New housing starts during the suburban boom after World War II. New private housing construction had been sharply reduced, first during the Depression and then during World War II. Courtesy of Grant Smith/Corbis.
In 1900, barely one in a hundred Americans lived alone, and half lived in large households of six or more persons. These living patterns changed dramatically, however. Between 1900 and the end of the century, the share of Americans living alone increased from 1 percent to 10 percent, while the proportion residing in households with six or more people declined from 50 percent to 10 percent.

One reason for the trend toward smaller households was the gradual disappearance of live-in servants and elderly parents and other relatives from family households. But the most important factor was that women had fewer children (see page 84). Although very large families were not uncommon at the beginning of the century, they were exceedingly rare at the century’s close. As late as 1940, one of nineteen births was an eighth or later birth. The comparable figure at the end of the century was one of every 219. While the baby boom of the 1950s raised the birth rate far above the level of 1940, it did not permanently restore the pattern of large families.

As the increasing availability of contraception, sterilization, and abortion gave women effective control over childbearing, they chose to have fewer children. Reinforcing that choice were factors such as the influx of women into the labor market, rising health and educational costs, the increased incidence of divorce, ideological considerations associated with the women’s movement, and concerns about the putative effect of large populations on the environment.
Population by Household Size
Percentage of population living in each size household

1 person

2 persons

3–5 persons

6+ persons

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Construction of new housing surged after World War II, and Americans’ preference for single-family detached homes remained strong.

Housing is one of the most cyclical of all industries, as shown in the sharp fluctuations in new housing starts per thousand population each year (see upper chart). During World War I, the Depression, and World War II, housing starts dropped to near zero. After World War II, however, the surge in housing construction was unprecedented.

The widespread development of suburban housing that got under way in 1946 was inspired by the typical American pattern of rural settlement, where each farmhouse stands alone on its own ground, with its own barns and sheds, surrounded by its own fields and woods, often out of sight of any neighbors.

The typical suburb consisted almost entirely of single-family detached houses surrounded by their own lawns, gardens, and sheds, and centered on lots that provided at least minimum separation from neighbors, even in low-income and middle-income districts. In more affluent suburbs, houses often reached baronial scale.

The average new house of 1998 was a relatively large edifice: it typically had two or more stories, three bedrooms, two and a half baths, central heating, central air conditioning, a working fireplace, and a garage. With 2,190 square feet, it was 46 percent larger than the average new house in 1970.

Although the single-family share of new housing fluctuated, the preference for the single-family detached house was relatively stronger at the end of the century than at the beginning (see lower chart). In 1998, single-family detached houses constituted 79 percent of new housing compared with 65 percent in 1900. The familiar pattern of so-called “suburban sprawl” and peripheral strip development reflects this preference and its requisite low settlement density and heavy traffic density.
New Housing Starts
New dwelling structures per thousand people each year

Single-Family Detached Houses
Percentage of new dwelling structures

(Data unavailable for 1945–1958)
Home ownership rose substantially from the beginning of the century to the onset of the Great Depression, when the trend was checked by widespread foreclosures, reduced incomes, and the virtual cessation of homebuilding (see upper chart). The decline would have been even greater without the intervention of the federal government, which began to regulate lenders and guarantee residential mortgages that met certain qualifications.

The upward trends in home ownership and mortgage usage resumed during the economic boom years after World War II, when veterans became eligible for federally guaranteed mortgages on favorable terms. By 1960, more than three in five nonfarm dwellings were owner-occupied, and more than half of them were mortgaged (see lower chart). Home ownership rose more slowly after 1960.

Because the quality of owned housing greatly exceeded that of rental housing, Americans enjoyed a higher quality of housing when they purchased their homes. Owned units had fewer structural defects than rental units, along with many more usable fireplaces, separate dining rooms, garages, and other amenities. In 1997, for example, 62 percent of owned units but only 35 percent of rental units had a dishwasher, while 60 percent of owned units but only 40 percent of rental units had central air conditioning.

Seventy percent of white householders owned their homes in 1997, compared with 45 percent of black householders and 43 percent of Hispanic householders. Even greater differences in home ownership were related to family structure: 82 percent of married-couple families owned their homes in 1997, but only 47 percent of female-headed families (no spouse present) did. Home ownership also varied strongly with age: only 18 percent of people under age twenty-five owned their homes, but substantial majorities of adults over age thirty were homeowners.
Home Ownership
Owner-occupied homes as percentage of all homes

Homes Mortgaged
Mortgaged homes as percentage of all owner-occupied homes
American homes were extensively mechanized.

The typical American home of 1900 did not use much more mechanical energy than the home of 1800 or even 1700. The occupants cooked and heated with iron stoves instead of open fireplaces. They read by the light of kerosene mantles or gas jets rather than candles or whale oil lamps. They used foot-powered sewing machines, which augmented the handheld needle and thread. The domestic lives of most Americans had changed very little by 1900.

