

Images of a Growing Nation, From Census to Census

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By DAVID J. GARROW

The 2000 United States Census was "a snapshot of a moving target," Sam Roberts reports in this fascinatingly fact-filled picture of today's America.

Ten years ago Mr. Roberts, an editor at The New York Times and the host of "New York Close-Up," an interview program on the cable station New York 1, wrote a similar volume, "Who We Are," which presented a statistical portrait of the United States based on the 1990 Census. His new work emphasizes the significant changes that took place from 1990 to 2000, but some of Mr. Roberts's most striking numbers contrast present-day America with that of a half century or a century ago.

During the 1990's, the nation's population grew to an estimated high of more than 292 million, an increase of 32.7 million people. This is "the largest 10-year numerical increase ever," Mr. Roberts writes. It was a bigger jump than expected, and immigration from abroad was the major reason. That trend continues; "in 2001," he notes, "more than one million legal immigrants entered the United States." In the 1990's, Mr. Roberts writes, "America's foreign-born population increased by 57 percent, to more than 31 million, a record high, making America now the least 'American' it has ever been." The change was especially striking in New York City, where "the proportion of foreign-born residents skyrocketed from 28 percent in 1990 to 40 percent in 2000." Fifty-two percent of those born abroad come from Latin America, and by 2002, Hispanics were a larger proportion of the population than blacks: 13.4 percent versus 13.1 percent. Non-His-

panic whites are already less than 50 percent of the population in California and New Mexico, and are almost at that level in Texas. Mr. Roberts reports that if the current growth rates continue, by 2050 America will be more than 24 percent Hispanic, and "non-Hispanic whites will officially become a minority sometime between 2055 and 2060." Changes in the composition of American households are also notable. Since 1950, households of married couples have dropped "from nearly four in five to barely one in two," Mr. Roberts writes. People living alone now constitute 26 percent of households, a greater proportion than married couples with children, who make up only 23.5 percent. Fewer than one-third of those families, just 7 percent of the total, include a working father and a stay-at-home mother.

More troublingly, Mr. Roberts writes that "since 1960, the proportion of children living with both their natural parents plummeted from 88 percent to 68 percent." In 1960 only 9 percent of children lived with a single parent, while by 2000, 28 percent did, including 53 percent of black children.

Indeed, "the number of families headed by a woman grew five times faster in the 1990's than the number of married couples with children," Mr. Roberts observes. Statistics from 2001-2 show that one out of three babies, and "nearly two in three black babies," were born out of wedlock. Those developments, Mr. Roberts says, suggest "a further erosion of marriage as a social convention." "Who We Are Now" also paints an interesting picture of what can be called a locally transient country: "Almost two-thirds of Americans still live in the state where they were born," Mr. Roberts reports, but "in the 15 months before the 2000 census, nearly one in five of the nation's 105 million households changed residences." That image of mobility, however, has some limitations, he

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Michael J. Roberts

Who We Are Now

The Changing Face of America in the Twenty-First Century

By Sam Roberts.

Illustrated. 293 pages. Times Books/Henry Holt & Company. \$27.50.

adds, for "among young adults 18 to 24, 57 percent of men and 47 percent of women are still living with their parents." One large segment of the population is not free to move. At the end of 2002, Mr. Roberts writes, 2,166,260 people were incarcerated as criminals. Statistics from that year, he says, showed that there were 701 prisoners for every 100,000 United States residents, a notable increase from the rate of 601 just seven years earlier, in 1995. At a statewide level, the 2002 figures ranged from a high of 794 prisoners per 100,000 people in Louisiana to a low of 141 in both Maine and Minnesota.

Growing imprisonment is not the only stark negative that Mr. Roberts highlights. The 2001 poverty rate of 11.7 percent was "about half of what it was in 1959," he states, but "children in poverty included fully 30.2 percent of black children and 28 percent of Hispanic children." In 2001, the poorest fifth of all United States

households received only 3.5 percent of the country's aggregate income, the smallest share ever. In contrast, the top fifth of households received 50.1 percent of all income, a record high. But inequality prevailed even in that echelon, as the top 5 percent collected 22.4 percent of all household income, the most in history.

And the population will continue to grow. The current number, more than double the 1950 figure, will grow "to 300 million in 2010, 338 million in 2025, 404 million in 2050, and 571 million" by the end of this century, Mr. Roberts reports. Spurring that increase is a continuing rise in Americans' life expectancy. A century ago, the average person lived to 47. By 1950 that figure had risen to 68, and in 2000 it reached 76.9 years.

The pronounced aging of America is already close at hand, as the so-called baby boomers begin reaching retirement. From 2000 to 2025, Mr. Roberts warns, "the number of elderly will more than double to 70 million," and "by 2050, the number of Americans 65 and older is expected to be more than 80 million, or more than double what it is today." This will place what Mr. Roberts correctly calls an "unprecedented drain" on entitlement programs for the elderly, like Medicare. Estimates show "a gap of \$51 trillion between payroll taxes and costs of medical care and Social Security" by 2030, he writes. The question of "Who's going to make up the difference?" may not be one that President Bush and Senator John Kerry are eager to address, but "Who We Are Now" convincingly demonstrates that it is a question that Americans will be forced to wrestle with in the years ahead.

David J. Garrow is the author of "Bearing the Cross," a Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.