

Chapter 7

Human height since 1820

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Average height is an important indicator of people's well-being. It is also a relatively undistorted and easy-to-measure indicator, which makes it particularly suitable for comparisons across time and space. Drawing upon an extensive body of research, the chapter describes the strengths and weaknesses of this indicator. It finds that during the 19th century, average height in Western Offshoots was much higher than elsewhere. Differences between Western Europe and the rest of the world (Eastern Europe, East Asia) were marginal, in spite of the much higher real incomes in the former region. This changed after about 1870, when people's height began to increase in Western Europe, whereas this lagged behind elsewhere. Africans were relatively tall during much of the period studied, but experienced declining height in many countries after the 1960s. People in Southeast Asia stayed relatively short throughout the period.

Introduction

Human development and the size and shape of people's bodies would seem to be unrelated. However, there is much evidence that the average height of large numbers of individuals can be considered an important indicator of people's welfare. Development economists and other specialists in the fields of nutrition and health have studied the share of stunted (i.e. shorter than expected) children. The rationale underlying these studies is that the human body reduces its growth if the nutritional situation worsens beyond a certain minimum, or if diseases reduce the available amount of nutrients. The reflection of nutritional or health-related problems in the human body provides a relatively undistorted indicator, whereas many other welfare proxies (such as calories or protein per capita, real income, etc.) require quite complicated measurement procedures, which are particularly difficult to obtain in developing countries and in historical studies. However, anthropometric data require a set of techniques in order to be transformed into informative and undistorted indicators. This chapter reviews these methods, and provides evidence on differences in human stature between countries and regions since the 1820s.

By providing a comprehensive dataset on average human height across all world regions, this chapter provides an alternative view of the history of human well-being and health status. It suggests that human height has increased globally since the late 19th century, and that Africa is the only part of the world where height has steadily declined in the past two decades. Human stature has been used as a proxy indicator for health, especially for time periods and societies in which other indicators are not available or are of unclear quality. For example, evidence on height is available for Africa, Southeast Asia and other world regions during the 19th century, a period for which other well-being indicators are very scant.

But what does it mean that height is a proxy indicator? The value of an additional year of life is relatively obvious for any human being, whereas an additional centimetre of height does not have a direct meaning. Height developments and differences (across countries and periods) only reveal their importance if their correlation with other components of health and the "Biological Standard of Living" (Komlos 1985 suggested this term) is known to the observer. This correlation is quite well-established (even if there are some exceptions), and the further we go back in time, the closer the correlation. But even in 20th century Norway, a correlation was shown: Robert F. Fogel – drawing on the research of Waaler (1984), who measured several thousand Norwegian men and then followed them in a longitudinal study – reported in his Nobel Prize lecture (1994) that as late as the 1960s and 1970s a 17.5-cm height deficit meant for a Norwegian man a 71% higher risk of dying in the next period of their life, a staggering difference when one considers that at the time Norway's nutritional ratings were unmatched. Having analysed height data for the birth cohorts of 1860, 1900 and 1950, Baten and Komlos (1998) concluded that every centimetre above a given population's average height translated into a 1.2 year increase in life expectancy.¹ Thus a mere half-centimetre

deviation from the population average is significant, representing six months of life. The correlation between height and longevity is even closer among children (Billewicz and MacGregor, 1982; Martorell and Habicht, 1986).

Another implication of the fact that height is only a proxy indicator of health status is that governments have not viewed it as an important reflection of their own policies. Some governments engaged in “window-dressing” when development indicators such as national income, life expectancy, school enrolment, etc., were published: for example, the Soviet Union tried to make its statistics look better than they were in reality, while Nazi Germany did the same. A proxy indicator of well-being that we study today, in the 21st century, but whose informative value was not clear to contemporaries, will be less vulnerable to manipulation. Indeed, several studies on the communist countries and Nazi Germany have revealed that human stature provides important insights there were hidden when looking at other indicators.

Description of the concepts used

Human stature is a well-established indicator for the biological standard of living, positively correlated, along with good health and longevity, with a nutritious diet.² In the 1980s, Robert F. Fogel, Richard Steckel and John Komlos pioneered its use in the field of economic history, and a large body of literature has emerged since (Steckel, 2009; Komlos and Baten, 2004). Anthropometric studies of individual countries have made a significant contribution to welfare analysis over the past several decades, and have provided the basis for a number of collective analyses, in which several studies are presented and compared (e.g. Steckel and Floud, 1997; Komlos and Baten, 1998).

Most studies in anthropometric history rely on adult stature, which is most strongly influenced by environmental factors during the first years of life (especially the first three years after birth). Even if there is a moderate influence also during teenage years, the birth decade is the usual category by which historical height evidence is organised, and this convention is also used in this chapter.³ This has the implication that the time series presented here end in the 1980s, as not all persons born during the 1990s have reached their final adult stature yet.

What are the most important determinants of the biological standard of living? A population's average height is in large part a function of the disease environment and the availability of high-protein foodstuffs (chiefly meat and dairy products). The impact on anthropometric values of high-quality proteins and calcium has been described in terms of a bottleneck (Baten, 2010). The bottleneck concept implies that other food items necessary for a balanced diet, such as fruit, vegetables and grains, were much more easily available, whereas protein was expensive to produce in densely populated areas over most of the period under study. The historical record indicates that humans have always needed large amounts of protein to generate the antibodies needed to fight infectious disease, and today's underdeveloped countries are no exception. Milk in particular helps to create antibodies (Grigg, 1995; De Beer, 2012)). Added to this protein effect is that of the disease environment, which is often approximated with infant mortality rates (Baten and Blum, 2012a and 2014).

This chapter also compares height trends with GDP per capita, used as a measure of aggregate economic production. Countries with higher GDP are able to generate not only more high-quality foodstuffs but also, at least since the last century, more medical goods

and services. However, a variety of issues may drive a wedge between economic production and the biological standard of living.

If historians are beginning to use height as a valid complement to conventional welfare indicators, this is because it has some specific advantages. A given income level permits the purchase of a given quality and quantity of food and medical services, and is thereby correlated with health status, which in turn is correlated with height. However, this income-height correlation is not one-to-one, as it is modified by important inputs not traded in the marketplace but provided as public goods, such as infant-nutrition programmes and public hospitals. This may lead to deviations between purchasing power-based and height-based measures of human well-being. Moreover, income measures fail to account for differences in people's command over resources within households. While the anthropometric approach cannot account for every potential influence in a given population, it permits economists and historians to capture important aspects of the biological standard of living (Komlos, 1985; Steckel, 1995), particularly in developing countries, which were hitherto neglected because of the lack of reliable data. The well-known Maddison dataset (2001), for example, provides only rough estimates for per capita GDP in many such countries prior to 1910. While height is not without its deficiencies as a measure of a given population's standard of living, it generates insights into global changes, and is particularly valuable as a countercheck as well as a complement to conventional indicators, permitting more reliable results than might otherwise be the case.

