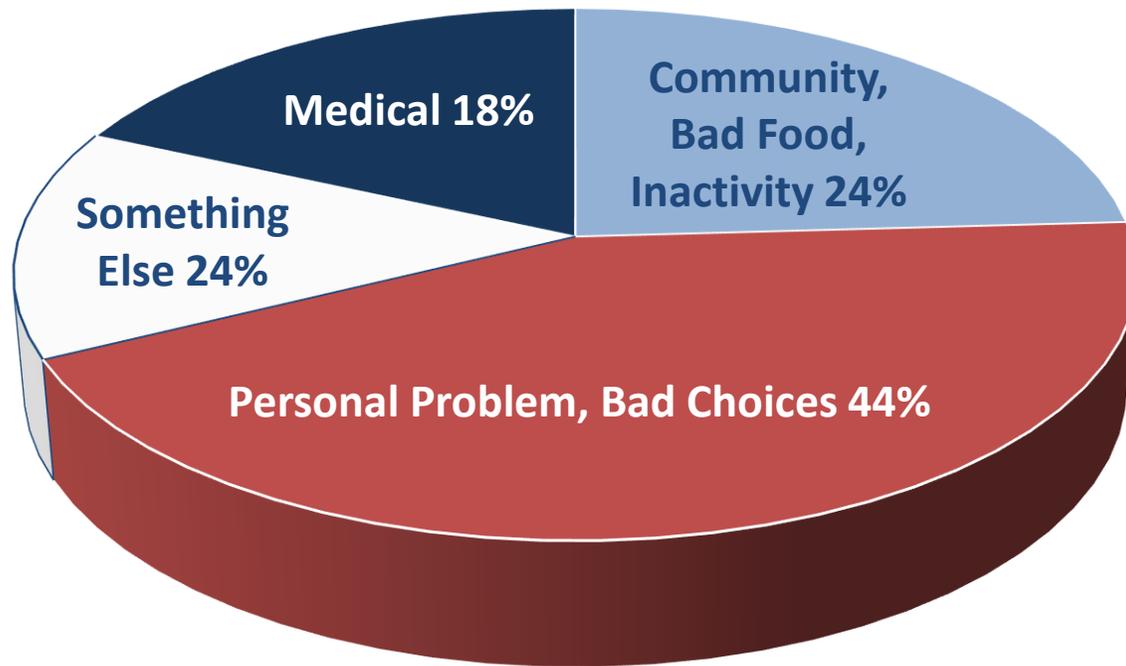
God Judging Adam, Etching by William Blake / WikiArt

