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The biological standard of living in 19th century Mexico and in the American West

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Abstract

During the mid-19th century, the United States acquired Texas and large parts of Mexican territory with the vast Mexican-born population. This paper considers the biological standard of living of the part of this population that was incarcerated in American prisons. We use their physical stature as a proxy for their biological welfare. These data confirm earlier results which showed that adult heights tended to stagnate in Mexico during the late-19th century despite considerable social and political turmoil. While there is some evidence of a decline in height among youth, the decline is slight (<1 cm). As in other 19th century samples, farmers were the tallest. Americans were taller than Mexican prisoners by about 2 cm.

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1. Introduction

Industrialization and modernization frequently bring about rising incomes, wages and life expectancy, particularly in the long run (Komlos, 1985, 1987; Floud et al., 1990, pp. 272–273). However, in the short run economic change also creates social

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turmoil, such as increasing inequality, crime and a more virulent disease environment, which can lead to deteriorating biological living conditions. Hence, the overall effect of industrialization and modernization on biological living standards depends on which of these effects dominates. In case of 19th century Mexico, economic growth and changing biological living conditions were also influenced by general backwardness, including poorly developed institutions. Moreover, until the fourth quarter of the century, Mexico's economy depended on an inefficient overland transportation system that kept the costs of domestic transportation high (Coatsworth, 1978, p. 91; Coatsworth, 1979, pp. 939–940). Government policies also impeded factor mobility and failed to protect property rights. However, the Tuxtepec rising in 1876 and the subsequent Porfirian policies improved the transportation system and changed institutional arrangements to favor factor mobility, inequality and was conducive to economic growth, which eventually influenced biological well being (Coatsworth, 1978, p. 91; Katz, pp. 75, 80–81).

Stature measures the cumulative net influence of physical, economic, nutritional, and disease environments in which individuals come to maturity. Average stature reflects nutritional advantages during childhood, and environmental conditions, minus disease insults and calorie claims of work; consequently, variations in environmental conditions during childhood can influence physical stature of a population (Eveleth and Tanner, 1976). A common theme throughout many 19th century European and American anthropometric samples is the existence of an early-industrial growth puzzle, insofar as wages and output per capita increased, while average physical stature underwent a noticeable decline (Komlos, 1996; Sunder, 2004). Possible reasons for this paradox include increased inequality, changes in relative food prices, increased income variability, population growth, urbanization, the commercialization of agriculture, changes in work intensity, climatic variation, and changes in the disease environment (Komlos, 1998; Steckel, 2004, p. 217; Haines, 2004, p. 252). It is against this backdrop that this paper considers whether any of these patterns and explanations hold for 19th century Northern Mexico. A sample of Mexican-born men who were born in Mexico but later incarcerated in America's Western prisons is analyzed to consider Mexican biological welfare during the period of early modernization. Because not all American prisons recorded city of origin, and because Mexican birth was self-declared, the comparison is between Mexicans claiming birth in Mexico, and Americans born in the Western states.¹ We consider the extent to which political instability affected the biological welfare of the Mexican population. During the 19th century, Mexico experienced much political turmoil; between 1821 and 1876, several factions within Mexico fought for political control. However, from 1864 through the end of the 19th century, first Maximilian (1864–1867), a member of Austria's Imperial Habsburg family, and later Díaz (1876–1911) introduced economic policies that significantly changed Mexico's political institutions and economy. Moreover, we examine the spatial and social correlates of stature in this prison sample.

¹ For the purpose of this paper, Western origin is considered as birth in Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, Oregon, Texas, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming.

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