

T H E F I R S T
M E A S U R E D
C E N T U R Y

AN ILLUSTRATED GUIDE TO TRENDS
IN AMERICA, 1900–2000

Theodore Caplow
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Cover photo: *In 1926, Mrs. Ida Zahler and her eleven children arrived in New York City from Switzerland. They continued their journey to a farm in North Canton, Ohio, where they joined Mr. Zahler. Courtesy of UPI/Corbis-Bettman.*

Inside front and back covers: *Chicago's Hull House was home to a group of university-educated women devoted to charitable work on behalf of immigrants living in the poor, inner-city neighborhood depicted in these maps. In 1893, the women conducted an in-depth, door-to-door survey of their immigrant neighbors, gathering information on socioeconomic characteristics such as ethnicity and wages, which was eventually converted into these detailed color-coded maps. Courtesy of the University Library, Department of Special Collections, University of Illinois at Chicago.*

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Contents

xii Preface

Chapter 1. Population

- 2 The American population nearly quadrupled during the twentieth century. The annual rate of population growth fluctuated until about 1960, when a distinctly lower growth rate ensued.
- 4 The life expectancy of Americans increased dramatically, first for infants and children, then for adults.
- 6 The proportion of children and adolescents in the population declined, while the proportion of older people increased throughout the century.
- 8 During the first half of the century, the proportion of centenarians in the population declined, but in the last two decades of the century that age group increased more than any other.
- 10 As the nation grew, the share of the population living in the Northeast and Midwest declined, while the share residing in the West grew rapidly and the South remained the most populous region.
- 12 At the beginning of the century, the American people were mostly rural. At the end, they were largely urban. Most of these urban dwellers lived in the suburbs.
- 14 Two great waves of immigration swelled the American population and changed its composition.
- 16 The size of the foreign-born population in the United States fluctuated in response to changing immigration policies.

- 18 During the second half of the century, the proportion of minorities in the population increased dramatically.
- 20 Minority migrants from the rural South and minority immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean settled predominantly in large cities.

Chapter 2. Work

- 24 The majority of the male labor force shifted from material extraction to material processing to working with people and information.
- 26 The decline of the farm population reflects a long process of attrition driven by huge technical advances in agriculture.
- 28 Even in blue-collar occupations, men's work became cleaner, less strenuous, and much safer.
- 30 Propelled by advances in technology, the ratio of engineers to population increased steadily. The comparable ratio for lawyers and physicians, however, remained largely unchanged until 1970, when it began to rise markedly.
- 32 The proportion of American men who were in the labor force declined.
- 34 Daily and weekly work hours declined until World War II, but annual work hours continued to decline moderately throughout the century.
- 36 The time that women devoted to housekeeping declined steeply.
- 38 Married women entered the paid labor force in large numbers.
- 40 Attitudes toward the employment of married women shifted from strong disapproval to equally strong approval.
- 42 The concentration of working women in a few occupations diminished as they found employment throughout the economy.
- 44 Women and blacks were represented only marginally in law, medicine, and engineering until 1970, when they began to move into these influential professions.
- 46 The unemployment rate fluctuated with the business cycle and military manpower needs.
- 48 The unionized share of the labor force peaked in midcentury. The union base moved from the private to the public sector.

Chapter 3. Education

- 52 High school and college graduates were rarities in 1900. Their numbers rose impressively during the hundred years that followed.

- 54 Women's share of bachelor's and advanced degrees trended upward throughout much of the century.
- 56 The pupil-teacher ratio in the nation's public elementary and secondary schools declined by nearly half during the century.
- 58 Preschool enrollment remained very low throughout the first half of the century but increased rapidly during the second half.
- 60 Enrollment in private elementary and secondary schools peaked in 1960 and then declined through 1990, when enrollment began to increase again.
- 62 Undergraduate tuition at Harvard—and virtually all other colleges—rose sharply after 1980.
- 64 The number of graduate degrees awarded more than quadrupled after 1960, and graduate credentials became the normal path to the lucrative professions.

Chapter 4. Family

- 68 The marriage rate was lower at the end of the century than ever before. The average age at first marriage, which fell to an all-time low during the baby boom, climbed to an all-time high by the close of the century.
- 70 At the beginning of the century, very few women were sexually active before marriage. By the end of the century, most of them were.
- 72 The cohabitation of unmarried couples became common in the last decades of the century.
- 74 Extramarital sexual activity followed a downward trend.
- 76 Tolerance of premarital sexual activity increased steadily, but tolerance of extramarital sex remained extremely low.
- 78 The divorce rate rose unevenly but substantially from 1900 to about 1967, when the introduction of no-fault divorce led to a doubling of the rate during the subsequent decade to a level that was sustained through the closing years of the century.
- 80 The decline in the share of U.S. households maintained by a married couple proceeded slowly until 1970 and accelerated thereafter.
- 82 The proportion of the population that is married varied considerably, with the lowest points occurring at the beginning and the end of the century.
- 84 Women's fertility declined during the early decades of the century, increased during the baby boom, and declined sharply thereafter.
- 86 Births to unmarried women increased sharply after 1960.