Historical sources

This section provides a selective description of the more prominent studies on which our dataset on human height is based. Thanks to the existence of a considerable body of scholarly work, long-term time series are today available for a considerable number of countries around the world; however, in other cases, the available evidence remains limited. The availability of data varies among world regions, but over the past decade it has significantly increased. Western Europe and European settlements have been the object of numerous studies, while there are a few studies for other world regions (e.g. Floud, Wachter and Gregory, 1990; Floud, 1994; Baten and Komlos, 1998; Steckel and Floud, 1997). Costa and Steckel (1997) combined all United States studies in a trend estimate that is based on a number of individual studies using data from the military and prison records for the 19th century (see also Zehetmayer, 2011). More recently, Southern Europe has been added to the dataset (A'Hearn, 2003; Pesacchi, 2008; Martínez-Carrión, 1994). Garcia and Quintana-Domeque (2007) and Hatton and Bray (2010) extended the European dataset, while Whitwell, de Souza and Nicholas (1997) provided evidence for Australia.

Evidence for both Eastern Europe and Central Asia has been provided by Mironov (1999, 2004), thanks to a combination of archival and contemporary anthropological data (see also Mironov and A'Hearn, 2008). Mironov's estimates of Russian and various other Eastern European height data provide a valuable overview of this region, even if Wheatcroft (1999) has offered a different interpretation. Data for central Asia can be drawn from the so-called demographic and health surveys (DHS) conducted from the 1980s onward that allow to cover birth decades after the 1940s, while anthropologists have provided data for the birth period 1960-89 in Eastern Europe (e.g. Bielicki and Hulanicka, 1998; Vignerova and

Blaha, 1998). Among Komlos' many studies are several on those regions of southeastern Europe that once composed the Habsburg Empire (1985, 1989, 2007). Kopczyński has done likewise for Poland (2006).

For pre-1950 Latin America, data on Argentina and Colombia – mainly based on prisoner lists, military and especially passport samples – have been provided by Salvatore (1998, 2004), Salvatore and Baten (1998), López-Alonso and Porras (2003), Meisel and Vega (2004a, 2004b), Carson (2005, 2008), and recently Baten and Carson (2010). Brazil, Peru, and Argentina have been recently studied by Baten, Pelger and Twrdek (2009) and Twrdek and Manzel (2010). In addition, there is scattered information regarding the Indian populations in these and other countries (Bogin and Keep, 1998).

India, Asia and the Middle East and North Africa are only modestly documented. We have access to Indian height data for the early 20th century (Guntupalli and Baten, 2006) but also for birth cohorts dating as far back as the early 19th century (Brennan, McDonald and Shlomowitz, 1994a, 1994b, 1997 and 2000). Although the latter studies are based on labour-migrant heights, which are not necessarily a representative sample of India's population, the authors offer persuasive arguments that these height estimates were equivalent to those of the population as a whole. For Japan, evidence is provided by Mosk (1996), Bassino (2006), Shay (1994) and Honda (1997), while for China estimates are available through Morgan (2006), Baten and Hira (2008) and Baten, Ma, Morgan and Wang (2010). The latest of several studies of Korea is one for North Korea by Pak, Schwekendiek and Kim (2010). As for Southeast Asia, a modest amount of data on this region is available (Bassino and Coclanis, 2008, for Myanmar/Burma; van der Eng, 1995, Baten, Stegl and van der Eng, 2009, for Indonesia; Murray, 2002, for the Philippines). Estimates for the Middle East and North Africa in the late 19th and early 20th centuries have been provided by Stegl and Baten (2009). Data from the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) programme allow computing a trend estimate for Turkey and Egypt during the period 1950-89, while the 1970s and 1980s have been the object of a number of anthropological studies.

African height data on freed slaves and military recruits permit a rough estimate for the early 19th century (Eltis, 1982; Austin, Baten and van Leeuwen, 2012). Eltis (1982) argued that the height discrepancy between freed slaves and others was negligible, because height was not an important pricing criterion; while slave heights varied from region to region, regional prices did not reflect this variation. Furthermore, any height differences among freed slaves were diminished by Africa's own demand for the strongest (and thus presumably the tallest) workers available, because Africa was a labour-scarce world region herself. At the same, there is no evidence that the slave market established anything like the military's minimum-height requirement. A comparison of soldiers' and slaves' height data indicates that the latter did not suffer from significant bias (Austin, Baten and van Leeuwen, 2012). For Africa during the period 1890-1930, a large number of anthropological studies are available: for example, estimates for the two major Kenyan peoples, the Kikuyu and the Maasai (Orr and Gilks, 1931), as well as recent studies for a broader set of population groups (Moradi, 2009a; Austin, Baten and Moradi, 2008). The problem of potential survivor bias in the African DHS datasets, which span the years 1945-89, has been addressed and resolved by Moradi (2005).

As a result of all these studies, the coverage of height estimates for almost all countries in the world is quite comprehensive (Baten and Blum, 2012a), and for many countries, continuous time series are available.

Data quality

Depending on the type of historical sources used, a number of methodological issues need to be considered. How can we estimate trends in world height over a period spanning nearly two centuries? Needless to say, in some cases height estimates are compromised by regional selectivity biases and other factors. The estimates presented in this chapter have been collected in as accurate a way as possible under the present circumstances, recording height by province whenever possible, and adjusting calculations to take into account any modifications of national borders. An assessment of data quality is provided in Table 7.1.⁴

Only certain combinations of countries and birth decades are sufficiently well documented to contribute to our estimates; for instance, no evidence is available for the Middle East and North Africa in the early 19th century, largely because of the absence of precise height measurements in Ottoman Empire military data, which categorised each recruit as small, medium or large, and as barefaced or bearded. In most other world regions, however, army data are available for the early 19th century.

