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Evidence of Less Blame and More Acceptance of Obesity as a Medical Condition Among U.S. Adults

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Background: Among U.S. adults, many view obesity as matter of personal choice and responsibility. In 2013 the AMA ruled obesity is a complex chronic disease, but skepticism remains. Bias that denies the physiology of obesity and blames persons with obesity (PwO) harms patients. The present study aimed to detect possible shifts in public opinion about obesity and blame directed at PwO.

Methods: A total of U.S. 7,076 adults completed online surveys – 3,530 in Nov 2017 and 3,546 in May 2020. Each respondent answered only one question – either a multiple choice question to describe the type of problem they believe obesity to be (personal problem of bad choices; community problem of bad food and inactivity; a medical problem; or none of the above) or a 5-point Likert scale item to indicate their agreement regarding whether or not a) obesity is the fault of a PwO; b) obesity is a problem because PwO are blamed for the disease instead of receiving needed medical help; or c) they would interview a PwO for a job.

Results: Between 2017 and 2020, there was little change in participants' views that obesity is a matter of personal choice or responsibility; 35% of respondents endorsed this view in 2017, versus 34% in 2020. However, more respondents in 2020 agreed with the narrative that PwO need less blame and more medical help, which increased from 30% to 42%. Respondents were nominally less likely to assign blame to PwO (a drop from 31% in 2017 to 25% in 2020) and more likely to agree that obesity is not their fault (up from 11% in 2017 to 16% in 2020). Finally, 66% of respondents in 2020 indicated they would interview PwO for a job, up from 58% in 2017.

Conclusions: Personal responsibility remains a dominant view of obesity among U.S. adults, despite its classification as a disease by the AMA. However, fewer

respondents in 2020 explicitly blame PwO, deny the need for medical care, or say they would discriminate against PwO in employment.

Category:

Track 6 Policy/Public Health

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ObesityWeek 2020

What Is Weight Bias?



God Judging Adam, Etching by William Blake / WikiArt

- **Negative:**
 - Attitudes
 - Beliefs
 - Judgments
 - Stereotypes
 - Discriminatory acts
- **Based solely on weight**
- **Subtle or overt**
- **Explicit or implicit**

Weight Bias & Stigma Are Pervasive



God Judging Adam, Etching by William Blake / WikiArt

- Family and friends
- Community, education, and employers
- Healthcare providers

Bias Compromises Quality of Care

The New York Times

Why Do Obese Patients Get Worse Care? Many Doctors Don't See Past the Fat

By GINA KOLATA SEPT. 25, 2016



Sarah Bramlette, who advocates awareness of

You must lose weight, a doctor told Sarah Bramlette, advising a 1,200-calorie-a-day diet. But Ms. Bramlette had a basic question: How much do I weigh?

The doctor's scale went up to 350 pounds, and she was heavier than that. If she did not know the number, how would she know if the diet was working?

The doctor had no answer. So Ms. Bramlette, 39, who lived in Ohio at the time, resorted to a solution that made her burn with shame. She drove to a nearby junkyard that had a scale that could weigh her. She was 502 pounds.

One in three Americans is obese, a rate that has been steadily growing for more than two decades, but the health care

- Less empathetic care
- Less preventive care
- Patients feel berated and disrespected
- Obesity blamed for every symptom

“You could walk in with an ax sticking out of your head and they would tell you your head hurt because you are fat.”

