

Who We Are

**A
Portrait
of
America
Based
on the
Latest
U.S. Census**

Revised and Updated



Sam Roberts

of The New York Times

**Some of the surprising facts
discussed in *Who We Are*:**

- ★ The steepest rise in single-parent families is among white women.
- ★ Fully half of the poor work—and more than one quarter of them receive no government benefits.
- ★ More than one in 250 Americans live in a correctional institution.
- ★ More illegal immigrants in New York City come from Italy than from China.

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A PORTRAIT OF AMERICA
BASED ON THE LATEST U.S. CENSUS

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SAM ROBERTS



R A N D O M H O U S E

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**WHO
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ARE**

CHAPTER I

WHO WE ARE

Who are we? For two centuries, America has taken stock every decade, fulfilling a constitutional mandate and then reaching beyond it to produce a vivid, statistical self-portrait. In 1990, the nation's bicentennial census cost billions of dollars to produce—more than has ever been paid for any other painting by numbers. With a population that had grown 10 percent to at least 248,709,873 people since 1980 (plus 922,819 Americans living overseas), America embarked on the final decade of the twentieth century manifestly beset by doubts about its destiny in the twenty-first. By 1995, the population passed 263 million—well on its way toward breaking 275 million before the decade ends.

America, Theodore H. White once wrote, is more of an idea than a place. It is an idea that has drawn together the most

diverse population on Earth and one that is becoming more varied every day. Uncle Sam, meet Ms. America. Today, the average American is a 32.7-year-old white woman who lives in a mortgaged suburban home that has three bedrooms and is heated by natural gas. She is a married mother, with some German ancestry, on the cusp of the MTV generation—roughly the thirteenth to come of age since Benjamin Franklin's. She graduated from high school and holds a clerical job. She moves to a new home more frequently than residents of any other developed nation. She is also a myth.

If average is a mathematical mean and if typical is emblematic of that mean, then the United States consists of too many parts to make a representative whole. It is a country of contrasts personified by a quarter of a billion people—including the homeless, whom the 1990 census counted specifically for the first time, and the prison population, which exploded by 139 percent in the decade (and included 2,356 Americans in legal limbo on death row at the end of 1990), though the number of inmates still was outnumbered by the residents of nursing homes. The nuclear family fizzled in the 1980s: For the first time, the number of married, childless couples surpassed the number of couples with children; fewer than three in four children are being raised by two parents; only one in seven families includes a married couple with two children; women, with and without children, began working outside the home and marrying later than at any time in a century; the ratio of divorces to marriages set a record; and the decline in household size halted. The birth rate rose again to what relieved demographers hailed as a "replacement level" of 2.2 children per woman—a rate suppressed by a record 15 million abortions during the decade but fueled, in part, by the surge in babies born to women who had never married. Still, only during the Depression of the 1930s had the population grown more slowly. And only during the 1950s had the population

expanded by more people than are expected to be added in the 1990s.

Unlike the Balkans and the Baltics, unlike Western Europe—which took centuries even tentatively to embrace an imperfect union of sovereign states—the artificial political subdivisions that constitute the United States have withstood two centuries of unique civic evolution and wrenching tectonic upheaval. Only once did the fragile mosaic split, but the nation survived the Civil War in the nineteenth century and has endured far longer since that war than the four score and seven years between the nation's birth and the breach. The Civil War's grim legacy, though, is a nation still ambivalent about race, a nation that makes self-interested overtures to the Third World but overlooks a seemingly impenetrable Fourth World in the ghettos of its biggest cities and in its rural Tobacco Roads. Because, in part, of the decline in European immigration, blacks represent a greater proportion of America's population today than at any time in a century.

