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Checking America's Vital Signs

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he federal government spent \$6.5 billion conducting the 2000 census. That's \$56 per American home, and twice what was spent to conduct the 1990 census. An audacious sum for a statistical exercise, no matter how you look at it. I suggest

less costly methods should be planned for the 2010 census.

Meantime, a mighty mound of numbers detailing the national condition has chugged out of the Census Bureau computers over the last six months, complementing heaps of data gathered by private organizations and companies, as well as other government agencies. We decided to mine that statistical rockpile for an issue of *The American Enterprise*. In the pages that follow, we assess the health of our families, our economy, and our communities the way a doctor judges a patient's status by taking his pulse, his blood pressure, his weight-to-height ratio, his cholesterol levels. America, it's clear, is going to live. As for just how well, you'll have to read the stories and judge for yourself.

As a kind of warm-up, let me give you a few samples of the sorts of things the demographic and economic numbers reveal to be happening in the USA at present. I'll sort them loosely into three categories: the Dramatic, the Downbeat, and the Welcome.

The Dramatic

*T*he single most dramatic finding of the recent census was the huge influx of new arrivals into the United States during the last decade. Fully one out of every nine people now living in our land was born in some other country. Our foreign-origin population zoomed from 19.8 million in 1990 to 31.1 million in 2000.

The more than 13 million new immigrants who arrived on our shores over the last ten years were a greater number than anyone expected, and well above the 8.7 million who arrived during the 1980s. Most of them were legal entrants, but a significant number were not: Census 2000 showed 8 million illegal aliens living in the U.S., a serious problem that the nation needs to address.

America's foreign born are particularly concentrated in certain areas. In New York City, for instance, four out of ten residents started their lives in another country. Even more startling is that 40 percent of all the residents of California, by far our most populous state, now speak a language other than English at home. (For most of them it's Spanish.) Nationwide, the fraction of Americans who use a foreign language at home is well over one out of six.

Another of today's dramatic numerical realities is the razor's-edge partisan and political balance that emerged after the last election. Let's review the rather incredible numbers: National balloting for candidates to the House of Representatives was split 49 percent for the Republicans, 49 percent for the Democrats. If you total all the U.S. Senate races, the GOP won 50 percent of the vote to 49 percent for the Democrats. Of course the Presidential race was split 48 percent to 48 percent.

Astonishingly, the state races were just as close. There were 11 governor's races in

the last election; if you put them together, the Republicans won 50 percent of all the votes cast, to 49 percent for the Democrats. Currently, the GOP controls 17 state legislatures, the Dems 16. (Others are shared.) There are actually several state legislative chambers that are *exactly* balanced in seats, as the U.S. Senate was until James Jeffords changed his colors. A partisan parity this precise may never have existed before in our country, and we're unlikely to see it again in our lifetimes.

The Downbeat

It's possible that one effect of hung legislatures is to exempt either party from ultimate accountability. Whether for that reason or simply because the Democrats retook the Senate in 2001 after nearly seven years of Republican control of Congress, the reality is that federal spending has recently begun racing upward. This was true well before September 11. The 2001 jump in federal outlays, measured as a percentage of our total economy, was the largest since the 1970s.

This year's \$190 billion spree is making federal budget surpluses go away fast. Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle, of course, had a different interpretation, saying in a January speech that "September 11 and the war aren't the only reasons the surplus is nearly gone. They're not even the biggest reasons. The biggest reason is the tax cut."

To test Daschle's contention, the Tax Foundation recently published a study of the relevant numbers (www.taxfoundation.org/nosurplus.html). Their findings: President Bush's tax cut caused an 11 percent reduction in the 2002 surplus. Spending increases evaporated 16 percent of the expected surplus. The remaining 73 percent of the reduction came from the recession and some technical factors that had caused the Congressional Budget Office to overestimate the surplus in the first place. Now, in wartime, both Republicans and Democrats are racing to throw even more logs on the federal spending pyre. This would be a very good time for taxpayers to locate their wallets and hold tight.

Another downbeat development in recent American social life has been family decay. The problem flared up in the 1960s, accelerated through the 1990s, then very recently leveled off. The worst among several ugly family trends has been the surge in births to unmarried mothers—all the way to today's scary level of one out of every three new arrivals. Out-of-wedlock births wound children, impoverish mothers, untether men from the grounding influences of family life, and damage society by pushing things like test scores, income levels, crime rates, and drug use in all the wrong directions.

In his contribution to our "State of the Nation" section,

*The proportion of American children
living in traditional families
(that is, with both of their biological parents)
rose 10 percent over five years.*

Charles Murray unravels some complicated data and shows that family failures of various sorts are the primary factor creating unequal outcomes among young Americans today. Liberationists "must recognize that in the last 40 years we have done more than

modify a few sexual mores and social customs. We have set in motion a variety of forces that will have devastating effects primarily on the lower half of American society," Murray writes.