Source: *NY Times*, Sep 25, 2016

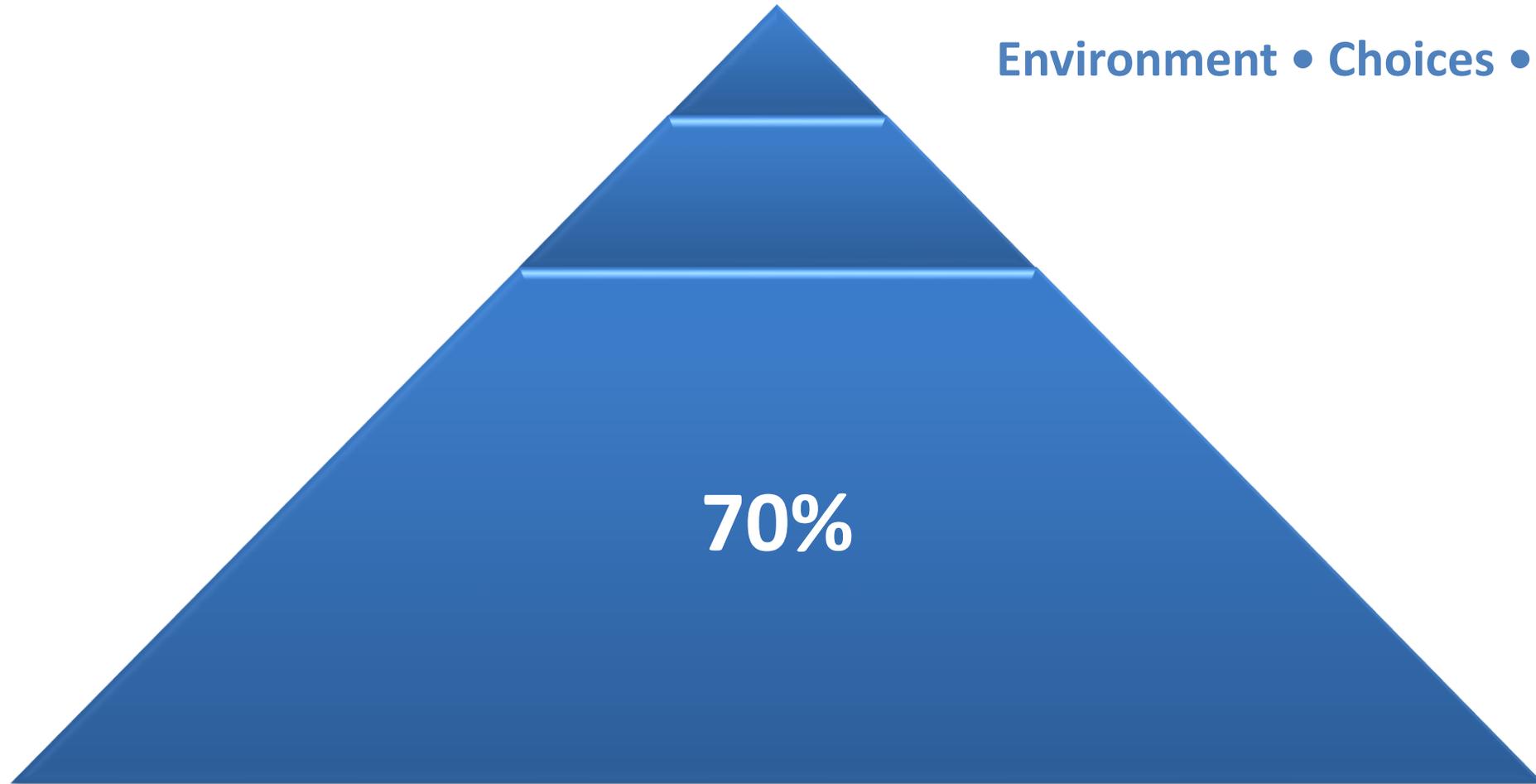
COVID-19 Concerns for People with Obesity

- Patients avoiding healthcare
- Increased fear of being discounted
- Extreme fear of infection and hospitalization
- Concerns about changes in eating habits, exercise, weight gain



