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AMERICA'S DIVERSITY:



ON THE EDGE OF **TWO** CENTURIES

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DEAR READERS:

This issue of PRB Reports on America is timely for many reasons. "America's Diversity: On the Edge of Two Centuries" uses population data from the 1890s and the 1990s to show that immigration and diversity were as much a part of our turn-of-the-last-century conversations as they are of our current conversations about the kind of country that America was founded to be—and about the country it has become.

Familiar though the words "a more perfect union" might be, that phrase still generates heated debate, defies simple definition, and sets up both boundaries and boundless opportunities for citizens and immigrants alike.

According to author Daphne Spain, "immigration is the 'bookend' demographic phenomenon of 20th-century America." More than 1 million immigrants arrived each year during the early 1900s and about 1 million have arrived annually since 1992. But immigration isn't the only factor shaping America at the edge of the 21st century. The Emancipation Proclamation freed blacks from slavery in 1863, but it did not create racial equality. And complicating the pursuit of racial equality is the question of whether assimilation or pluralism is the ideal goal for American society. Should we champion racial and ethnic differences or should we strive to blur the differences and thus help to blot out the discrimination that diversity has too often brought about?

The answers to these questions are not clear, and may never be. But over the next few months, PRB will publish two other reports that, along with this latest PRB Reports on America, will offer more data and analysis of America's diversity. A new Population Bulletin, "Immigration to the United States," will examine current immigration patterns and policies and will review the peaks and troughs of immigration. And the 1999 United States Population Data Sheet will provide a state-by-state rundown of population size, density, and other demographic data, including the racial and ethnic differences among states and changes in the minority and foreign-born populations since 1890.

The upcoming August issue of PRB Reports on America will cover the "rural rebound," the remarkable demographic revival of rural or nonmetropolitan areas in the United States. To receive a complimentary subscription to this important series, please call PRB or visit our Web site (www.prb.org).

Peter J. Donaldson
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BY DAPHNE SPAIN
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AMERICA'S DIVERSITY: ON THE EDGE OF TWO CENTURIES

The “Y2K” problem has come to symbolize everything that could possibly go wrong on Jan. 1, 2000, when computers are supposed to balk at the arrival of the new millennium. But the end of the last millennium also presented technological challenges that created public anxiety, although problems associated with the telephone, electricity, and the automobile now seem relatively benign compared with the potential havoc that computer breakdowns might generate.

On the brink of the 21st century, it is useful for us to consider other similarities to the end of the 19th century when assessing how American society has changed and how it remains the same. This report on America’s diversity will highlight how demographic data from the edge of two centuries can be used to inform public policy. Two significant issues, for example, are as important today as they were 100 years ago.

Immigration is one. The number of immigrants entering the country is at its highest point since 1900, and we are still concerned about who moves to this country, whether they will work, if they should receive public assistance, and where they will ultimately live.

Racial diversity is a related and equally important demographic issue on the national agenda. African Americans migrated involuntarily to this country as slaves, a legacy that continues to jeopardize the quality of race relations.

How to form “a more perfect union” from a population as diverse as that of the United States has created some of the most intense and important public debates in American history. On one side are those who believe that ethnic and racial boundaries

should be erased through assimilation of immigrants to achieve a “melting pot” society. On the other side are those who think that maintaining (or accentuating) racial and ethnic differences creates a stronger pluralistic society—a “mosaic.”

Interestingly, Americans exhibit support for both sides of the debate. A national survey conducted in 1994 by the National Opinion Research Center showed that about one-third of Americans thought pluralism was the best route, about one-third endorsed assimilation, and about one-third expressed opinions right in the middle.

We lack comparable survey data from the end of the last century, but anecdotal evidence suggests a long history of ambivalence toward immigration and diversity that continues to drive all kinds of change in American society.

This report places contemporary concerns about immigration and race relations, and assimilation and pluralism, in historical perspective by reviewing similarities and differences between the 1890s and the 1990s—the edge of two centuries.

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WAVES OF IMMIGRATION

Immigration is the “bookend” demographic phenomenon of 20th-century America. More than 1 million immigrants arrived annually during the first part of the century, and about 1 million have arrived annually in the last decade. (Relatively little immigration occurred between 1925 and 1965 because of the Depression and various forms of restrictive legislation.)

Immigrants come from different countries and go to a wider range of cities than in 1900, but they raise some of the same issues today that