The year 1950 marks a turning point in that, from that moment on, population censuses, health surveys and similar sources include height data on women – in fact, considerably more than on men – because institutions other than the military, particularly those related to the health sciences, began to take an interest in them. The fact that there is a correlation, if not a simple one, between male and female heights is now beyond dispute (Baten and Murray, 2000; Moradi and Guntupalli, 2014), which justifies our substituting one set for another when necessary. Objections to this strategy might be raised by those who accept the female-resiliency hypothesis, which holds that for biological reasons the average height of a given female population is more resistant to adverse conditions than is the average height of their male counterparts. Some evidence from small prehistoric samples supported this hypothesis. However, drawing on the largest height sample available to date, Guntupalli (2005) has gone far to disprove this hypothesis for the last two centuries. Since the vast majority of historical height estimates are for men, we transform all estimates into male equivalents, estimating specific regression equations for each world region in order to account for potential differences (Baten and Blum, 2012).⁵

To construct this database, we have taken great care to identify all the biases that may have been generated by the institutional context – enlistment in the military, incarceration in prison and sale in the slave trade, chiefly – in which heights were recorded.⁶ Estimates from voluntary soldier samples were included in the database only if satisfactory statistical methods had been used by the researchers who collected such data to eliminate the height bias of truncated samples.⁷

As for those institutional contexts that are specific to certain world regions and time periods, Baten and Blum (2012) have included them in a series of bias-analysis regressions, each designed to expose a potential bias typical of a given region or time period. For example, the estimates used here rely partially on prison samples for Latin America and North America in the 19th century, whereas those for most European countries are based on conscript samples, which as a rule cover a broader portion of the social spectrum; and anthropological samples were virtually the sole source for certain world regions. In order to assess the impact of datasets that were potentially unrepresentative, Baten and Blum (2014) have produced estimates including and excluding these: in most cases the differences were negligible.

Self-reported heights are particularly prevalent in Western countries in the later 20th century. Since, according to a number of studies, men tend to overestimate their own height, the corrective recently proposed by Hatton and Bray (2010), which Baten and Blum (2012) have tested for accuracy, has been adopted here.

In the case of data for the Middle East and Africa, a drawback of early anthropological studies is that the importance of identifying individuals by birth cohort was not yet understood, as it was assumed that the physical measurements of a population did not evolve from one decade to the next. The result is that, when using anthropological data, Baten and Blum (2012a) had to approximate birth decades, and accept the possibility that a small proportion of those individuals identified as belonging to a given cohort actually belonged in one of the two adjacent ones.⁸

When Baten and Blum (2012a) regressed human stature in a global sample of almost 100 countries on a full set of country and birth-decade dummies and on those potential-bias variables, all coefficients of the latter variables turned out to be statistically insignificant.⁹

The question of what role genetics, as well as nutrition, may play in determining a given population's average height was often raised in the early years of anthropometric research (Blum, 2013). It turns out that, while genes are a key determinant of an individual's height, genetic deviations from the mean cancel each other out when analysing groups of individuals. Moreover, there is considerable evidence that it is environmental conditions, not genes, which account for today's height gap between rich and poor populations, including those inhabiting a single nation. Habicht et al. (1974), for example, found that the height gap between the rich and poor populations in Nigeria was even wider than that between high-ranking groups in a typical low-income country and in the United States.¹⁰ Similar conclusions were reached by Fiwoo (1979) in his study of Ghana, by Eksmyr (1970), based on data on several Ethiopian ethnic groups, and by Graitcer and Gentry (1981), who studied Egypt, Haiti and Togo. The height distribution for children from rich families in Graitcer and Gentry (1981) are also in line with those for the United States. Of course, not all height differentials are due to environmental conditions: African bushmen and pygmies, for example, spring to mind, but these groups account for only a small percentage of their respective nations' populations.

Table 7.1. Quality of data on population heights by region and benchmark year, 1820-1973

	Western Europe (WE)	Eastern Europe (EE)	Western Offshoots (WO)	Latin America and Caribbean (LA)	Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA)	Middle East and North Africa (MENA)	East Asia (EA)	South and South-East Asia (SSEA)
1820	2	2	2	3	4	..	3	..
1870	2	2	2	2	3	2	3	3
1913	2	2	2	2	3	2	3	2
1950	1	2	1	1	1	2	1	2
1973	1	2	1	1	1	2	1	2

Note: 1. High quality; 2. Moderate quality; 3. Low quality; and 4. Estimates. See the section on «Data Quality» in Chapter 1 for a description of the quality criteria.

Source: Clio-Infra, www.clio-infra.eu.

StatLink  <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888933096958>

However, the evidence presented here on Africa has potential for improvement, because the estimates sometimes relied on small numbers of cases for the early period, and typically on only one institutional context (such as measurements of slaves, prisoners or soldiers, or anthropological studies). In contrast, in other world regions, we can often compare evidence from different institutional contexts, which reduces the likelihood of measurement error. For example, early South African evidence comes from Xhosa labourers who worked as temporary labourers on Western Cape farms. This may lead to an upward bias, if only the healthiest and strongest individuals were accepted as labourers (despite the argument of Brennan et al., 1994a, 1994b, 1997, 2000, that this bias was not strong in the South Asian case).

Table 7.1 provides a snapshot assessment of the quality of the height indicators used here. The table relies on slightly different criteria – relative to other chapters in this report – to create four classes of data, as in the other chapters, because height was never a part of official statistical reporting:

- Institutional data: the evidence is the product of international institutions, such as the Demographic and Health Surveys and the Eurostat compilations, which aim at high standards of representativeness of their sampling procedures.
- High-quality data: the product of economic-historical research that assessed the possibility of sample-selection bias in the sources by using secondary characteristics (such as comparing the occupational structure of samples with the occupational structure of representative censuses, and re-weighting samples to become representative), or which relied on sources that are unlikely to be affected by sample selection bias.
- Moderate-quality data: estimates from historical research that relied on sources that could be affected by sample selection biases, or that made use of indirect data and estimates.
- Low quality data: estimates based on guesses, conjectures and interpolation between benchmark years.

It should be noted that Table 7.1 reports averages. In some world regions, some countries might have had weaker data.

