

December 16, 2006

EDITORIAL

The Story of the Numbers

There is a novel hidden in the raw data recently released in the Census Bureau's 2007 Statistical Abstract — a kind of collective "Pale Fire" by Vladimir Nabokov, a portrait of strangeness amid familiarity. All the vestiges of causality and context are missing from the numbers, so one is left to ponder what link there might be between the growing size of our houses and our drinking 23 gallons of bottled water a year.

Could our passion for high-fructose corn syrup have something to do with the decline in the divorce rate? And why have college students given up hopes of finding a meaningful philosophy of life in favor of being financially well off? Is it because they seem to be taller than their elders?

Let's face it. In the abstract — statistically — we don't make much sense. Before the data means anything it has to be balanced, weighted, contextualized and interpreted. Even then the questions of cause and volition are still problematic. Do we drink 10 times more bottled water than we did in 1980 because we now distrust tap water? Or have we been led into aquatic skepticism by bottled-water marketing campaigns? Or does the truth lie muddled in the middle? The census numbers are endpoints in our understanding of the country around us. They outline our demographic diversity, our economic decisions, but they have a harder time showing the pressures that bear upon us every day and that shape our behavior.

Still, there is something fascinating about thumbing through this summary of America. Every census tries to capture a detailed snapshot of who and how we are, a portrait of the present. But as everyone who has ever stood in front of a camera knows, we will look back at these numbers — 13 million blogs created, 64 days a year watching television — and wonder who on earth we were.

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