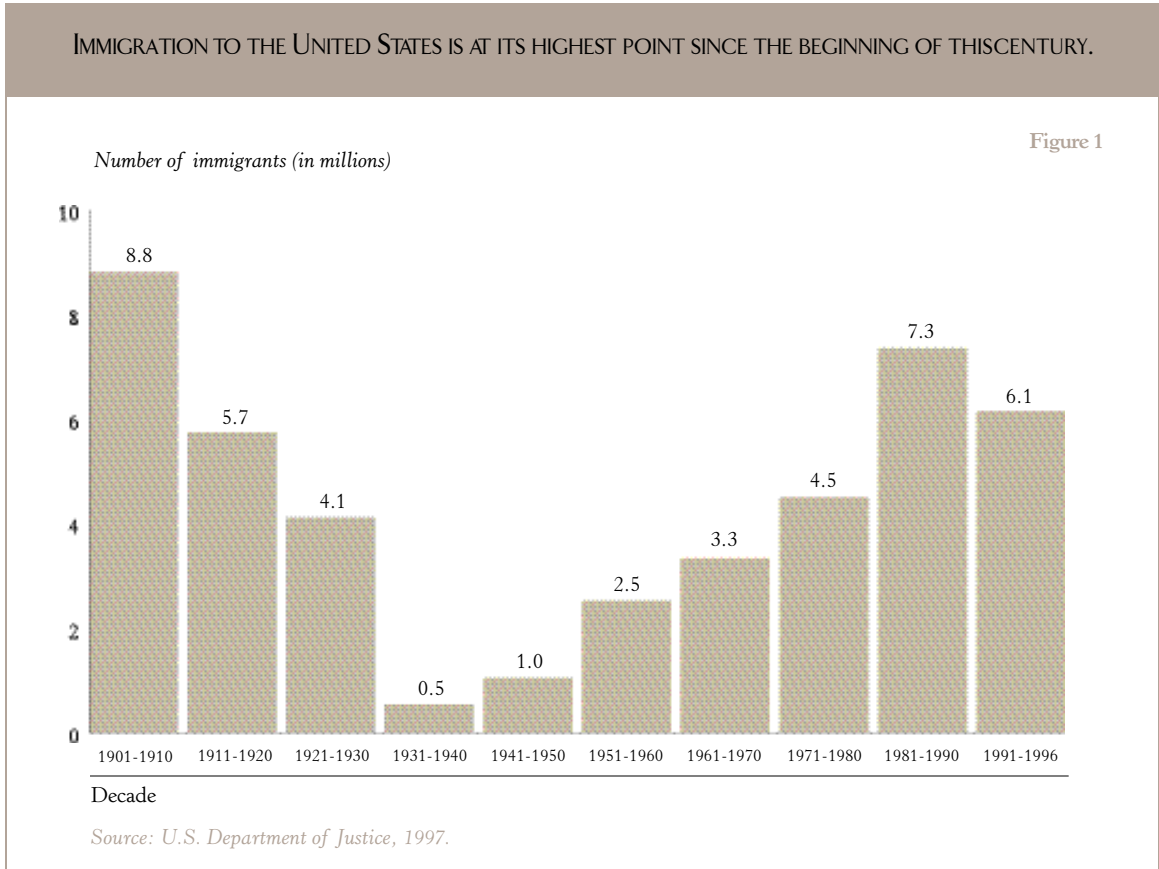
they did 100 years ago: Who is an American and who is not? Which metaphor best describes our social goal—melting pot or mosaic?

Demographers Philip Martin and Elizabeth Midgley have identified three reasons why immigration is a subject of debate in the 1990s. The first is that the number of immigrants is rising from its low point in the 1940s. The second is that today’s immigrants differ in ethnicity, education, and skills from native-born Americans more than

immigrants did at the beginning of the century. The third is that no political consensus exists on whether immigrants are assets or liabilities to the society.

These issues bear a striking resemblance to those concerning immigration at the turn of the last century. Then, immigration was at a historic high, “new” immigrants were distinguished from “old” immigrants on the basis of their origins, and nativist sentiments fueled urban riots that pitted the native-born against the Irish.

IMMIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES IS AT ITS HIGHEST POINT SINCE THE BEGINNING OF THIS CENTURY.



