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Who Americans Are and What They Do, in Census Data

By [SAM ROBERTS](#)

Americans drank more than 23 gallons of bottled water per person in 2004 — about 10 times as much as in 1980. We consumed more than twice as much high fructose corn syrup per person as in 1980 and remained the fattest inhabitants of the planet, although Mexicans, Australians, Greeks, New Zealanders and Britons are not too far behind.

At the same time, Americans spent more of their lives than ever — about eight-and-a-half hours a day — watching television, using computers, listening to the radio, going to the movies or reading.

This eclectic portrait of the American people is drawn from the 1,376 tables in the [Census Bureau's](#) 2007 Statistical Abstract of the United States, the annual feast for number crunchers that is being served up by the federal government today.

For the first time, the abstract quantifies same-sex sexual contacts (6 percent of men and 11.2 percent of women say they have had them) and learning disabilities (among population groups, American Indians were most likely to have been told that they have them).

The abstract reveals that the floor space in new private one-family homes has expanded to 2,227 square feet in 2005 from 1,905 square feet in 1990. Americans are getting fatter, but now drink more bottled water per person than beer.

Taller, too. More than 24 percent of Americans in their 70s are shorter than 5-foot-6. Only 10 percent of people in their 20s are.

More people are injured by wheelchairs than by lawnmowers, the abstract reports. Bicycles are involved in more accidents than any other consumer product, but beds rank a close second.

Most of the statistical tables, which come from a variety of government and other sources, are presented raw, without caveats; and because the abstract is so concrete, the statistics can suggest false precision. The table of consumer products involved in injuries does not explain, for example, that one reason nearly as many injuries involve beds as bicycles is that more people use beds.

With medical costs rising, more people said they pray for their health than invest in every form of alternative medicine or therapy combined, the abstract reports.

Adolescents and adults now spend, on average, more than 64 days a year watching television, 41 days listening to the radio and a little over a week using the Internet. Among adults, 97 million Internet users sought news online last year, 92 million bought a product, 91 million made a travel reservation, 16 million used a social or professional networking site and 13 million created a blog.

“The demand for information and entertainment seems almost insatiable,” said James P. Rutherford, executive vice president of Veronis Suhler Stevenson, the media investment firm whose research the Census Bureau cited.

Mr. Rutherford said time spent with such media increased to 3,543 hours last year from 3,340 hours in 2000, and is projected to rise to 3,620 hours in 2010. The time spent within each category varied, with less on broadcast television

(down to 679 hours in 2005 from 793 hours in 2000) and on reading in general, and more using the Internet (up to 183 hours from 104 hours) and on cable and satellite television.

How does all that listening and watching influence the amount of time Americans spend alone? The census does not measure that, but since 2000 the number of hobby and athletic nonprofit associations has risen while the number of labor unions, fraternities and fan clubs has declined.

“The large master trend here is that over the last hundred years, technology has privatized our leisure time,” said Robert D. Putnam, a public policy professor at [Harvard](#) and author of “Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community.”

“The distinctive effect of technology has been to enable us to get entertainment and information while remaining entirely alone,” Mr. Putnam said. “That is from many points of view very efficient. I also think it’s fundamentally bad because the lack of social contact, the social isolation means that we don’t share information and values and outlook that we should.”

More Americans were born in 2004 than in any years except 1960 and 1990. Meanwhile, the national divorce rate, 3.7 divorces per 1,000 people, was the lowest since 1970. Among the states, Nevada still claims the highest divorce rate, which slipped to 6.4 per 1,000 in 2004 from 11.4 per 1,000 in 1990, just ahead of Arkansas’s rate.

From 2000 to 2005, the number of manufacturing jobs declined nearly 18 percent. Virtually every job category registered decreases except pharmaceuticals. Employment in textile mills fell by 42 percent. The job projected to grow the fastest by 2014 is home health aide.

One thing Americans produce more of is solid waste — 4.4 pounds per day, up from 3.7 pounds in 1980.

More than half of American households owned stocks and mutual funds in 2005. The 91 million individuals in those households had a median age of 51 and a median household income of \$65,000.

That might help explain a shift in what college freshmen described as their primary personal objectives. In 1970, 79 percent said their goal was developing a meaningful philosophy of life. By 2005, 75 percent said their primary objective was to be financially very well off.

Among graduate students, 27 percent had at least one foreign-born parent. The number of foreign students from India enrolled in American colleges soared to 80,000 in 2005 from 10,000 in 1976.

As recently as 1980, only 12 percent of doctors were women; by 2004, 27 percent were.

In 1970, 33,000 men and 2,000 women earned professional degrees; in 2004, the numbers were 42,000 men and 41,000 women.

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