

REVIEWS

LISTS

If you haven't been doing a Rip Van Winkle in the past few years, you already know that Americans are among the fattest people in the developed world.

And you have probably read that Americans have long been among the tallest people in the world – a fact generally attributed to the quality of food available to ordinary people, especially as children.

What you probably don't know is that the rest of the world is rapidly catching up, or even surpassing Americans on height. Indeed, most northern and western Europeans are now taller than Americans, and the gaps seem to be widening. Compare German males to their American counterparts.

What's going on? John Komlos, an American economist and historian, argues that average height and (avoidance of) obesity are better measures of socioeconomic development than per capita income because they are affected by the quality of the social safety net for children, education levels and the overall health the population. But, then, we already had some clues from the fact that people in other developed countries live a lot longer than Americans. **M**

MALE OBESITY RATES (%, CIRCA 2000)

Finland	22%
United States	20
France	15
Belgium	10
Russia	8
China	4

AVERAGE HEIGHT ADULT MEN MID-19TH CENTURY (CENTIMETERS)

America (whites)	174.1
Australia	172.7
Norway	168.6
England	165.6
Denmark	165.3

AVERAGE HEIGHT MALES (CENTIMETERS)

Birth date	West Germans	Americans
1929-38	172	175
1939-48	174	177
1949-58	177	177
1959-68	179	178
1969-78	180	178

LIFE EXPECTANCY IN YEARS, 2000

Japan	80
Sweden	79
Canada	79
Britain	78
United States	77
Cuba	76

SOURCE: John Komlos and Marieluise Baur, "From the Tallest to the Fattest: The Enigmatic Fate of the American Population in the late 20th Century," Center for Economic Studies at the University of Munich, Ifo Institute for Economic Research, Working Paper 1028, Sept. 2003.