



THE FAT REPORT

YOUNG PEOPLE AND
FATPHOBIA



**The Young
Foundation**

**youth
futures**
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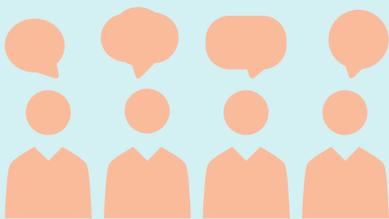
Executive summary.



This report explores young people's experiences of fatphobia, and the medicalisation and dehumanisation of fat bodies.

Fatphobia has been defined as the irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against, obesity or obese people (Collins Dictionary, 2019).

This research has been undertaken by Kickstart peer researchers employed at The Young Foundation who were motivated by their own and other young people's experiences.



In total, 36 young people completed an online survey sharing their experiences of fatphobia.

The target audience for this report includes the general public, employers, education professionals and body-positivity charities.



Findings revealed that young people experienced fatphobia in a variety of contexts, and that these experiences often affected them throughout their life.

Young people said they were socialised into accepting fatphobic attitudes, with the dehumanisation of larger bodies on TV, in society more generally, and in popular culture, and with fatphobia reinforced through fashion inaccessibility.

Early life experiences of fatphobia in schools and from family and friends reinforced these ideas and often affected young people's confidence and self perception.



Young people experienced fatphobia in medical spaces, which included the dismissal of non-weight related issues and eating disorders.

There were persistent occurrences of body-shaming within communities, which led to feelings of exclusion. Young people said they want to see bodies of all shapes and sizes uplifted to challenge fatphobia.

"A body is a body, and while it is beautiful in its uniqueness, it's just a vessel for our characters" - survey participant



Kickstart Scheme

The Kickstart Scheme was launched by the government, funding employers to offer new job roles to 16- to 24-year-olds in receipt of Universal Credit. The scheme was designed to create opportunities for young people to access and explore their career options, giving them a chance to experience a different working environment.

As Kickstart peer researchers, the authors of this report have benefited from the scheme and worked across three research sprints during their time at The Young Foundation. In the third sprint, they decided to focus on the topic of fatphobia.

Participating in this scheme as peer researchers has allowed them to develop their research skills whilst also drawing attention to the issues that are important to young people today and giving a platform to those whose voices are less heard from. These peer researchers believe fatphobia is often controversial or misunderstood, and hope to change that through this report.

Why this topic?

The Kickstart Researchers share their personal testimonies for choosing the topic:

Up to the age of 18, I faced years of bullying as a result of my weight. I had tried to lose weight through diet and exercise, but nothing ever worked. It wasn't until I was 18 that my fat body made sense. I was diagnosed with lipoedema.

Predominantly affecting the legs, it causes an abnormal build-up of fat which causes pain and can severely limit mobility. With the diagnosis, I finally felt like I was allowed to start feeling confident and happy in my body. I still face fatphobia in my social life and in medical settings but I no longer allow it to rule my life. If people have the time to make comments about my body, they must live the most boring of lives. Or I'm just the most interesting person to exist.

Amelia, peer researcher

I have not experienced fatphobia towards myself but have seen it happen to others. It is the look on their face, especially when a fatphobic comment comes out of nowhere. It is saddening to see how a friend is smiling one minute, and the next they're trying not to let a comment affect them.

Miraal, peer researcher

I have experienced fatphobia ever since I can remember. I have always been heavier, resulting in a lot of bullying throughout my childhood, which made me lack confidence. During my adolescence, I discovered my trans identity and realised I wanted top surgery. This is where I experienced fatphobia in the medical sector. A surgeon told me I was far too fat to operate on unless I got my BMI down from 41 to 34, which I successfully did, upon which his team informed me that their BMI allowance had changed from 34 to 30. This is where I feel I experience fatphobia in the medical sector. Fortunately, within months I found another surgeon who was willing to operate on me with my BMI at 38.

Tyler, peer researcher

I wanted to research into the topic of fatphobia because I have experienced it all of my life. Medically, socially and physically, I have been discriminated against because of my weight.