In 1941, before it was even half over, Henry Luce dubbed this the American Century. "It now becomes our time," he said, "to be the powerhouse from which the ideals spread throughout the world and do their mysterious work of lifting the life of mankind from the level of beasts to what the Psalmist called a little lower than the angels." America dominates the world—those whom Kipling called "lesser breeds without the law"—even more unequivocally at the century's end. The United States defended some countries, defeated others, and fed still more. They returned the favor, but in less proprietary ways. The rest of the world provided America with the immigrants who have made the burrito as ubiquitous as the bagel. America, ambivalently, provided a welcome. At no other time in the nation's history have so many people born abroad been residents of the United States. Nor have so many places within the nation seemed

foreign to so many others—despite the commercial homogenization of America that television, faxes, and other forms of instant communication accomplished. The breadth of delocalized marketing was typified by the Brooklyn Savings Bank's metamorphosis from a neighborhood bank into a national conglomerate with an anonymous name. It merged to become Metropolitan Savings, then finally changed its name in the 1980s to the innocuous CrossLand. Every translucent store enclosure from Michigan Avenue to Main Street is now touted as an atrium. Fortunately for President Bill Clinton, no Big Mac attack need go unrequited for long. *The New York Times* declared the Gourmet Revolution accomplished, now that sun-dried tomatoes, extra virgin olive oil, and microwaveable chicken entrées scarred by faux grill marks are universally available.

But never before, despite previous waves of immigration, has the nation been so diverse. Nor have contrasts between and within regions, while becoming more isolated, been so stark. In the Pacific region, one in five Americans is foreign-born. In a broad swath of the Midwest Farm Belt, only one in fifty is. Blacks made up a majority in 89 of the nation's 3,141 counties, but the census found not a single one in another 117 counties and they accounted for less than 1 percent of the population in 1,400 others. "If you believe that the descendant of an English lord and a descendant of a Polish shtetl are part of the same group, then that group is going to continue in the majority for a long time to come," said Ben J. Wattenberg, the demographer and political commentator who has hailed America as the first universal nation. "Still, there's a big difference between being a 90 percent majority, a 70 percent majority or a 55 percent majority."

Whatever its size, that majority is tenuous. It is hardly homogeneous and it is shrinking. The 1990 census found that whites made up 80 percent of the nation's resident population. Blacks increased 13 percent to constitute 12 percent of the population.

The number of Hispanic people climbed 53 percent, to 9 percent of the population. Asians doubled, to account for about 3 percent of the total. Only three in four Americans are non-Hispanic whites (referred to hereafter, for the sake of brevity, simply as whites) although distinguishing Hispanic people as foreign or newcomers seems to defy even history: They settled in New Mexico and Florida before the English landed in Jamestown. Moreover, half of them typically skipped “white” or “black” on the census form and identified themselves as “other.” Until the 1970 census, Hispanic people, except for Puerto Ricans in some states, were not even counted as a separate category. In 1990, the census found that whites constitute only half of New Mexico’s population. Nationwide, they account for more than 99.5 percent of the population in 60 counties. But in 186 other counties, blacks, Hispanic people, Asian-Americans and other groups that, individually, are still regarded as minorities together have become the majority—suggesting what the nation as a whole may look like around the middle of the twenty-first century.

The nation’s complexion changed more starkly in the 1980s than in any previous decade, and twice as fast as in the 1970s—change that, in an uncertain economic climate, fueled the backlash against immigration. When the 1980s ended, Asian-born Americans outnumbered the European-born. United States residents born in Latin America outnumbered both. Between 1980 and 1990, not only did the share of white children shrink in every state, but an even more striking shift occurred: Blacks no longer made up a majority among the nation’s minority children. In 1980, one in five Americans identified themselves as having African, Asian, Hispanic, or American Indian ancestry. In 1990, one in four did. One in eight people nationwide speaks a foreign language at home, so many of them that the 1990 census devised a new category—linguistic isolation—to measure households in which all members speak a language other than English and none

fourteen years or older speaks English very well. One in twenty-five children nationwide and nearly one in seven in California were isolated in this linguistic limbo. In 1980, two thirds of Californians were European whites; ten years later, only a little more than half were. As many immigrants came through California during the 1980s as passed through New York during the first decade of the century. California is now home to nearly four in ten of the nation's Asians and Pacific Islanders. Nearly two thirds of Miami's residents are Hispanic. But in New York City, where there are now more Asian-Americans than in Hawaii, an even higher proportion of residents speak a language other than English at home. Four in ten Los Angelenos, three in ten New Yorkers, and two in ten Bostonians were born abroad.