In their landmark study of Middletown (Muncie, Indiana), a community whose residents enjoyed better-than-average household amenities, Robert and Helen Lynd noted that in 1890, “only about one family in six or eight had even the crudest running water—a hydrant in the yard or a faucet at the iron kitchen sink…. By 1890, there were not two dozen complete bathrooms in the city.” Central heating was virtually unknown.

Between 1900 and 1950, however, a variety of conveniences brought spectacular improvements to the nation’s private homes. During this time, the occupants of nearly all private homes acquired electrical service, complete bathrooms, refrigerators, central heating, and washing machines, along with vacuum cleaners, toasters, phonographs, telephones, and radios. Mechanization continued apace during the second half of the century as water heaters, color televisions, microwave ovens, and clothes dryers became standard household equipment. Tens of millions of families installed swimming pools, home freezers, personal computers, water softeners, whirlpool baths, and other technologically advanced conveniences. Air conditioning became standard, particularly in the South and Southwest, where it fostered both population and economic growth. Among its many effects, domestic mechanization greatly lightened the routines of housework, thereby enabling married women to seek work outside of their homes (see page 38).
Mechanization of the American Home
Percentage of occupied housing units with each item

- **Electricity**: 2%, 94%, 99%
- **Flush Toilets**: 10%, 76%, 98%
- **Central Heating**: 8%, 50%, 93%
- **Refrigerators**: 0%, 80%, 99%
- **Washing Machines**: 0%, 47%, 76%
- **Air Conditioning**: 0%, 0%, 78%
The automobile and television, introduced fifty years apart, diffused with extraordinary speed and affected virtually every aspect of American life.

Eight thousand passenger cars were registered in 1900, half a million in 1910, and nearly 10 million in 1920. No previous invention anywhere had ever spread so quickly. The first real automobile did not appear in the Lynds’ Middletown until 1900; just twenty-two years later, there were two cars for every three Middletown families. Driven an average of more than five thousand miles a year in the 1920s, these automobiles had a major impact on work, leisure, religion, and sexual behavior.

By 1950, the basic open car of 1900 had evolved into a wide array of motor vehicles: sedans, coupes, station wagons, pickup trucks, delivery vans, large trucks, and buses. Further development led to the hotrod, the eighteen-wheel truck, the minivan, the sport-utility vehicle, and other variations. By the end of the century, some Americans made their homes in recreational vehicles as large as city buses, migrating seasonally between warm and cool sections of the country.

As the upper chart shows, the rise in motor vehicles per thousand population seldom flagged. The brief halt in car production during World War II was made up as soon as the war ended. Multiple vehicle ownership was not common until the 1950s, but by the end of the century, nearly half of car-owning families had two or more vehicles. More than 90 percent of American households had at least one. Nine of every ten journeys to work were made in private automobiles.

The spread of television was even more rapid. There were 8,000 television sets in the entire country in 1946. Eight years later, 26 million sets reached more than half the population. At the end of the century, 98 percent of American homes had television sets and most homes had at least two.

As the lower chart indicates, television viewing rose to a very high level by 1970 and remained at about the same level through the end of the century. In the average household, at least one set was on for more than seven hours a day, and the average person actually watched the screen for about four hours. Divining the alleged consequences of extensive television watching became an industry in itself. The list of putative effects included increased juvenile violence, the fading of regional accents, the commercialization of college sports, the growth of evangelical denominations, the decline of school homework, the commercialization of elections, and a global audience for scandal.
Automobiles, Buses, and Trucks
Per thousand population

Households with at Least One Television Set
Percentage of all households

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The U.S. population at the end of the century was not conspicuously mobile. Residential mobility—the movement of individuals and families from one dwelling to another, whether across the street or across the country—declined during the century. As the upper chart shows, the proportion of people changing addresses from one year to the next declined from one of five in 1948, the earliest year for which national data are available, to one of six in 1999. Studies of residential mobility in several localities strongly suggest that the proportion of annual movers began to decline before 1900.

The principal factor affecting the rate of residential mobility is home ownership. Owners are much less inclined to change dwellings than are renters. Thus, as home ownership increased, residential mobility declined. A related factor is the rising average age of the population. Young adults move the most, but their share of the population was declining as the average age of the population increased.

In 1997, two of every three movers remained in the same county. Five of six movers found new homes in the same state. About 3 percent of the population made out-of-state moves in any given year. These numbers did not change appreciably throughout the second half of the century.

Migration—the movement of individuals and families between states—increased moderately during the century, as the lower chart indicates. In 1900, 79 percent of the native population lived in the state where they were born. By 1990, only 62 percent of the native population lived in their state of birth.