People Typically View Obesity as the Result of Poor Choices



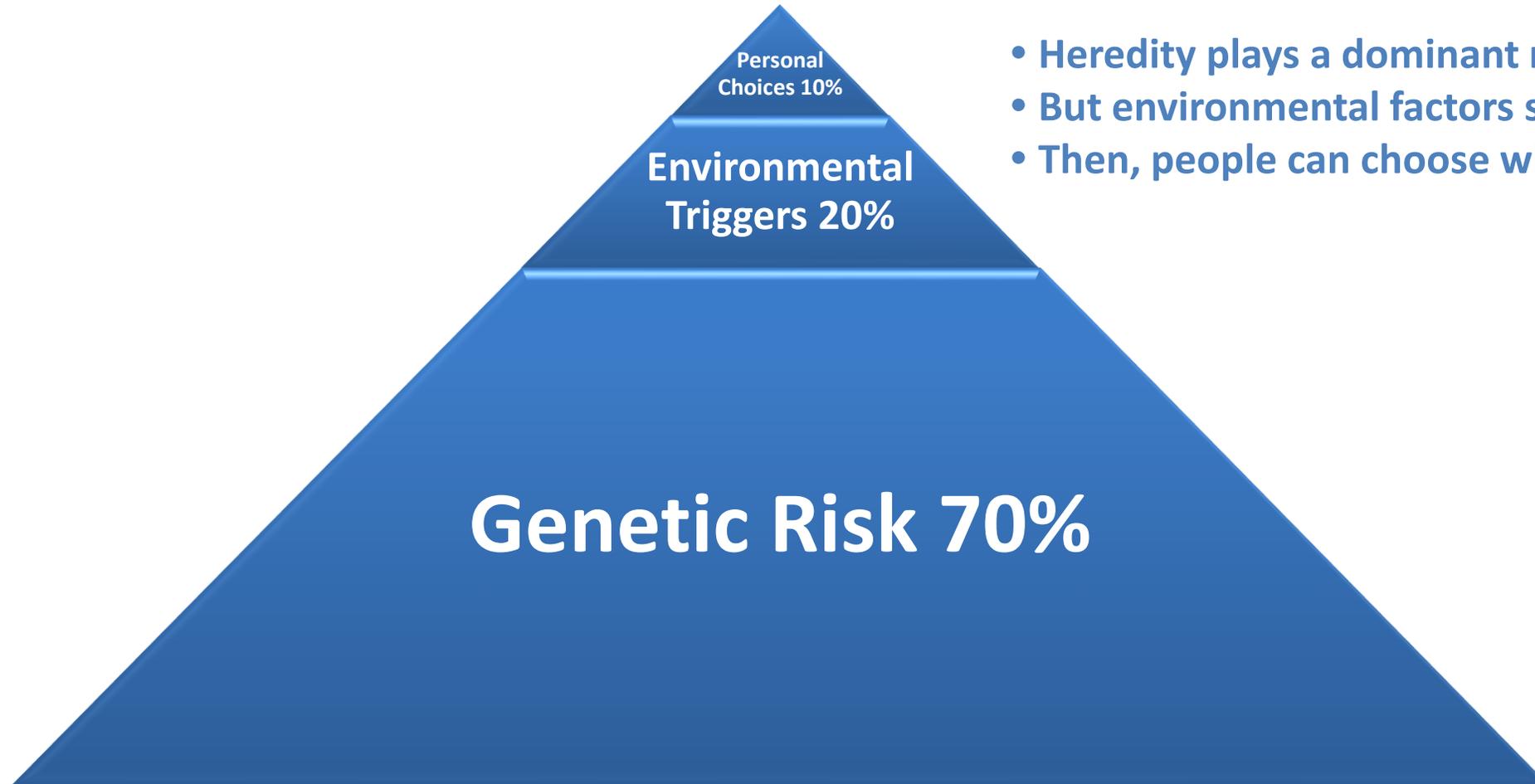
Long Viewed as a Matter of Choice

“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**

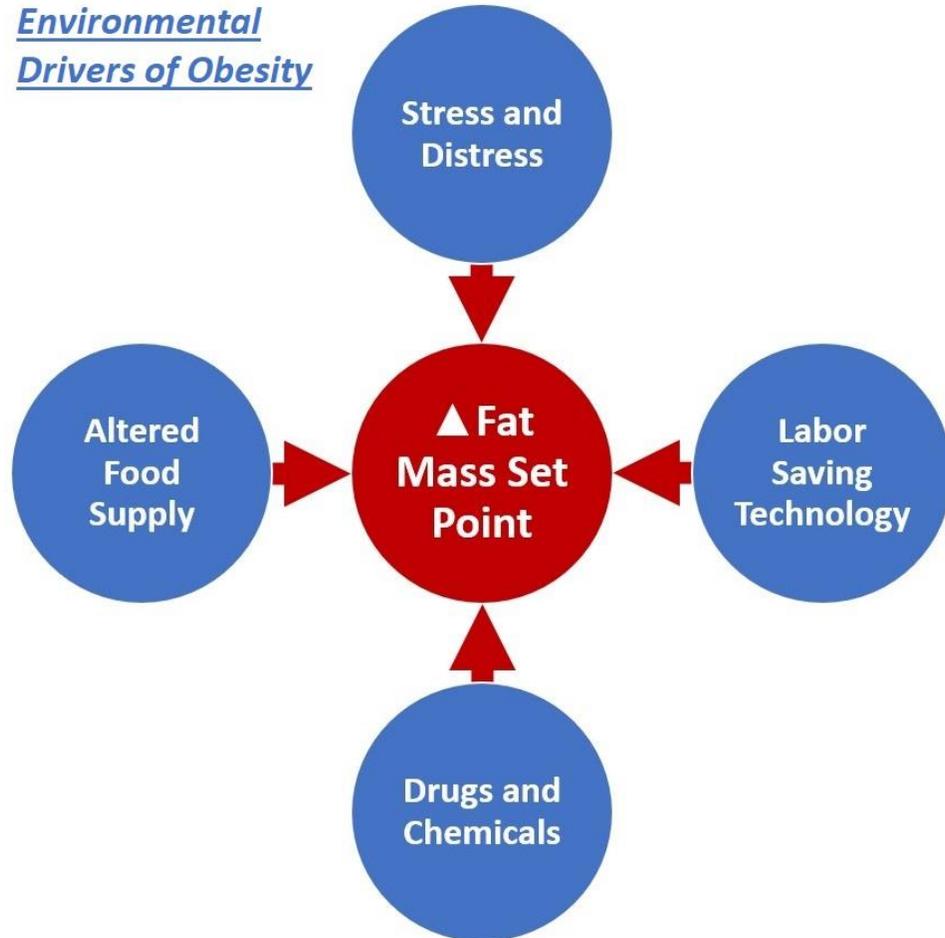
The Truth Is That Obesity Is a Highly Heritable Chronic Disease



- Heredity plays a dominant role in obesity risk
- But environmental factors serve to activate it
- Then, people can choose what to do about it

A Perfect Storm of Environmental Triggers

Environmental Drivers of Obesity



- Simplistic explanations are invariably wrong
- The more accurate view is a perfect storm of multiple factors