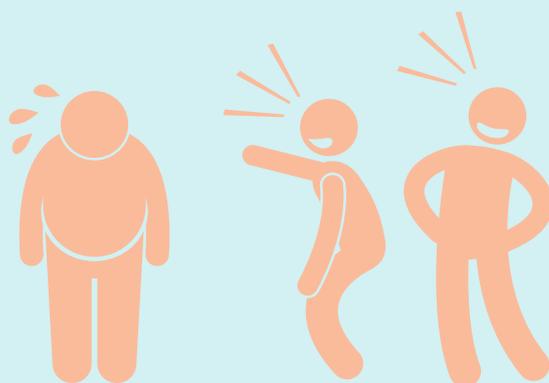
Elly, peer researcher

Maddie has chosen not to share her testimony but she is a valued member of the group who has helped shape and carry out this research project.

Introduction

The discrimination of fat bodies is prevalent in all facets of society. From casual mockery and demonisation of fatness on TV to judgement and accounts of mistreatment within healthcare, hateful comments left on photos of fat people and even prejudice within family and friendship groups – fatphobia runs rampant.

This report seeks to shine light on the issue of fatphobia, as it is often overlooked and not taken seriously. Fat people deserve to have their voices not only heard, but also acknowledged and listened to. When young people in particular experience fatphobia, it can compound the challenges they are already facing on account of their age. This report explores how young people are experiencing fatphobia in different areas of their lives.



Literature review

Through desk-based research, it became apparent that within the fat activist spaces, the term 'fat' was being reclaimed as 'a neutral descriptor for themselves' (Zoller, 2020). Through reclamation of the word, it loses its ability to be used as an insult and becomes nothing more than a descriptor. It no longer carries the same weight it once did. Hence, the usage of the term fat within this report as opposed to medical terms such as obese.

Policy

Legislation is in place to protect individuals from discrimination based on specific characteristics that a person has or believes in i.e., gender, race and religion. They are protected by the Equality Act (2010) and the Protection from Harassment Act (1997). However, discrimination on the grounds of weight, specifically being fat, is not a protected characteristic and so not covered under the equality act. For some people it could be argued that their weight is linked to their disability but where this is difficult to prove, especially for people with fat disorders, it can leave them open to abuse.

Healthcare

Within healthcare, fatphobia is often forgiven as it can be passed off as concern for a patient's health. This is despite research in the *International Journal of Obesity* finding that 74% of fat people surveyed have been discriminated against due to their weight by healthcare professionals by having unrelated health issues linked to their weight (Metro Science Reporter, 2021). Language used to describe fat people is often aggressive and shocking as a way to make statistics appear worse than they are whilst also used as a way to stir up panic. This has become worse during the Covid-19 pandemic, due to the link between Covid-19 and obesity (Metro Science Reporter, 2020).

Employment

Fatphobia within workplaces can limit how far a fat individual actually progresses. In a US study, researchers found 45% of employers are less inclined to recruit a candidate they considered fat. They also found fat people are less likely to be regarded as leaders, and often had lower starting salaries (Levine and Schweitzer, 2015). In a separate study, it was found that fat employees are 12 times more likely to report unfair treatment at work than thin employees (Bevan, 2019).

Social

Fat Acceptance and Body Positivity movements began on social media as a way to create a more accepting space for differing bodies, including size, disability and more. Rebecca Jennings (2021) discusses how these movements, however, can have negative effects. She states that seeing mostly skinny bodies on social media can make people who usually have a stable body image feel insecure in themselves.

Other

Diet Culture, defined by Daryanani (2021) as '*a set of beliefs that values thinness, appearance, and shape above health and wellbeing*', leads to the belief that all types of thinness is viewed as good and that all fatness is bad. Alongside the damaging effects of diet culture, we now encounter the issue of 'Fat Talk' - which is defined as the normalised degradation of body shape, weight, and size (Compeau, 2011). 'Fat Talk' leads to many individuals developing low self-esteem due to feelings of not being good enough. Both of these issues lead to wider repercussions within society, such as a rise in eating disorders in young people.

Gaps in research

There is very little research exploring how fatphobia affects specific social groups within society, as often the research focuses on fat people as a monolithic group with no consideration of how age, disability and race may affect this.

This research is therefore focused on young people's experiences of fatphobia, with some questions touching on how different social factors can contribute to the discrimination people face. Additionally, bridging this gap would add a wealth of understanding to the research area.

The researchers found the topic of 'concern trolling' has only recently become a point of discussion when it comes to fatphobia. Often, research focuses on the internal comparisons individuals make in regard to their own bodies, with limited discussion around how the comments of strangers can also do harm. Therefore, the researchers gave space for individuals to discuss this topic as part of the research.

