

## Results of the NAAFA Survey on Employment Discrimination

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*"I was told that I could not be hired because insurance would not cover me."*

*"I was told by upper management that I would never be promoted until I lost weight and the union took management's side when I went to the union."*

*"The prospective employer assumed that I would lack energy."*

*"People are always surprised when I do a good job or display any talent or ability."*

Two years ago, the NAAFA Newsletter contained an editorial entitled "It's time to give employment a higher priority." This article indicated that NAAFA had published a large number of articles on health in its Newsletter but few on employment. When we read this article, we were intrigued, since we had been conducting research on weight and employment discrimination but were dismayed at the lack of prior research in this area. At the same time, we were aware that all across the country, isolated individuals were in the process of suing their employers for discrimination due to weight.

As a result, we developed the NAAFA Survey on Employment Discrimination, which was approved by the NAAFA Board of Directors and mailed to all NAAFA members in the fall of 1987. Each respondent was also asked to give an additional copy of the survey to someone else. The survey asked about current employment, job satisfaction, and salary, as well as past employment. It asked respondents whether they had ever been not hired, denied promotions, denied benefits, demoted, fired, or pressured to resign because of their weight. We also asked about more subtle kinds of discrimination—did supervisors, co-workers, or subordinates ever make fun of or criticize the respondent for their weight, or were they ever threatened, chased, or beaten because of their weight. We asked whether personal self-confidence had been diminished because of weight, so that it affected their job

applications, job interviews, asking for raises or promotions, or getting to know co-workers. Other questions asked whether respondents had ever concealed or hidden their weight from others (such as using a telephone rather than appearing in person) because of weight. We wanted to know whether respondents had been victimized during their school years because of their weight, and whether their weight had interfered with attainment of educational goals. We also asked about two areas of discrimination that were not related to employment—medical and housing discrimination based on weight—because there have been no surveys to our knowledge of these forms of discrimination against fat people. Finally, we asked respondents for some demographic information, including their age, education, marital status, income, weight, height, and weight history.

Response rate and method of scoring of the survey. We received back a total of 367 surveys from women and 78 from men. We were impressed, not only with the number of NAAFA members who completed and returned the surveys, but also with the number of people who included written comments about their particular situations. These comments were extremely helpful to us in understanding weight discrimination, and we will quote some of these comments in this article (making sure to avoid comments that would violate confidentiality).

In general, our results indicated that there was a strong relationship between respondents' weight and their experience of all forms of discrimination. Thus, the heavier a respondent, the more likely he or she had experienced job discrimination, verbal or physical abuse, school victimization, housing and medical discrimination, that he or she had concealed or hidden weight, and that personal self-confidence was lower because of weight.

Next, we were interested to see whether these forms of discrimination differed for women and men. Also, in order to present some of our results on a table, we needed to divide people into groups based on their weight. This is so the reader can see how fatter people experience more discrimination than thinner people. Although there are several ways we could have done this, we chose to list three groups: 1) NON-FAT PEOPLE: those who would be considered "average weight", or no more than 19% over "average weight" by standard height and weight tables; 2) MODERATELY FAT PEOPLE: those who would be considered

20-40% above average weight on these tables; and 3) FAT PEOPLE: those who would be considered over 50% above average on the tables.

We realize that there are problems with any arbitrary grouping of people into categories and certainly with our choosing to label these groups as we did. Since many NAAFA members are proud of the term "fat" then some may be insulted to discover that we would categorize them as "moderately fat" or "non-fat" as though we do not consider them part of the organization. Others may feel that in today's society, with its fanatic focus on thinness, almost no one (particularly women) feels "non-fat" so that term is misleading. Certainly, some people may be the heaviest person in their workplace, yet be labeled "non-fat" by our method, and others may be categorized as "fat" by the above method yet not appear so in their place of work, etc. Nevertheless, we hope that our categorization will help to illuminate some of the issues that respondents indicated in response to our survey.

Job discrimination. Over 40% of fat men and 60% of fat women stated that they had not been hired for a job because of their weight. In contrast, almost none of the non-fat respondents indicated that this had ever occurred. Over 30% of fat men and women indicated that they had been denied promotions or raises, and over 25% indicated that they had been denied benefits (such as health and life insurance) because of their weight. Nearly 70% of fat men and women had been questioned about their weight on the job or urged to lose weight, and this was also true of about 30% of moderately fat people and 10% of non-fat people.