- 88 The time and attention that American parents devote to their children increased significantly.

Chapter 5. Living Arrangements

- 92 U.S. households became smaller.
- 94 Construction of new housing surged after World War II, and Americans' preference for single-family detached homes remained strong.
- 96 Home ownership and the use of purchase mortgages increased, as did the quality of owned housing.
- 98 American homes were extensively mechanized.
- 100 The automobile and television, introduced fifty years apart, diffused with extraordinary speed and affected virtually every aspect of American life.
- 102 Residential mobility declined, while migration between states increased moderately.

Chapter 6. Religion

- 106 Membership in churches and other religious organizations increased slowly but steadily.
- 108 Conservative Protestant denominations grew, while mainstream Protestant denominations declined.
- 110 The Roman Catholic share of the national population nearly doubled.
- 112 Organized religion became much more diverse as a result of the rapid expansion of Christian denominations that are neither Protestant nor Catholic and the simultaneous growth of non-Christian faiths.
- 114 Church attendance remained fairly level in the latter decades of the century.
- 116 While levels of religious belief and practice remained relatively stable, the character of religion in the United States changed in important ways.

Chapter 7. Active Leisure

- 120 The major professional sports of baseball, football, basketball, and ice hockey achieved extraordinary growth in the last two decades of the century.
- 122 Track and field performance improved significantly.
- 124 The growth of leisure activities that followed World War II included significantly increased usage of the National Park System.
- 126 The steady increase in membership in the Boy Scouts of America peaked in the early 1970s and then fluctuated during the last quarter of the century.

- 128** The world record for land speed, not subject to any particular human limitation, increased throughout the century.
- 130** Overseas travel by Americans greatly increased during the latter part of the century, but the number of foreign visitors to the United States increased even more.

Chapter 8. Health

- 134** The health of children showed spectacular improvement.
- 136** The infectious diseases that killed great numbers of adults in the early part of the century were largely brought under control. Cancer and cardiovascular diseases became the major killers of adults.
- 138** The incidence of sexually transmitted infections did not decline as much as that of other infectious diseases. In the last two decades of the century, the AIDS epidemic took a heavy toll of lives.
- 140** The suicide rate fluctuated with economic conditions during the first half of the century and then leveled off in the second half. Every year, more Americans killed themselves than were killed by others.
- 142** The per capita consumption of alcoholic beverages fluctuated.
- 144** Cigarette consumption increased enormously during the first half of the century but declined when the health effects became known.
- 146** The popularity of psychotropic substances fluctuated.
- 148** Life in America became much safer.
- 150** The use of general hospitals increased steadily from the beginning of the century to about 1980, when usage began to decline.
- 152** Health care expenditures increased sharply toward the end of the century.
- 154** The population institutionalized for mental disorders increased from early in the century to the 1950s and then declined sharply. The number of people institutionalized for mental retardation, however, continued to grow throughout the century.
- 156** Fewer blind people received public assistance at the end of the century than in 1950. At the same time, the number of public assistance recipients with other types of disabilities increased fortyfold.

Chapter 9. Money

- 160** The real earnings of American workers improved steadily during the first three quarters of the century, but economists disagree about what happened during the last quarter.

- 162** Although the equalization of women's and men's earnings proceeded slowly, the process accelerated after 1980. The gap between the average earnings of white male workers and black male workers also narrowed.
- 164** The real incomes of middle-income families at the end of the century were five times greater than those of middle-income families in 1900.
- 166** As real incomes increased during the century, Americans spent smaller shares of their incomes on food and clothing, but larger shares on medical care and transportation.
- 168** Private philanthropy increased more than fivefold in the last half of the century.
- 170** The ratio of personal debt to personal income reached a peak in the 1990s. The bankruptcy rate climbed slowly after World War II and more rapidly during the last two decades of the century.
- 172** Income inequality decreased throughout much of the century, increased from 1980 to 1995, and then leveled off.
- 174** Poverty decreased significantly from 1959, when official measurements began, until 1973, when it increased moderately and remained at a slightly elevated level during the subsequent two decades. Between 1993 and 1999, however, the incidence of poverty declined by more than a fifth.
- 176** Inflation alternated with deflation and periods of price stability from 1900 to 1955. Every year thereafter witnessed some inflation, although at substantially reduced levels toward the end of the century.