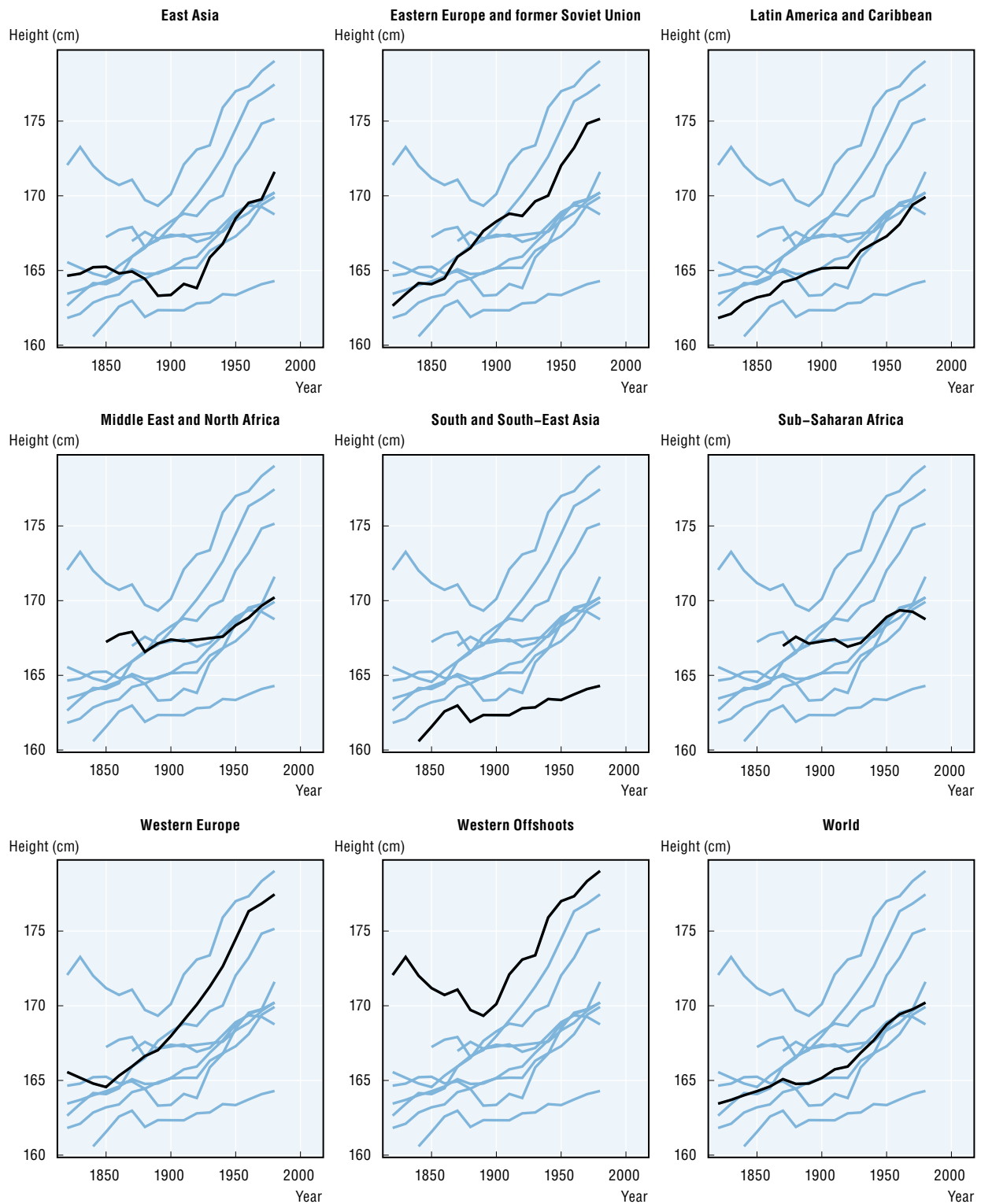
Main highlights of human height trends

Figure 7.1 and Table 7.2 show adjusted height estimates of world regions for the entire 1810-1980 period based on the population-weighted averages of 156 countries (Baten and Blum, 2012b). Several groups of world regions can be distinguished:

- The Western Offshoots had very high anthropometric values for much of the period under study. Height in these countries declined slightly towards the level prevailing in other regions until the late 19th century, then started to grow again.
- Both Western Europe and those countries in Eastern Europe that experienced socialist rule recorded a strong upward trend in average height after the 1880s. However, once the USSR came into being the height gap between Western and Eastern Europe increased (Komlos, 1999; Mironov, 2006). In contrast, average height in Latin America, the Middle East and North Africa was at relatively high levels in the 19th century but experienced only modest increases during the 20th century (Salvatore, 2004).

Figure 7.1. **Regional averages of population heights, 1820s-1980s**

Centimetres, decadal averages



Notes: For an assessment of data quality, see Table 7.1. In reproductions, please cite as Baten and Blum, 2014 (in: *European Review of Economic History*).

Source: Clio-Infra, www.clio-infra.eu.


StatLink  <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888933095856>

Table 7.2. **Regional averages of population heights, 1820s-1980s**
Centimetres, decadal averages

	Western Europe (WE)	Eastern Europe (EE)	Western Offshoots (WO)	Latin America and Caribbean (LA)	East Asia (EA)	South and South-East Asia (SSEA)	Middle East and North Africa (MENA)	Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA)	World
1820s	165.6	162.6	172.1	161.8	164.6	..	..	..	163.4
1830s	165.2	163.4	173.3	162.1	164.8	..	..	..	163.7
1840s	164.8	164.2	172.0	162.9	165.2	160.6	..	..	164.0
1850s	164.6	164.1	171.2	163.2	165.2	161.6	167.2	..	164.3
1860s	165.3	164.5	170.7	163.4	164.8	162.6	167.7	..	164.6
1870s	165.9	165.9	171.1	164.2	164.9	163.0	167.9	167.0	165.1
1880s	166.6	166.5	169.7	164.5	164.4	161.9	166.6	167.6	164.8
1890s	167.0	167.6	169.3	164.9	163.3	162.3	167.1	167.1	164.8
1900s	168.0	168.3	170.1	165.1	163.4	..	167.4	..	165.2
1910s	169.0	168.8	172.1	165.2	164.1	162.3	167.3	167.4	165.7
1920s	170.1	168.6	173.1	165.2	163.8	162.8	167.4	166.9	165.9
1930s	171.3	169.6	173.4	166.3	165.9	162.9	..	167.2	166.9
1940s	172.6	170.0	175.9	166.8	166.8	163.4	167.6	168.0	167.7
1950s	174.5	172.0	177.0	167.3	168.5	163.4	168.3	168.9	168.7
1960s	176.3	173.2	177.3	168.1	169.5	163.7	168.9	169.4	169.4
1970s	176.8	174.8	178.3	169.4	169.8	164.1	169.7	169.3	169.8
1980s	177.5	175.1	179.0	169.9	171.6	164.3	170.2	168.8	170.2

Notes: For an assessment of data quality, see Table 7.1. In reproductions, please cite as Baten and Blum, 2014 (in: European Review of Economic History).

Source: Clio-infra, www.clio-infra.eu.

StatLink  <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888933096977>

- East Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa remained throughout the entire period near the global average, with the exception of East Asia during the late 19th century, where average height was significantly lower. Africa is the only world region in which the average height has steadily declined over the last two decades (Moradi, 2005).
- Average height in South and Southeast Asia remained at a low level throughout the period under study. While no upward trend of any significance occurred in South Asia since the end of the 19th century, Southeast Asia experienced a slight upward trend; at the start of the period, average height in this region was at an even lower level than for its neighbours (Brennan, McDonald, Shlomowitz, 1994a, 1994b, 1997 and 2000; Guntupalli and Baten, 2006; Baten, Stegl and van der Eng, 2010).