Weight Bias Flows from Common Assumptions About People with Obesity

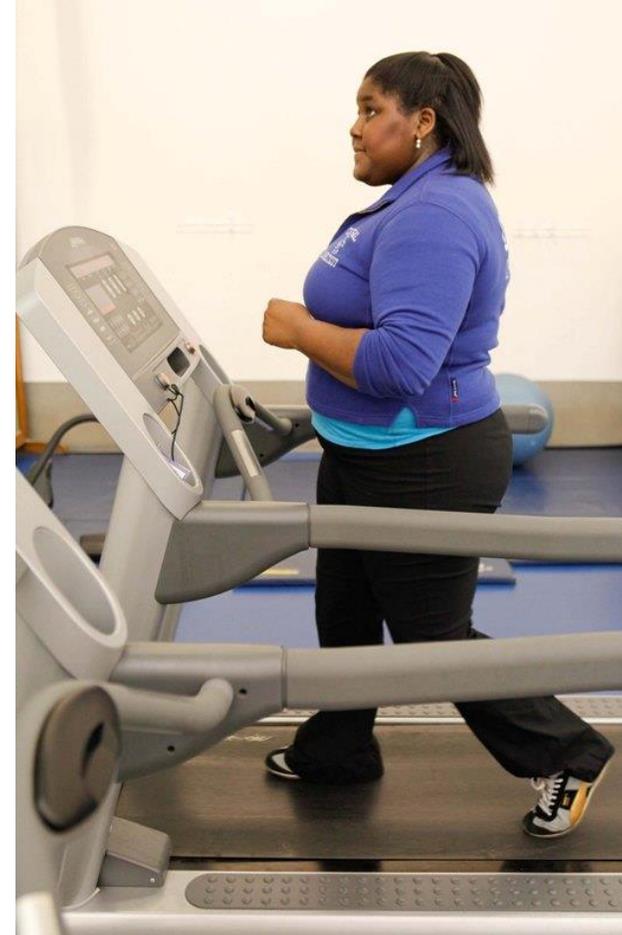


Untitled, photograph by Boohoomian / flickr



Photograph courtesy of the UCONN Rudd Center

Assumptions Can Be Wildly Misleading



Demeaning Stereotypes About People with Obesity

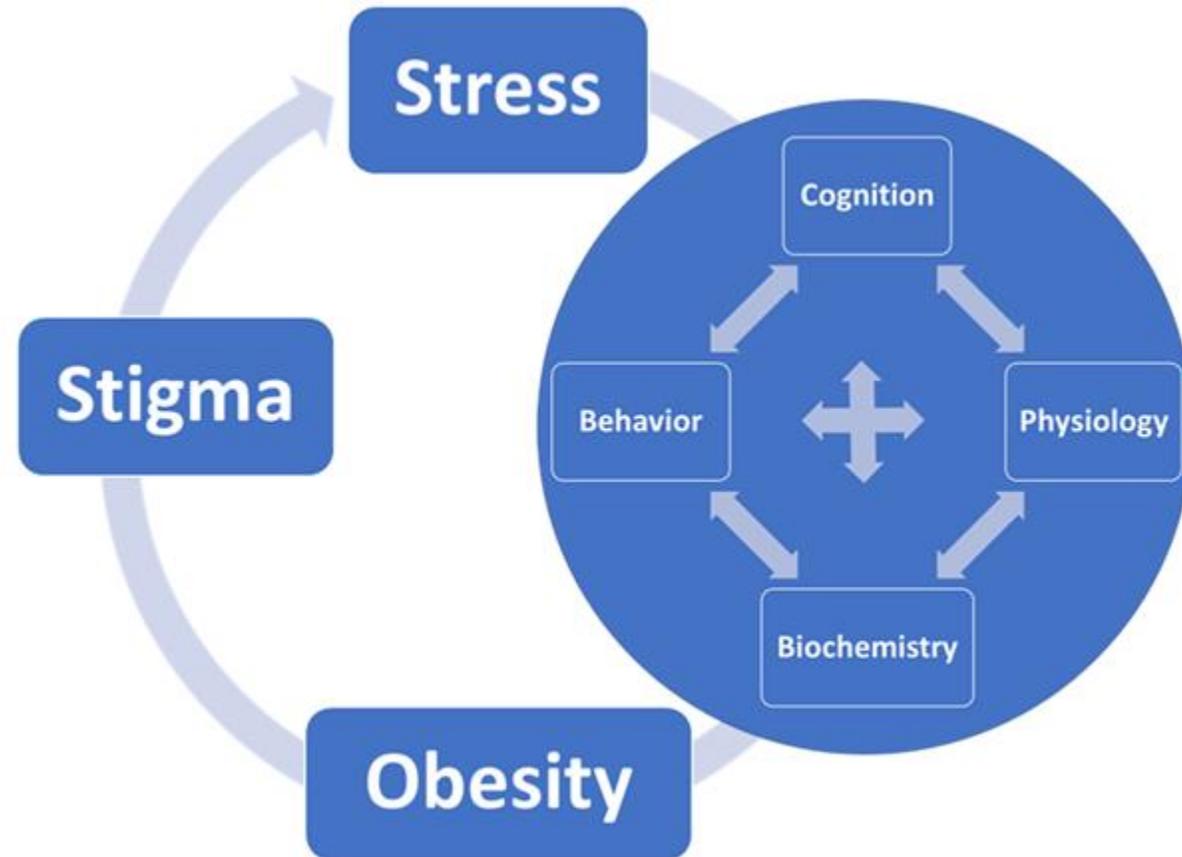
- Lazy
- Stupid
- Undisciplined
- Sloppy
- Awkward
- Losers
- Dishonest
- Won't follow directions
- Uniformly unhealthy
- Ignorant about nutrition
- Lives spent gorging on junk food



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

Living with Discrimination Makes People Sicker

Pathways from stress to obesity



Bias Gets in the Way of Progress



Blame, image © Ian Design / flickr

- **Stigma leads to denial and inaction**
 - Blame directed at people with obesity
 - Assumptions of
 - Laziness
 - Poor discipline
 - Social rejection
- **People seek less care, get poor care, so health suffers**
- **Leads to ineffective policies**

Project Implicit

- 4.4 million tests
- Implicit and explicit attitudes
- Internet population
- 13 years
- Sexual orientation, race, skin tone, age, disability, and body weight

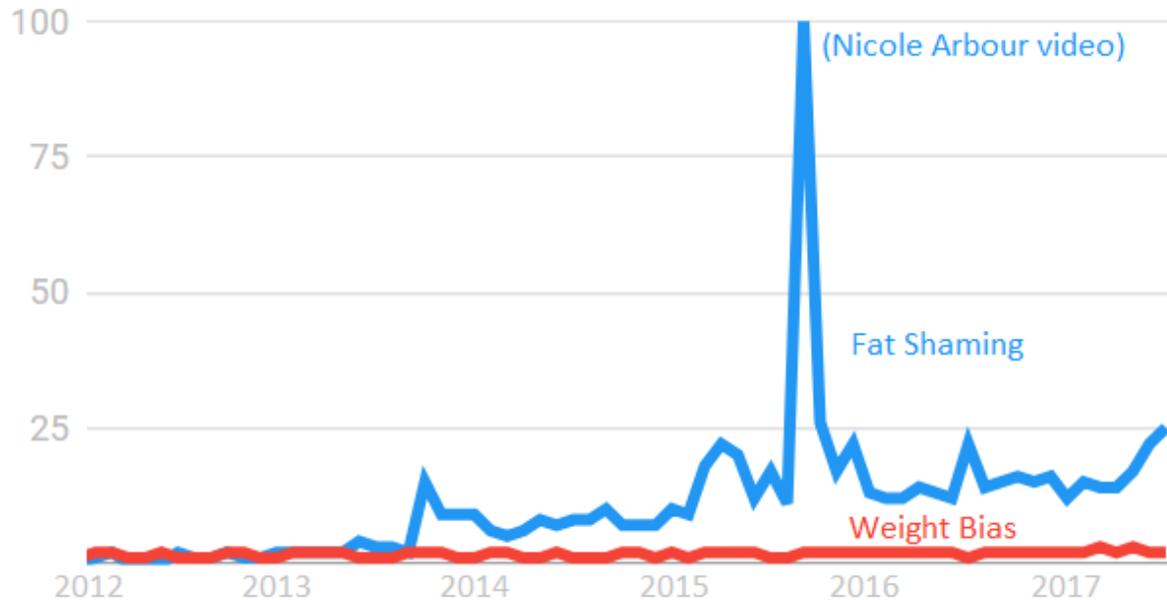


Explicit Weight Bias Is Fading

Dimension	Explicit Bias Trend 2007-2016
Sexuality	Down
Race	Down
Skin Tone	Down
Age	Down
Disability	Down
Weight	Down