IMMIGRANT POPULATION

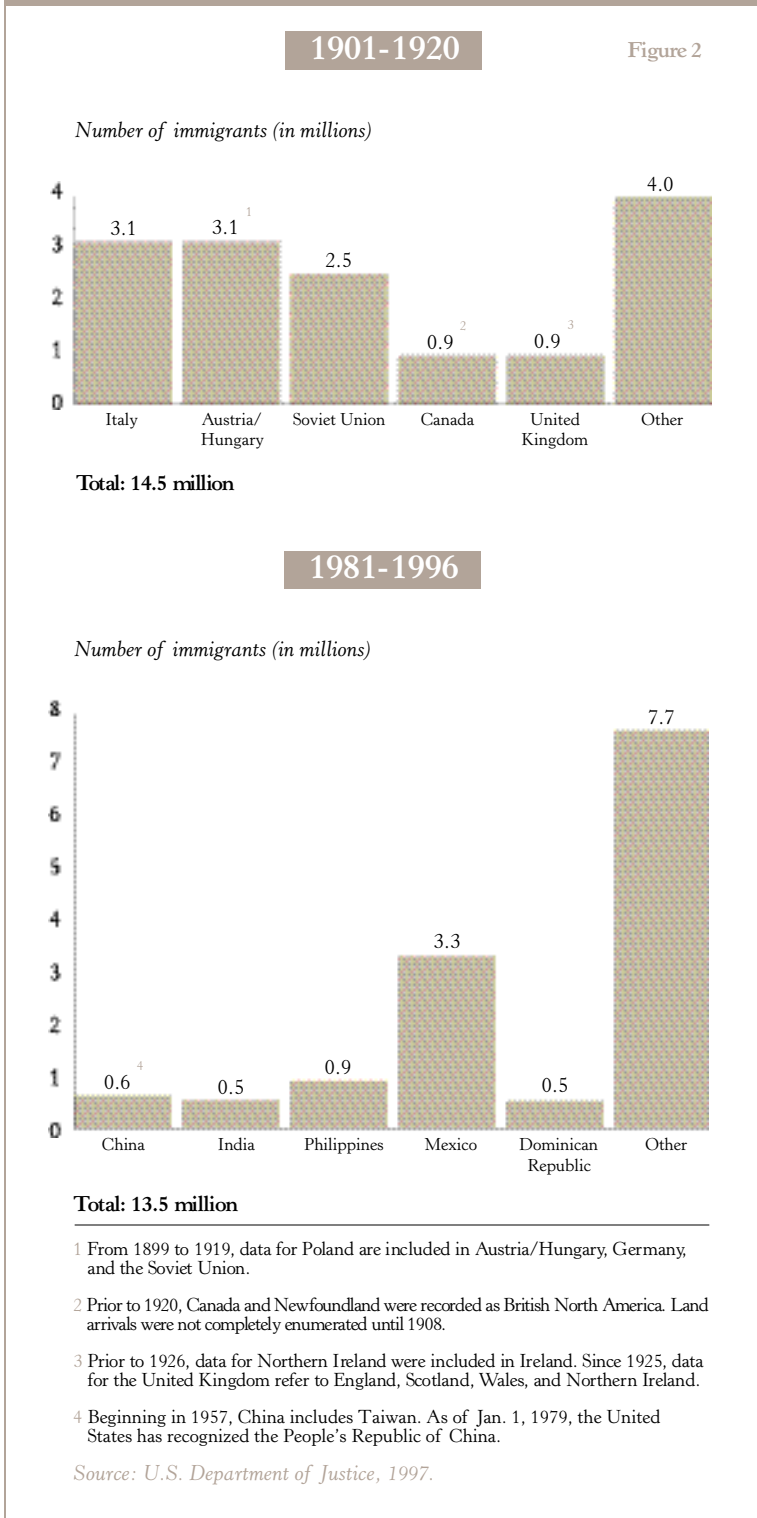
About 1 million immigrants, on average, came to America every year between 1905 and 1914. Nearly 1 million have entered the United States every year since 1992. (The immigration figures presented here reflect legal status rather than actual year of entry.) The numbers are high at both ends of the century, but their impact on the composition of the American population is different because the country is so much larger now (see Figure 1). The foreign-born accounted for almost 15 percent of the total population in the early 1900s compared with about 9 percent today. (The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, which authorized the legalization of illegal aliens living in the United States since 1982, accounts for a surge in immigration numbers between 1989 and 1991.)

The most obvious difference between immigrants at the beginning and end of the 20th century is their country of origin (see Figure 2). Mexico emerged as a significant contributor to U.S. immigration during the 1920s and now accounts for the largest number of immigrants entering the country.

In the 19th century, immigrants from southern and eastern Europe arriving after 1880 were called “new” to distinguish them from the “old immigrants” from north-western Europe. New immigrants were “less American” because they lived in urban ghettos, whereas old immigrants were widely dispersed across the country and presumably shared its rural values.

Today, the newest immigrants are “less American” because many live in central cities instead of suburbs. Today’s immigrants, like their earlier counterparts, also differ from native-born Americans in

THE MAJORITY OF IMMIGRANTS AT THE BEGINNING OF THE CENTURY CAME FROM EUROPE; THE MAJORITY AT THE CENTURY’S END CAME FROM MEXICO AND ASIA.



language and religion, but ethnic and racial differences between newcomers and old-timers are more pronounced now. Because of their physical appearance, Asians and Hispanics face more

highly visible barriers to assimilation than their European predecessors. Census questions make it possible to identify relatively small groups of immigrants by country

of origin, recency of arrival, and citizenship status. Choosing to become a citizen through naturalization is one of the clearest signals of assimilation immigrants can convey. Among all immigrants in 1990, 40 percent had been naturalized. Italians and Germans had the highest naturalization rates (nearly three-quarters of all immigrants), while Central Americans had the lowest rates (less than 20 percent). To some degree, these differences reflect recency of immigration.

Is a 40 percent naturalization rate high or low by historical standards? In 1920, the first year women were eligible for U.S. citizenship, 49 percent of the adult foreign-born population was naturalized. One could interpret the slight decline in naturalization rates as an indicator of increased pluralism. On the other hand, the similarity in rates for 1920 and 1990 seems remarkable given the intervening diversity in sources of immigration and the changing political climate.

The comparability of naturalization rates between the century's beginning and end suggests that immigrants have carefully negotiated the balancing act between assimilation and pluralism over time.

DESTINATIONS

New York City was the favored destination of European immigrants landing at Ellis Island in 1910, when nearly 2 million residents—about 40 percent of the city's population—were foreign-born. Now that Latin America and Asia are major sources of immigration, Los Angeles competes with New York City for the largest immigrant populations (see Table 1).

