

Society of the United States of America

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Key Concepts

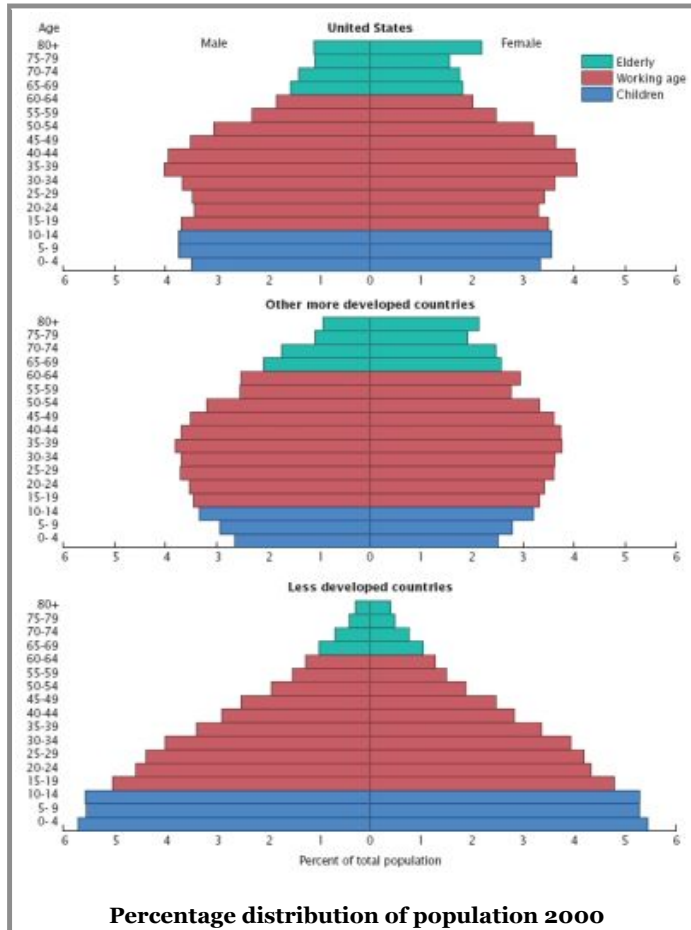
The Population of the US – Census Data

The Constitution of the United States requires that a nationwide **census**, a “head count” of all Americans, must be taken every ten years. The census was originally created to find out how many people live in each state since the number of Representatives each state can elect to the federal House of Representatives is determined by the state’s population (see [Congress](#)). The figures are also very important in establishing how much money from federal taxes will be returned to the states, or how much cities will receive in aid from the federal government. Today, the census also gives a wealth of other information on almost any aspect of American life. The information is public and easily available, and anyone interested in accurate descriptive data on the U.S. should check the Internet site of the [U.S. Census Bureau](#). All the data and charts used in the following are taken from Census Bureau publications (See also [Sources](#)).

Basic Population Data


The [most recent census](#) in the US was taken in 2000. According to it, the United States had a population of more than 280 million people in that year. The population of the country is rapidly increasing: since the previous census in 1990, the population grew by more than 13%. In mid-2006, the Census Bureau estimates the population of the US to be close to 300 million, and it will most probably exceed this mark by 2010. With such figures, the US is the third most populous country in the world after China and India.

Despite the continuing population growth, the average population density of the US is only 30 people per square kilometer, which is explained by the huge size of the country. By comparison, the population density of  Hungary is 108, of the United Kingdom 243, and of the Netherlands (the most densely populated country in Europe) 395 people per square kilometer. Out of the countries with comparable territories, China has 136, Russia 8, and Canada 3 people per square kilometer (see comparative figures ).



The vital statistics of American population reveal trends that are generally characteristic of “more developed countries” (this is the collective term of demographers for Europe, North America, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan) as opposed to “less developed countries” (the rest of the world, used to be called “third world”). The US has a significantly lower birth and death rate than most third-world countries, while the average life expectancy is much longer. As a result, the population of the US is slowly but continuously getting older: the median age (the age which divides the population into two equal halves) recorded by the 2000 Census (35.3 years) was the highest in the history of the country.