New Jersey gained 365,177 residents during the 1980s, but only 2,998 of them were non-Hispanic whites. Its Native American population—or, more precisely, the number of New Jerseyans willing or wanting to be classified as Indians—soared by an astounding 78 percent (although the number who listed themselves as Asian Indian was nearly six times larger). Since 1980, the number of Americans identifying themselves as Indians rose 38 percent—a reflection, perhaps, of the ambiguous census category, “Indian (Amer.),” which, while it also asked for tribe, appeared on the census form several inches above what for many immigrants probably was the more appropriate designation: “Asian Indian.” In 1990, the number of American Indians living east of the Mississippi was ten times greater than the first census estimated. But in embracing a heritage that had become culturally chic, they also abandoned a name that a European had bestowed upon them by mistake. Instead, Indians became Native Americans or, better yet, First Americans. Perhaps more significantly, another group that had even fewer historical or emotional motivations to adopt a country that had savagely kidnapped its forebears from another continent, centuries ago, proudly reverted to an earlier identification: African-American.

From the beginning, America has been a nation on the go. Examples abound. In virtually every decade, except, perhaps, the 1930s, when only about 50,000 immigrants arrived yearly, more people have always been coming into the country than emigrating; and even in the 1980s, most people lived in a different house at the end of the decade than when it began. Fully 80 percent of New Yorkers were born in the state they now call home. But 70 percent of the people who lived in Florida in 1990 had moved there from someplace else. Florida gained 3.2 million people during the decade, more than twice as many as lived in the whole state in 1950. But that was only about half the number of immigrants, newborns, and newcomers from other states who boosted California's population in the 1980s until it required a record fifty-two congressional seats and had gained a political dominance that no state had wielded since New York in the nineteenth century. Too big, some Californians complained. One faction in the northern counties fantasized about secession from the rest of the state, as New York City had similarly contemplated a generation earlier and as its two most middle-American boroughs, Queens and Staten Island, still do, if ambivalently.

States are a political contrivance of cartographers. Today, the American state of mind is being defined by the suburbs. Jefferson notwithstanding, fewer than one in fifty Americans lives on what the census broadly defines as a farm. And in 1992, the number of farms fell below 2 million for the first time since before the Civil War. Instead, despite the remaining vast tracts of sparsely populated land, one fourth of the nation has gravitated to cities or seems stuck there. Fully another half of the nation has made metropolitan areas outside central cities—in other words, the suburbs—the most popular place to live. Ninety percent of the nation's population growth in the 1980s was concentrated in metropolitan areas of a million or more people, and such growth was most rapid outside the denser central cities. The

1992 presidential election was the first in which suburbanites cast fully half of the votes. For the first time, half the nation's population lives not merely in metropolitan areas—by census standards, a low threshold—but in megalopolises of a million people or more. The United States now qualifies for the roster of city-states—those tiny nations, countries with vast uninhabited areas and the industrial giants like Germany and Japan—in which three quarters of the population live in nonrural places. Even Vermont had bestowed upon it the mixed blessing of its first official metropolitan area, though its reputation as the pristine pastures that provide raw material for Ben & Jerry's ice cream was largely undiluted (recalling Harry Lime's dismissive observation in *The Third Man* that after 500 years of democracy and peace, all that Switzerland had produced was the cuckoo clock). But New York, which until as recently as 1960 had been, with Rhode Island, the most urban state, slipped to tenth—tied with Massachusetts and becoming less urban even than California, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Hawaii, Utah, Arizona, Nevada, Illinois, and Florida. The spaces in between are still wide open, but the most urbanized region of the nation is now the West.