The Welcome

That's the unhappy news; there were also many more welcome developments over the last decade. In any grand, sprawling cacophony like America there is going to be an intermingling of trends positive and negative. If you step back and look at our country over time, though, bracing progress tends to be the dominant result.

There is certainly much to be encouraged by today. Even in family life, which has been America's Achilles heel since the 1960s, some auspicious turnarounds now seem to be under way. Illegitimacy has levelled off, divorce has actually fallen, and marriage seems to be reviving as a solution to both of these ills.

As a result, the traditional two-parent family has started to enjoy something of a comeback. A recent Census Bureau study found that the proportion of children living with both of their biological parents rose 10 percent over the latest five years. If you add in adoptive and stepparents, the fraction of all U.S. kids under 18 who live with two parents has now rebounded to 71 percent. Even among blacks, where family meltdown has been most severe over the last generation, the proportion of children living with married parents increased by more than 10 percent between 1995 and 2000.

A good part of this can be credited to welfare reform. Keep in mind that when the fight was on to get the Welfare Reform Act of 1996 through Congress, *The New Republic* howled that "families will fracture." Richard Gephardt insisted "more than one million children will be forced into poverty because of this bill." Pat Moynihan warned that "those involved will take this disgrace to their graves." Tom Daschle called the measure "extremist." They were utterly wrong. The welfare reform bill is up for renewal this year, and deserves to be strengthened further.

There remains much damage to repair (black kids living with married parents are still only four out of every ten). Just the same, recent declines in single parenthood have to be considered healthy and welcome news. Many husbands and wives raising kids will agree with me that even *two* parents often feels like too few to get the job done right. So let's encourage the return to traditional family structures wherever possible.

In other areas as well, data tidbits are popping up that signal

a strengthening of family ties. For instance, women are having more children. In 2000, the U.S. fertility rate hit its highest level since 1971 (an average of 2.1 lifetime births per woman).

Interestingly, families are also taking steps to increase the *quality* of childhood. For the last 25 years, the proportion of new mothers concentrating solely on their baby in its first year of life has been falling, falling, falling. In 2000 that reversed: Among mothers with an infant under one, the *percentage pursuing paid work declined*—for the first time in a generation. More mothers are opting to give their children their full attention at home (which is the greatest gift any young child can receive).

A second indicator of American social revival over the last decade is religion. Membership in religious congregations is swelling across the U.S. This in turn is fueling a multimillion-dollar church construction boom. In 2000, according to the Census Bureau, religious institutions spent nearly \$8 billion on construction projects—a \$500 million increase from the previous year. Moreover, there is a pronounced shift under way in America toward more rigorous, serious, and demanding varieties of religion. See the interesting trio of articles by Richard Cimino, Jeff Jacoby, and Blake Hurst starting on page 26.

Yet another sign that Americans are growing up and settling down is evidence from the 2000 census that we are becoming more responsible and loyal members of our local communities. “I like to see a man proud of the place in which he lives. I like to see a man live so that his place will be proud of him,” Abraham Lincoln once said. This is difficult, though, if people are constantly flitting to different locations—as has been the American pattern since World War II.

The last census, however, showed a significant reduction, compared to earlier decades, in the number of opportunistic household moves that Americans made to trendy new locales. Employers are now reporting that it’s much easier than in times past to recruit talented workers to small cities and towns and previously bypassed states. This seems to be because people are seeking more rooted and family-friendly community lives. Joel Kotkin opens our “State of the Nation” feature with reporting on this trend, and William Frey discusses a related phenomenon in his piece closing the collection.

Sociologists have been telling us recently that when it comes to making people happy and well-adjusted, money and career status are often less important than what they (awkwardly) call “social capital”—the efficiency, warmth, cohesiveness, safety, and friendliness of the people and institutions in one’s home town. “People are looking for a better way of life,” says Greg

*Doubting the long-term health
of the USA is,
quite simply, a dumb bet.*

Moran, president of an upstate New York technology firm. Factors like close-knit neighborhoods, strong churches, healthy small businesses, modest commutes, and manageable-size schools will often contribute more to the good life

than the flashy amenities of boom towns.