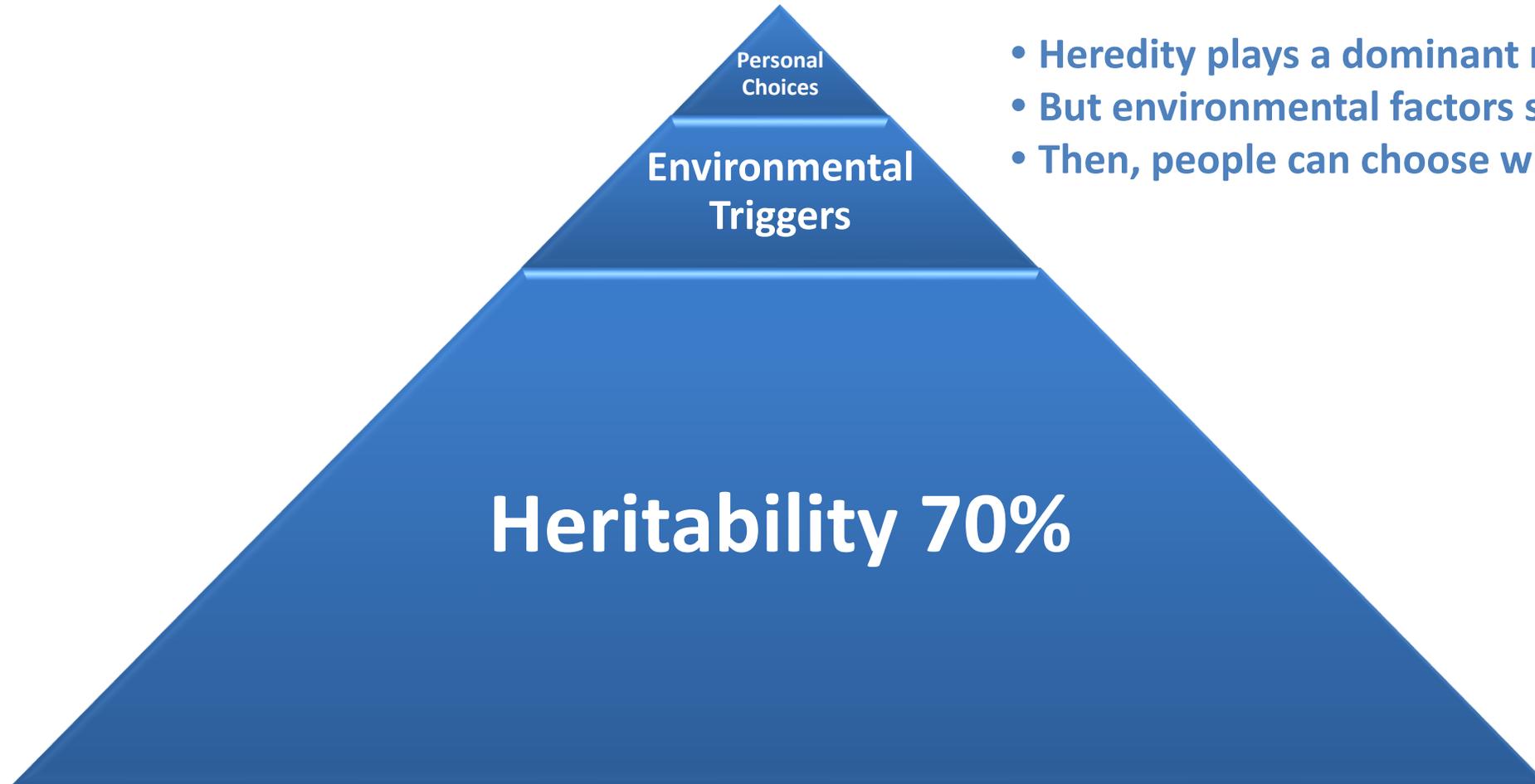
Let's Get Real, photograph © Obesity Action Coalition / OAC Image Gallery

People Typically View Obesity as the Result of Poor Choices



Environment • Choices • Genes

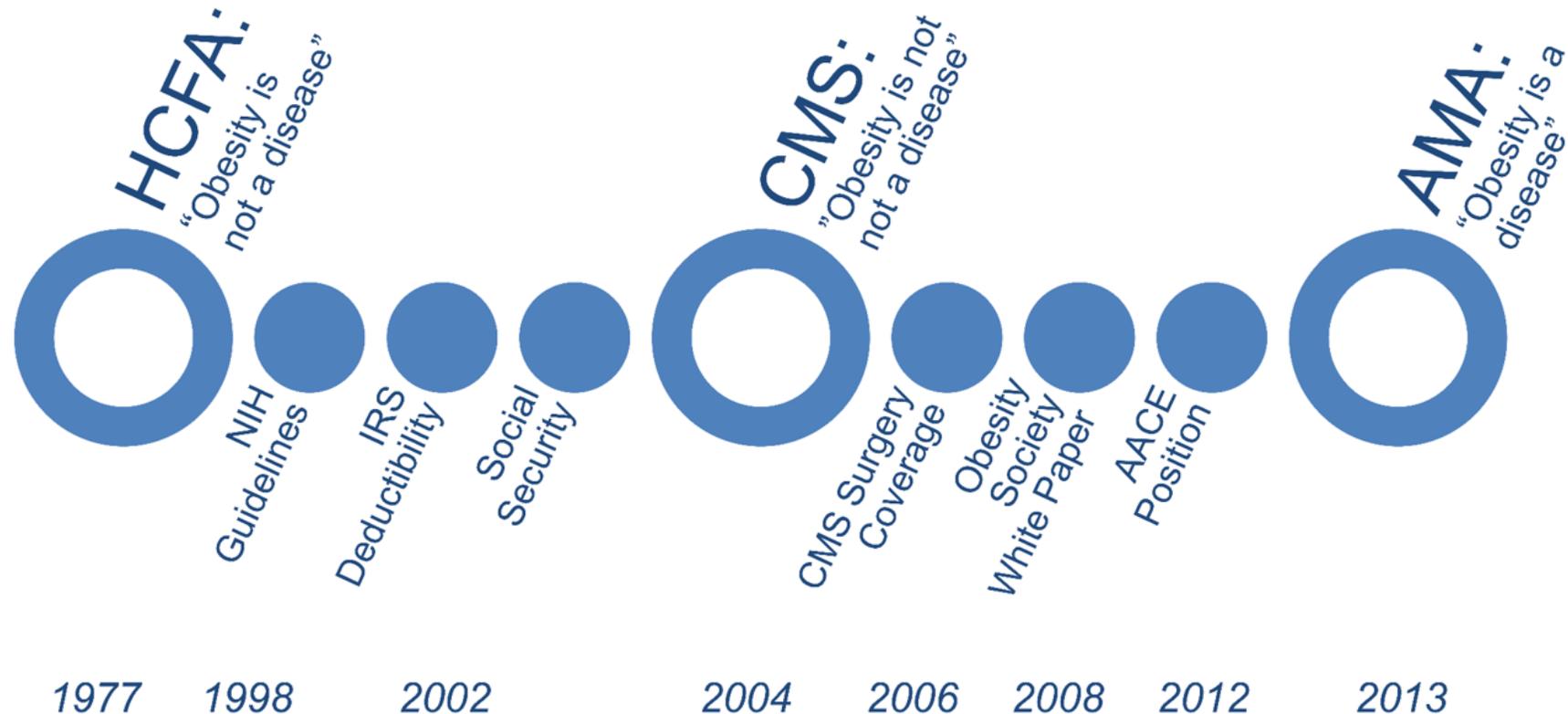
The Truth Is That Obesity Is a Highly Heritable Chronic Disease