Methodology.



The project began with an in-depth desktop review of existing research.



This was followed by the creation of a detailed research proposal, which was presented to the team for approval.



TAKE SURVEY

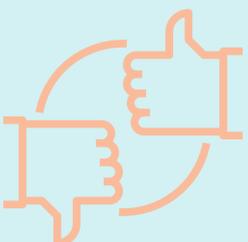
An online survey was designed to gather data from participants aged 16 to 25. The survey included a mixture of open and closed questions.



Participants were recruited through social media sites.



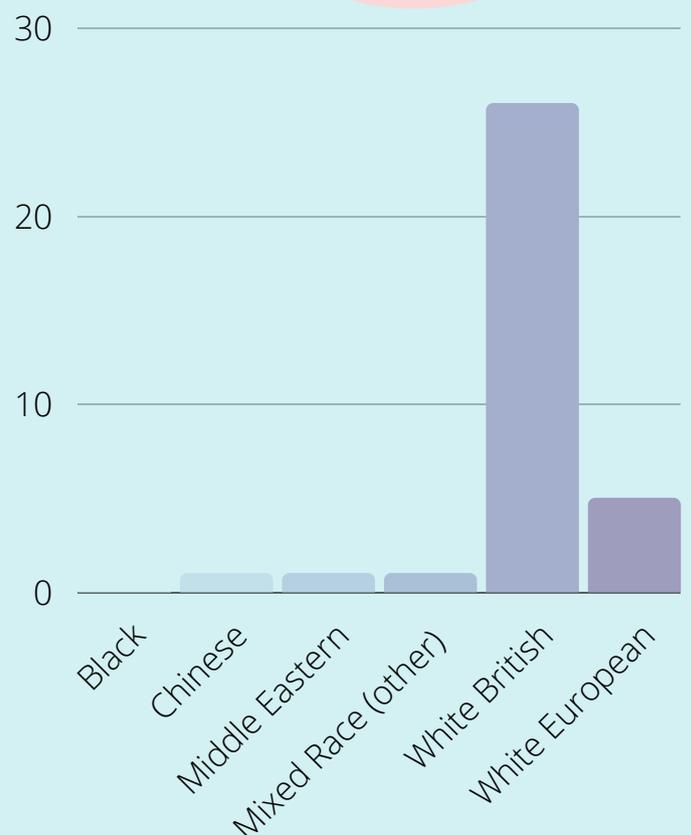
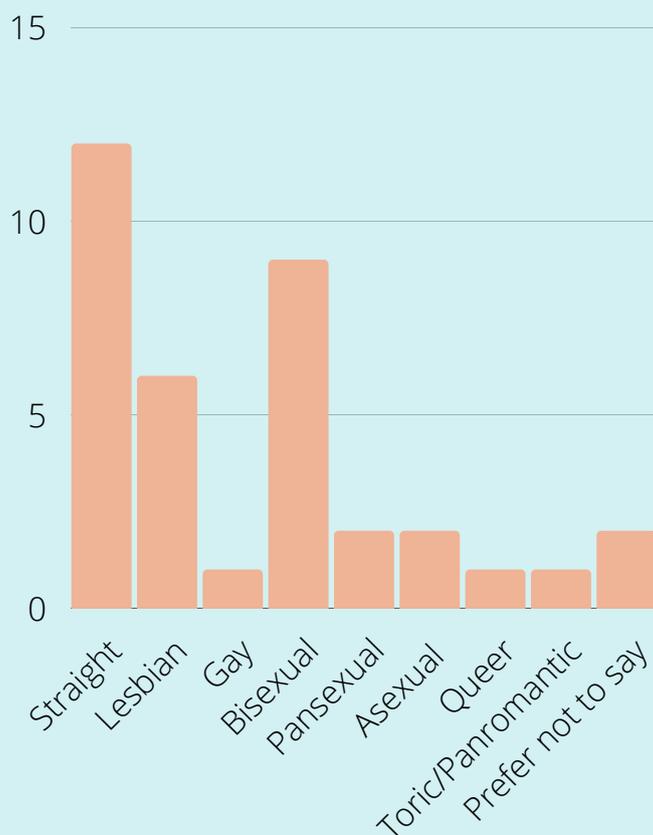
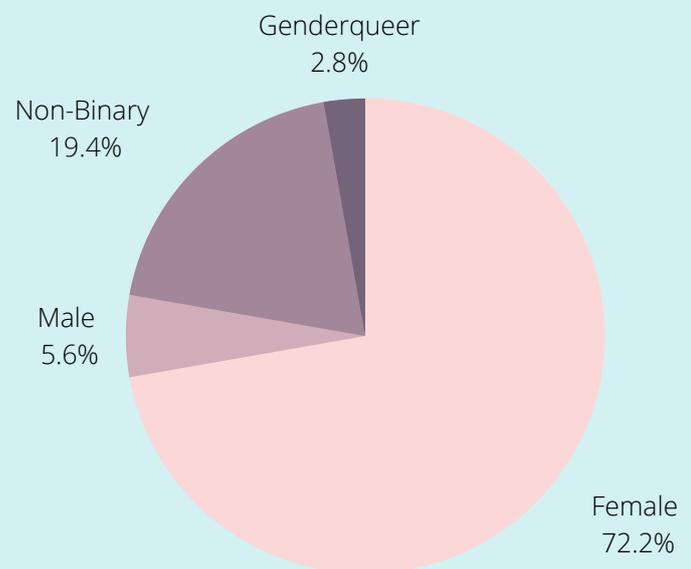
The Kickstart researchers analysed and then presented the quantitative data collected using graphs. This data mostly supported the qualitative responses, which were coded using thematic analysis. Codes were assigned to each quote, then grouped into broader themes.



