

Hemiville

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Hemiville is a small Midwestern town with one very curious characteristic: Half of the adults in town are exactly four feet tall, and the other half are exactly six feet tall. A government researcher was sent there many years ago to collect data on people of "average" height, but he's had some difficulties. The problem, of course, is that the average height of adult Hemivillians is five feet, but there's not a single person in town of this height. The statistic is correct; it just doesn't apply to anyone. Statistics can do that. Our government researcher roams the streets, day and night, searching for the average Hemivillian, but all he ever finds are four-footers and six-footers. The government keeps sending his pay check every month, but he feels unfulfilled. He watches the four-footers closely, hoping for signs of growth, and, as the years pass, he finds himself praying secretly that one of the six-footers will be the victim of an industrial accident. Local officials are also feeling frustrated. Every doorway in Hemiville's historic town hall is precisely five feet high. Occasionally, mindless citizens bump their heads on the doorways,

and, following recent national trends, they've starting filing law suits. The town council hires the government researcher who, after all, has a lot of spare time on his hands — to study the problem. He reports that people who squat before entering doorways rarely bump their heads. "The statistics," he says, "are clear." So the town council issues public service announcements and posts signs by every doorway: "To avoid bumping your head, squat before entering." For a while, this does the trick. The rate of head-bumping declines dramatically. What's

more, the law suits disappear because no one can sue the town without admitting that he or she can't read. Unfortunately, as the months pass, people begin to complain of knee problems, and they blame their swollen knees on the squatting advisories. The government researcher — still searching vainly for the average Hemivillian — is asked, once again, to help. To the council's dismay, he confirms that the recent upsurge in knee problems is associated with the government's squatting campaign. As usual, the statistics are clear. "But the squatting campaign has eliminated the head-banging problem!" shouts the mayor. "Here, here!" add the town council members, some of whom are rubbing their swollen knees. Another study is commissioned, which shows that knee problems are often reduced when people take long walks in the countryside, which, alas, is inhabited by a band of hungry velociraptors with no height preferences.

Meanwhile, Hemivillians, short and tall, continue to squat before entering public doorways, because that's what the signs recommend. The skeptic's moral: Short people who listen to statisticians are fools, and tall people who listen to statisticians are bigger fools. Of course, people who listen to skeptics are the biggest fools of all, so the matter isn't settled. The believer's moral:

Okay, I may not be tall, and my knees may be the size of grapefruits, but squatting is damn good exercise, so leave me the heck alone!

Author's exegesis: Statistics are, after a fashion, useful to administrators, but they do not apply reliably to individuals. Statistically valid recommendations will always help a few people, always have no effect on others, and always hurt the rest of us. Which group are you in?