Weight Bias Concerns Have Moved into Popular Culture, Labeled as Fat Shaming

Google Trends: Interest over Time



- Multiple social movements
 - Body positivity
 - Feminism
 - Fat acceptance
 - Obesity activism
- Converged to make fat shaming unacceptable

Unfortunately, Implicit Bias Is Growing

Dimension	Explicit Bias Trend 2007-2016	Implicit Bias Trend 2007-2016
Sexuality	Down	Down
Race	Down	Down
Skin Tone	Down	Down
Age	Down	Flat
Disability	Down	Flat
Weight	Down	Up

How Bias Harms People and Blocks Progress Against Obesity

Policy Implications of Bias About Obesity

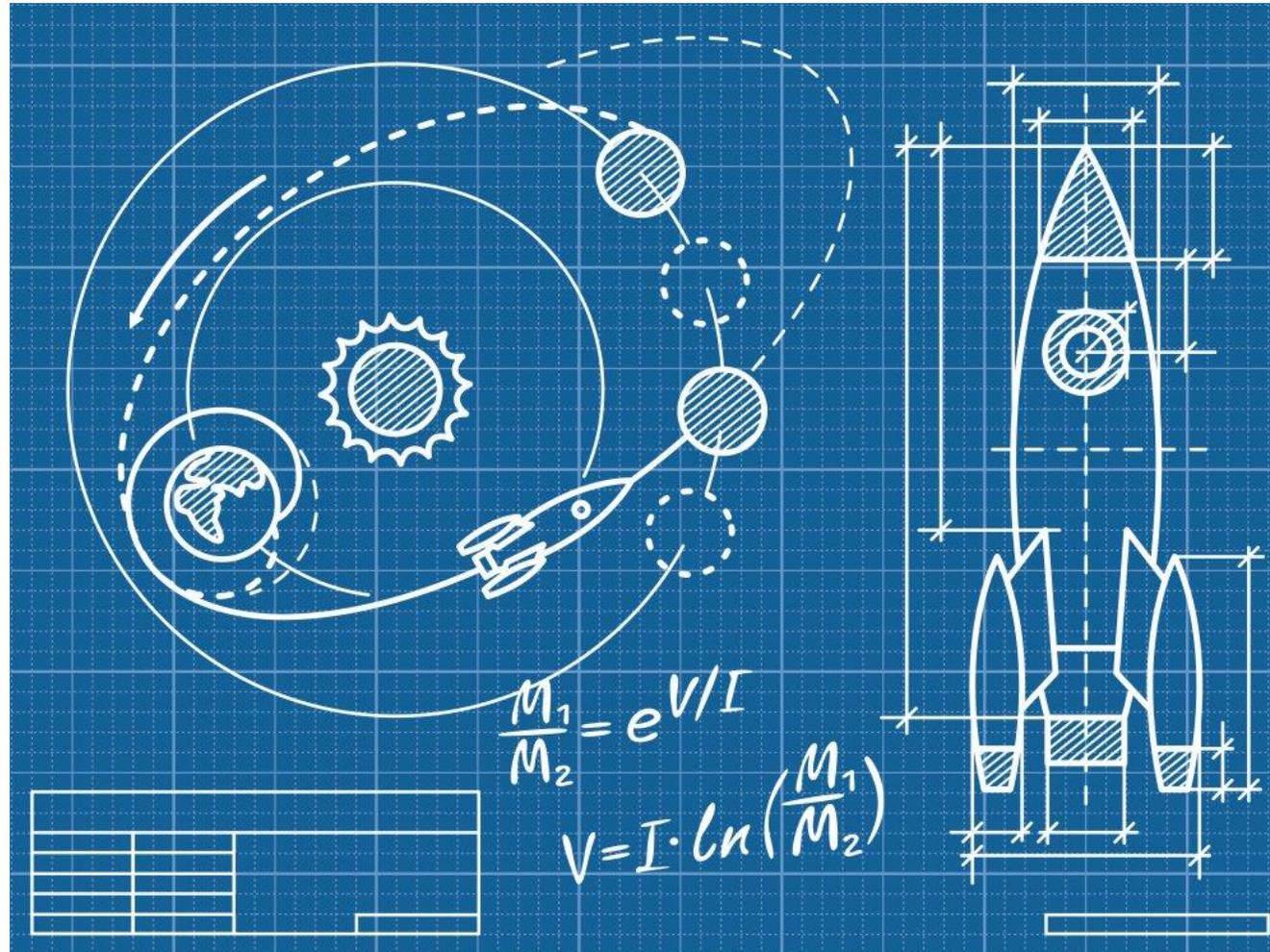
Isn't Obesity Just the Result of Eating More Calories Than You Burn?