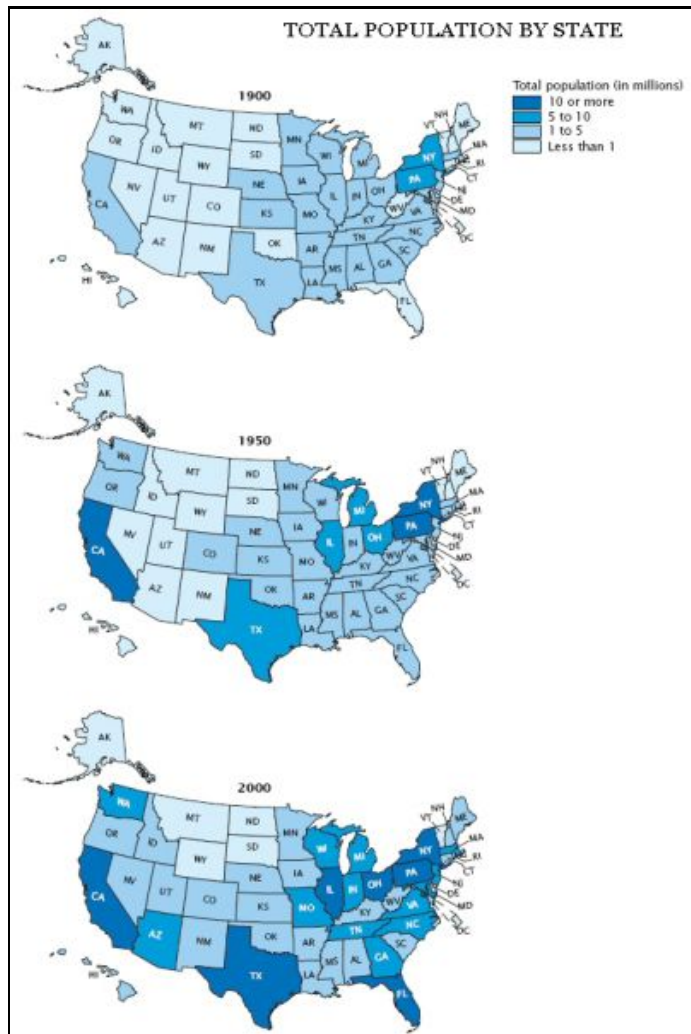
If one examines the distribution of age groups within the US population (see graph [Percentage distribution of population 2000](#)), it can be immediately seen that the primary source of population growth is not the birth rate but the immigration of young adults. The largest age groups in the current US population are those

who are in their 30s and 40s, whereas in third-world countries with high birth rates, the largest age groups are those between 0 and 15. On the other hand, the US still has a significantly higher birth rate than most European countries, including  Hungary (see table [Comparative population data of US, UK, and Hungary](#)). As a result, the population of the US is on average slightly younger, and the average number of children is a bit higher than in Europe, while the excellent health care system ensures that most people live into their late 70s or even 80s. So the population of the US would probably increase even without immigration, but the rate of growth would be much smaller.

Urban and Rural population

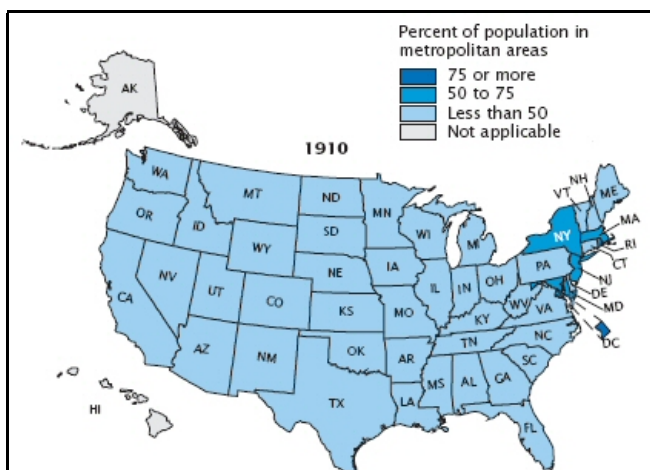
The distribution of US population is very uneven: the great majority (80%) of Americans live in [metropolitan areas](#). The concentration of people in big cities and their surrounding areas is a steady trend in US history, but the process became faster during the 20th century: in 1900, more than 70% of Americans still lived in small towns and farms, defined as “**rural**” or “non-metropolitan” areas.