The comments of respondents indicate that, for some, their job interviews focused almost entirely on their weight. Others were enthusiastically encouraged to apply and then the enthusiasm waned when they were seen in person. Employers told fat people that they would lack energy; that they would provide bad role models. They felt they were treated as though they were mentally handicapped. Some fat people had been given health insurance but were charged more for it. They were not included in firm functions. They were told not to sit on the new office furniture in case it would break. They could not get a new job when they moved. They were passed over for promotions because of their appearance. And one respondent wrote, "you can't demote someone already on the bottom."

continued next page

**Table**  
**Percentage of survey respondents  
 who indicated discrimination**

Category	Men			Women		
	Non-fat	Mod Fat	Fat	Non-fat	Mod Fat	Fat
<b>Job Discrimination:</b>						
not being hired	0	0	41.7	0	30.8	61.6
denied promotion or raise	0	0	36.1	0	7.7	30.6
denied benefits	0	0	30.6	0	5.1	25.3
fired or pressured to resign	0	0	11.1	0	2.6	17.4
urged to lose	15.4	26.7	69.4	10.6	33.3	68.0
<b>Concealed weight because of:</b>						
public harassment	3.8	0	27.8	6.4	17.9	46.3
employment	0	0	16.7	0	10.3	25.3
medical	0	0	16.7	2.1	10.3	26.0
other	3.8	0	11.1	0	15.4	13.9
<b>Lack of Self Confidence because of:</b>						
applying for job	0	0	41.7	10.6	56.4	73.3
job interviewing	0	0	44.4	12.8	64.1	73.0
raise/promotion	0	0	22.2	6.4	28.2	39.5
getting to know co-workers	11.5	6.7	22.2	4.3	38.5	47.3
continuing education	0	0	19.4	4.3	25.6	36.7
medical	11.5	26.7	44.4	17.0	53.8	73.0
other	0	0	11.1	10.6	20.5	26.3

More than any other comment, however, respondents wrote that they suspected job discrimination but couldn't prove it. As one person wrote: "Who knows—but I'm sure." Thus, the results on the frequency of job discrimination may actually be underestimating the true incidence.

**Salary and job qualification.** The men who responded had been in the labor force longer than the women and earned higher salaries. However, there was not much difference between fat, moderately fat, and non-fat people regarding their salary nor how long they had been in the labor force. Given all the discrimination that fat respondents had indicated, it hadn't significantly affected their salary. This seems to be a tribute to the perseverance of NAAFA members! Nevertheless, fat people were more likely to indicate that they were over-qualified for the jobs they had.

**Job prestige.** Respondents stated their job title on the survey, and two researchers carefully looked up the prestige of each job title using census data. (They agreed on the prestige of 93% of all respondents' jobs—quite a high reliability). Although men and women did not differ in general in job prestige, there was a difference between the overall prestige of jobs of people in different weight categories. In general, fat people were employed in jobs that had lower prestige.

**Personal self-confidence.** Over 70% of fat women stated that their weight had interfered with their personal self-confidence in applying for a job and going to a job interview. This was true of 40% of fat men, and over half of moderately fat women, but for virtually none of non-fat men and women. Additionally, about 40% of fat women felt their weight had interfered with their self-confidence in asking for a raise or promotion, in getting to know co-workers or customers/clients, and in continuing their education. Over 70% of fat women, over 40% of fat men, and about one fifth of moderately fat women said that their weight had interfered with their self-confidence in going to a physician or nurse.

Although we didn't ask about self-confidence interfering with sexual and social relationships, nearly all of the people who checked the "other" category mentioned this omission. People wrote about lack of self-confidence in dating, starting sexual relationships; taking risks, being flirtatious, and getting married. "Face it," wrote one person, "it affects the whole personae and life of a fat person in today's socially slender world." Other people also mentioned going to public places, participating in physical activities, going shopping, going to church, going to work, travelling, attending college, eating in public, turning in a complaint, beginning a lawsuit, and, as one respondent wrote: "every single part and facet of daily personal and professional life. When one is made to feel inferior at an early age, the fears and problems remain even though negative occurrences are very rare now."