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

In 2013 AMA Resolved That Obesity Is a Complex, Chronic Disease

Milestones in Regarding Obesity as a Disease

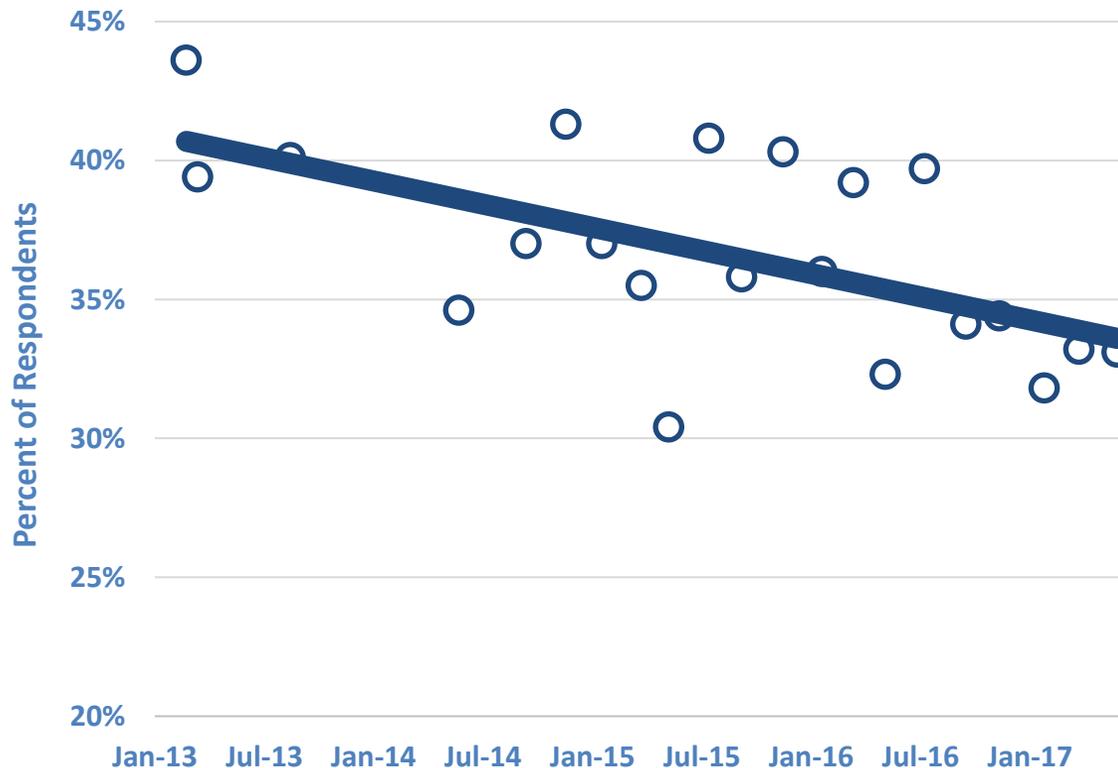


Explicit Bias Is Down, But Implicit Bias Is Up

Dimension	Explicit Bias Trend 2007-2016	Implicit Bias Trend 2001-2016
Sexuality	Down	Down
Race	Down	Down
Skin Tone	Down	Down
Age	Down	Flat
Disability	Down	Flat
Weight	Down	Up

