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CAREERS

Short guys don't measure up on payday

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BY DEBRA PICKETT STAFF REPORTER

Yet another reason tall men are so attractive: They make more money.

A new study conducted by researchers at the University of Pennsylvania shows that taller men make an average of 13 percent more than their shorter counterparts. And the taller they are, the more they earn.

The difference begins in high school, when short guys are less likely to participate in sports and other activities that put men on the path to high achievement. It's missing out on those opportunities--and the confidence they build--that really makes the difference, says Penn economist Nicola Persico, who co-authored the study. In fact, Persico's team found that if a guy is short in high school, he remains behind the curve on salary throughout his life, even if he eventually grows taller.

Several studies have demonstrated that taller workers receive a "wage premium," Persico said, but his study is the first to quantify the difference--which is similar in magnitude to the race and gender gaps--and to trace its roots back to adolescence.

"There's a fair amount of literature to suggest the reason why there is a disparity is there is a preference by employers. You see a tall person, you like him a lot, and you want to pay him more," said Persico. But it turns out things are more complicated than that. "You can look at two adult men, one relatively tall and one relatively short, and if they were the same height when they were 16, they end up making the same salary," he said.

Persico said he believes his team's findings offer insight into the impact of many forms of discrimination. "This enables us to see when the good and bad effects accrue," he said.

To create their report, "The Effect of Adolescent Experience on Labor Market Outcomes: The Case of Height," Persico and his colleagues surveyed 2,000 men working in the United States, ranging from 5 feet to 6 feet 8 inches, and measured their wages during a seven-year period when they were 31 to 38 years old. The men reported their heights at ages 7, 11, 16 and 30. Their height at age 16 was the most related to their future earnings.

"This is not contemporaneous discrimination," Persico said. "An employer would not be able to see how tall someone was when they were 16. So there must be some unobservable characteristic. They see something else they value, which turns out to be developed by tall adolescents."

The team looked at similar data for women, and while they did find a slight salary advantage for taller women, it did not seem to correlate to adolescent height.

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Persico happens, at 5 feet 10 inches, to be perfectly average--neither short nor tall, though he does point out that he's the tallest of the study's co-authors. So its conclusion "might just turn out to be sour grapes," he said, in the case of researchers Andrew Postlewaite and Dan Silverman.

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