

The Fat Tax

The haunting issue of obesity is impossible to be unheard of in America. With fast food restaurant chains and false hope from miracle exercise machines growing larger, obesity dominates our American culture. In 2000, about 400,000 deaths were due to diseases caused by obesity, a 33% increase from those in 1990. Current researchers believe that if the obesity-related death rate continues to skyrocket, it may become “the nation’s number one cause of preventable death” (The Associated Press). Typically, we define obesity as being above one’s normal weight. Medical experts in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, however, specifically define obesity as having a body mass index (BMI) of 30 or more. A person with a BMI of 30 is about 30 pounds overweight. Despite our lazy attempts to act on this issue, airlines took a notice to their many overweight passengers after a plane crash in Charlotte, North Carolina during takeoff due to excess weight in 2003.

Lately, airlines such as the United Airlines have been nitpicking over what they should do about their obese passengers taking up too much space. They have imposed a new policy on overweight passengers popularly called the fat tax. This policy states that if a passenger is unable to fit into their seat, fasten their seatbelt even with the seatbelt extender, and fully lower the arm rests, he or she will be charged for a second seat. The flight attendant will try to find two empty seats together for the heavy passenger or ask them to upgrade to business or first class, where the seats are larger. If the flight is full, they’ll be asked to take a later flight with more available seats. They may also be asked to stay in their full flight and simply pay for a second seat on the next flight. The truth is that other airlines such as the Southwest, Continental, and Delta Airlines have already had similar policies for the past few decades. The United Airlines though seemed to attract more attention and therefore, the policy became better exposed.

There have been two major opposing viewpoints on this policy, one of the regular weight passengers who usually get squished because of their larger neighbors and the other of those who are considered obese according to the airline policy. Obese passengers cause drawbacks not only for them, but for their skinnier neighbors as well as the airlines. Normal passengers agree with this new policy, because they feel that heavier passengers should pay a fee for the discomfort of regular passengers. It's difficult to enjoy an airplane flight with the-already-cramped-airplane seating. Obviously, anyone would loathe the experience even more with somebody spilling over into their seat, especially on a long international trip. In addition, more weight requires more fuel for the plane to travel. The cost of the extra fuel is reflected on a passenger's ticket. This is the way Scott Cluthe, who travels several times a year for personal trips, puts it: "A small child needs to pay for a flight, so why wouldn't an obese person? I'm not a discriminatory person, but we have to look at the reality of the situation. It's getting a little crowded in here" (Chen).

On the other hand, obese people are charging this new policy with discrimination. Unfortunately, weight isn't protected under federal anti-discrimination laws like race and gender are. Obese people feel that it's unfair for them to pay so much extra money when say, broad shouldered or tall people are charged with only a fraction of the seat price for extra legroom. Plus, it's embarrassing to be confronted about their weight and having to change seats or switch to another flight. Most of the overweight passengers strongly argue against the nitpicking, while some simply want to be comfortable and will gladly pay for the second seat. For instance, Mike Vasey of Cheyenne, Wyoming, a 400-pound man over six feet tall claims, "I'd rather be comfortable first and worry about discrimination later" (Chen). Unlike rational overweight passengers like Vasey, other heavy passengers as well as normal passengers have filed lawsuits about their discomfort or in their search for justice. The judicial courts however did not want to take responsibility and declared that airlines are within their rights to issue such a policy.

As mentioned before, airlines realized the flaw in their individual and luggage weight requirements after the 2003 airplane crash in North Carolina. The Federal Aviation Administration recognized the higher obesity rates and their assumption of the average male body weight increased by at least fourteen pounds from 2003 to 2004. They changed the weight standards for flights after the crash by ten pounds. The average total weight of the passenger plus their carry-on luggage was estimated to be 180 pounds in 1995 and then, 190 pounds in 2003. Nowadays, the airlines are restricting passengers to one carry-on bag weighing about eight to ten pounds and one luggage bag no more than fifty pounds to maintain safety regulations. Airline crews realized that their overweight passengers, as obscene as it sounds, can become a safety hazard. For example, if an obese passenger is sitting near one of the emergency exits and has difficulty getting out of their seat and something supposedly happens that requires all of the passengers to evacuate, then the evacuation wouldn't go as efficiently as possible and more dangers are posed for all the passengers.