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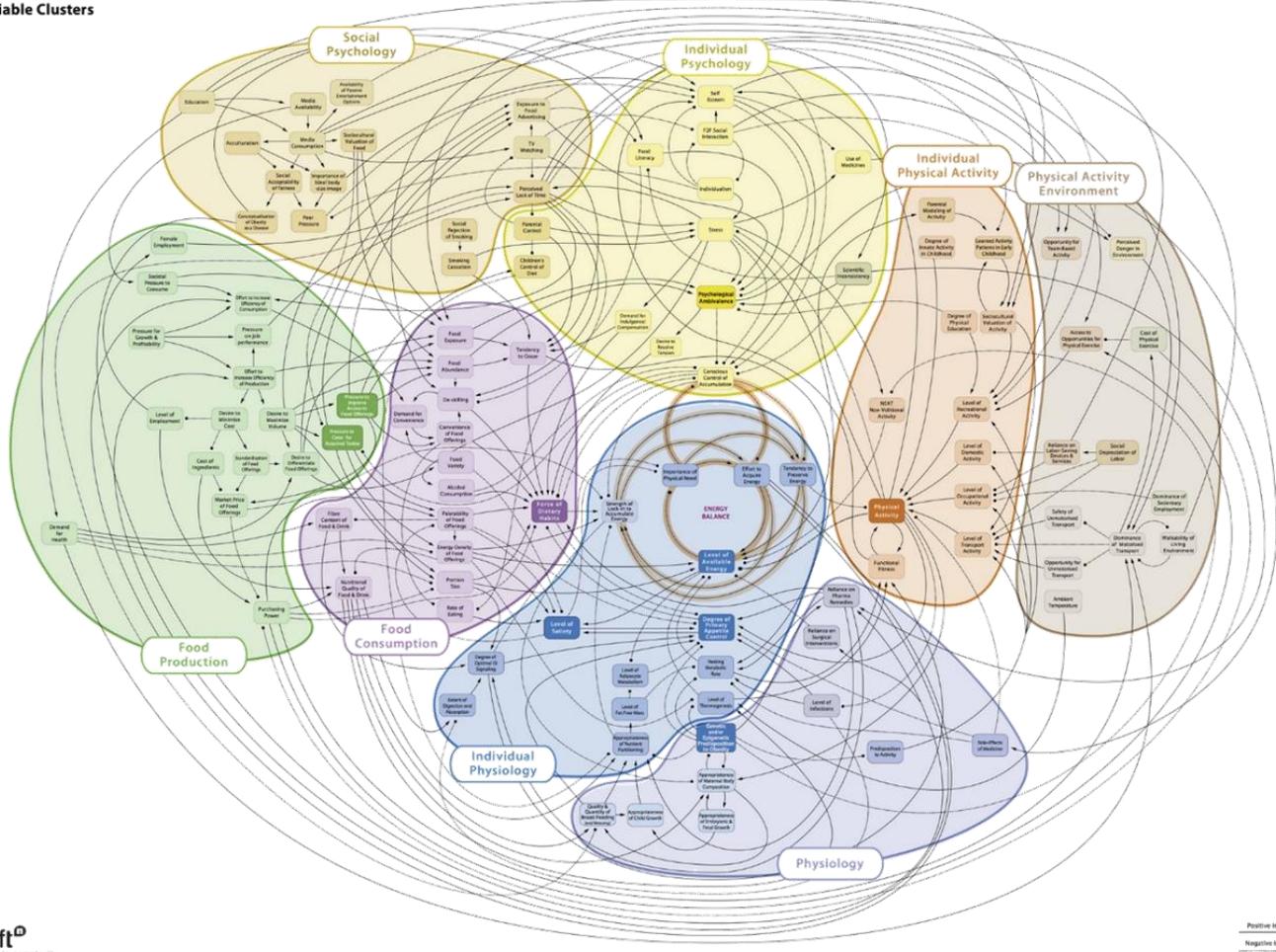