Population figures of US cities can be misleading because the number of people living within the administrative boundaries of the city itself might be relatively small; however, millions more live in the surrounding **suburbs** or **commute** from nearby cities and suburbs. Therefore, statisticians prefer to use the term ‘metropolitan area,’ which includes both central cities and the surrounding enormous suburban areas. The most densely populated region of the country is the so-called “**Megalopolis**”, the string of big cities and urban areas stretching from Boston in southern **New England** along the coastal areas of **New York**, **New Jersey**, **Pennsylvania** and **Maryland** to **Washington D.C.** (it may be surprising, but New Jersey is actually the most densely populated state in the US). There are also a number of large metropolitan areas in the **Great Lakes** area, especially around Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland and Pittsburgh. The **Pacific coast** has three large metropolitan areas: in Southern **California** around Los Angeles and San Diego, in northern **California** around San Francisco, and further north around Seattle, **Washington** and Portland, **Oregon**. Besides these three areas, larger and smaller metropolitan areas are scattered all over the US, but most of them east of the **Rocky Mountains**.

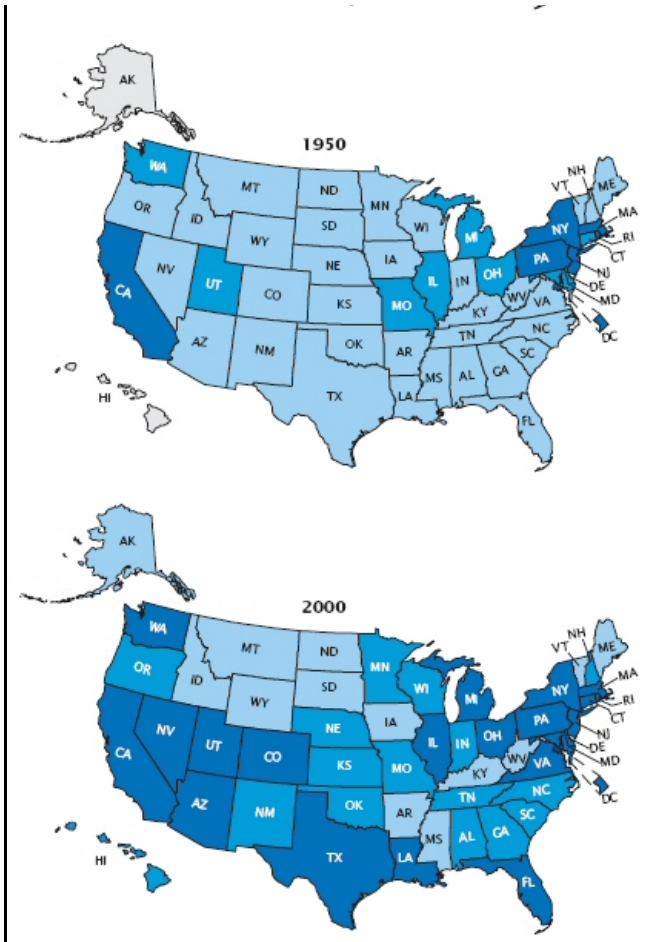


Although all metropolitan areas of the US are growing in population, certain trends can be clearly observed. During the 20th century, and especially since the end of World War II, people have been more attracted to the West and the South, especially to the big cities of the **Pacific coast**, **Florida**, and **Texas**. Two-thirds of all the population growth during the 20th century occurred in these two regions, and 58% of the population lived in the West and the South in 2000, whereas in 1900, more than 60% still lived in the Northeast and the Midwest. As a result, the states of **California** and **Texas** have the largest populations today, overtaking **New York** and Pennsylvania, the largest states in 1900, and **Florida** may overtake **New York** to become the third largest state some time in the near future (see the Sun Belt – Frost Belt distinction in **Climate**). The least populated states are – except for **Alaska** – all located in the northern Midwest and the northern Rockies

(see the map "Total Population by state").



Comparing the proportion of metropolitan and rural populations by region, today the Midwest is relatively the least metropolitan region of the US, since less than 75% of its population is metropolitan, a little smaller proportion than in the South. In contrast, in the Northeast almost 90% of the population is metropolitan. There are much larger differences between individual states: in 21 states, 75% or more of the population lived in



metropolitan areas in 2000, whereas in 12 states the majority of the population was still rural. The most metropolitan states were [California](#), [Connecticut](#), [Florida](#), [Maryland](#), [Massachusetts](#), [New Jersey](#), [New York](#), and [Rhode Island](#), with over 90% of their population living in metropolitan areas. In contrast, [Idaho](#), [North Dakota](#), [South Dakota](#), [Vermont](#), and [Wyoming](#) had the highest proportion of rural people (and, not surprisingly, very small overall populations) in 2000 (see map "Percent of population in metropolitan areas").