In sum, after the 1880s, global heights increased on average, but also became more unequal.

Some country developments are particularly interesting and are discussed below (see Table 7.3 on height trends in 25 countries). In the Americas, between-country differences of stature were particularly pronounced. Mexico displayed the shortest level in the early 19th century, at just over 160 cm, followed by Brazil. On the top end of the spectrum, the United States, Canada and Australia were leading in anthropometric values, also worldwide. North Americans and Australians born in the New World were much taller than the European population from which they originated, thanks to an abundant food supply. Argentina's anthropometric level was initially similar to the Western Offshoots, but when population


Table 7.3. Population heights in selected countries, 1820s-1980s

Centimetres, decadal averages

	Western Europe (WE)							Eastern Europe (EE)		Western Offshoots (WO)			Latin America and Caribbean (LA)			Middle East and North Africa (MENA)		Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA)			East Asia (EA)			South and South-East Asia (SSEA)		
	GBR	NLD	FRA	DEU	ITA	ESP	SWE	POL	RUS	AUS	CAN	USA	MEX	BRA	ARG	EGY	TUR	KEN	NGA	ZAF	CHN	JPN	IND	IDN	THA	
1820s	169.1	165.1	163.9	167.3	165.8	..	..	..	162.1	..	171.5	172.2	160.4	164.3	169.9	..	..	..	162.2	..	165.8	..	..	..	..
1830s	166.7	164.2	164.0	166.8	164.1	161.0	168.1	..	163.0	..	171.5	173.5	160.4	164.8	170.9	..	..	..	..	..	165.8	..	..	..	..
1840s	166.5	164.5	164.3	166.6	162.0	163.7	167.9	163.1	164.2	..	170.4	172.2	162.5	164.6	169.6	..	..	..	..	..	166.2	..	160.3	160.4	..
1850s	165.6	165.3	165.2	163.8	162.9	162.5	168.4	..	163.4	170.0	172.5	171.1	163.4	164.5	168.2	166.3	168.7	..	..	..	166.2	..	161.8	160.6	..
1860s	166.6	166.5	165.4	165.5	163.1	162.7	169.3	165.5	163.3	170.6	172.0	170.6	162.9	165.0	167.4	167.7	169.1	..	..	..	165.7	..	163.0	160.4	160.1
1870s	167.2	167.1	165.5	166.9	163.5	162.6	170.3	166.3	165.8	170.1	171.2	171.1	163.7	166.5	167.6	166.9	170.1	..	165.6	..	165.8	..	163.8	158.1	161.5	
1880s	167.9	168.5	165.9	167.9	163.9	163.9	171.2	166.8	166.6	171.1	171.2	169.5	163.9	166.1	167.6	163.0	167.4	164.5	167.9	..	165.3	157.8	162.4	158.6	162.3	
1890s	167.4	169.4	166.1	168.6	164.7	164.0	172.4	167.2	168.3	171.3	170.7	169.1	163.9	167.1	167.8	..	168.4	166.0	..	170.4	164.0	157.8	163.0	158.8	161.0	
1900s	169.4	170.9	166.8	169.2	165.6	164.6	172.8	166.6	169.2	172.3	169.9	170.0	163.9	167.5	167.9	166.2	168.4	166.7	..	169.9	164.0	158.7	..	159.0	162.1	
1910s	170.9	172.6	167.8	170.5	166.3	165.1	173.2	169.0	169.1	172.7	171.5	172.1	163.7	166.5	168.2	166.2	167.9	168.1	166.8	169.7	164.7	159.6	162.9	159.6	161.5	
1920s	171.0	173.5	168.5	173.3	167.3	165.6	168.3	..	167.0	172.8	173.0	173.1	161.1	166.6	169.0	165.1	169.3	167.7	165.6	169.2	164.2	160.7	163.5	160.9	161.3	
1930s	173.9	174.1	169.9	174.0	168.1	165.2	175.5	173.0	167.9	..	172.7	173.4	165.5	167.0	169.8	..	169.3	..	164.6	170.0	166.5	161.4	163.7	160.7	161.2	
1940s	174.9	177.5	171.7	175.2	169.3	166.3	178.5	170.5	169.0	..	174.6	176.1	165.8	167.1	170.6	167.5	167.2	..	167.2	168.2	167.4	162.6	164.0	160.4	..	
1950s	176.0	178.7	173.2	176.8	171.3	170.8	179.3	173.2	172.0	..	177.0	177.1	165.1	168.2	170.8	170.1	166.6	169.9	168.5	170.1	169.2	163.6	163.5	161.7	..	
1960s	176.9	182.2	174.9	178.9	173.0	174.2	180.1	175.3	173.6	176.3	178.3	177.3	166.4	169.0	..	170.6	167.4	170.7	169.8	169.5	170.0	165.7	163.9	162.4	..	
1970s	177.1	182.3	175.1	179.4	174.1	175.2	180.0	..	177.0	178.4	178.8	178.3	..	171.6	..	171.2	168.6	170.9	169.7	168.9	170.0	166.8	164.3	163.1	..	
1980s	176.8	182.7	176.5	180.5	174.5	175.6	180.4	177.4	177.0	..	179.6	179.0	167.8	171.7	..	171.3	..	171.2	169.5	168.1	171.5	171.7	164.4	164.0	..	

Notes: For an assessment of data quality, see Table 7.1. In reproductions, please cite as Baten and Blum, 2014 (in: European Review of Economic History).

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density grew, heights in Argentina declined slightly, converging to Brazilian heights around 1900. Various countries in the region experienced declining heights during the 1880s and 1890s.

Previous studies suggested two different explanations for the decline in height in the late 19th century in different world regions, namely the Americas, Africa and Asia. In the Americas, immigration and rapid population growth reduced the available protein per capita (and inequality was growing, with negative health effects). In addition, urbanisation sometimes led to a worsening disease environment. In Asia and Africa, in contrast, a wave of cattle plague was probably the most important factor leading to lower average height (Stegl and Baten, 2009; Baten et al., 2010), although other factors also contributed. With respect to the most recent period, Komlos (2009) argued that the height-advantage in the United States, relative to Europe, declined, while the gap between black and white United States residents increased. In the case of black United States women, their height declined – relative to white women – by 1.42 centimetres during the 1980s; black United States women were shorter than Western European women, including the Spanish and Italians (Komlos, 2009).