Rocket Science May Be Complicated



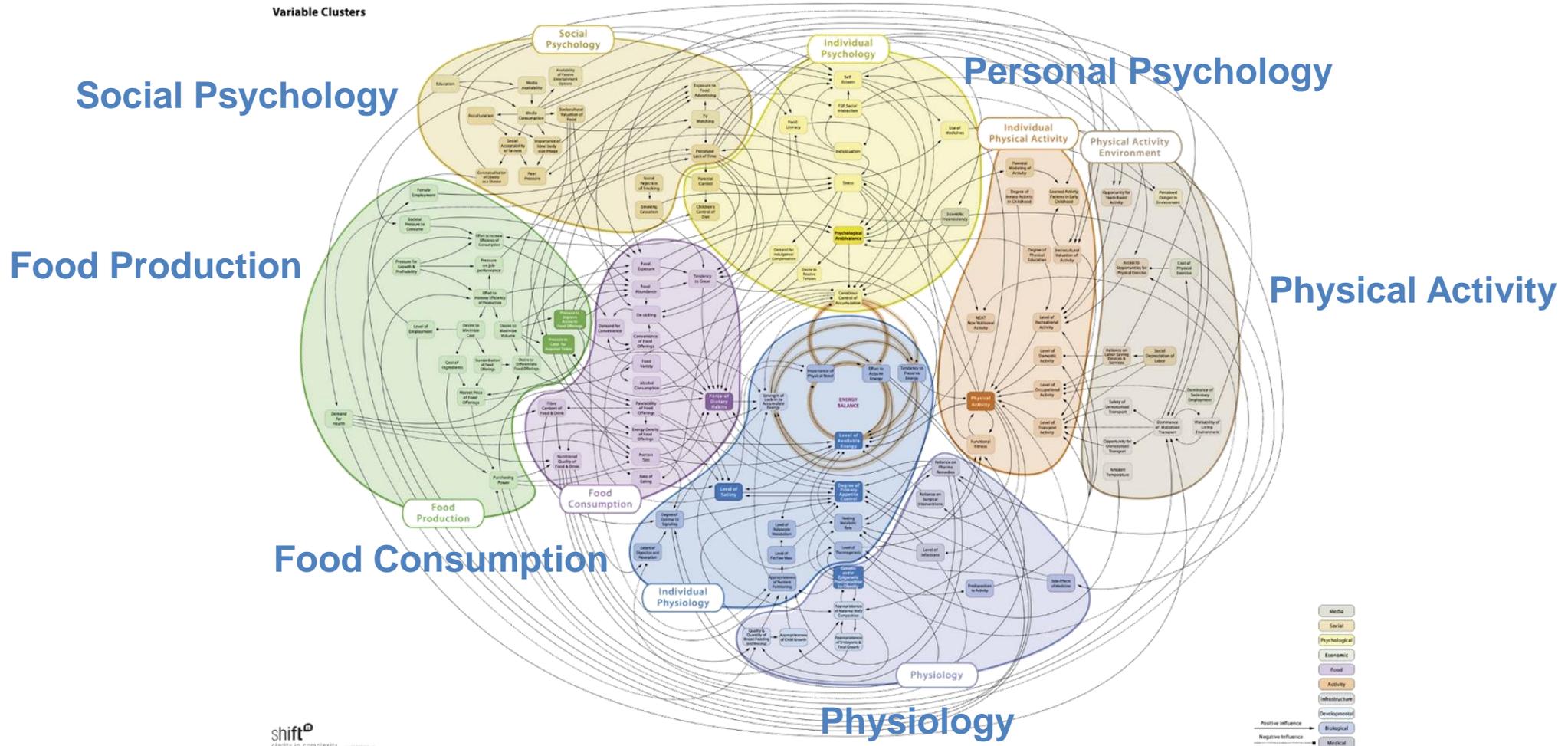
But Obesity Is Far More Complex

Obesity System Map
Variable Clusters



Obesity Grows from Complex, Adaptive Systems

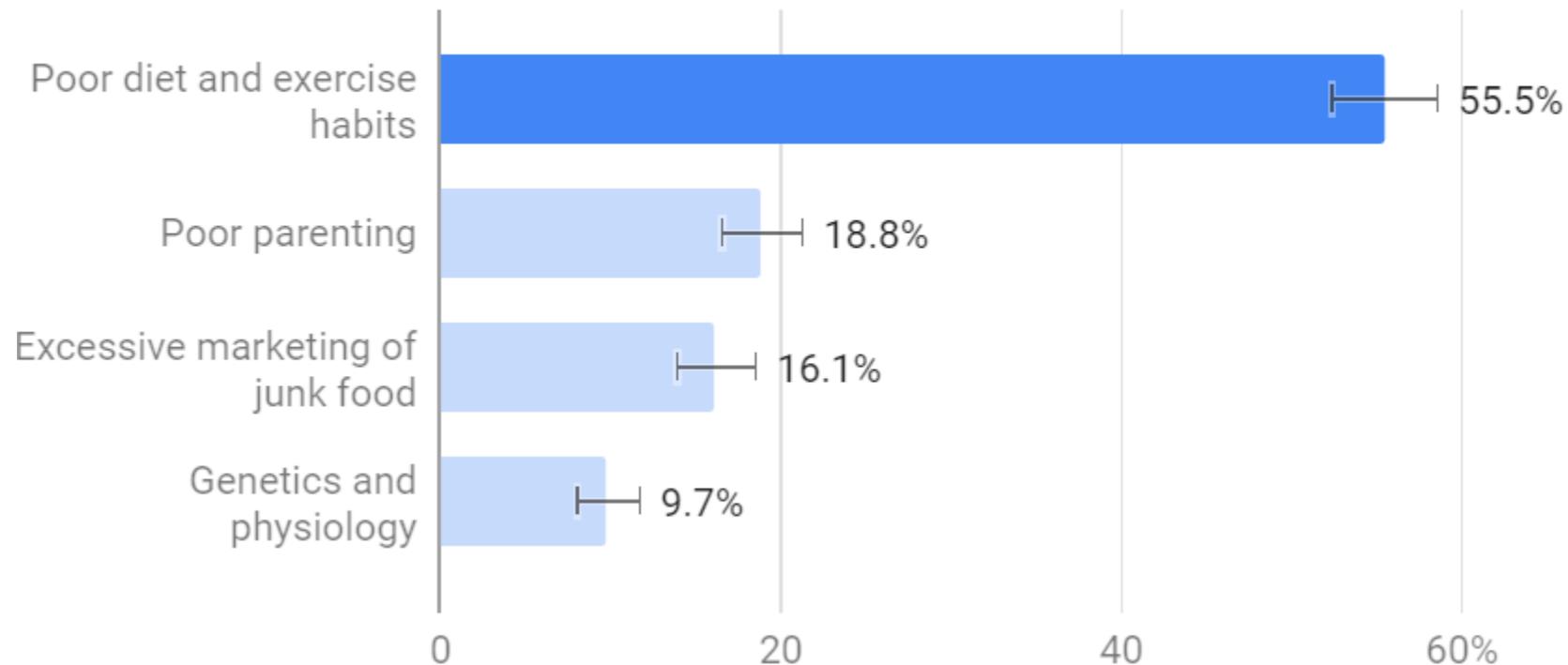
Obesity System Map
Variable Clusters



Yet People Are Still Thinking Severe Obesity Is a Simple Matter of Bad Habits

What do you believe is the primary cause of severe obesity when it occurs in young children?

722 respondents

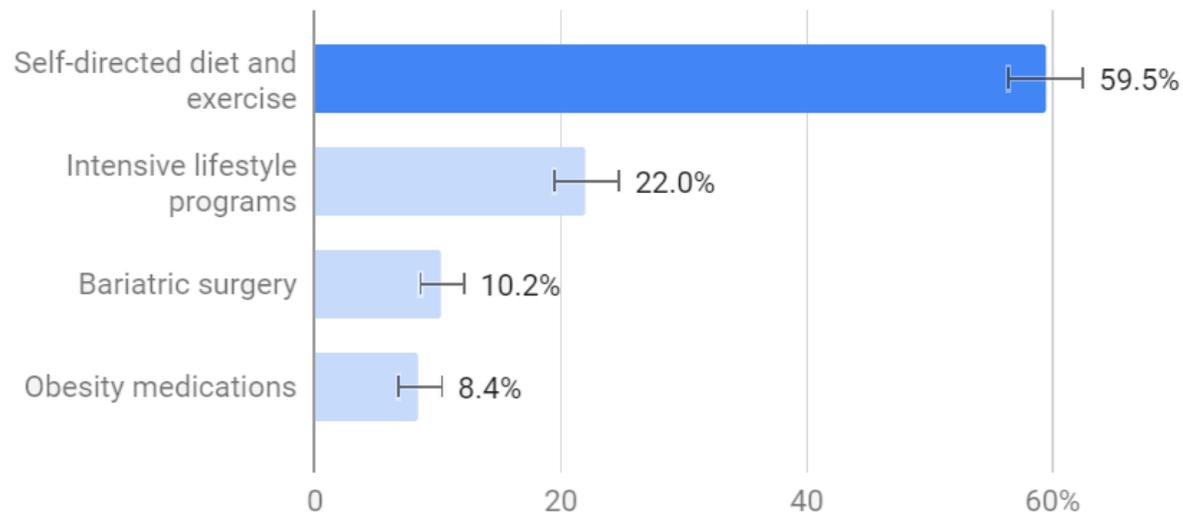


And They Mistakenly Think Self-Help Can Cure It

Obesity Treatments - U.K.

