

# Ten reasons why we're not the way we were

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Here are ten jaw-dropping demographic trends, according to Cheryl Russell, editorial director of New Strategist Publications, in *American Consumers Newsletter*, 8 January 2008, that make us different from the way we used to be – and what they tell us about our future. While the statistics may be based on Americans, the trends are fairly universal in developed societies.

## 1. We are fatter

Much fatter. In 1960, the average woman weighed a reasonable 10 stone\*. Now she weighs an oversized 11 and a half stone\*. The average man has seen his weight rise from under 12 stone\* to over 13 and a half stone\*. A new study published by the National Bureau of Economic Research estimates that 75 percent of our gain in weight is from eating too much rather than exercising too little.

## 2. We are diverse

In 1950, fully nine out of ten Americans were white-and virtually all whites were non-Hispanic. Today, only 66 percent are non-Hispanic white, and Hispanics – who were not part of the mix in 1950 – are now the largest minority. Every year the US population grows by another 3 million, and Hispanics account for half the gain. Most of the increase is occurring in the nation's maternity wards, not at the border crossings.

## 3. We are richer

Much richer. The median income of the average household climbed 31 per cent over the past 40 years, after adjusting for inflation. This is good news, but unfortunately it is also old news. Median household income peaked several years ago, in 1999. Even more alarming, the median earnings of men with full-time jobs peaked all the way back in 1986. Only one factor fuelled household income growth until 1999: working women.

## 4. Most women (including mothers) work

In 1960, only 28 percent of married women with children under age 18 were in the labour force. Today, fully 67 percent have jobs. Americans once disapproved of working women, especially working mothers. No longer. The working mother is now the only factor that keeps many families from falling out of the middle class. But mother's touch may be fading. The median earnings of women with full-time jobs peaked in 2002, after adjusting for inflation.

## 5. We are better educated

In 1950, only 34 percent of adults had a high school diploma. Today, fully 85 percent of adults are high school graduates. The percentage of Americans with a college degree has climbed from just 6 to 28 percent. But the college boost to incomes may be waning. The median income of households headed by college graduates peaked in 1999 and has fallen 5 percent since then, after adjusting for inflation.

## 6. Food is cheaper

Food prices have plummeted since 1950. The average household spends 40 percent less

on food today than in 1950, after adjusting for inflation. But cheap food may not be entirely beneficial. The NBER examination of the reasons for our weight gain finds that as food gets cheaper, we eat more, adding to our girth.

#### **7. We have more stuff**

Houses are bigger than ever, but they are home to fewer people. More than one in four households (27 percent) are now home to just one person, up from 11 percent in 1950. Our growing affluence has allowed us to buy larger houses, second and third cars, more television sets and other stuff – which is why we also have 2.2 billion square feet of rentable self-storage space available for our use, according to the Self Storage Association.

#### **8. Fewer households have children**

Since 1950, the share of households with children has plummeted from nearly half to less than one-third, imperilling the public education system as childless homeowners balk at rising property taxes. It doesn't help that nearly half – 45 percent – of children are Asian, black, or Hispanic, while non-Hispanic whites pay 82 percent of property taxes.

#### **9. More children are born out of wedlock**

As men's incomes have fallen, women have become less willing to make a lifetime commitment to one man. Consequently, out-of-wedlock births are now commonplace. The increasingly dire economic plight of men can be read in this trend: the percentage of babies born outside marriage has climbed from 4 percent in 1950 to 38 percent today.

#### **10. We are living longer**

Our life expectancy is at an all-time high of nearly 78 years. Life expectancy is rising in part because the death rate from heart disease has plummeted thanks to new medications and the decline in smoking. Disturbingly, however, a shrinking share of young and middle-aged adults report being in very good or excellent physical health, and their mental health is eroding as well.

*\* Figures are approximate.*



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