Average heights in Asia (including the Asian part of Turkey) displayed less variation than in the Americas. Turkey and China topped the height league in the region, with Turkey losing its prime position to China around the mid-20th century. At the lower end, Indonesia and Japan recorded the lowest height, although in Japan heights increased dramatically over the 20th century, reaching a joint top position with China in the 1980s. The tremendous growth in average height in Japan and the partial globalisation of its cuisine might have contributed to this spectacular growth. India and Thailand took middle positions in Asia.

Finally, Europe started short and ended very tall. Only the richest country, the United Kingdom, had high anthropometric levels in the 1810s and 1820s, but when industrialisation and urbanisation reached its maximum speed around the mid-19th century, the British also became short, at least relative to United States Americans of English ancestry. Scandinavia (Sweden in Table 7.3) had the lead in most of the period, but the Dutch took over after their welfare state expanded and after it became technologically feasible to transport high-quality protein (contained in milk, for example) to such a densely settled country in large quantities.

These technological possibilities were lacking in Southern Europe (Italy, Spain) until much later. Only over the last half century have young Spaniards and Italians become almost as tall as other Europeans. In general, Europe started its dramatic height increase after the 1870s and 1880s, and this increase included the East (Poland, Russia) as well as the West. Northwestern Europe (including Germany) was always slightly ahead, according to this indicator – but far behind the New World in the early 19th century.

Correlation with GDP per capita

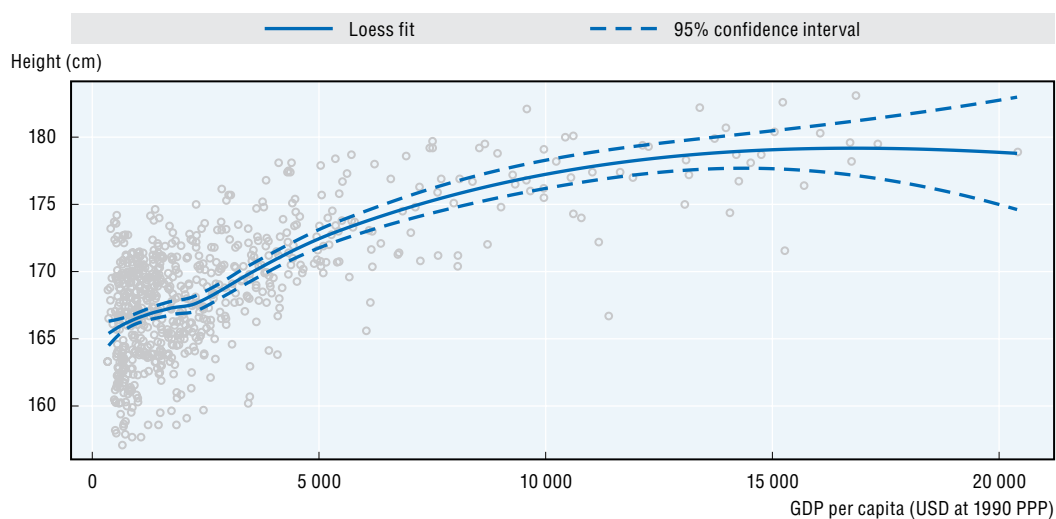
Height and GDP per capita are complementary measures of the standard of living. GDP per capita is a measure of the value of the final goods and services produced within a country in a given time period, and captures the aggregate production of the economy, whereas height is more closely correlated with nutrition and health care. While their correlation was initially stressed in the literature (Fogel et al., 1982), evidence over the past two decades indicates that they should be regarded as indicators that sometimes do not move in parallel. Significant deviations have been found not only between average height and GDP but also between height and real wages for unskilled labour (Margo and Steckel,

1983; Komlos, 1998). However, these findings are based largely on data for the United Kingdom and the United States, and the correlation between real wages and heights was much closer in most other countries (Baten, 2000). Figure 7.2 shows that, across countries, the correlation between height and GDP per capita is significant, but also that it flattens out among more developed countries.

Jamaica displays higher anthropometric values than GDP per capita in the 1910s. This result is interesting, because Jamaica is often cited as an example of an early achiever of high life expectancy, despite its low income level (see the health chapter in this volume). The biological standard of living in Jamaica has entered the literature as “The Jamaica Paradox” (Riley, 2005). Riley wondered why Jamaica had a relatively high life expectancy in spite of its low income per capita. The fact that the majority of the Jamaican population had African slave ancestors also did not encourage an expectation of a high life expectancy, because in other Latin American countries regions with high concentrations of former slaves (Brazil’s Northeast and Colombia’s lowlands) typically had low levels of welfare. However, Jamaica differed in some important ways. First, some aspects of the British educational system, which provided basic literacy, had survived in former colonies like Jamaica: with basic literacy and numeracy, people are usually better able to take care of their own health. Riley also noted that the government invested substantially in public health, extending access to poorer people. Another factor that may explain the Jamaica Paradox was the relatively high level of gender equality: former French and British colonies in the Caribbean had a remarkably similar level of basic numeracy for both genders. Osmani and Sen (2003) have argued that gender equality is an important determinant of the health status of the next generation. In most societies, women have a large impact on child care, as well as on children’s health and education. For height – and for longevity, before countries reach a certain level of GDP per capita and world market integration – the proximity to protein is also an important advantage.


Figure 7.2. **Population heights and GDP per capita**

Centimetres and US dollars at 1990 PPP



Notes: For an assessment of data quality, see Table 7.1. In reproductions, please cite as Baten and Blum, 2014 (in: *European Review of Economic History*).

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Jamaica had a large number of cattle per capita, and in any case the rates were many times higher than in most Asian countries of the same income level.

If we consider three other examples – Norway, with taller heights than expected from GDP values, and Italy and Vietnam with shorter heights – the latter two determinants of health might have similar effects: Norway had substantial proximity to protein production, and gender inequality was traditionally low (partly because women had an active role in dairy farming). By contrast, in both Italy and Vietnam, gender inequality was substantially higher, and cattle per capita numbers were low during the late 19th century.

How close is the correlation between average height and GDP per capita over time? Before 1870, and for the 1880s and 1890s, estimates on height and GDP are available for fewer than 30 countries, making statistical inference questionable. This may explain the fact that the correlations before the 1870s are smaller than afterwards (Figure 7.3). After the 1870s, the correlation is always around 0.6 to 0.8. During the 20th century, the closest correlation occurs during the 1940s, i.e., the most disrupted period for the world economy. One possible explanation is that the biological standard of living during this decade depended mostly on country-specific resources and productive capacity, whereas in the post-war period transfers of resources and knowledge about medical technologies played an increasing role in mitigating the income-health relationship.

