



May 10, 2010

For Crime, Is Anatomy Destiny?

By **PATRICIA COHEN**

Poverty, greed, anger, jealousy, pride, revenge. These are the usual suspects when it comes to discussing the causes of crime. In recent years, however, economists have started to investigate a different explanation for criminal activity: physical attributes.

A small band of economists has been studying how height, weight and beauty affect the likelihood of committing — or being convicted of — a crime. Looking at records from the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries, they have found evidence that shorter men are 20 to 30 percent more likely to end up in prison than their taller counterparts, and that obesity and physical attractiveness are linked to crime.

“The profession has developed a large interest in biology,” what some refer to as anthropometric economics or history, said Gregory N. Price, an economist at Morehouse College and one of the authors of a paper on height and crime.

There is already a sizable stack of research that examines the connections between physical characteristics and the labor market. Economists have found, for example, that every inch of additional height is associated with a nearly 2 percent increase in earnings; that employees rated beautiful tended to earn 5 percent more an hour than an average-looking person, while those rated as plain earned 9 percent less; that obesity can cause a drop in white women’s earnings.

To make a point about income tax, [Gregory Mankiw](#), an economist at [Harvard](#) and the former chairman of President [George W. Bush’s Council of Economic Advisers](#), has facetiously proposed taxing taller people more, since someone 6 feet tall can be expected to earn \$5,525 more a year than someone who is 5-foot-5, after accounting for gender, weight and age.

Linking physical traits to criminality may sound like a throwback to the biological determinism advocated by 19th-century social Darwinists who believed that there was a genetic predisposition for wrongdoing. Practitioners are quick to distance themselves from such ideas.

Mr. Price, for example, argues that crime can be viewed, at least partly, as an “alternative labor market.” If individuals with certain physical attributes are disadvantaged in the labor force, they may find crime more attractive, he said.

H. Naci Mocan, an economist at Louisiana State University and an author of a paper on crime and attractiveness, explained that theories about the relationship between weight, height or beauty and the labor force emerged because “economists looking at standard determinants — like education, experience, productivity, human capital — found that they could only explain some of the variation in wages.”

“This is very new,” Mr. Mocan said of the research into crime. “It opens up our horizons a little more.”

A link between a physical attribute and salary, or crime, does not necessarily mean cause and effect. Mr. Mocan pointed out that we do not know why someone who is overweight, unattractive or short is at a disadvantage in the labor market or more likely to commit a crime. It could be employer discrimination, customer preference or that the physical attribute may make the worker less productive. If a job involves carrying heavy loads, for instance, brawn would be an advantage.

That is what both Howard Bodenhorn, an economist at [Clemson University](#), and Mr. Price concluded from 19th-century prison records. In that era increased body weight was associated with a lower risk of crime. In the 21st century, though, in which service jobs are much more common, Mr. Price found that being overweight was linked to a higher risk of crime.

Mr. Mocan and Erdal Tekin, an economist at Georgia State University, analyzed data from a national survey of adolescent health that involved 15,000 high school students who were interviewed in 1994, 1996 and 2002. They found that being unattractive in high school was correlated with a lower grade point average, more problems with teachers and suspensions.

Other studies have found that shorter students tend to participate less frequently in clubs and sports. As a result these students may suffer a drop in self-esteem or not develop certain kinds of social skills that are useful later in life, the two economists theorized.

According to their study, both men and women who were rated unattractive (as rated on a five-point scale) in high school were more likely to commit — or at least more likely to be caught while committing — one of seven crimes, including burglary and selling drugs, than those rated average or attractive.

Mr. Price said anthropometric economics was based on the work of economic historians — including the [Nobel Prize](#)-winner Robert Fogel, John Komlos at the University of Munich and Richard H. Steckel at [Ohio State University](#) — who have used height and weight to assess changing social conditions.

Since biologists believe that 80 percent of height is determined by genetics and 20 percent by environmental conditions, height — and sometimes weight — can be an index of childhood nutrition, health care and exposure to disease. Thus smaller stature may be a sign of an impoverished upbringing.

Mr. Komlos, for example, wrote a 2007 paper with Benjamin E. Lauderdale that found that Americans were the “tallest in the world between colonial times and the middle of the 20th century,” but have since “become shorter (and fatter) than Western and Northern Europeans. In fact, the United States population is currently at the bottom end of the height distribution in advanced industrial countries.”

“We conjecture,” they concluded, “that the United States health-care system, as well as the relatively weak welfare safety net, might be why human growth in the United States has not performed as well in relative terms as one would expect on the basis of income alone.”

Though beauty would superficially seem to be in the same category as weight and height, studies that assess the economic advantage of being attractive are actually quite different, said Christina Paxson, an economist at Princeton who has studied the relationship between stature and status. While height is a sign of health and social conditions, the impact of beauty is more psychological, she said. There the question is how someone’s perception of a worker’s productivity, skill and talent is influenced by looks.

Mr. Price has suggested that there may be policy implications in his work, saying, “Public health policies successful at reducing obesity among individuals in the population will not only make society healthier, but also safer.”

At the moment, Mr. Mankiw is skeptical of any real-world utility. “Economists love quantifying things,” he said, “but there are so many possible interpretations, it doesn’t settle debates as much as it opens up questions.”

He did note that his students at Harvard have been particularly fascinated by the research that shows quantifiable economic advantages of beauty. The benefit of these “weird facts,” he said, is that it “forces you to think about the world in ways you didn’t before.”