Earlier Research Suggested a Trend Toward Less Blame Between 2013 and 2017

“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

Study Objectives

- Detect shifts between 2017 and 2020 in public opinion about:
 - Obesity
 - People living with obesity
 - Blame directed toward them

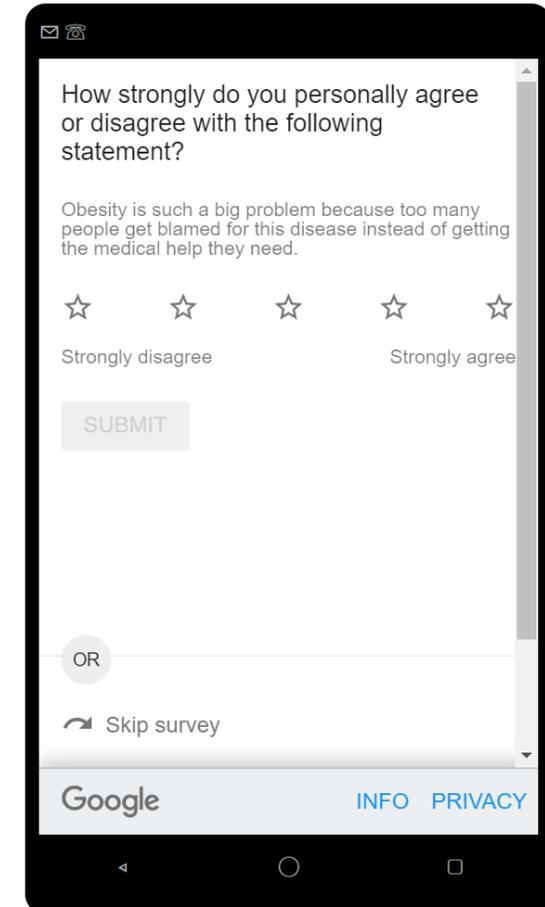
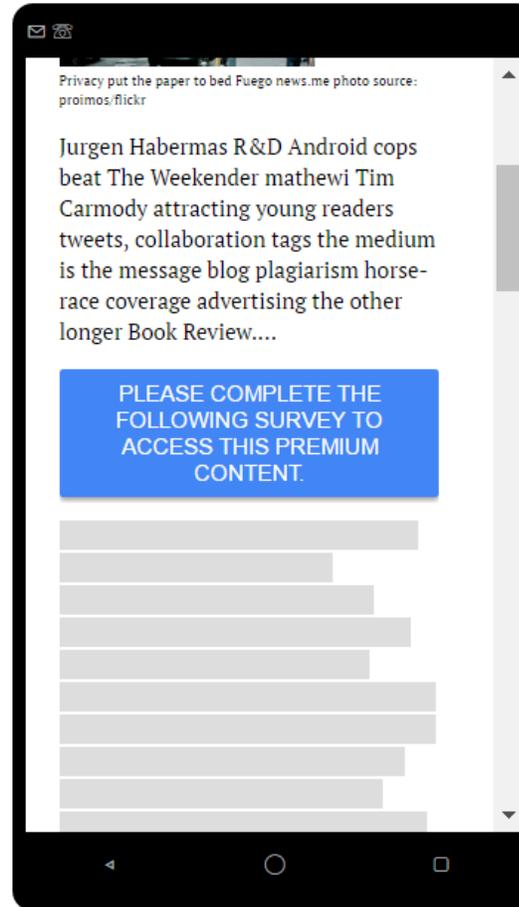