**Concealed or hidden weight.** Over one quarter of fat men and nearly half of fat women had concealed their

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Size Chart	Our Size	XXS	XS	S	M	L	XL	XXL	3XL
	Depth of Bust Size	32	34	36	38	40	42	44	46
Bust	36	38	40	42	44	46	48	50	52
Waist	29	31	33	35	37	39	41	43	45
Hips	38	40	42	44	46	48	50	52	54

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weight (such as using the telephone rather than appearing in person) in order to avoid public harassment or intimidation. About 16% of fat men and one quarter of fat women had done so to avoid employment discrimination and medical discrimination. Such concealment of weight was virtually nonexistent among non-fat men and women and among moderately fat men.

Respondents' written comments indicate that they selected jobs involving telephone work or writing at home in order to avoid being seen, or chose jobs such as newspaper reporting, dispatching, or telemarketing that involved the telephone. Others indicated that they were more comfortable speaking on the phone than meeting in person. Many mentioned avoidance of social situations, family gatherings, school reunions, or said that they send other people on errands to avoid being seen.

NAAFAs are fat activists. Despite the tremendous amount of discrimination that NAAFA members had received in all areas of their life due to weight, we were impressed with the number of written comments that indicated a spirit of fighting back. Here are some of these comments which relate to the areas covered in the first part of this report:

*"I was told that I would never amount to much because I was fat. Well, look at me now!"*

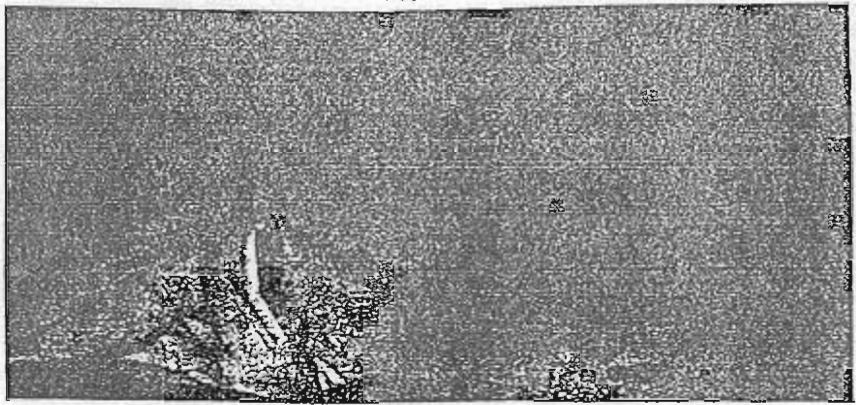
*"I now write NOT APPLICABLE on applications that ask for my weight."*

*"My confidence is there, the accommodations (large seats on buses, airplanes, theaters, etc.) are not."*

*"I'm an exclusive Fat Advocate. I have no room for fat bigotry!"*

[Next month, we'll continue with part 2 of this report and cover the responses to question about verbal and physical abuse, school victimization, medical discrimination, and housing discrimination, and the researchers' final conclusions. —Ed.]

Esther Rothblum is a NAAFA member and an Associate Professor of Clinical Psychology at the University of Vermont, currently on sabbatical at the Women's Studies Institute of the University of Minnesota in Duluth. Pamela Brand is a NAAFA member and a doctoral student in Social Psychology at the University of Vermont. Carol Miller is an Associate Professor of Social Psychology at the University of Vermont. Helen Oetjen is an undergraduate psychology major and was a research assistant on this project. All are conducting research in the area of weight and job discrimination, and women, weight, and social stigma.



**It's A Boy!** Congratulations to Debra Ermsberger and her husband Dr. Paul Ermsberger (NY) on the birth of their first child, Timothy Scott, born on December 6, 1988. Mom, Dad, and Timmy are doing fine. Paul is the Chairman of NAAFA's Advisory Board and Deb was the first Coordinator of the Feminist SIG.

