

## BACKGROUND BOOKS

### STATISTICS

- Publishers issued 53,380 new books and revised editions in America in 1983, versus 15,012 in 1960.
- The country has 13,084 golf courses, 1,220,000 coin-operated video games, and 19,000 movie theaters (average ticket: \$3.15).
- Of every 1,000 married couples, 14 are inter-racial, up from seven in 1970.
- Women passed men in college enrollment in 1979. By 1983, they comprised 51.2 percent of the nation's 12,320,000 students.
- Among the 50 biggest U.S. cities, Tulsa, Oklahoma, has the highest per capita money income (\$11,059); El Paso, Texas, the lowest (\$6,550).
- Motor vehicle deaths (within a year of the accident) went from a peak of 56,300 in 1972 to 44,600 in 1983.

These are some of the items in the latest **Statistical Abstract of the United States** (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1985, paper). It is a 991-page compendium of data from scores of public and private sources that is billed as "the standard summary of statistics on the social, political, and economic organization" of America. As seen in the *Abstract*, the nation has no shortage of statisticians—whose specialty, as defined by W. Allen Wallis and Harry V. Roberts in **The Nature of Statistics** (Free Press, 1962, cloth; 1965, paper), provides "a body of methods for making wise decisions in the face of uncertainty."

Keeping tallies of people, events, and things is a mark of advanced societies. Hyman Alterman writes in **Counting People: The Census in History** (Harcourt, 1969) that "the civilizations of the pre-Christian era that have left records of enumerations of their people . . . developed a system of mathematics and number notation of a high order."

The societies that began population counts (the Babylonians kept records as early as 3800 B.C.) did so to see how many taxpayers and potential warriors they had. But such knowledge could be a source of peril as well as of strength. The Old Testament tells of King David's 1017 B.C. order to Joab: "Go now through all the tribes of Israel . . . and number ye the people." Joab worried that Satan had tricked the king into the census, figuring that a count would anger the Lord. Sure enough, after the tally (it found 1,300,000 "valiant men that drew the sword"), Israel suffered a plague that killed 70,000.

Even now, censuses arouse fear, notes Alterman. When some newly independent Third World nations attempted a first census, the counters "were either killed or driven off."

The term census—derived from the Latin *censere*, to assess—came from the Romans, the first people to hold regular population counts. As Dan Halacy notes in **Census: 190 Years of Counting America** (Elsevier/Nelson Books, 1980), the Roman censor not only registered all citizens but also collected taxes and served as "a guardian of public morals."

For centuries after Rome's fall, few counts were taken, partly because of a lingering religious aversion to them. But as the Dark Ages waned, trade grew, and so did a need for reliable numbers. In 1085, William the Conqueror sent agents through England to interview one in every 100 people—an early effort at statistical "sampling"—to gather data for the so-called Domesday Book. In Florence in 1338, data on bread sales were used to reckon the city's population: 90,000. By 1515, enough numbers were available to allow the Ital-

ian Niccolò Machiavelli to publish *Portraits of France and Germany*, an analysis of their resources.

The census's modern age was launched during the 17th century by John Graunt, a Londoner who employed parish birth and death records to estimate population size—useful, he said, for “good, certain and easie Government.” When Graunt showed that London was more populous than Paris, Alterman writes, his feat “aroused envy in the latter city and stirred a great deal of discussion there about the need for more reliable estimates of population.”

Other milestones followed. In 1679, the English mathematician Sir William Petty published *Political Arithmetick*, “the art of reasoning by figures upon things relating to government.” Seventy years later in Germany, Gottfried Achenwall wrote a detailed description of the major European nations—and coined the term *Statistik*. Britain conducted its first modern census in 1801, when France also held its first true census. Greece followed in 1836; Switzerland, in 1860; Italy, in 1861.

By then, America's decennial census was already the oldest periodic national head count. The U.S. lust for numbers was admired by European statisticians, as related in **The Census Bureau: A Numerator and Denominator for Measuring Change** (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1975, paper). During the 19th century, France's Moreau de Jonnes hailed the Americans' use of statistics to shape “their civil and political rights, and the destinies of the Nation.”