Self-Portrait, photograph © Mike Fritcher / flickr

Web and Smartphone Samples Obtained via Google Consumer Surveys

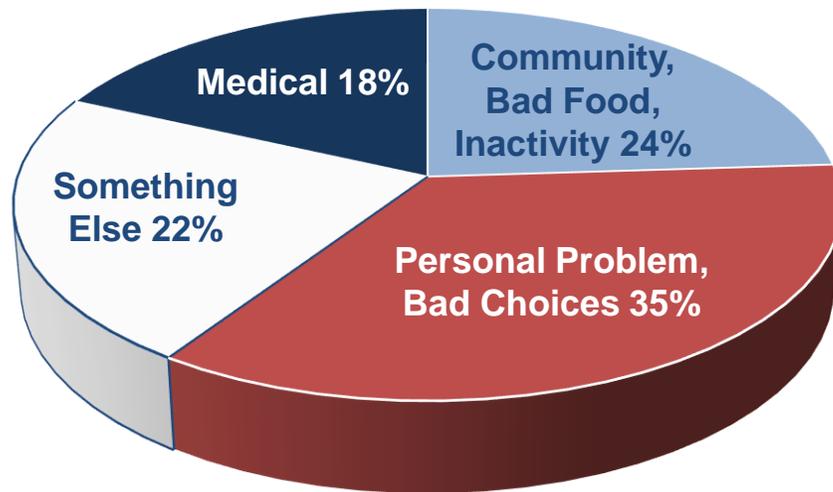
Sample Size

- 7,076 total
- U.S. adults
- 3,530 in Nov 2017
- 3,546 in May 2020
- Only one question per respondent

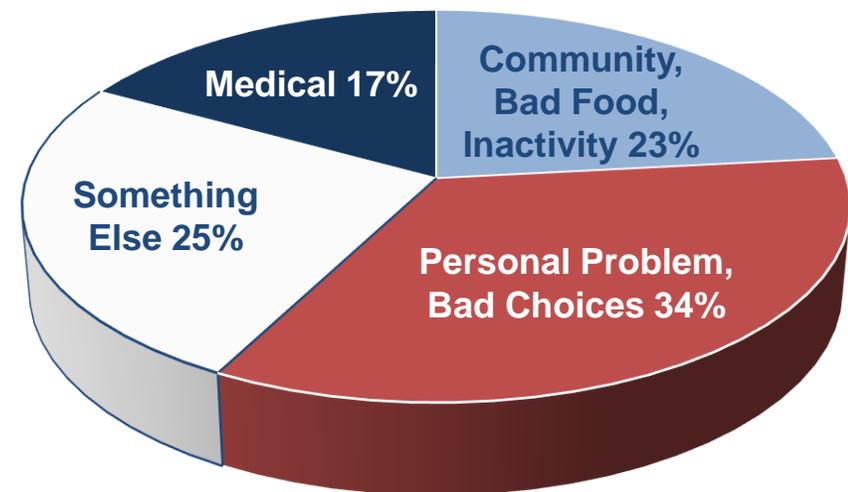


No Big Shifts from 2017 to 2020 in the Public's Primary Views of Obesity

“Which phrase comes closest to describing the type of problem you think obesity is? Personal problem of bad choices, community problem of bad food and inactivity, medical problem, or a something totally different.”