In 1996 more than one in five immigrants planned to live in either New York or Los Angeles, and since 1991 New York and Los

THE PRIMARY DESTINATIONS FOR IMMIGRANTS HAVE SHIFTED FROM THE NORTHEAST AND MIDWEST TO THE SOUTH AND WEST.

1991-1996

Table 1

	Metropolitan Statistical Area **	Number of Immigrants Intending Residence *
1	New York, NY	676,868
2	Los Angeles-Long Beach	634,885
3	Chicago	222,189
4	Miami	191,627
5	Orange Co., CA	151,580
6	Washington, DC	150,827
7	Houston	142,387
8	San Diego	133,126
9	San Francisco	109,171
10	San Jose	102,154
11	Riverside-San Bernardino, CA	98,514
12	Boston	98,026

* Intended residence is the address where the permanent resident status visa or "green card" is sent.

** MSA did not exist as a census classification in 1910.

1910

	City	Number of Foreign-Born
1	New York, NY	1,927,703
2	Chicago	781,217
3	Philadelphia	382,578
4	Boston	240,722
5	Cleveland	195,703
6	Detroit	156,565
7	Pittsburgh	140,436
8	San Francisco	130,874
9	St. Louis	125,706
10	Buffalo	118,444
11	Milwaukee	111,456
12	Newark, NJ	110,655

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 1913;
U.S. Department of Justice, 1997.

Angeles have been the intended destinations for more than 600,000 immigrants each. Chicago, the second most popular city at the beginning of the century, ranked far below both New York and Los Angeles and only slightly above Miami by the end of the century. Only New York, Chicago, Boston, and San Francisco appear on both the 1910 and 1990s list, reflecting their geographic advantages and welcoming economies. Boston and San Francisco, for example, benefit from their coastal sites, reputations in the information and technology industries, and large service sectors.

Other cities on the list, however, share a significant regional characteristic that makes them more similar than different. Eleven of the 12 primary destination cities in 1910 were in the Northeast or Midwest. Nine of the 12 major destinations now are in the Sun Belt or in the West. When immigrants were arriving primarily from Europe, they settled in the Northeast and Midwest. The large numbers of immigrants now arriving from Latin America and Asia are moving to the South and West, and to a degree have mirrored the migration patterns of native-born residents over the past century, although the Northeast is still a major recipient of new immigrants.

States on the southern border of the country had the highest numbers of foreign-born in 1990, while “heartland” states had the lowest numbers, making the national debate about assimilation versus pluralism distinctly regional.

LEGAL RESTRICTIONS

Immigration and naturalization laws establish the criteria by which immigrants are eligible for

legal residence in America. These laws serve as a gauge of formal public opinion toward immigrants. Few immigration laws were on the books at the beginning of this century, but those few were similar in intent to those in effect today. The most significant legislation, The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, targeted a specific ethnic group and remained in effect until the 1940s. It suspended the immigration of Chinese laborers for 10 years, deported many Chinese already in the United States, and barred Chinese immigrants from naturalization. The purpose of the legislation was to limit the flow of cheap labor used to build the railroads. Politicians of the late 19th century were as concerned as legislators of the late 20th century about immigrants displacing Americans from low-skilled jobs.

In addition to the Chinese, the United States excluded other categories of people that sound familiar today. For example, the 1882 law preventing entry to “persons likely to become a public charge” resurfaced in the 1996 laws on welfare reform that established restrictions on the eligibility of legal immigrants for welfare. Attempts to keep criminals out in 1875, 1891, and 1907 were reinforced in 1994 with the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act. “Anarchists” that were such a threat in 1903 are now called terrorists and are barred from entry under the 1996 Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act. Conspicuous by its absence is any contemporary mention of prostitutes (first banned in 1875) or “women coming to the United States for immoral purposes” (excluded again in 1907). Concern about sexual morals still exists, but the political climate has made it unacceptable to single out sexual behavior as grounds for exclusion from the country.

PUBLIC OPINION

The 19th century exhibited various forms of discrimination against immigrants, from the serious to the seemingly petty. Organized labor tried to prevent the factory employment of unnaturalized foreigners, while New York charged immigrants \$20 for a hunting license compared with the \$1 it charged citizens. The Immigration Restriction League joined labor officials to fight competition from cheap immigrant workers, and the League demanded a literacy test for all immigrants. In 1889, the Wisconsin and Illinois legislatures prevented public schools from teaching in foreign languages.

Similar sentiments have emerged over the past few years in states evaluating whether to make English mandatory in the classroom. Americans are also uncertain about the benefits of immigration. In a 1994 survey, the National Opinion Research Center found that 62 percent of respondents believed that immigration should be reduced from current levels. Slightly more (68 percent) thought additional immigration would “make it harder to keep the country united.” About 62 percent of respondents thought that immigration was unlikely to contribute to higher economic growth, and 85 percent thought that higher immigration would create higher unemployment (although 62 percent thought that immigrants had little effect on their own job security).

Americans’ complicated opinions about immigration are matched by their attitudes toward race relations. Unlike most other immigrants, black slaves did not come to this country voluntarily.