1. Which of the following treatments for obesity is most effective?

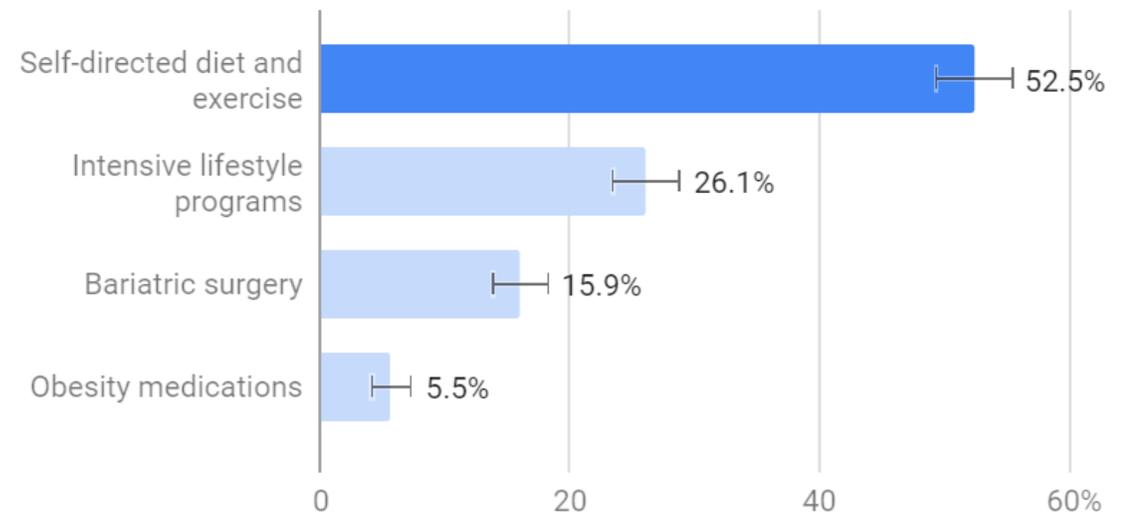
766 respondents



Obesity Treatments - U.S.

