

New data reveals that the average height of European males has grown by 11cm in just over a century

1 September 2013

The average height of European males increased by an unprecedented 11cm between the mid-nineteenth century and 1980, according to a new paper published online today in the journal *Oxford Economic Papers*. Contrary to expectations, the study also reveals that average height actually accelerated in the period spanning the two World Wars and the Great Depression.

Timothy J. Hatton, Professor of Economics at the University of Essex and the Research School of Economics at Australian National University in Canberra, examined and analysed a new [dataset](#) for the [average height](#) (at the age of around 21) of adult male birth cohorts, from the 1870s to 1980, in fifteen European countries. The data were drawn from a variety of sources. For the most recent decades the data were mainly taken from height-by-age in cross sectional surveys. Meanwhile, observations for the earlier years were based on data for the heights of military conscripts and recruits. The data is for men only as the historical evidence for women's heights is severely limited.

Professor Hatton said, "Increases in human stature are a key indicator of improvements in the average health of populations. The evidence suggests that the improving disease environment, as reflected in the fall in infant mortality, is the single most important factor driving the increase in height. The link between infant mortality and height has already been demonstrated by a number of studies." Infant mortality rates fell from an average of 178 per thousand in 1871-5 to 120 per thousand in 1911-15. They then plummeted to 41 in 1951-5 and 14 in 1976-80.

In northern and middle European countries (including Britain and Ireland, the Scandinavian countries, Netherlands, Austria, Belgium, and Germany) there was a "distinct quickening" in the

pace of advance in the period spanning the two World Wars and the Great Depression. This is striking because the period largely predates the wide implementation of major breakthroughs in [modern medicine](#) and [national health](#) services. One possible reason, alongside the crucial decline in infant mortality, for the rapid growth of average male height in this period was that there was a strong downward trend in fertility at the time, and smaller family sizes have already been linked with increasing height.

Other factors in the increase in average male height include an increased income per capita; more sanitary housing and living conditions; better general education about health and nutrition (which led to better care for children and young people within the home); and better social services and health systems.

More information: 'How have Europeans grown so tall?' by Timothy J. Hatton *Oxford Economic Papers*, [DOI: 10.1093/oep/gpt030](https://doi.org/10.1093/oep/gpt030)

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