PURSUING RACIAL EQUALITY

Slavery produced the ultimate test of America's commitment to national unity. When abolitionist arguments moved out of the pulpit and onto the battlefields of the Civil War, the country split apart regionally as well as ideologically. Although the Emancipation Proclamation freed blacks from slavery, it failed to establish racial equality. The pursuit of racial equality has shaped American society ever since.

The most well-respected spokesmen on race relations during the 1890s were W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington. DuBois, Massachusetts-born and a graduate of Harvard University, promoted the idea of the "talented tenth." The most highly educated black professional elites, estimated by DuBois to compose approximately one-tenth of the black population, would meet the standards for admission to white society and pave the way for others of their rank. Washington, born of slaves in the South and educated at Virginia's Hampton Institute, believed that basic vocational skills for large numbers of blacks were the key to acceptance by white society, which was his rationale for founding Tuskegee Institute. The two men were intellectual adversaries throughout their lives.

The modern version of the conflict between DuBois and Washington is that between Rev. Jesse Jackson and Louis Farrakhan. Jackson, a disciple of Dr. Martin

Luther King, Jr., has promoted an agenda for black literacy, voter registration, and other programs aimed at assimilating African Americans into mainstream society. By comparison, Farrakhan, the leader of the Nation of Islam, has stridently endorsed a racially separatist agenda.

Other similarities—and some differences—characterize 19th- and 20th-century race relations in the United States. Among the important ones are the size and geographic distribution of the African American population, the degree of racial segregation, and public opinion about race relations.

BLACK POPULATION

The black population at the beginning of this century was just under 9 million people, or approximately 12 percent of the population. The 1990 census reported 30 million African Americans—still about 12 percent of the population. The 1990 census numbers are contested because of the rate of undercount for blacks—the rate was over four times higher for blacks than for nonblacks—but annual data from the Current Population Survey for the last two decades show that the black population equals between 12 percent and 13 percent of the total population.

More than 90 percent of all black Americans lived in the South when President Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves in 1863. Little migration out of the South occurred immediately after the Civil War. Eventually, however, Reconstruction and the destruction of the cotton crop created "push" factors, demands for labor resulting from declining European immigration created the "pull," and southern rural blacks embarked on the Great Migration to industrializing cities in the North. The nation's largest-selling black newspaper, Chicago's *Defender*, actively encouraged black men and women to move north. It advertised throughout the South that May 15, 1917, would be the date of "the Great Northern Drive."

Continued out-migration in the 1900s has been offset by a more recent return-migration of blacks to the South. Now, slightly more than one-half of all African Americans live in the South. But regardless of regional distribution, blacks are disproportionately likely to live in central cities. Approximately one of every two African Americans lives in a central city, compared with one in four white Americans.

RACIAL SEGREGATION

“Separate but equal” Jim Crow laws prevailed across the South at the turn of the last century. Racial segregation of schools, restaurants, churches, jobs, prisons—even cemeteries—became the norm, but “equal” never did. In 1890, Homer Plessy was arrested in Louisiana for trying to ride in a segregated railroad car, even though Plessy was seven-eighths Caucasian and only one-eighth black. He fought his arrest all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, but in 1896 the court ruled against him and affirmed the constitutionality of racial segregation in public accommodations such as railroad cars and schools (*Plessy v. Ferguson*).

Conflicts over racial inequalities continued into this century, with Rosa Parks and a bus replacing Homer Plessy and a train as the images of resistance. When the Supreme Court overturned “separate but equal” school facilities in 1954 (*Brown v. Board of Education*), the doors to racial integration were legally opened. The Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act of the 1960s contributed to affirmative action legislation during the 1970s that provided African Americans paths to greater assimilation: access to traditionally white educational and occupational opportunities. Those laws have now been challenged in the states of California and Washington.

Schools and jobs have been more responsive than neighborhoods to federal legislation promoting integration. Residential separation of the races continues to be so pronounced that sociologists Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton have called it “American Apartheid.” Residential segrega-

tion has declined somewhat over time, but it is still high. During the 1960s, approximately 80 percent of blacks (or whites) would have had to move to be equally represented across the average metropolitan area; by the 1980s, approximately 70 percent would have had to move to achieve racial integration.

Indexes of segregation are typically calculated using census data on the proportion of blacks and whites in each metropolitan tract. No other source of data allows the nation to monitor its progress toward this form of racial equality. Because access to resources in the United States is so strongly determined by neighborhood, geographic proximity affects one’s entire quality of life. Schools, jobs, transportation, hospitals, parks, and playgrounds all vary by neighborhood. As long as residential segregation by race persists, more whites than blacks will have more access to the best of these resources.

PUBLIC OPINION

In its 1994 General Social Survey, the National Opinion Research Center asked respondents to react to these statements: “Some people say that it is better for Americans if different racial and ethnic groups maintain their distinct cultures. Others say that it is better if groups change so that they blend into the larger society, as in the idea of a melting pot.” About 38 percent of the respondents endorsed assimilation (blending with the larger society), 31 percent endorsed pluralism (maintaining differences), and 29 percent were neutral.

