Was migration from Europe to colonial Algerian cities good for the health of settlers?

The anthropometric evidence from conscription records (1850-1880) Laurent Heyberger (université de technologie de Belfort-Montbéliard, laurent.heyberger@utbm.fr)

It is well established that Western city-dwellers paid an urban penalty during the first phase of industrialization, as anthropometric evidence has demonstrated for Europe, North America and Australia. Like the United States, Australia and Canada for the United Kingdom, Algeria is for France a settlement colony, where a rapid urbanization boom took place during the second half of the 19th century. Nevertheless, this urban explosion in the only Western settlement colony in Africa wasn’t due to industrialization but to the administrative and commercial activities in Algerian cities, paving probably the way for a smooth way of urbanization. It is all the more plausible that Algerian urbanization took place without urban penalty as the mortality rate of military and civil Western populations dramatically decreased from the 1850s onwards. Did the French settlers benefit from an urban bonus in colonial Algeria? A set of 3,168 individual data randomly selected from the conscription records for the 1850-1880 birth decades shows that actually it was not the case. City-dwellers became shorter and shorter when compared to their countryside counterparts, not matter what large immigration occurred at that time. This phenomenon culminated in Algiers, the biggest administrative city, but didn’t exist in the prosperous commercial city of Oran. It is likely that this phenomenon could be explained rather by the spread of non-fatal illnesses among city-dwellers than by a decline in nutritional intake, as the height trend for countrymen suggests, as the food market was already integrated in the middle of the century. Finally, settlers were taller than their counterparts from their European regions of origin –just as was the case in the British Empire- but suffered from a height decline, whereas the opposite occurred in Europe, paving the way for a revision of the rosy picture of colonization for European populations at the end of the 19th century.