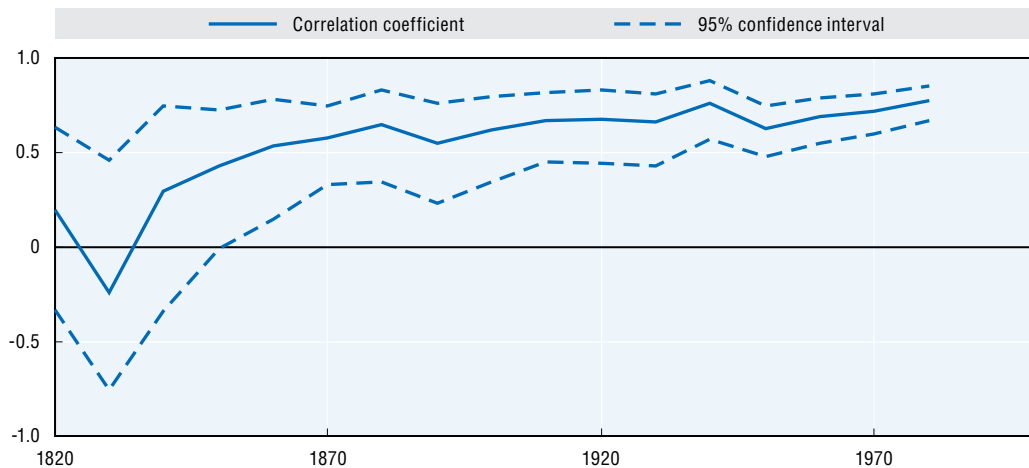
Heights can also be used to study inequality between countries in the world economy. How has inequality between a sample of 25 countries changed over time? (for the definition of this group, see Table 7.3) Figure 7.4 shows the coefficient of variation between countries, which is a standard measure of dispersion between countries (O'Rourke and Williamson, 1999), with countries weighted by their population size. In general, there is a tendency towards a greater dispersion of the average height in the different countries from the 1870s to the 1970s (the line with diamonds in Figure 7.4). If we compare the dispersion of GDP levels for the same period, the trend is very similar (the rectangles in the same figure). However, the volatility of GDP dispersion is slightly greater in the 19th century than in previous periods.¹¹

In general, the 1940s and 1950s represent the period when inequality has increased most rapidly for both height and income. In spite of WWII, this was a period when medical and hygienic knowledge spread around the world. Also, the quality of nutrition could be improved in the Western Offshoots as well as in Eastern and Western Europe due to the diffusion of fertiliser and agricultural machinery and technology. But in general, the 20th century height increase in the richer countries can be attributed to improvements in health rather than in nutrition. In contrast, the large countries of the developing world experienced particularly difficult times in the 20th century. For example, China suffered particularly from military conflicts and institutional changes, while India suffered from those factors as well as from civil wars between religious groups.

The GDP dispersion suggests that the 1980s were a turning point towards much less between-country inequality. The 2000s display a coefficient of variation among the 25 countries that was as low as it had ever been in the 20th century. Conversely, when using the interpolation method suggested by Baten and Blum (2012a, 2012b) for the early 19th century, we find that anthropometric dispersion did not change very much from the 1810s to the 1870s.¹²

Figure 7.3. **Correlation between population heights and GDP per capita, 1820s-1980s**

Pearson correlation coefficient and upper/lower bounds of 95% confidence interval per decade



Note: For an assessment of data quality, see Table 7.1.

Source: Clio-Infra, www.clio-infra.eu.


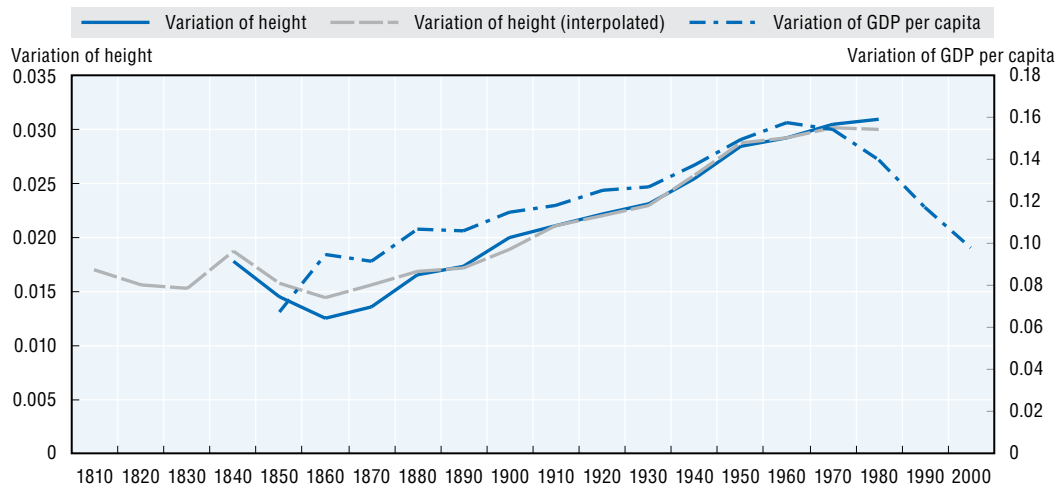
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Figure 7.4. **Variation in height and GDP per capita in selected countries, 1810s-2000s**

Coefficient of variation, including interpolated series, decadal averages



Notes: All values are weighted by population size. Height values are available between the 1840s and 1980s for 17 countries (1840s), 19, 21, 22, 23, 22, 23 (1900s), 25, 24, 22, 22, 23 (1950s), 23, 20, 19 (1980s). Interpolated height values are available: 22 for the 1810s-1850s, and 25 for 1860s-1980s. GDP values are available between the 1850s and 2000s for 18 countries (1850s), 16, 21, 16, 20, 19 (1900s), 21, 20, 20, 17, 23 (1950s), 23, 24, 23, 24, 24 (2000s). For an assessment of data quality, see Table 7.1. In reproductions, please cite as Baten and Blum, 2014 (in: *European Review of Economic History*).

Source: Clio-Infra, www.clio-infra.eu.

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Priorities for future research

What should be the future priorities for the study of human stature as a development indicator? The greatest potential probably lies in extending the existing evidence back to preindustrial and ancient times. Steckel and Rose (2002) as well as Koepke and Baten (2005 and 2008) have pioneered the use of long bones for reconstructing height trends in those early periods of human development. The potential for mobilising additional data in this field is large. For example, the rapid construction of highways in China over the last decade has required numerous archaeological excavations. It seems that a large number of human bones were simply stored in buildings next to the highways and await more detailed analysis. Other countries in the Middle East, Central Asia, Eastern Europe and Southern Africa also have great potential for anthropometric analysis; both the tropics and subtropics might provide samples of long bones to study.

