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## Obesity/Overweight and the Role of Working Conditions: A Qualitative and Participatory Investigation

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**CPH-NEW**  
Center for the Promotion of Health  
in the New England Workplace



**MassCOSH**



*A NIOSH Center for Excellence to Promote a Healthier Workforce*

# **Obesity/overweight and the role of working conditions – A qualitative and participatory investigation**

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# Disclosure

- We have no actual or potential conflicts of interest in relation to this program/presentation.



# Research Objective

- To explore how low-wage workers experience their jobs and workplaces in relation to leisure time physical activity, eating patterns, and other behaviors related to body weight



# Study Methods (1)

- Focus groups of low-wage workers
- Primary topic: how the workplace affects dietary and/or exercise behaviors
- Participants recruited through 2 community NGO's in 3 cities
  - Employment criteria: hourly work  $\geq$  20 hr/week in past 2 years
- Number of groups judged sufficient when findings converged
  - Spanish-speaking (6 groups)
  - English-speaking (2 groups)

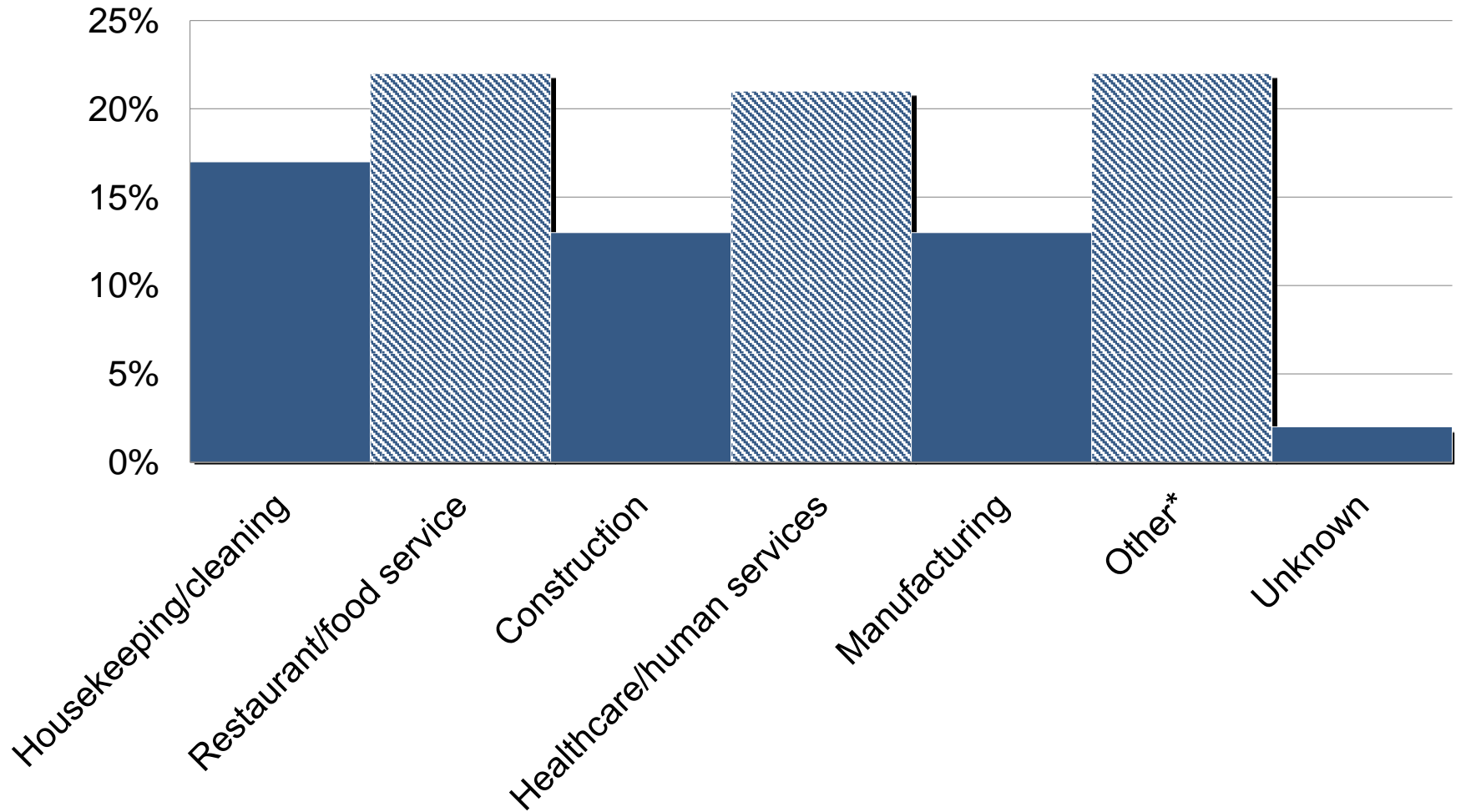


# Study Methods (2)

- Each focus group had 2 facilitators plus a note-taker
- All discussions recorded & transcribed
- Themes coded in NVivo
  