Studies over the last decade have helped quantify this by measuring things like levels of volunteerism, numbers of close friends, charitable giving, and neighborly support—where small communities and closer-knit cities stack up very well. But ultimately this is a matter of common sense. “Everyone knows that Archimedes said, ‘Give me a lever long enough, and I shall move the earth.’ What they sometimes forget is that Archimedes said he needed not just a lever but ‘a place to stand.’ Without a place to stand—a family, a neighborhood, a people and its language—we move nothing, we do nothing, we are nothing,” Thomas Fleming has written. “The first task of a moral human being is not to play the stranger to our friends and judge the world as if we were gods; our obligation is—to use the language of Martin Luther and the Nashville Agrarians—to take our stand.” That, Americans seem to be concluding in growing numbers, means putting down local roots.

Amidst the often-grim headlines of America’s big-city newspapers, it is easy to miss the happier tidings outlined above (or the successes described by Dinesh D’Souza in his article “What’s So Great About America?” later in these pages). Don’t let the clangor of normal daily criticism skew your view of our nation’s overall condition. Human nature is as fallen in America as anywhere else, and our country has plenty of stark problems in need of repair. But we have a remarkable society which helps us recognize our own weaknesses and then make corrections.

Doubting the long-term health of the USA is, quite simply, a dumb bet. God bless her.



Please Write

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All letters receive our careful consideration, and many will be published (unless you tell us your comments are not for attribution). Letters may be edited for length and clarity.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Sidelights

Sixty-four percent of Palestinians support suicide bomb attacks against Israel, according to a poll by the Jerusalem Media and Communications Center. ... Forty percent of British Muslims think Osama bin Laden's war against America is justified, according to a *London Times* poll. The same number believe Britons who fight with the Taliban are justified in doing so. ☛ Three fourths of homosexuals and bisexuals feel more accepted by society than they did a few years ago, according to a Kaiser Family Foundation poll. ... Two girls will be listed as "class sweethearts" in a Dover, New Hampshire high school yearbook. ☛ Nearly 6 million Poles, making up 40 percent of the Polish work force, want to live and work abroad, states a report published by Pricewaterhouse-Coopers. ... The United Kingdom and Ireland have the highest rates of depression in Europe, declares a British psychiatric journal. Spain has the lowest. ☛ A new Maryland law will require gun buyers to watch a two-hour film on gun safety before buying a firearm.

Karen Davis, president of the animal-rights group United Poultry Concerns, wrote that it is "speciesist to think that the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center was a greater tragedy than what millions of chickens endured that day, and what they endure every day because they cannot defend themselves against the concerted human appetites arrayed against them." ☛ Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. described corporate pork production as a threat "greater than that in Afghanistan. This is not only a threat to the environment, it is a threat to the American economy and democracy." ☛

Representative Lois Capps, California Democrat, has secured \$50,000 in federal funds for the Liberty Tattoo Removal Program of San Luis Obispo County. She defended the move by observing that "people with tattoos often find themselves being unfairly stereotyped in a way that makes it difficult to find employment or be promoted to higher, better paying positions." ☛ Matt Stone and Trey Parker, creators of the cartoon "South Park," told a convention of the left-wing People for the American Way that they're "proud Republicans." ☛ According to the *Daily Telegraph*, former chess champion Bobby Fischer described the World Trade Center attack as "wonderful news. It is time to finish off the U.S. once and for all." ☛ Fifty-nine-year-old Madalenna Lai, who came to America in 1977 as a Vietnamese refugee, sold her house to raise \$100,000 to build a float for the Tournament of Roses Parade. It carried the message "Thank you America and the world." ☛ The IRS lost more than 2,300 laptop and desktop computers and servers over three years, according to a report by the Treasury Department. ☛ Italian president Silvio Berlusconi told the European Union: "Nobody, I repeat nobody, can think they can put us under their control or, worse still, treat us as a subject with limited sovereignty." ... Under EU pressure, Denmark is giving up its ban on canned beer and other drinks.

Three out of four African Americans approve of President Bush's performance since 9/11, according to a *New*



York Times/CBS News poll. ☛ Maryland's Commission on Indian Affairs is working to ban use of the words Indians, Warriors, and Braves as names for public school sports teams. "What next?" wonders Montgomery County Council member Nancy Dacek. "I don't want to see the day when our sports teams are...called the 'Daisies' and the 'Snowpersons.'" ☛ The Sled Dog Action Coalition of Miami condemned the Disney film *Snow Dogs*. "They are brainwashing children into believing that this dogsled racing is wonderful and the dogs love it," said the coalition's director, Margery Glickman. "They're hiding all the harsh realities that the dogs face. The movie is very deceptive." ☛ Mark Brewer, Michigan's Democratic chairman, explained his party's appeal to gun owners: "What unifies us tends to be the economic issues. I tell people, 'If you don't have a job, you can't afford a gun, let alone the ammunition.' We're a very diverse party." ☛ A Japanese sanitation worker was arrested for threatening a bar owner with a knife because he refused to separate his trash for recycling.

—BB