Although public opinion is pretty evenly divided on the issue of assimilation versus pluralism

when it concerns *cultural* differences, most Americans prefer assimilation to pluralism when it comes to *political* issues. In that same survey, 66 percent of Americans agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that “political organizations based on race or ethnicity promote separatism and make it hard for all of us to live together.” In this sense, people seem to practice what they preach. When asked about their own identities, an overwhelming majority of respondents (89 percent) chose the category “American” rather than a particular racial or ethnic group. “Hyphenated Americans” is a term used to describe Americans who identify strongly with an ethnic or racial group, such as African-Americans or Italian-Americans. Surveys suggest that only one in 10 Americans places himself or herself in this category.

A MORE PERFECT UNION

The framers of the Constitution envisioned “a more perfect union” to establish justice and promote the general welfare. As surveys show, Americans disagree about whether assimilation or pluralism constitutes that ideal union. Whichever the preferred goal, it is important to be able to measure our progress toward it.

Three indices of racial and ethnic assimilation are typically used to assess that progress. The first is the “psychological distance” between groups—their level of comfort with intergroup relationships. For example, a white person who indicates that she has several black friends would exhibit less psychological distance from African Americans than if she knew blacks only at work. The less the psychological distance between racial or ethnic groups, the greater the assimilation. Since marriage is the most intimate of relationships, the incidence of interracial and interethnic marriages is a good proxy for psychological assimilation.

The second measure of assimilation is a residential (or geographic) measure of the extent of segregation by race and ethnicity. The third is a measure of socioeconomic well-being, reflected by data on education, occupation, and income for various groups. Nationally representative surveys as they are currently conducted cannot measure these concepts for small minority groups or for small geographic areas within cities, but the U.S. census can.

INTERMARRIAGE

Marriage outside one’s racial or ethnic group is an extremely rare event in the United States: More than 95 percent of all couples in 1990 were married to someone of the same race or ethnicity. Blacks and whites are the least likely of any racial-ethnic group to intermarry.

American Indians have the highest rate of intermarriage (about 74 percent), and African Americans have the lowest rate (about 6 percent).

IMMIGRANTS WHO ARRIVED IN THE UNITED STATES BEFORE 1980 HAVE HIGHER FAMILY INCOMES THAN THOSE WHO ARRIVED AFTER 1980. LATER ARRIVALS ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE COLLEGE-EDUCATED.

Table 2

		U.S.-Born	Foreign-Born	
			Arrived before 1980	Arrived after 1980
Education*	Percent With High School Degree	57%	40%	34%
	Percent With College Degree	20%	19%	24%
Occupation**	Managerial/Professional	27%	26%	17%
	Sales/Support	32%	27%	22%
	Skilled Labor	11%	12%	12%
	Semi-Skilled Labor	30%	35%	49%
Income	Median Family Income (in 1989)	\$35,500	\$35,700	\$24,600
	Percent of Families in Poverty (in 1989)	10%	11%	23%

* Persons ages 25+

** Employed persons ages 16+

Source: Martin and Midgley, 1994.

RESIDENTIAL SEGREGATION

Residential separation by race is greater than segregation by any national origin. As with intermarriage, the greatest residential separation exists between whites and blacks. According to census data, in 1990 approximately 70 percent of blacks (or whites) would have had to move to achieve racial integration throughout metropolitan areas in the United States. By comparison, 50 percent of Hispanics, 41 percent of Asians, and 35 percent of American Indians would have had to move to achieve ethnic integration in the average metropolitan area. Racial and

ethnic segregation declined or remained stable, however, between 1980 and 1990.

ECONOMIC WELL-BEING

Education, occupation, and income are the three basic indicators of socioeconomic status in the United States. In a perfectly assimilated society, differences in these measures by race and ethnicity would be minimal. One would also expect such distinctions to decline the longer immigrants were in this country.

Census data for 1990 partially support these assumptions: Earlier immigrants do have higher status

than more recent immigrants. Since the ideal of assimilation is far from the reality, however, racial and ethnic differences in socioeconomic status persist. American Indians have the lowest median family incomes of any racial-ethnic group, followed by Hispanics and blacks. The anomaly is that Asians, among the most recent immigrants, are of higher educational, occupational, and income status than non-Hispanic whites (see Table 2 and Table 3).

What do these data tell us about assimilation and pluralism? National surveys suggest that, subjectively, Americans favor assimilation. Objectively, however, we still exhibit evidence of a pluralistic society in which some racial and ethnic groups interact more with, and fare better than, others.

ASIANS HAVE HIGHER EDUCATION AND INCOME LEVELS THAN ANY OTHER RACIAL OR ETHNIC GROUP CURRENTLY LIVING IN THE UNITED STATES.

Table 3

		White	Black	American Indian	Asian	Hispanic
Education*	Percent With College Degree	26%	11%	10%	42%	10%
	Male	26%	11%	10%	42%	10%
	Female	19%	12%	9%	32%	8%
Occupation**	Managerial/Professional	28%	18%	18%	31%	14%
	Sales/Support	33%	29%	27%	33%	26%
	Service	12%	22%	18%	15%	19%
	Skilled Labor	12%	8%	14%	8%	13%
	Semi-Skilled Labor	13%	21%	19%	12%	23%
	Agricultural	2%	2%	3%	1%	5%
Income	Median Family Income (in 1989)	\$37,630	\$22,470	\$21,750	\$41,250	\$25,060
	Percent of Families in Poverty (in 1989)	7%	24%	27%	12%	22%

* Persons ages 25+

** Employed persons ages 16+

Source: Harrison and Bennett, 1995.

BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES

Is it possible, or preferable, to blur the boundaries between racial and ethnic categories? The census has already begun the process.

One common way to define *race* is on the basis of a distinguishing set of physical traits, and an *ethnic group* is typically defined on the basis of common ancestry, national origin, and culture. Yet race and ethnicity are often combined to indicate a group's heritage.

The original census categories of whites and blacks have evolved into five racial-ethnic groups. Modern census questionnaires on race and ethnicity usually categorize persons as African American, Hispanic, Asian American, American Indian, and non-Hispanic white. The extent to which these categories are socially constructed is demonstrated by the increase in the number of American Indians and the creation of the designation "Hispanic."

People reporting their race as American Indian accounted for only about 1 percent of the population in 1990, but the number of American Indians counted by the census rose by 72 percent between 1970 and 1980. More than one-half of that increase occurred because more people apparently reclassified themselves as American Indians in 1980 from some other designation in 1970. Greater increases were recorded in California and in the

eastern United States than in states with established American Indian populations. These results suggest that identifying oneself as American Indian became more acceptable during the 1970s.

Another significant change in racial-ethnic groups occurred during the 1970s. The term "Hispanic" was tested for the first time in the 1970 census as a response to lobbying by political leaders of Latin American ancestry. Their concern over socioeconomic disadvantages among people of Spanish lineage led to an alliance that eventually produced a separate ethnic category for Hispanics. Since 1980, the census has asked respondents to indicate if they were of "Spanish/Hispanic origin or descent." Answer categories were Mexican, Mexican-American, or Chicano; Puerto Rican; Cuban; or other Spanish/Hispanic. This question was asked separately from the question about race, so Hispanics can be of any race.

The question about Hispanic heritage is significant because it provides a semantic bridge between people who are native-born and those who are foreign-born, since members of either category could identify themselves as Hispanic. Hispanics can also be black or white.

The racial category in the census was as controversial 100 years ago as it is today, judging by the significant changes in terminology that have occurred in the

last decade of each century. Census enumerators in 1890 had a great deal of latitude in determining a person's race. Their instructions were to designate each person as "white, black, mulatto, quadroon, octoroon, Chinese, Japanese, or Indian." They were cautioned to be particularly careful to distinguish among blacks. The word "black" meant persons with three-fourths or more "black blood"; mulattos had anywhere between three-eighths and five-eighths black blood; quadroons had only one-fourth black blood; and octoroons had "one-eighth or any trace of black blood" (like Homer Plessy).

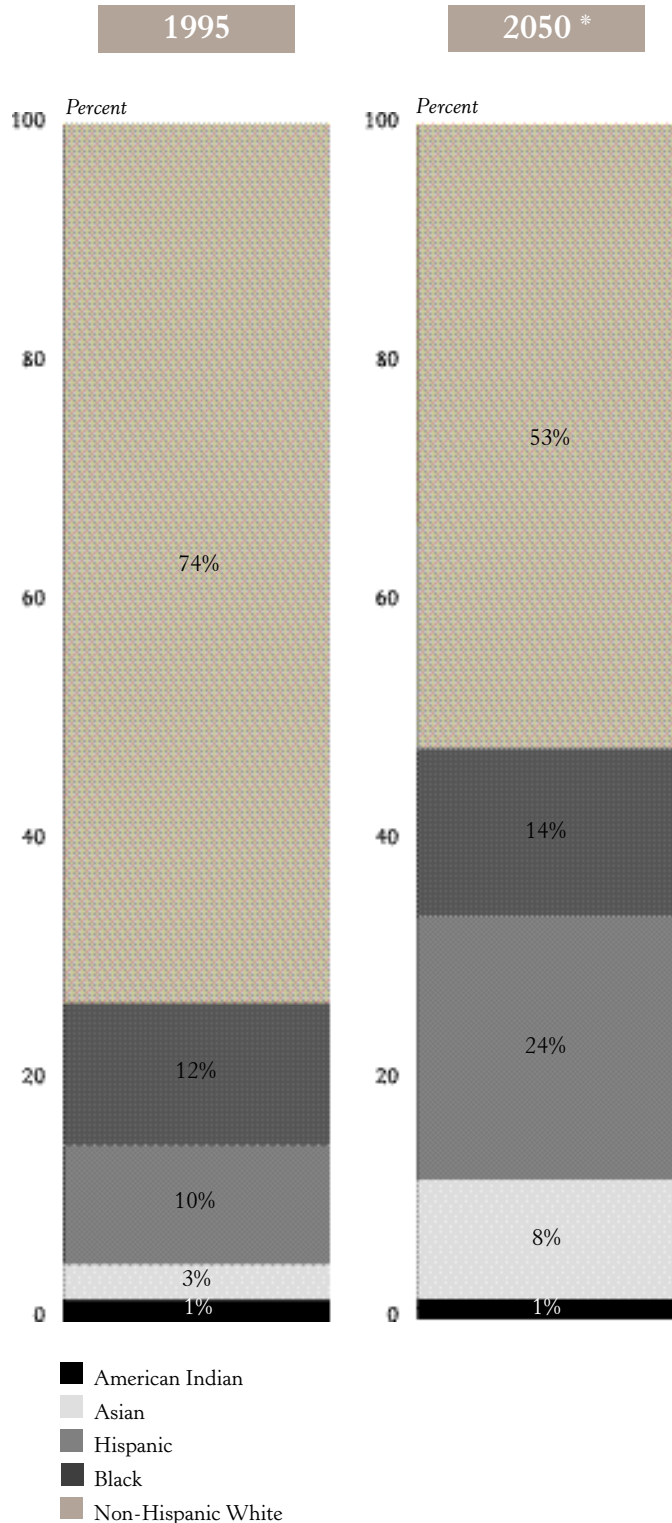
A comparably radical change in racial classification is occurring between the censuses of 1990 and 2000. In 2000, for the first time in the history of the U.S. census, people will be able to identify themselves as being of *one or more distinct races*. In addition to the 14 categories provided, a person may designate "other" race or a combination of races. The decision to allow multiple racial designations was made by the Office of Management and Budget and was the result of intense debate among federal agencies, statisticians, politicians, and the public. It indicates a shift toward racial assimilation for both blacks and whites, and it opens the possibility that previously contentious racial distinctions may eventually disappear.