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**Table**  
*Percentage of survey respondents  
who indicated discrimination*

Category	Men			Women		
	Non-fat	Mod Fat	Fat	Non-fat	Mod Fat	Fat
<b>Verbal/Physical Abuse</b>						
by friend/family	30.8	66.7	86.1	44.7	92.3	92.9
by co-worker	15.4	46.7	80.6	23.4	61.5	73.3
by supervisor	3.8	13.3	52.8	2.1	38.5	45.4
by subordinate	0	20.0	44.4	5.4	23.1	37.0
punched/hit/beaten	3.8	0	27.8	2.1	15.4	16.4
threatened/violence	3.8	0	25.0	0	7.7	17.1
sexually assaulted	0	0	2.8	4.3	2.6	7.8
chased	0	0	16.7	2.1	5.1	24.2
objects thrown	0	0	13.9	4.3	7.7	16.7
<b>School Victimization</b>						
tricks and anti-fat jokes in:						
junior high	19.2	33.3	55.6	10.5	41.0	64.4
high school	11.5	20.0	41.7	8.5	33.3	52.0
college	3.8	13.3	19.4	6.4	7.7	25.0
nicknames or negative names in:						
junior high	15.4	33.3	50.0	10.6	56.4	69.0
high school	3.8	13.3	44.4	6.4	28.2	52.0
college	3.8	6.7	13.9	2.1	10.3	21.4
threats of violence/physical abuse in:						
junior high	11.5	0	25.0	0	12.8	15.0
high school	0	0	19.4	0	5.1	10.0
college	0	0	8.3	0	5.1	3.6
<b>Medical</b>						
told to lose weight for no reason	23.1	53.3	77.8	19.1	71.8	92.5
called neg. names	3.8	0	38.9	2.1	23.1	44.1
refused treatment	0	6.7	16.7	0	7.7	24.2
other problems	3.8	0	16.7	0	5.1	29.2

ous condition was ignored, or they were told (incorrectly) that they were not pregnant, just fat. They were refused birth control prescriptions, or they were told to lose weight before coming back. They were told they were too fat for the doctor to find the diseased organ during surgery. They were prescribed inappropriate or dangerous medications for weight loss. They were told that weight loss is easy.

Some stayed away from medical treatment because of their experiences with doctors or their fear of injury because of how their doctor felt about their weight. Or they were told that the doctor does not see obese people, or told to leave the office. They mentioned the problem of small blood pressure cuffs, scales that stop at 300 pounds, and small hospital gowns. There was a sense that doctors felt that fat people deserved the illnesses they had. And one person wrote, "I was told by a doctor to just take a gun and shoot myself."

**NAAFA's are fat activists.** Despite the tremendous amount of discrimination that NAAFA members had received in all areas of their life due to weight, we were impressed with the number of written comments that indicated a spirit of fighting back. Here are some of these comments which relate to the areas covered in this second part of our report:

—"I received very rough treatment from one doctor. I did not return to him, of course."

—"Medical personnel have not annoyed me because I demand polite and professional treatment."

—"I am tall and very intimidating. Very few people will be rude or nasty unless it's behind my back—fear instills respect."

—"Please note: I am no longer intimidated."

**Conclusion.** In summary, the results of the survey indicated a very high incidence of reported job discrimination among fat people. Fat men and women have jobs with less prestige than those who are thinner. However, fat people in this study do not have lower salaries than do thinner people.

The survey results also indicated very high frequencies of discrimination in other areas of life, many of which have implications for employment success. Thus fat people are more likely than are non-fat people to have experienced verbal taunts and comments by co-workers and supervisors, as well as by friends and family members. They are more likely to have been physically abused on account of their weight. Many fat women and men were victimized while in school. Fat people tend to conceal their weight by relying on the telephone or on others in order to avoid public harassment or intimidations in the worksetting. Most fat people have lower self-confidence due to their weight, and state that this low self-confidence has interfered with applying and interviewing for jobs, asking for a raise or promotion, and getting to know co-workers. Thus, the results show evidence of both direct and more indirect forms of discrimination that affect employment.

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	Waist	36	40	42	44	46	48	50	52

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## Survey Results continued

It is important to emphasize the tremendous incidence of medical discrimination cited by most respondents, but particularly by fat people. Given the negative experiences, some fat people indicated that they had stopped going to see their doctor, or that their doctor refused to see them because of their weight.

Finally, given the lack of attention that has been paid to job discrimination, the surveys give evidence of the general stress experienced by fat people in their daily lives. But they also show an impressive extent of coping and a determination to succeed despite extreme societal biases against fat people. We would like to thank all respondents for their time and their candor in completing the surveys.

## Researchers/Authors:

Esther Rothblum is a NAAFA member and an Associate Professor of Clinical Psychology at the University of Vermont, currently on sabbatical at the Women's Studies Institute of the University of Minnesota in Duluth.

