This is a book about social change in the United States during the twentieth century. It relies on statistical trends to tell that awesome story.

The twentieth century was the first century that could be measured in a systematic manner. Those who saw it coming included President James A. Garfield who, while still a congressman in 1869, observed in a speech to the U.S. House of Representatives:

The developments of statistics are causing history to be rewritten. Till recently, the historian studied nations in the aggregate, and gave us only the story of princes, dynasties, sieges, and battles."

Now, statistical inquiry leads him into the hovels, homes, workshops, mines, fields, prisons, hospitals, and all other places where human nature displays its weakness and its strength. In these explorations he discovers the seeds of national growth and decay, and thus becomes the prophet of his generation.

Alas, President Garfield was assassinated in 1881 and did not live to see much beyond the earliest flowering of his prescient observation. As it turned out, we never stopped hearing all about "princes, dynasties, sieges, battles," as well as the other great historical anecdotes, personalities, and moments of the ensuing years: the Titanic; the Hindenburg; Elvis; Lindbergh; Challenger; December 7, 1941, and June 6, 1944; the Roaring Twenties; Einstein; Madonna; the Zapruder film; O.J.; and Monica.

But, as Garfield surmised, we developed a second way of seeing history. During the twentieth century, Americans became the most energetic measurers of social life that ever lived. They measured everything that had been counted before, such as population and the size of the government's territory and army. And they pioneered the measurement of facets of American life that had never been systematically counted before, such as crime, love, food, fun, religion, and work.
This tradition of counting and measuring social conditions gradually spread to virtually every nook and cranny of life in America. Numerical thinking became the discourse of public life. Complicated statistics about arcane matters of national policy permeated presidential debates. The numbers that fill the news—the Gross National Product, the Consumer Price Index, the unemployment rate, the teenage pregnancy rate, the poverty rate, and so forth—were inventions of the American twentieth century. This was the first measured century in human history.

Of course, measurement in the social sciences does not yield certitude. The measurers, the social scientists, the politicians, the advocates, and the activists often disagree about what the data really mean. But, on balance, the explosion of numerical investigation has indeed offered great value: an imperfect measure of accountability, an imperfect way of problem-solving, and an imperfect way of seeing that many things we thought were so, weren’t.

The panorama of the American twentieth century presented in this volume unfolds as a series of key trends, each explained in a one-page essay illustrated by one or more colored charts on the facing page. The First Measured Century was designed as a tool for teachers and students, journalists and bureaucrats, managers and consultants, social scientists and housewives, and everyone else who wants a better understanding of American society.

The selection of information was as objective as we could make it. We have focused on significant aspects of the nation’s experience without favoring any particular viewpoint. We have tried to exclude our own biases, leaving value judgments to the reader. We have offered partial explanations for many of the individual trends, but we have not advanced any general theory to explain them as a whole. However, we encourage readers to think through their own interpretive designs based on the data. (It is not so hard to become an expert.)

Some trends have been omitted for reasons of space. Social change in a complex society has innumerable facets. In other cases, information we would like to include simply does not exist. Although much more data about American society is available today than in 1900 or even in 1970, huge gaps remain.

To maintain readability, we have kept in-text references to a minimum. But every number and every numerical statement in the text or in the charts is based on a credible source and can be traced back to that source by using the notes at the back of the book.

This book also serves as the companion volume to the three-hour PBS television documentary “The First Measured Century,” a prime-time special by the producers of the PBS discussion series Think Tank. Unlike many companion volumes, this book does not re-package the television program into a coffee-table picture book. It is a comprehensive reference book. Indeed, the data presented here formed the spine of the PBS documentary. We believe it can add immeasurably to the value of the television program, not least because it presents far more data than could be included in a dramatic television rendering. This works in reverse
as well: teachers might consider course presentations based on both the book and the program.

A special feature of this book is the inclusion of the first published results from “Middletown IV.” In 1929, Robert and Helen Lynd published the groundbreaking Middletown: A Study in Cultural Change based on their research during the 1920s in Muncie, Indiana. In 1978, Theodore Caplow led a team of social scientists that replicated and extended the Lynds’ original work. In 1999, The First Measured Century Project commissioned partial replications of the Middletown study to provide long-term data on certain topics not covered by official statistics. The research team, directed again by Theodore Caplow, used the same survey instruments in the same place with the same wording as the Lynds used seventy-five years earlier. For many of the topics in these surveys, these data are the longest time series existing in the world. More extensive findings from Middletown IV will be published in journal articles.

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None of those acknowledged is responsible for any errors the book may contain. Those are the sole responsibility of the authors, who would be grateful to hear from discerning readers about errors of commission or omission, so that they may be addressed in future editions.

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