

The numbers behind Americans' everyday lives

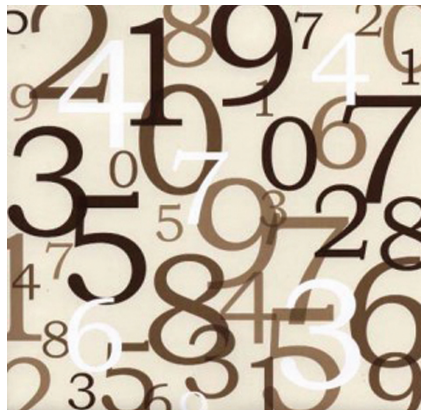
—by Robert J. Samuelson

You may think that the last place to find a portrait of a nation is a book full of numbers. But turn to page 673 of the *Statistics Abstract of the United States*, and you find these intriguing figures.

About three-quarters of Americans (76.1 percent in 2007, to be exact) get to work by driving alone. Only 10.4 percent carpool, while 4.9 percent use public transportation and 2.8 percent walk. On average, Americans spend 25.3 minutes commuting each way. The state with the longest commuting time is New York, at 31.5 minutes; the states with the shortest are North and South Dakota, at about 16 minutes, followed closely by Montana and Nebraska, at 17.6.

I'm an avid fan of the *Stat Abstract*, published annually by the Census Bureau, because it tells so much so quickly. The just-out 2010 edition bulges with information. For me, the *Stat Abstract* is often the place to start a story, because it substitutes evidence for speculation. How do we compare with other countries? Sometimes favorably; sometimes not.

Being optimistic, Americans commit suicide at fairly low rates, 10.2 for every 100,000 people in 2004, less than the 11.9 average for all industrial countries or Japan's 20.3 and France's 15.1. Food is cheaper here than almost anywhere else. In 2007, only about 6.9 percent of U.S. consumer spending went for food at home; Germans spent more (11.4 percent), as did Italians (14.5 percent) and Mexicans (24.2 percent). On the other hand, low food prices may contribute to Americans' obesity. In 2006, about 34 percent of U.S. adults were judged obese, triple France's rate (10.5 percent) and four times that of Switzerland (7.7 percent).



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The United States may be the birthplace of feminism, but that's not obvious from global figures. In 2009, women were 16.8 percent of the U.S. House of Representatives. In other national legislatures, women did better. For Canada, the comparable figure was 22.1 percent; for the Netherlands, 41.3 percent. The United States was nearly on a par with Uzbekistan's 17.5 percent.

Considering last year's economic slump, America may seem a land where progress has died. Not so. *The Stat Abstract* offers many counterexamples. Crime is one.

Two decades ago, governments seemed helpless against a rising tide of murders, assaults, and drug deals. Then crime began to subside. From 1993 to 2007, murders dropped from 25,000 to 17,000 and robberies from 660,000 to 445,000. Crime rates per 100,000 declined more, because the population rose 16 percent over the same period. There is no consensus as to why. Possibilities include better policing techniques and tougher sentencing (the incarcerated population doubled from 1.15 million in 1990 to 2.29 million in 2007). But crime still remains serious, especially for the young: In 2007,

18 percent of high school students reported carrying a weapon sometime in the previous year.

There are other signs of progress. Smoking continues to decline, from 25.3 percent of adults in 1990 to 19.7 percent in 2007. Five-year survival rates for cancer are up: from 62.4 percent in 1990-92 to 69.1 percent in 1999-2005 for whites; and from 48.2 percent to 59.4 percent for blacks. Voting is also up; the 57.1 percent turnout in 2008 was the highest since 1968. Garbage per person has stabilized; it was 4.5 pounds per day in 1990 and 4.6 pounds in 2007. Among young adults (18 to 29), Internet usage is virtually universal: 92 percent in 2009, up from 72 percent in 2000.

But bad news abounds, too. In 2007, nearly two-fifths of all U.S. births were to unmarried women, double the share in 1980. Since 1970, the student-teacher ratio in schools has declined dramatically, from 22:1 to 15:1 in 2007, with little effect on test results. The share of children under the federal poverty line in 2007 (17.6 percent) was virtually the same as in 1980 (17.9 percent).

Mostly, we learn how we're living and changing. By 2050, the U.S. population is projected at almost 440 million, up from 304 million in 2008. Almost one-quarter of elementary and high school students are immigrants or have immigrant parents. In 2007, the average American spent 1,613 hours watching TV, the equivalent of 67 days. From 1980 to 2007, the number of pickup trucks, vans, and SUVs almost quadrupled, to 101.5 million, while the number of cars rose only 12 percent, to 135.9 million.

The Stat Abstract provides multitudes of facts. How we discuss, interpret, and debate them is the stuff of democracy.