- In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with selected individuals



# Focus Group Participants: Type of Work



\* Business owner, community organizer, daycare, delivery driver, educational advisor, office work, sales, seamstress

# Focus group results: 4 broad themes emerged from participants' comments

- **Psychosocial stressors**
  - High demands, low control, low social support
- **Physically demanding work**
  - Illnesses and injuries, leisure time activity
- **Time pressure**
  - Scheduling, multiple jobs/responsibilities
- **Food environment at work**
  - Available food choices, kitchen equipment, space to eat at work



# Psychosocial Stressors at Work

- **High demands**

- *“The work that three people used to do is given to one person. That creates more stress and eating more...”*

- **Low control**

- *“Working in factories, you have to eat fast or you get fired.”*

- **Low social support**

- *“A lot of harassment...it was really stressful so the depression really set in.”*



# Physically Demanding Work

- **Illness and Injury**

- *"I know someone that gained weight because of the cleaning job. He had to vacuum a lot. He had problems with his shoulder. He ate more because he was anxious that he thought he was going to lose his job because he couldn't do it."*

- **Impact on leisure time activity**

- *"I don't have the desire to do exercise after standing for 15-16 hours. I just want to eat and sleep. The next day is the same thing all over again."*



# Time Pressure

- **Scheduling**

- *“At 10:00 a.m., they give me a 15-minute break. I don’t have time to eat healthy food, even if I bring homemade food. I don’t have time to do exercise.”*

- **Multiple jobs and responsibilities**

- *“Once you get home, you have to clean the house, do the laundry, get the kids ready. Your job is not done. By the time you get time for you, it’s time to take care of your jobs all over again.”*



# Food Environment at the Workplace

- **Available food choices**

- *“Food from vending machines, soda. When we don’t have time to eat, we eat crackers or chocolate.”*

- **Equipment**

- *“I don’t have a microwave to heat up my food. I have to eat my food cold...”*

- **Space to eat**

- *“I cannot even talk about the cafeteria because that ‘cafeteria’ is in a corner of a dirty and unsanitary room.”*



# Conclusions

- Physical and psychosocial features of work were identified as important antecedents for overweight.
- In particular, non-traditional work shifts and working multiple jobs limit workers' ability to adhere to public health recommendations for diet and physical activity.
- Workers in all groups perceived themselves to be powerless to improve the conditions that negatively impact health



# A more comprehensive public health approach is needed

- Programs to address obesity in low-wage workers must include the work environment as a fundamental starting point:
  - Work organization, work scheduling, physical demands, psychosocial stressors
  - Policies for mealtime and rest breaks
  - Clean, adequately equipped eating facilities
  - Strong health and safety protections



# So What??

How does the research  
impact practice?



# Report “Release Event” November 12, 2013



# Release Event Details

- Attendees from a variety of organizations



# An Impressive Panel



# The Voices of Workers



# Time to Brainstorm and Report Back



# You Tube has the Entire Event!

- You Tube has the Entire Event!

[Report Release Event: Obesity/overweight and the role of working conditions – A qualitative and participatory investigation](#)

- Press Coverage After the Event....
  - Boston Globe, Cleveland-The Plain Dealer, Metrowest Daily, Worcester Gazette, New England College of Occupational and Environmental Health Newsletter, NPR, and several science blogs



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HOME > HEALTH > OBESITY STUDY EXAMINES IMPACT OF WORK CONDITIONS ON WEIGHT

## Obesity Study Examines Impact of Work Conditions on Weight

A new study, "Obesity/Overweight and the Role of Working Conditions," links weight and working conditions among low-wage workers, and rather than focusing on sedentary lifestyles, examines workers toiling in heavy labor and how their work conditions contribute to weight gain and obesity.

Sandy Smith

Nov. 13, 2012

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# EXPERIENCE

## New study says manual labor jobs linked to obesity

There are approximately

15 MILLION

cyber attacks a day.

**MetroWest Daily News**  
 Posted Nov 12, 2012 @ 05:30 PM

BOSTON – A new study linking low-wage man and obesity will be released in Boston Tuesday. The study, entitled “Obesity/Overweight and Conditions” and authored by representatives

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# The Pump Handle



## Exploring links between working conditions and obesity in low-wage workers

Posted by [Celeste Monforton, DrPH, MPH](#) of George Washington University School of Public Health & Health Services on November 28, 2012

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It's no secret that the U.S. has a weight problem. Nearly 36% of U.S. adults are obese and

# Beyond the Event....

- Participation in the testimony regarding the Massachusetts Tax Credit for Employers implementing Health Promotion Programs.
  - Importance of work environment and working conditions
  - Consideration of conditions facing lower income workers
- Continued collaboration with MDPH
  - Working on Wellness
  - Mass in Motion





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