1. Which of the following treatments for obesity is most effective?

776 respondents

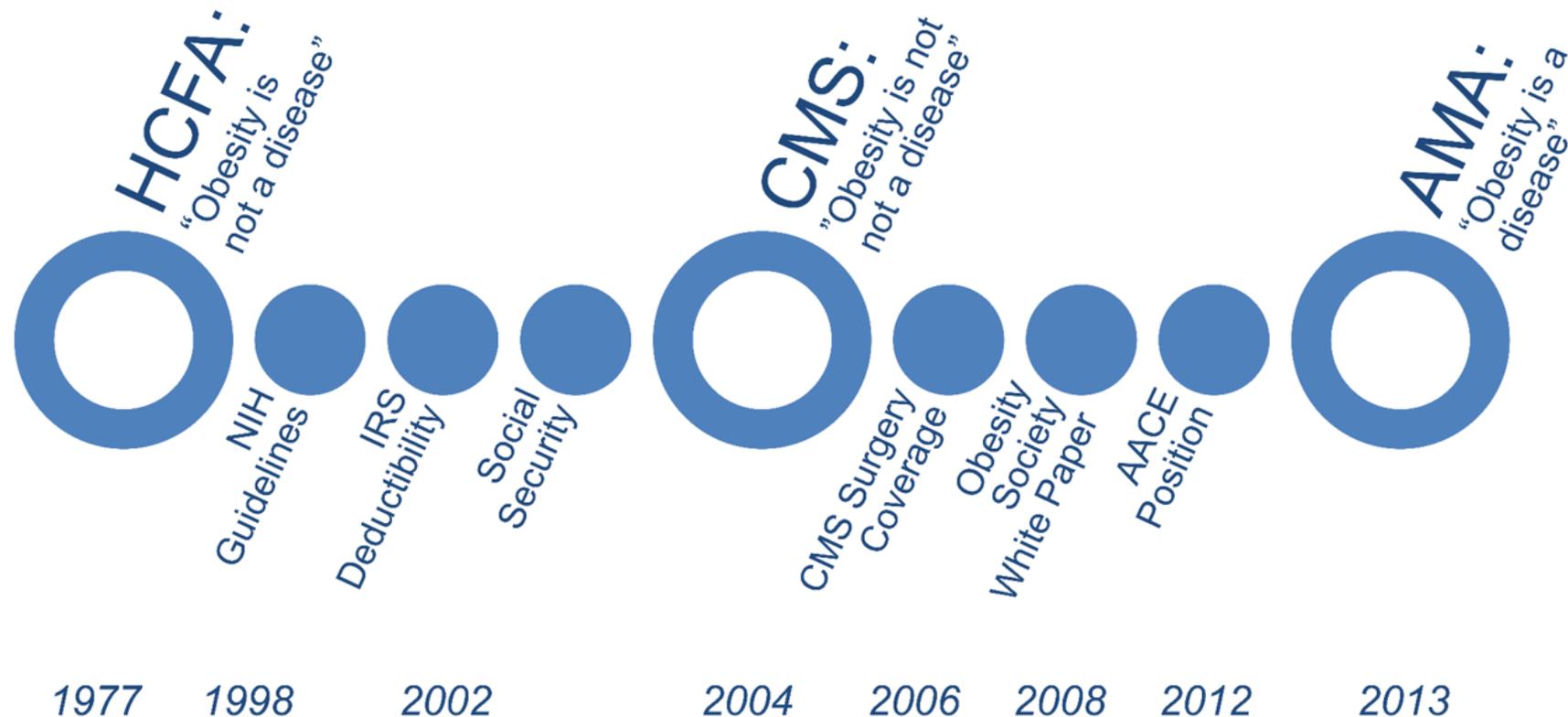


How Bias Harms People and Blocks Progress Against Obesity

Movement Toward Progress Against Obesity

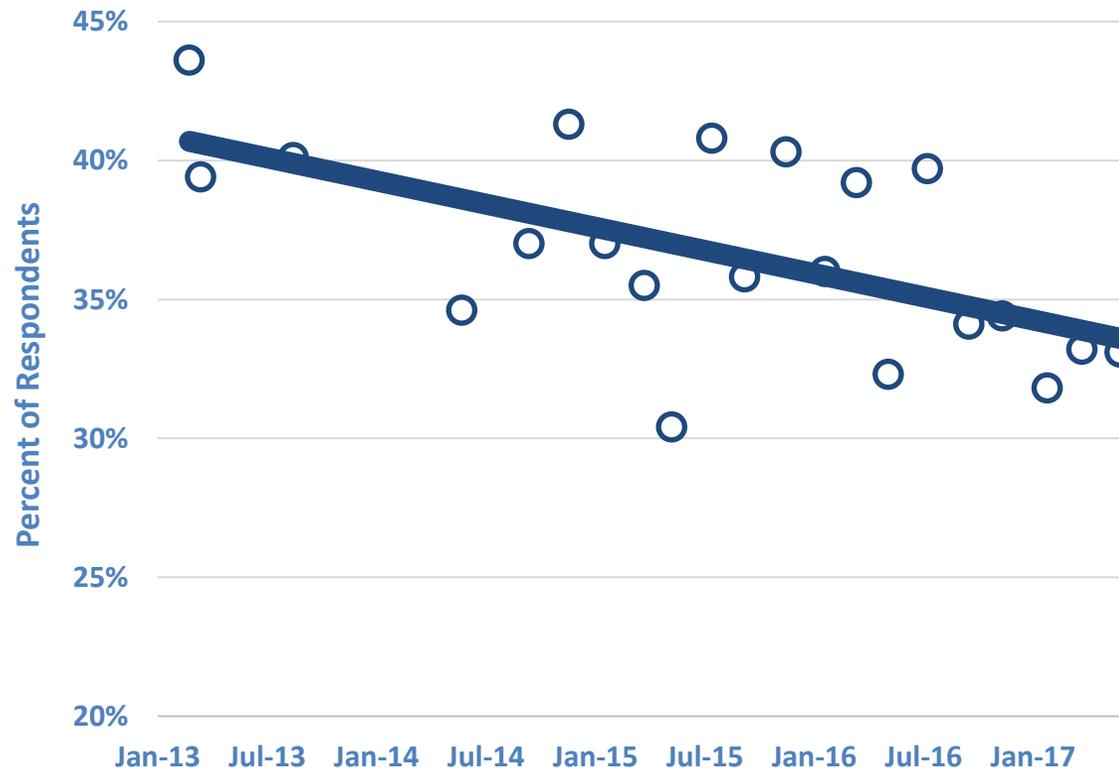
In 2013 AMA Declared Obesity Is a Complex, Chronic Disease

Milestones in Regarding Obesity as a Disease



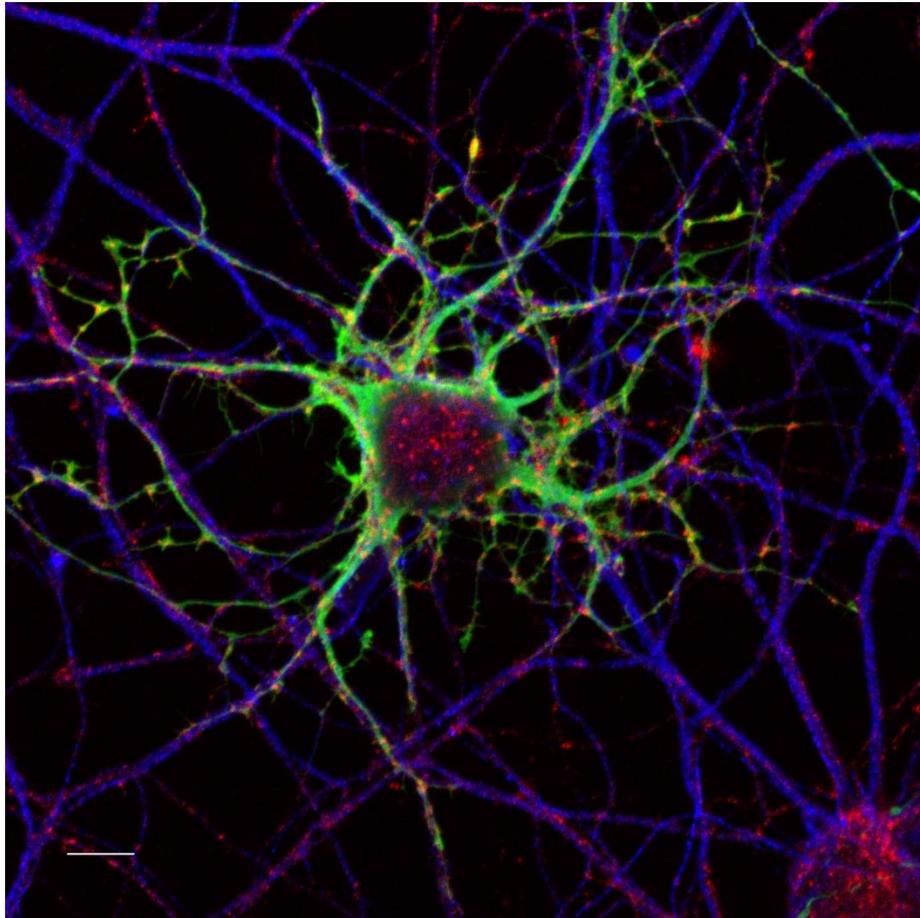
Explicit Public Views Are Slowly Shifting

“Obesity is a personal problem of bad choices”



- Fewer people think of obesity as a problem of bad personal choices
- People are shifting toward more diverse views of obesity

Obesity Science Is Bringing Better Insights and Solutions



Neurons, photograph © ZEISS Microscopy / flickr

- Hypothalamus controls fat mass and blood sugar
- More therapies to manage obesity
- Bariatric surgery extends life and puts diabetes in remission

Summary of Opportunities

Better progress will require:

- Objectivity to replace bias
- Curiosity about obesity and the people it affects
- Care for these people



Targets of Opportunity, photograph by Randy Robertson / flickr

More Information



conscienhealth.org/news



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