The solution to this problem seems rather simple: bigger and wider seats. However, the government didn't impose this obesity policy. The airlines did. The government doesn't require airplane seats to be a certain width. The airlines set the standard width of an airplane seat to be between seventeen to eighteen inches. On the contrary, the government does give certain safety regulations that the airlines must follow such as every passenger wearing a seat belt especially during takeoffs and landings and the armrest being down on either side of the passenger.

After receiving about 700 complaints in 2008 from upset and uncomfortable passengers, the United Airlines, according to spokeswoman Robin Urbanski, claimed the new policy to be created "for the comfort and well-being for all our guests on board" (Chen). Although the airlines seemed forced to impose this policy to keep up with safety requirements, they did have the option of bigger seats, but if they changed the width standard to provide bigger seats for

passengers in coach, then they'd lose money. Their ultimate goal is to make money and bigger seats mean fewer seats on the plane, both reducing capacity and raising ticket fares. Most people won't put up with paying more than they have to for an airplane flight, so the airlines would lose business with less people boarding their flights. The alternative solution is to add a few wider seats and charge extra for them, but that would require costly modifications to the interior and exterior of their planes. That's why this option was struck out as well.

Besides complaints, heavy passengers are causing the airlines to spend more money on fuel. In 2000, 14.8 billion gallons of jet fuel was used in U.S. domestic flights alone. Out of those 14.8 billion gallons, 350 million gallons of jet fuel could have been saved if the average adult and their carry-on luggage continued to weigh around 170 pounds. Those 350 million gallons cost the airlines about \$275 million more. No wonder airlines imposed this policy. It has a smaller opportunity cost for them compared to bigger seats with heavier passengers. Airlines try to compensate for the extra money the fuel costs them by raising ticket prices, which ultimately is a disadvantage for both passengers and the airlines. The passengers have to pay more for the same flight and the airlines, although they kind of make more money, lose many customers. Their net loss exceeds their net gain.

Furthermore, heavy passengers have caused airlines to make many cutbacks. Spokesman of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Jack Evans claimed, "Passengers gain weight, but airlines are the ones that go on a diet" (The Associated Press). To keep up with the safety regulations and the cost of extra fuel, airlines made many minor changes to lighten the weight load on airplanes. They switched the material airplane seats are made out of to a lightweight material. They got rid of bulky magazines and replaced metal forks and spoons with plastic ones. They don't control their passengers' weights, so they had to make up for their excess fuel use somehow.

Most international airlines haven't committed to this policy. Some even refuse to accept it. For example, Australia's Aussie Airlines object to the policy and don't force their heavy passengers to pay for two seats. They simply request these passengers to book two seats in advance. Air France-KLM Airlines, however have decided to adopt this policy and blame it on their duty to the well being of everyone. In short, they allow the policy due to safety reasons. Air-France KLM Airlines impose the same policy by requiring overweight passengers to pay 75% of the price for a second seat on their flight or the next flight. They guarantee refunds if the next flight doesn't have an empty seat. Other international airlines, like those in Canada have made the policy unique to their airlines. The Canadian Transportation agency declared a "one person, one fare" rule in which "anyone who can produce documentation that they will need an extra seat to be able to fly will be eligible for two seats at no extra charge" (Hewitt). Many obese people support this compromising policy because in a way, it prevents discrimination.

People often ask who makes the call for how much is too much. They wonder when and how an overweight person is checked to be at a suitable weight for the airplane: at check-in? at the gate? Do they have a special seat that tests one's compatibility with the airplane seat? All we know is that America's waistline continues to grow and little is being done to prevent obesity. No matter how many exercise programs or healthy diets an obese person goes under, it's ultimately their motivation that'll determine whether they're likely to shave off a couple of pounds. Airlines seem to take advantage of these overweight people through their new policy, but they have a point too and must maintain some safety. Either way, the obesity policy is a lose-lose situation, because both the airlines and heavy passengers end up paying extra out of their pockets whether it's for comfort or fuel. Like economists say, "There's no such thing as a free lunch." There's always a price to everything.