Another priority for further research could be to develop a measure of inequality based on long bone data, if income inequality measures to calibrate and compare these can be developed. Apart from projects for the pre-modern period, a number of gaps should be addressed by future research, such as the study of heights in the Middle East for the early 19th century or clarifying the selectivity of slaves relative to the population from which they were captured.

Finally, several gaps could be filled by developing a good model for the height selectivity of migrants. To what degree were migrants similar in height to their native population? If they were different, were the determinants of positive or negative height selectivity similar to the migrant selectivity of education (Borjas, 1987; Stolz and Baten, 2012)? Finally, studies on regional differences in height are required in the future, especially for the developing world. While this chapter has focused on national averages, regional variation within countries can sometimes be as large as international differences.

Notes

1. The third cohort analysed by Baten and Komlos (1998) refers to those who attained adulthood at some point between the 1970s and the present. Baten and Komlos (1998) also found that differences in the coefficient linking height and life expectancy among the three cohorts were negligible.
2. The term “biological standard of living” was coined by Komlos in 1985. One of the rare exceptions to the height-longevity correlation is that of the relatively short, because protein-deprived, Japanese prior to the economic boom of the 1960s; their longevity was above average, thanks to the high value they put on personal hygiene, the importance of which was underscored by health-related instruction in the schools.
3. This implies that adult height data for the cohort born in the 1960s should be confronted with indicators for other well-being dimensions referring to the 1960s, because height reflects the health situation in the first years after birth, and other well-being indicators (such as period-specific mortality) reflect the situation when they are measured.
4. The criteria used to create the four classes of data differ from those used in other chapters, because height was never a part of official statistical reporting. Evidence is the product of: 1) international institutions, such as the Demographic and Health Surveys and the Eurostat compilations, which aimed at high standards of representativeness of their sampling procedures, or 2) economic-historical research that assessed the possibility of sample-selection bias in the sources by using secondary characteristics (such as comparing the occupational structure of samples with the occupational structure of representative censuses, or using numeracy for the same purpose, and re-weighting samples to become representative), or which relied on sources that are unlikely to have had sample selection bias, or 3) economic historical research, based on sources that could contain sample selection bias, or making use of indirect data and estimates, or 4) guesstimates, conjectures or interpolation between benchmark years.

5. It is also reasonable to assume that a teenage conscript from a malnourished population has yet to reach his maximal height. In such a case, we calculate what their height will be when they reach adulthood by applying the method presented in Baten and Komlos (1998). See the notes to Table 1 in Baten and Komlos (1998).
6. The databases presented here were also corrected, to the extent possible, for other types of social, ethnic and regional biases.
7. One could imagine that height samples based on volunteer army records might also be affected by another type of sample selectivity: in fact, the preference for joining the military as an income opportunity will decline in times of war, but might increase in periods of high unemployment and low relative wages in the civilian sector. With respect to the first factor, this is because better-off (and taller) people might have avoided the risk of being killed in a war, and hence did not join the army during this period, whereas in peacetime some well-off people might have considered the army. With respect to the second factor, the social composition of those joining a voluntary army might have differed between prosperous and depressed periods. Among the poorer and less educated strata, a certain share might have always joined the army. Conversely, among the wealthier strata, one could imagine a higher share might have joined the army during bad times, because civilian jobs were less easy to obtain and poorly paid. Fortunately, less than 10% of global height samples in our database were derived from volunteer army or prison records (i.e. samples that were potentially selective). Height series estimated based on this type of source were carefully examined by comparing height series from other institutional contexts, or some other information in the sources (occupational structure, literacy, numeracy) was compared to census records of the time, in order to assess how representative the samples considered were. In order to mitigate the effects of labour markets at the time of recruitment (or war risk), anthropometric historians have used samples taken only in one or very few years that were homogenous in terms of the labour market and military situation.
8. Koepke and Baten (2005, 2008) and Stegl and Baten (2009) estimated average heights in such cases by using a large number of studies that reflect in sum the changes over time, because if a study was done in the 1940s, the birth decades of mostly the 1910s were covered, and if a study was done in the 1960s, the birth decades of the 1930s could be covered, and so on. It should also be noted that time trends that result from such estimations resemble moving averages in that they smooth out the evolution of height averages. For example, if there was a height decline among a given population during the 1880s, but only 70% of the individuals in the dataset belonged to the 1880s cohort (the remaining 30% having been born in the previous cohort), the decline would appear to be smoother than it was in fact.
9. The coefficients were also small in most cases, with the exception of the coefficient for slave-based samples, which was however statistically insignificant. Thus, in the special case of slaves, it may very well be that an insufficient amount of data, for the purposes of comparison, accounts for the large coefficient. For other anthropometric studies, a very important result is that prisoners and voluntary soldiers did not differ significantly from other height sources – this had been an issue in many earlier studies.
10. The following review of the literature is based on Moradi and Baten (2005).
11. For the 1870s, GDP estimates are available for 21 countries, but for the 1880s only for 16 (including a number of poorer countries).
12. To compensate for such missing values, we applied the best possible interpolation strategy: wherever possible, we identified an estimated benchmark level for each country that allows obtaining levels close to true height values for the country to be interpolated. We then used the variation over time of other, nearby countries with similar characteristics. Linear interpolation was to be avoided, because of the risk that it might obscure certain fluctuations: for instance, declines that occurred in certain countries during the second half of the 19th century. Instead, we opted for backward- and forward-projection techniques, using the country-specific benchmark years and obtaining the changes between benchmark and estimated decades from a similar and neighbouring country. For example, the change from the 1870s to the 1880s in Iraq was more similar to the change in Iran over the same period than one would conclude from the results of a linear interpolation in Iraq between 1870 and 1890. Keeping the height level with the 1870 Iraq benchmark guarantees its accuracy.

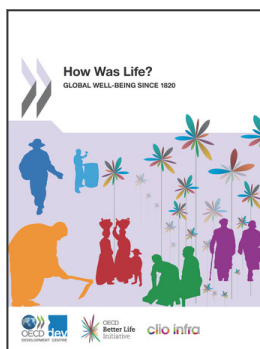
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From:
How Was Life?
Global Well-being since 1820

Access the complete publication at:
<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264214262-en>

Please cite this chapter as:

Baten, Joerg and Matthias Blum (2014), "Human height since 1820", in Jan Luiten van Zanden, *et al.* (eds.), *How Was Life?: Global Well-being since 1820*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264214262-11-en>

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