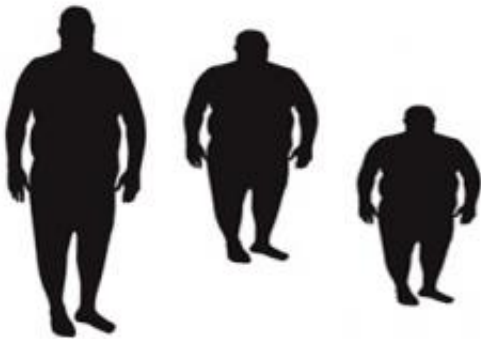


# Americans getting shorter, wider

November 1 2010, by Vansh Muttreja, Duke University

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Americans are getting shorter and wider

Americans are falling behind in the global height race as well.

“Height trends reveal hidden aspects of economic and social growth,” said Professor John Komlos, chair of the Institute of Economic History at the University of Munich, during his talk here on Thursday entitled *“Economics and Human Biology: Why are Americans shorter and fatter?”*

Americans were the tallest people in the world during the colonial times and the Industrial Revolution. However, over time, their physical stature has gradually diminished, and now they are one of the shortest populations among all the advanced nations.

“There are three significant periods of interest in this study-

## Contemporary United States, Industrial Revolution and Antebellum United States.”

Height is a historical record of health and nutrition until age 20, and is an important indicator of biological well being, Komlos said. Eighty percent of a person’s height from conception till the age of 20 depends on genetics, while the other 20 percent depends on external factors. “It is this 20 percent which leads to the differences in heights from region to region.”

During the Colonial times, [Americans](#) were the tallest in the world. In the case of the Industrial Revolution and the Antebellum Era, the heights of people in the industrialized countries were shrinking even when the average incomes were increasing.

“Total average height decreased during these periods; however this was not the case if you consider only the richer people. This was primarily because they were able to pay for their nutrition even when the prices of food were going up.”

Thus, according to Komlos, income and other money measures do not completely reveal the well being of a nation. “Standard of living is multidimensional. Height, health and happiness are outcome measures of welfare, which are better and more direct than income.”

His research showed that the average height of the Dutch increased by almost 8 inches since the middle of the 19th century, compared to an increase of just 2 inches in the height of Americans.

A family’s socio-economic status, externalities in the society and regional economy and nutrient use are some factors that affect a person’s [height](#).

“Americans are shorter because of the existence of inequality in the society, an uninsured safety net that is not as strong as that in other advanced nations, less robust health care system, and a poorer diet.”

These factors also explain why Americans are relatively fatter compared to their modern counterparts.

“Lack of consumer protection, bias towards the present (instant gratification), overindulgence, lack of will power and countervailing abilities, are other reasons for these anomalies.”

**More information:** To read more about John Komlos’ anthropometric history, [follow this link](#).

Provided by Duke University

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