

The biological standard of living (and its convergence) in Colombia, 1870–2003

A tropical success story

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Abstract

During the 20th century, the evolution of the biological standard of living in Colombia was a tropical success story from the point of view of the secular increase in height as well as the reduction of inequality. During the period 1905–1985 the average height of females and males increased by nearly 9 cm on the basis of 9 million records examined from National Identification Cards. We also study the evolution of height of Colombians on the basis of passport records. The elite group of passport holders was much taller than average, and remained stable for the birth cohorts of 1870–1919. In the early 20th century the height of passport recipients was 168.7 cm (men) and 158 cm (women) compared with 162 cm and 150 cm for heights in the national ID cards. The results also show that Colombians experienced significant regional and intrapersonal convergence in height.

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1. Introduction

Since the late 1970s there has been a growing interest among economic historians in the study of the development of height over time, as an alternate perspective on the standard of living

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(Komlos, 1989).¹ Adult height reflects the net nutritional status of a person during the years of physical growth, which is influenced by food intake, health, and work effort (Steckel, 1995; Tanner, 1994).² Thus, it provides a measure of the biological standard of living, a dimension of the overall standard of living.

For Latin American populations, the studies of height from recruitment files show for Mexico a stagnation from the end of the 19th century until the 1930s or 1940s. It is similar to the results found for the Mexican passports records, although the latter group was 6.0 cm taller (Lopez-Alonso and Porras, 2003). From 1880 until 1910 the average height of men was 170 cm for the passports records and 164 cm for military data. In the case of Argentina, army data show that between 1900 and 1914 height was stagnant, although this was a period of rapid economic growth. After 1914, when the “Argentina golden age” had come to an end, the height of recruits increased by about 2.1 cm, from 165.1 cm to 167.2 cm (Salvatore, 2004a,b).

This paper studies the evolution of the height of Colombians born between 1870 and 1985. For those born in 1985 height was recorded in 2003, when they received their citizenship card (*cédula de ciudadanía*) at age 18.³ With 9,321,776 observations, this is the largest database in the world on anthropometric history to date.

In economic terms Colombia was a success story during the 20th century. The rate of growth of per capita GDP from 1905 to 2000 was 2.3% per annum, one of the highest in Latin America (GRECO, 2002). This economic success was reflected in several dimensions of the standard of living, one of which is the height of its population. Colombian men and women born in 1985 were 8.9 cm taller than those born in 1905–1909, an enormous improvement in physical well being achieved in only three generations.

The paper is divided into five sections. First, the trend in the height for a group of Colombians born in the period 1870–1919 is presented. The information was obtained from passports, thus the sample has a clear bias due to the social composition of the group. Next, a database constructed with information from the national citizenship card for Colombians born in the period 1905–1985 is discussed. Then, the evolution in their height is analyzed. Section 4 compares the behavior in the average height by departments, the main sub-national territorial units, and a convergence analysis is performed for the period as a whole. The last section concludes.

2. Stature of the Colombian elite⁴, born 1870–1919

For the pre-industrial era in Colombia, that is to say for the 19th century, information on height is available only from 1870. We have obtained about 16,000 observations from the records of

¹ The research of Robert Fogel and his collaborators in the 1970s contributed to the increasing interest in anthropometrics on the part of economic historians.

² The first three years of life are the very important for a person's final height, although growth continues until around 18 years of age.

³ Registraduría Nacional del Estado Civil (RNEC). After 1975 the citizenship card began to be issued at that age of 18. Before that it was issued at the age of 21. Since the citizenship card is needed for almost all commercial and legal transactions the overall of population obtain it one or two years after age 18. However there is not upper age when a person can receive this document. The database was obtained by the Central Bank of Colombia (Banco de la República) through a formal request. The Registraduría Nacional del Estado Civil (RNEC) provided a database with 9,321,776 observations. For more information see: <http://www.registraduria.gov.co/>, Address: Av. El Dorado # 46-20, Bogotá, Colombia.

⁴ The Colombian elite was basically comprised of rich landowners, merchants, high officials, and professionals of European ancestry.

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