Nov 2017
766 Responses



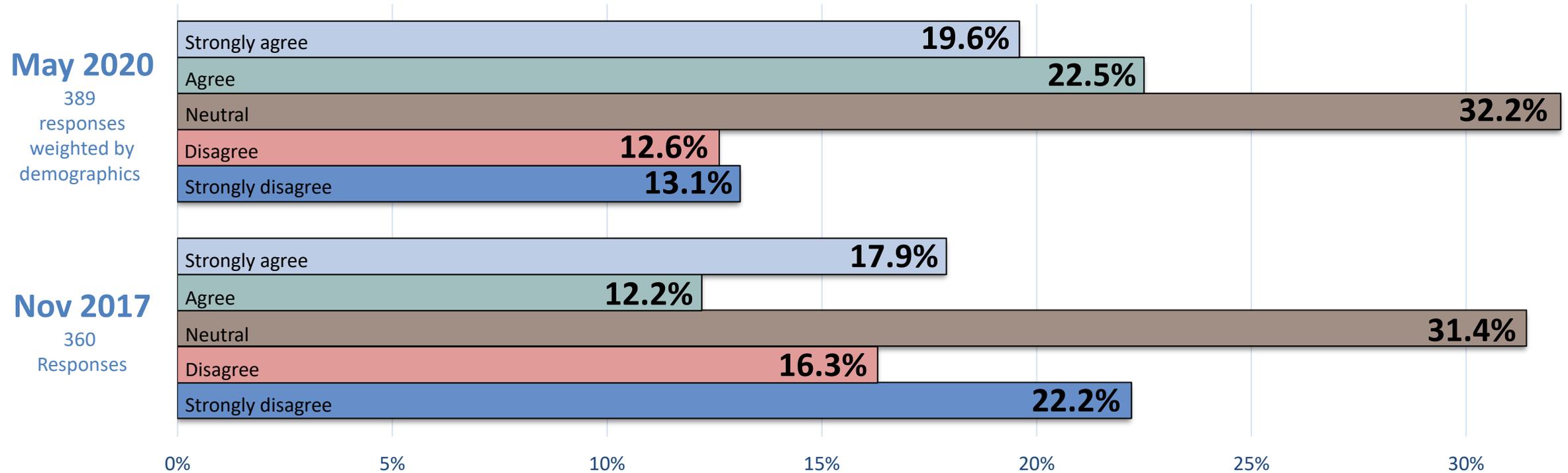
May 2020
747 Responses

Responses weighted by demographics

A proportional odds baseline category logit model demonstrates that differences between 2020 and 2017 responses are not significant, $p > 0.18$.

Agreement with a Medical Narrative for Obesity Grew Between 2017 and 2020 in the U.S.

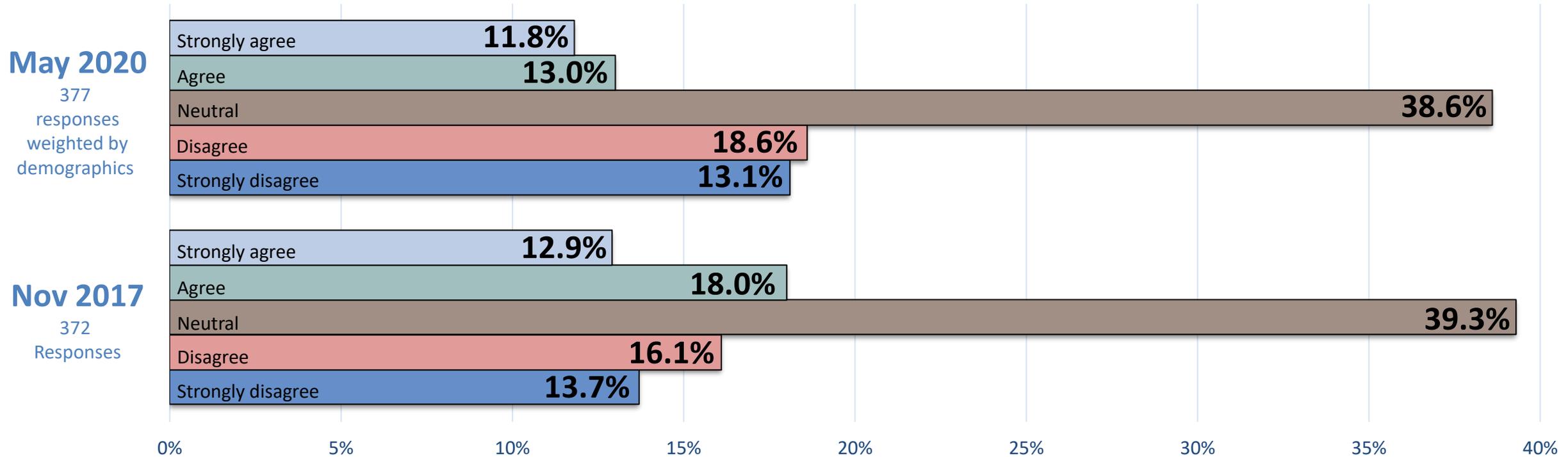
How strongly do you agree or disagree? “Obesity is such a big problem because too many people get blamed for this disease instead of getting the medical help they need.”



A proportional odds cumulative logit model demonstrates that differences between 2020 and 2017 responses are significant, $p=0.001$.

Respondents Trended Away from Agreeing Obesity Is the Fault of People Who Have It

