

The Rise and Fall of SES gradients in heights around the world

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Abstract

The association between measures of wealth and health is well-documented both over time and across space. Height is often used as a "stock" indicator of health, as it also depends on net nutrition and disease during growth. Average height in a population is sometimes used as an indicator of economic development, and many countries have indeed experienced secular increases in stature during periods of rapid economic growth. However, in LDCs the cross-sectional association between adult height and GDP has been shown to be weak. We show, first, that while more recent data confirm this weak correlation, the association is strong, positive, and growing with age among children. Using individual-level longitudinal data from a number of countries, we then confirm the existence of a rise and fall of SES gradients in height, and we show that for both boys and girls the inversion of the slope takes place around puberty. We conjecture that marriage and child-bearing patterns may in part explain the flattening of the association between SES and height in adulthood.