As defined by density rather than destiny, there may be no more frontier to tempt the imaginations of Americans. Still, they were lured by employment and other opportunities and by places to which they wanted to return or to retire. Cleveland and Detroit lost population. But Naples, on Florida's Gulf Coast, grew by 77 percent as the West and South surged.

Again, the nation's population center shifted farther west from where it began its journey two centuries ago, near Washington—a city seemingly so far removed from the rest of the country that President Ronald Reagan pronounced it as not a place of “real people.” Yet Washington typified another phenomenon that had become all too real, and not just in America's cities: Government officials there have more to fear from random gunfire than from assassination attempts. While congressmen no

longer routinely arm themselves to attend nighttime sessions on Capitol Hill, as their predecessors did in the nineteenth century, violent crime bred by poverty, racial tension and greed, and symbolized by the arrest of Washington, D.C.'s mayor on drug charges, focused everyone's attention on the extent of social disintegration.

Materially, the nation's growth was uneven. More households owned three vehicles than one. Many more homes boasted at least five bedrooms than lacked indoor plumbing. But more and more people lived in housing they could not afford. Home ownership rates declined for the first time in fifty years. Crowding increased. Poverty—among blacks, in particular—was no longer a consequence of America's failure to absorb new immigrants quickly enough, as it had been historically. And, with the influx of middle-class blacks, Hispanic people and Asian-Americans into the suburbs, society was becoming as segregated by class as by race.

Poverty was redistributed. So was wealth. In 1990, the government counted more millionaires than it did homeless street people, and if all the millionaires had been assembled in one place it would have taken nothing less than the Yale Bowl to hold them. For the first time, three in four Americans were high school graduates, and a growing percentage were granted college degrees. But their economic gains were not always commensurate with their education.

"Life," lamented a character on *Middle Ages*, a short-lived, age-appropriate television comedy whose name evoked a gothic rite of passage, "is the scariest thing there is." Jann Wenner, who a quarter century earlier had founded *Rolling Stone* magazine, gathered no moss in producing another contemporary publication for his peers, titled *Family Life*. "A generation that once raised hell," Wenner deduced, "is now raising kids." Steamy romance novels celebrated parenting as a surprisingly fulfilling by-product of sex. The bulge of Baby Boomers climbed the chronological

ladder and they became bifurcated—the younger ones struggling more as the census captured a statistical portrait of Dorian Gray in reverse. For the first time, the census measured labor participation rates for mothers and found that among those with preschool children, a record 60 percent worked outside the home. And those who didn't earned an honorific: "Housewife" was summarily replaced by "homemaker." More Americans now work selling goods in wholesale and retail than in actually manufacturing goods for sale; more in finance, insurance and real estate than in construction; more in providing comforting protective services than in catering to leisurely recreation and entertainment. Twice as many people work for government as for themselves.

Even the vast trove of vital statistics accumulated by the Census Bureau and its sister agencies cannot realistically produce a composite American, though. We know that the number of college students studying Japanese tripled, that black teenagers were six times as likely as white ones to be fatally shot by someone else but half as likely to take their own lives with a gun, that the number of births to unmarried women soared about 75 percent over the decade, and that a major league baseball player's average salary more than quadrupled—from \$144,000 in 1980 to \$598,000 in 1990. For the first time, more than half the murders in America were being committed with handguns. The proportion of overweight adults (defined as about 25 pounds above the desirable weight of an average 131 pounds for a 5'4" woman and 30 pounds above the average 157 pounds for a 5'10" man), about one in four during the 1960s and 1970s, ballooned to one in three during the 1980s. Still, life expectancy continues to increase—a reflection, perhaps, of changing eating habits. Average intake of whole milk dropped by well over half; consumption of broccoli, meanwhile, increased sevenfold. Couch potatoes rejoice: 67,000 people were injured by exercise equipment in 1990, or about twice as many as were injured in accidents involving television sets. But no formula can find the average of diversity. And num-