Roberto Suro, author of *Strangers Among Us: How Latino Immigration is Transforming America*, proposes that our current vocabulary of race is inadequate because Latinos and Asians do not fit neatly into a world in which people are categorized as insiders or outsiders depending on whether they are white or black. That dichotomous vocabulary will become even more inaccurate as people increasingly identify themselves as belonging to more than one race.

Past and current immigration trends have contributed to an American population that is predominantly white and non-Hispanic (74 percent). If immigration continues at its present rate, however, non-Hispanic whites will be a bare majority (53 percent) by the middle of the next century. Hispanics will account for the single largest minority group at 24 percent, blacks the next largest at 14 percent, and the proportion Asian will have risen from 4 percent to 8 percent (see Figure 3).

IF IMMIGRATION CONTINUES AT ITS CURRENT PACE, ONE IN FIVE AMERICANS WILL BE OF HISPANIC ORIGIN BY 2050. NON-HISPANIC WHITES WILL CONSTITUTE A BARE MAJORITY AT 53 PERCENT OF THE POPULATION.

Figure 3



* Assumes a constant immigration rate of 820,000 people per year
 Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1996.

THE CENSUS CAN HELP

The census was established to apportion seats to the U.S. House of Representatives, and it has evolved as a way to measure progress toward the Constitution's goal of a more perfect union. These dual objectives have made the census crucial to America's identity.

The census was born in an era in which most European immigrants had become U.S. citizens, most blacks had been brought here as slaves, and indigenous Indians were considered "savages." These were the social, political, and demographic realities of America in the 19th century. The demographic realities today (and tomorrow) are that African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans, American Indians, and non-Hispanic whites share equal billing on the census form. Is this a sign of greater pluralism or of greater assimilation?

Gathering the objective data necessary to assess the degree of assimilation and inform public opinion is often difficult. The U.S. Census Bureau recognizes that some categories of people are harder to count than others, especially inner-city residents and minorities. Because of this difficulty, African Americans had a net "undercount" rate that was four times higher than the undercount rate for nonblacks in the 1990 census.

The Census Bureau proposed statistical sampling as a way to complete the enumeration—and

to reduce the undercount—for the 2000 census. The bureau originally planned to conduct a survey of a "sample" of households that did not respond to the mail questionnaire every household would receive. Fearing that anything other than a direct count of the population might skew the counts used to apportion seats in the U.S. House of Representatives, and fearing that they might lose House seats, Republicans challenged the constitutionality of sampling by filing a lawsuit in federal district court in 1998. They won that lawsuit. Democrats appealed, and the U.S. Supreme Court, after hearing arguments in November 1998, ruled that the Census Act prohibits the use of sampling to determine the population count for apportioning seats in the House of Representatives.

Why has a task as seemingly mundane as determining the total number of Americans become so controversial? The political ramifications are only part of the story. The census also focuses our attention on contemporary issues. Every 10 years since 1790, we have taken stock of ourselves as a nation. The census allows us to measure our progress toward achieving "a more perfect union" by providing social, economic, and residential yardsticks of success (or lack of success).

The 20th century has been characterized by trends toward greater inclusiveness in American

society, yet as we enter the 21st century, we are still immersed in debates about how well immigrants and African Americans are accommodated in a predominantly white society.

Analyzing the language of census questions and the results of the census itself will tell us something about assimilation and pluralism. The story is one of increasingly blurred boundaries between demographic groups. Although erasing distinctions completely may be neither possible nor desirable, minimizing them seems inevitable.

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