Pamela Brand is a NAAFA member and a doctoral student in Social Psychology at the University of Vermont.

Carol Miller is an Associate Professor of Social Psychology at the University of Vermont.

Helen Oetien is an undergraduate psychology major and was a research assistant on this project. All are conducting research in the area of weight and job discrimination, and women, weight, and social stigma. ☺

## Obituary

### Audrey S. Smith

Audrey S. Smith, mother of Sally Smith, died on March 31, 1989 in Sacramento, California after a long battle with cancer.

While Audrey was not a NAAFA member, she was a supporter of her daughter's NAAFA activities, and an active NAAFA volunteer. Until less than a week before her death, she continued to assist with mailings sent from the NAAFA office. In addition, Audrey was instrumental in providing the financial assistance necessary to move the national office to California.

Sally and her sisters have requested that those wishing to make memorial gifts make a donation to NAAFA, Inc. ☺

## "Give Five" Campaign Successful

Last fall's "Give Five" campaign was a smashing success. Members were asked to include NAAFA in their pledge to give five percent of their income and five hours of their time a week to the causes they care about deeply. The following dedicated NAAFA members gave a total of almost \$1,500 and pledged over 200 hours of volunteer time per month to further NAAFA's work in the size acceptance movement. Thank you!

### \$250 or more

Paul Nagel (KS)  
Sally E. Smith (CA)

### \$100 or more

Stephen K. Goodman (CA)  
Leslie Smith (MI)

### \$50 or more

Shirley J. Ash Gibson (OH)  
Beautiful Skier, Inc. (VT)  
Marilyn Christenson (MI)  
Peggy Ventura (NJ)  
Frances White (CA)

### \$25 or more

Anonymous Donor  
Ines V. Batain (MI)  
Anna Cannizzaro (NY)  
Ira Cohen (NY)  
Avery Ray Colter (CA)  
Dan and Sharon Davis (CA)  
Robert Funk (AL)

### \$25 or more continued

Jim Grant (OH)  
Linda Hodges (MO)  
Robbie Kassell (NY)  
Rosalie Radcliffe (NC)  
Donna Marie Ryzn (IL)  
Julia Schaltenbrand (WV)  
Carolyn and Ron Schmidt (IL)  
Kimberly Seiler (MD)  
Chris Squires (NY)  
Liz Sterling (CA)  
Kenneth Wachtel (NY)  
Adee A. Weckert (OR)  
Michael and Cathryn Wittly (CT)

### \$10 or more

Jeanette L. Apprill (NM)  
Ellen Bloom (NY)  
John J. Chandler (IL)  
Lillian Dzurisin (NJ)  
Mark and Ron Hadlund (IA)  
Emma Jane Lott (PA)  
Estelle Margolin (NY)  
Linda Mosbarger (CA)  
Milton J. Schloss, Jr. (OH)  
John and Margaret Trapani (NY)  
Jane Volonte (CA)

### Under \$10

Robert C. Herr (CA)  
Nadene Hunter (PA)  
Barbara J. Kennerly-Young (IL)  
Suzanne Keyes (VA)  
Sherrie L. Myers (CA)  
Elaney Roussopoulos (MA)

### *Volunteer Hours Pledged*

#### 20 Hours/Month or more

Melinda Foretich (TX)  
Belinda Hamilton-Madden (PA)  
Kimberly Seiler (MD)  
Adee A. Weckert (OR)  
Judith Weeg  
Mary C. Wentzel (MA)

#### 10 Hours/Month or more

Mark and Ron Hadlund (IA)  
Barbara J. Kennerly-Young (IL)  
Emma Jane Lott (PA)  
Sherrie L. Myers (CA)

#### 5 Hours/Month or more

Ines V. Batain (MI)  
Kathleen Bentley (CO)  
Avery Ray Colter (CA)  
Suzanne Keyes (VA)  
Chris Squires (NY)  
Peggy Ventura (NJ)  
Frances M. White (CA)

#### Hours/Month not Indicated

Martha L. Adkins (KY)  
Sylvia Engdahl (OR)  
Robbie Kassell (NY)  
Elaney Roussopoulos (MA)  
Kenneth Wachtel (NY)

In an upcoming issue of the Newsletter we will thank contributors to NAAFA's Major Donor Program. ☺