Limitations include a non-diverse participant pool as well as having only a one-week data collection window.

Demographics

Our survey was completed by 36 respondents aged between 16 and 25. The majority of participants were white British and female, so future research should aim to bring in respondents of different genders and ethnicities to gain a better understanding of how different young people experience fatphobia.

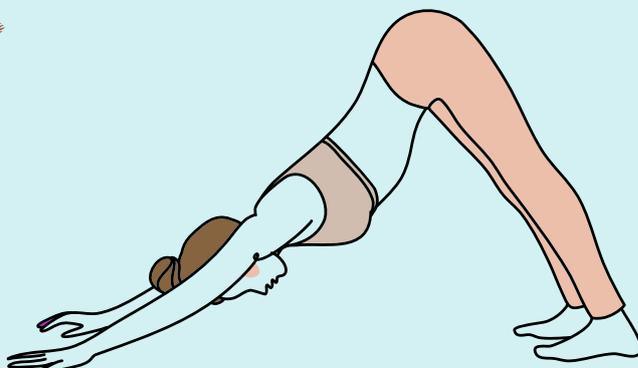


Findings – overview

When analysing the data, very strong themes emerged. One was the impact of **early life experiences of fatphobia**, where comments from family members and school practices enforced fatphobia from a young age. The **socialisation of fatphobia** covers how the dehumanisation of fat bodies and fashion inaccessibility contributes to internalised fatphobia.

Another strong theme was **medical fatphobia**, which includes the dismissal of eating disorders presented by fat people and the dismissal of health concerns, even with health issues that resulted in weight gain. The final emerging theme was **non-fat people's experiences of fatphobia**.

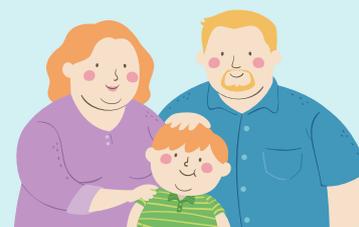
This section finishes with **looking to the future**, where participants wanted to see more done to celebrate bodies of all shapes and sizes.



Early life experiences of fatphobia

Young people's family played a big role in their early life experiences of fatphobia:

"My family commented on my weight before I was even fat. They gave me a complex about my weight, which meant I could never discuss it, and it gave me an unhealthy relationship with food and with my body."



Young people referenced wider policies, such as the National Child Measurement Programme, being a contributor to experiencing shame and bullying as a result of their weight:

"[In] Year 5, when everyone got weighed and my classmates asked me how much I weigh and commented on my weight, and my mum took me to the doctors after school when she got the letter."



This was reinforced in comments made by friends and other people close to them, which affected how they saw themselves and their body:

"I've always been told I have an amazing personality but I would be so much better if I just lost some weight. It made me feel disgusting and sick. I hated myself and the way I looked."

