Height, weight and mortality in the past: New evidence from a late nineteenth century New Zealand cohort

Evan Roberts

An enormous corpus of research examines how health affects longevity in modern populations. The historical trajectory of the relationship is equally interesting. Increases in body mass in adulthood beyond moderate overweight status have been found to reduce longevity. However the twentieth century has seen a trend towards both increased average body mass and increased average longevity. There are only two studies of weight and mortality for cohorts born in the nineteenth century. Our paper adds a third historical population to the literature: New Zealand-born men who served in World War I. Our analysis focuses on whether greater body mass led to premature mortality. Our estimates suggest the hazard of death between age 55 and 70 was 40-50% higher for men with a BMI over 27, compared to men in the ideal weight range (BMI of 20-25). Comparison to cohorts born in the mid-to-late twentieth century suggests that the mortality risk of being overweight dropped significantly over the past century.

Evan Roberts is an Assistant Professor in American history at the University of Minnesota. His research interests are in the social and economic history of Australasia and North America in the 19th and 20th centuries. His current research projects are about (1) health and living standards in New Zealand from the early nineteenth century to the present, and (2) married women’s work and the family economy in the United States between the Civil War and World War II.

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12.30 to 1.30

Small Lecture Theatre

ALL WELCOME!