

Risks associated with distorted perceptions of body weight norms among UK youth

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Abstract

This study examined the power of norms in predicting UK students' body weights and self-images. It further distinguished between actual peer weight norms and perceptions of those norms as potential influences. The association between perceived peer weight norms and personal weight status (BMI index category) was examined controlling for actual contextual weight norms. The study also examined how self-assessed personal body image varied according to perception of the peer norm. Surveys were conducted among students ($n = 2,286$) attending 12 schools in a Greater London borough in Spring 2010 in years 5-10. Students' perceptions of the weight norm for same sex peers in their year in their school are compared with the aggregate self-reports of weight for these same sex and year cohorts in each school as well as aggregate self-reports of students' closest friends.

The majority of students either overestimated or underestimated peer weight norms by more than 5%. Overestimating weight norms was associated with a greater risk for being personally overweight and underestimating norms was associated with being underweight. Moreover, misperceiving peer weight norms was associated with incorrect self-assessment of body image. Both perceived weight norms and actual weight norms of closest friends and of the larger peer group (based on the mean of self-reported weight) were strong predictors of BMI among males and females compared with demographic factors. Pervasive misperceptions of peer weight norms may contribute to unhealthy body image beliefs and help perpetuate inappropriate weight-related behaviors or unhealthy weight status.