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**everyday economics** How the dismal science applies to your life.

## Short Changed

Why do tall people make more money?

By Steven E. Landsburg

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Economists have known for a long time that it pays to be tall. Multiple studies have found that an extra inch of height can be worth an extra \$1,000 a year or so in wages, after controlling for education and experience. If you're 6 feet tall, you probably earn about \$6,000 more than the equally qualified 5-foot-6-inch shrimp down the hall. (Previously in this column, I wrote about the connection between [beauty and income and weight and income.](#))

That makes height as important as race or gender as a determinant of wages. And it works for women as well as men. Even among female identical twins (whose heights can differ more than you might expect), the taller sister earns, on average, substantially more than the shorter.

Height matters not just for wages but for ascension to leadership roles. When I served on the board of directors of a midsized corporation, I missed half the sights on the plant tours because I couldn't see over the heads of my colleagues—all of whom, unlike me, had considerable histories of success in the world of business.

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Of 43 American presidents, only five have been more than a smidgeon below average height, and the last of those was Benjamin Harrison, elected in 1888. (Another three, most recently Jimmy Carter, were just a hair below average.) Most presidents have been several inches above the norm for their times, with the [five tallest](#) being Abraham Lincoln, Lyndon Johnson, Bill Clinton, Thomas Jefferson, and Franklin Roosevelt—suggesting, incidentally, that height predicts not just electoral success but a propensity to subvert the Constitution. (This statistical anomaly works in the other direction as well; the shortest of American presidents was James Madison, who largely *wrote* the Constitution.)

So, what's the deal? Why do the tall tower over the short in more than just physical stature? Does height breed respect, so that tall people get showered with riches? Or does height breed self-esteem, so that tall people are more likely to assert themselves? In other words, do tall people succeed because of how others see them, or do

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tall people succeed because of how they see themselves? That sounds like the kind of question you could argue for years and never settle, but three clever economists have gone ahead and settled it. Their names are Nicola Persico, Andy Postlewaite, and Dan Silverman of the University of Pennsylvania, and they've uncovered a key bit of evidence: Tall men who were short in high school earn like short men, while short men who were tall in high school earn like tall men.

That pretty much rules out discrimination. It's hard to imagine how or why employers could discriminate in favor of *past* height. If tall adolescents—even those who stop growing prematurely—grow up to be highly paid workers, it's got to be because they've got some other trait that employers value. Persico, Postlewaite, and Silverman believe that trait is self-esteem. Tall high-school kids learn to think of themselves as leaders, and that habit of thought persists even when the kids stop growing.

If not self-esteem, what else could it be? Are tall kids better-nourished? Do they come from wealthier homes or have better-educated parents? Are they smarter? Do they mature early and therefore get more out of high school? One by one, the Penn economists considered and eliminated these hypotheses by examining relevant data. That leaves self-esteem—and very specifically, self-esteem in adolescence. Height at age 7 or 11 turns out to have no impact at all on future wages. But height at age 16 makes all the difference in the world.

Why should adolescent self-esteem be so significant? Partly, perhaps, because self-esteem, once learned, lasts a lifetime. But partly also because a kid with self-esteem is more likely to join the teams, clubs, and social groups where he learns to interact with people. And that participation is clearly valuable. The economists report that "after controlling for age, height, region and family background, participation in athletics is associated with an 11.4 percent increase in adult wages, and participation in every club other than athletics is associated with a 5.1 percent increase in wages." These effects account for part, but not all, of the wage premium for adolescent height.

Or the causality might go the other way: Maybe it's not self-esteem that gets you to go out for the chess club, but success in the chess club that breeds self-esteem. What we do know is that shorter kids tend to avoid extracurricular activities, and those activities are clearly associated with success in later life.

Did Lincoln free the slaves and Clinton lie to the grand jury because they learned in adolescence that they could dominate others through their height? Of course, it can't be quite that simple. But thanks to Persico, Postlewaite, and Silverman, we really do know a lot more than we used to about how and why the very tall are different from the rest of us.

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