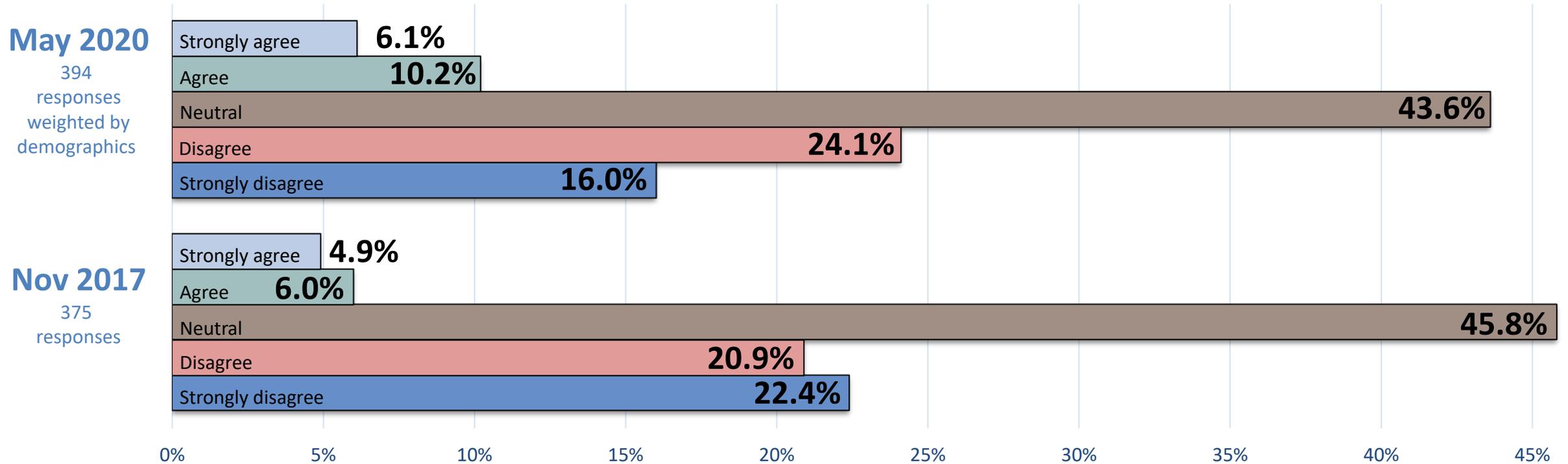
How strongly do you agree or disagree? “If a person has obesity, it is their own fault.”



A proportional odds cumulative logit model demonstrates that differences between 2020 and 2017 responses are not significant, $p=0.101$.

Respondents Trended Toward Agreeing Obesity Is Not the Fault of People Who Have It

How strongly do you agree or disagree? “If a person has obesity, it is not their fault.”



A proportional odds cumulative logit model demonstrates that differences between 2017 and 2020 responses are not significant, $p=0.163$.

Respondents Became More Likely to Agree They Would Interview a Person with Obesity for a Job

How strongly do you agree or disagree?

“If I were an employer, I would interview a person who has obesity for a job.”

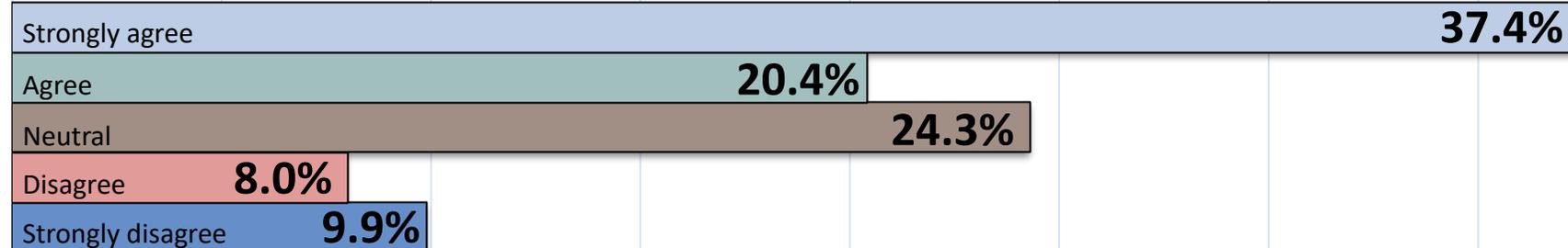
May 2020

395
responses
weighted by
demographics



Nov 2017

365
Responses



0% 5% 10% 15% 20% 25% 30% 35% 40% 45%

A proportional odds cumulative logit model demonstrates that differences between 2020 and 2017 responses are significant, $p=0.001$.

Conclusions

- Personal choice remains a dominant, though misleading theme in public opinion about obesity
- The public has become more open to a medical narrative for obesity
- Marginal trends suggest less inclination to blame people with obesity
- Public sentiment increasingly disagrees with discriminating against people with obesity



Consideration, photograph © Obesity Action Coalition / OAC Image Gallery

Implications

- **Explicit bias against people with obesity may be declining**
- **Implicit bias may be more challenging and deserves attention**



Feeling, photograph © Santiago Sito / flickr

More Information



conscienhealth.org/news



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