By Jonnes's time, statistics had helped to change popular perceptions everywhere. For example, when in 1830 the Belgian mathematician and social scientist Adolphe Quetelet introduced the concept of

“the average man,” people were shocked that humans could be reduced to numbers. The very word average was crass: It came from *avaria*, Old Italian for damage to cargo at sea. (Much of statistical method was developed by insurers calculating marine casualty probabilities.)

In **Social Indicators and Public Policy** (Elsevier, 1975), Judith Innes de Neufville examines how government came to “institutionalize” statistics—and, in turn, to be governed by them. Example: unemployment figures. After Washington found during the depression that it had no measure of national unemployment, Labor Department specialists undertook monthly surveys of joblessness, and before long, the results were shaping policy: In the Employment Act of 1946, Congress made it a duty of government to try to maintain “full employment” as measured by the official figures.

The interweaving of government and statistics has continued unabated. In pushing Great Society legislation through Congress, Lyndon Johnson set up a team in the Department of Health, Education and Welfare to “develop the necessary social statistics and indicators” as “yardsticks” to “measure the distance we have come and plan for the new way ahead.”

The world owes much to statistical method. Among its less-publicized achievements, statistical theory helped Gregor Mendel found the modern science of genetics a century ago, showed World War II naval planners how convoys could reduce ship losses to German submarines, and has permitted actuaries to calculate insurance premiums. Yet, history has provided those who scorn the collectors and interpreters of numbers with much ammunition. In **How to Lie**

with **Statistics** (Norton, 1954, cloth & paper), Darrell Huff cites the 1950 U.S. census, which counted more people in the 65-to-70 age group than had been found in the 55-to-60 bracket in 1940. The reason: Lots of Americans had raised their age to become eligible for Social Security.

Statistical projections are particularly fraught with peril. During World War II, for example, a U.S. Census Bureau booklet entitled *Uncle Sam: How He Grew* cited the reckoning of "authorities" that "by about 1980 our population growth will have stopped altogether, at a peak of around 153 million." Among other effects, the forecast helped to persuade Montgomery Ward's management to trim expansion—unlike Sears, which continued to grow.

Nonetheless, the flow of fearless or fearsome projections continues. Witness the **Global Two Thousand Report to the President**, edited by Gerald O. Barney, 3 vols. (Pergamon, 1980–82, cloth; Penguin, abr., 1982, paper only). The work of a presidential commission, it concluded that "if present trends continue, the world in 2000 will be more crowded, more polluted, less stable ecologically" and that life "will be more precarious" for "most" people.

New ways of quantifying the present also are always in demand, which accounts for the "misery index." Simply a combination of the seasonally adjusted unemployment rate and the inflation rate (as measured by the U.S. consumer price index), this concoction won notice during the 1976 presidential race; candidate Jimmy Carter made much of the Ford administration "misery" rate, which was

near 12 percent by election time. (The index hit 19.2 before Carter left office in January 1981.)

Judging national well-being by any single measure is a tricky undertaking. Have the good times gone? Perhaps, to judge by the Census Bureau's numbers on median family income: After surging by 38 percent during the 1950s and 34 percent during the 1960s, family income rose by only 0.4 percent during the 1970s. But in **The Good News Is the Bad News Is Wrong** (Simon & Schuster, 1984), Ben J. Wattenberg argues that many "Super Numbers" point to continued improvement. Some SNs:

- The 400 percent increase over just two decades in the number of young blacks (1.1 million) in college.
- The rising proportion of married couples under 35 who own their homes (up from 38 percent in 1950 to 62 percent in 1980).
- The 33 percent decline of sulfur dioxide in the air from 1975 to 1982.

Such figures, says Wattenberg, show trends that "are clearly positive—some of them sensationally so."

Positive or otherwise—and no matter how vital to the operation of a complex modern society—all aggregate numbers should not be swallowed whole. As the British statistician Sir Josiah Charles Stamp (1880–1941) warned:

"The government are very keen on amassing statistics. They collect them, raise them to the nth power, take the cube root and prepare wonderful diagrams. But you must never forget that every one of these figures comes in the first instance from the village watchman, who just puts down what he damn pleases."

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