Chapter 10. Politics

- 180** Democrats and Republicans shared presidential election victories almost equally. Voter participation declined from 1900 to 1912 and then fluctuated during the rest of the century with no clear trend.
- 182** Control of the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate oscillated between the two major parties.
- 184** After women first entered Congress early in the century, their numbers increased slowly and then rose rapidly.
- 186** The number of black elected officials increased greatly after 1970.
- 188** The attitudes of Middletown adolescents toward social issues did not vary dramatically between 1924 and 1999.

Chapter 11. Government

- 192** Federal, state, and local governments expanded their activities.

- 194** Federal government employees were a smaller component of the labor force at the end of the century than at any time since 1940.
- 196** Government payments to, or on behalf of, individual citizens increased during the second half of the century.
- 198** In the last three decades of the century, the judicial branch of the federal government grew at a much faster rate than the executive and legislative branches.
- 200** U.S. armed forces expanded rapidly for each major conflict during the century. During the cold war, the nation maintained a large permanent force for the first time in its history.
- 202** The armed services, rigidly segregated by race during the first part of the century, became a model of successful integration.
- 204** The proportion of women in the armed forces rose rapidly in the last third of the century.
- 206** In the five major conflicts in which the United States engaged during the century, American losses were highest in World War II.
- 208** Veterans made up a large part of the civilian male population during the second half of the century.
- 210** Patriotic attitudes of Middletown adolescents declined between 1924 and 1999, especially among females.

Chapter 12. Crime

- 214** Homicides increased sharply during the first third of the century and then declined to a lower level during the second third. The homicide rate escalated to new peaks during the final third and then declined sharply in the last decade of the century.
- 216** Robberies increased rapidly from the early 1960s to the mid-1970s and remained at a high level until the last decade of the century, when a sharp downturn ensued.
- 218** Capital punishment increased during the first four decades of the century and then declined sharply in the subsequent three decades. The practice was abolished and then restored during the 1970s, and its use increased in the last two decades of the century.
- 220** The cost and complexity of maintaining order increased sharply in the second half of the century.
- 222** The inmate population of state and federal prisons increased significantly after 1980.

- 224** Toward the end of the century, the proportion of new state and federal prisoners committed for property crimes declined, while the proportion committed for drug crimes increased.
- 226** Juveniles became more heavily involved in serious crime during the second half of the century.

Chapter 13. Transportation

- 230** Travel within the United States increased enormously, while the modes of travel changed.
- 232** The tonnage of domestic freight carried by rail increased throughout the century, while the tonnage carried by trucks, waterways, and pipelines began to increase around 1930. Trucks ranked behind other carriers in the tonnage they transported but ahead of all other carriers in the value of their shipments.
- 234** The number of motor vehicles exceeded road capacity.
- 236** The annual traffic death rate fluctuated until about 1970, when it began to decline markedly. Deaths per vehicle-mile decreased throughout the century.
- 238** Bicycles, like horses and sailboats, did not disappear when they were superseded by motorized transportation.

Chapter 14. Business

- 242** The Gross Domestic Product per capita, in constant dollars, grew eightfold during the century.
- 244** The economy became more stable.
- 246** After 1939, business activity expanded enormously. The corporate share of business activity increased at the expense of proprietorships and partnerships.
- 248** The volume of stock transactions expanded greatly after 1970.
- 250** In the first five decades of the century, the Dow Jones Industrial Average rose almost 250 percent. In the subsequent five decades, the average rose by more than 4,700 percent.
- 252** For much of the century, only a small fraction of the population owned stock, but from 1980 to 1998, the proportion of stockholders grew rapidly.
- 254** Domestic petroleum production grew until 1970, when a steady decline ensued. Per capita consumption of petroleum peaked a decade later and declined moderately thereafter.

- 256** Material progress required large inputs of mechanical energy and greater efficiency in the use of that energy.
- 258** As the number of U.S. patents grew, fewer patents were issued to individuals and more were issued to corporations. The proportion of U.S. patents issued to foreigners increased.
- 260** In the last three decades of the century, U.S. imports and exports increased nearly fivefold, while the trade balance shifted.
- 262** Toward the end of the century, U.S. ownership of foreign assets increased sharply, while foreign ownership of assets in the United States increased even more.

Chapter 15. Communications

- 266** The number of new books published in the United States remained fairly level during the first half of the century but surged upward thereafter.
- 268** Per capita newspaper circulation increased during the first half of the century and declined during the second half.
- 270** The importance of advertising in the national economy increased slowly during the first half of the century and rapidly during the second half.
- 272** As communities grew, the number of post offices decreased, while the volume of mail increased substantially.
- 274** Telephone calls became ubiquitous in American life.
- 276** The number of personal computers in American homes escalated when the World Wide Web was developed.

279 **Notes**

297 **Index**

307 **About the Authors**

309 **Supplementary Resources**