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Big and Tall: Does a Height Premium Dwarf an Obesity Penalty in the Labor Market?

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Highlights

- Most studies either focus on height and wages or obesity and wages.
- Using a semi-parametric approach, I focus on their three-way relationship.
- I examine the effects of weight on wages for various levels of height.
- I examine the effects of height on wages for various levels of weight.
- I find strong effects of weight reduction for short women but not for short men.

Abstract:

Previous studies have shown that both height and weight are associated with wages. However, some gaps in our understanding of the relationship between body size and wages remain. For example, given a height premium and an obesity penalty, due to forces working in opposite directions, the current literature is unable to provide clear answers to questions such as whether a tall obese woman or a short healthy weight woman would earn a higher wage premium. Using Australian data and iso-contour wage curves derived from a semi-parametric wage regression model, this paper illustrates the complex nature of the relationship between height, weight and wages and how the nature of these differences depends on gender and age. As adult height is fixed, a key focus of the paper is illustrating for various height ranges whether there are any wage benefits in the labor market to increasing or decreasing one's weight. For individuals aged 25-54 as a whole, I find that there are strong effects of weight reduction at lower ends of the height distribution for females (between 1.50 to 1.70 meters) but not for males (< 1.65 meters). For relatively taller men (> 1.85 meters), a wage premium is found for being overweight. For relatively taller women (> 1.72 meters), no penalty for being overweight is discernible.

Keywords: BMI, height, weight, wages, semi-parametric, P-spline.

JEL codes: J31, J71

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