Socialisation of fatphobia

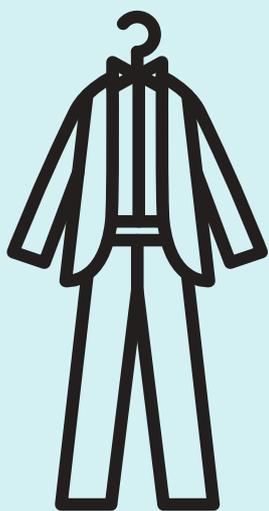
A reoccurring theme throughout this research project was that plus-size people feel like they are dehumanised and not treated with the same respect:

"[I've had] people taking pictures of me, hearing people make jokes about me to their friends like 'oh, there's your girlfriend over there', just to embarrass their mates."

Growing up being told that you'd be better if you lost weight has created a generation of young people with extreme body image issues, internalised fatphobia, and low self esteem:

"I don't know, all my life, really. I've always felt like people would like me more if I was skinny. I always felt like people didn't like me because I'm fat."

Not being able to find fashionable clothing in their size on the high street reinforces these feelings:



"I'm struggling to find clothing in my size. That's not good enough. Brands that say they cater to plus sizes do from size 4 to 18, when 16 is the national average."

"Most stores go to a size 18, if that. All the clothes I own are plain, like plain-coloured tops with no patterns, because it's either that or some really ugly designs and definitely not anything trendy."

Medical fatphobia

69% of participants reported experiencing medical fatphobia, with a large proportion reporting that they were then denied further investigation into their health issue:



"I was refused treatment and referrals to a specialist because of my weight and BMI for a medical reason that had nothing to do with my weight."

There was also a lack of understanding of the medical conditions that resulted in weight gain:

"When I got my PCOS diagnosis, they told me that my symptoms/testosterone levels will go down if I lose weight... {but} it's so much harder to lose weight and easier to gain with PCOS"

Additionally, some young people had experienced dismissal or a lack of empathy when trying to access support for an eating disorder. Furthermore, some young people felt treatment they received contributed to the development of an eating disorder:



"While struggling with an eating disorder, I was told I couldn't be offered help because I wasn't classed as underweight and so I would need to lose more weight in order to get help."



Non-fat experiences of fatphobia

A huge misconception is that fatphobia only affects people who are fat, but fatphobia has a broader grip with diet culture, body scrutiny, and a fear of fatness, whether for one's self or others.

"I'm very slim and always have been. I've felt judged my whole life when it comes to my weight..."

Non-fat survey respondents reported fatphobia happening at work, online, and in broader society:



"I have witnessed fatphobia in the workplace a lot... I've witnessed people talk about others when not around, saying things like 'she's putting on some weight'."

There was an appreciation for body positivity movements but not the hate that comes with it:

"I love the movements but don't love the constant attacks that come with them. Anytime someone mentions being bigger and confident, so many people come out hit out at them for it."



Looking to the future

A large number of participants want to see more being done in society to uplift and empower people of all shapes and sizes. This research asked the question, can more be done to uplift people of all sizes? With 30 participants saying yes, 5 saying maybe and 1 saying no. When expanding on their answer, participants made reference to the effect fatphobia has had on them:



"All my life, I've been made to feel like I am not a good person and not worthy of love, attention or understanding because of my weight. We should uplift people of all sizes because they're some of the most unconfident people around..."

Young people would like more positive representation of plus-sized bodies in media and TV to help uplift people and to challenge the assumptions that fat equals unhealthy:

"I think we lack media representation, especially when it comes to health and athletics. All that is put forward is the idea of thinness as health."



Conclusion

This research indicates that fatphobia is ingrained deeply into our current society, with the idea of fatness being viewed as an inherent wrong. This opinion of fatness leads all members of society to be affected, as there is a fear associated with becoming fat. This report aims to highlight why this opinion, and the subsequent fear, is so harmful to individuals, and how it can lead to medical and mental health issues either developing, or worsening.



Fatphobia is one of the final forms of discrimination that is widely accepted within society (Cottais, Pavard and Sanchez, 2021), and the Kickstart researchers leading this project hope this report can begin to change this. Their hope is that it helps at least one plus-size person to not feel so unheard; to know they are worthy, and they're not alone.

For young people - who already face a number of challenges - fatphobia can be another struggle at a time when they are vulnerable and trying to find themselves and navigate the world.



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