The continuous [urbanization](#) of the US is coupled with an increasing [suburbanization](#), since nowadays most of the urban growth is taking place in the suburbs. Until 1960, more urban people lived in big cities than in the suburban areas. Since then, suburbs has been growing explosively: in 2000, half of the total population of the country lived in suburban areas while only about 30% lived in central cities. Much of this growth came from middle-class people moving out of crowded, noisy, polluted central cities into

quiet, peaceful suburbs where they could enjoy their own house and garden.

Mostly as a result of the suburban growth, metropolitan areas tend to increase both in area and in population. In 2000, 30% of the total US population lived in metropolitan areas with more than 5 million people, and another 28% lived in areas with more than 1 million.

The Ten Largest Metropolitan Areas in 2000

Metropolitan area, state(s)	Region	Population in 2000 (rounded)
New York-Northern New Jersey-Long Island, NY-NJ-CT-PA	Northeast	21,200,000
Los Angeles-Riverside-Orange County, CA	West	16,374,000
Chicago-Gary-Kenosha, IL-IN-WI	Midwest	9,158,000
Washington-Baltimore, DC-MD-VA-WV	South	7,608,000
San Francisco-Oakland-San Jose, CA	West	7,039,000
Philadelphia-Wilmington-Atlantic City, PA-NJ-DE-MD	Northeast	6,188,000
Boston-Worcester-Lawrence, MA-NH-ME-CT	Northeast	5,819,000
Detroit-Ann Arbor-Flint, MI	Midwest	5,456,000
Dallas-Fort Worth, TX	South	5,222,000
Houston-Galveston-Brazoria, TX	South	4,670,000

Comparative population data of the US, the UK, and Hungary

<i>All data are 2006 estimates!</i>	United States	United Kingdom	Hungary
Population (rounded)	298,444,000	60,609,000	9,981,000
Median Age (years)	36.5	39.3	38.7
Birth rate (annual births per 1000 people)	14.14	10.71	9.72
Death rate (annual deaths per 1000 people)	8.26	10.13	13.11
Population growth rate (annual change, %)	0.91	0.28	- 0.25
Immigration rate (annual immigrants per 1000 people)	3.18	2.18	0.86
Life expectancy (years): total / male / female	77.9 / 75 / 80.8	78.5 / 76.1 / 81.1	72.7 / 68.5 / 77.1
Total fertility rate (children born per woman)	2.09	1.66	1.32

Race and ethnic group


The society of the United States is famous for its extraordinary variety of races and ethnic groups. First of all, it is important to understand the difference between the two terms. The term **race** has traditionally meant groups of people with different skin color and other physical traits like facial features, hair color, shape of the head and the eye, etc. Four races are commonly distinguished within American society:

- **Whites**, the descendants of European immigrants (in official categorization, they are often called **Caucasians**);
- **Blacks** or **African-Americans**, the descendants of slaves forcibly imported from West Africa and the Caribbean (before the 1960s, they were commonly called Negroes, but the term is now considered pejorative and should be avoided!);
- **Asians**, the descendants of immigrants from Southeast Asia (before the 1960s, they were often called Yellow people); and
- **Native Americans**, the descendants of the original inhabitants of North America (before the 1960s, they were commonly called **American Indians**)

The US Census Bureau distinguishes a fifth race which they call “Hawaiian and Pacific islander”, but their population is very small and they mostly live outside the Continental US.

In recent decades, ‘race’ has become a very controversial and problematic term in the US, because it has often been used in highly subjective and biased ways. For example, people are commonly considered ‘black’ in the US if they have any black ancestry or any recognizable features associated with blacks, even if one of their parents or several of their ancestors were white. In the early 20th century, such definitions of

blackness, called '[one-drop rule](#)' (suggesting that one drop of black blood is enough to make somebody black) were passed into law in most Southern states to reinforce racial discrimination between whites and non-whites. Similarly, the term Asian, originally applied mostly to Chinese and Japanese immigrants, has been extended to any immigrant group from Southeast Asia, many of whom have very different physical appearance from one another (e.g. people from India). Many social scientists argue that racial categories are not objective distinctions between groups but social constructions reflecting cultural prejudices. Nonetheless, in everyday language people continue to use the term.

Most races can be subdivided into [ethnic groups](#), which are defined not so much by physical traits but by cultural characteristics, such as a common language, original homeland, shared religious faith, customs and traditions, and most importantly, a sense of ethnic identity. There are dozens of different ethnic groups within the white, the Asian or the Native American race. Ethnic groups are not identical with nations; there are many ethnic groups (e.g. the Basques, the Gypsies, or the Kurds) who have no separate country on their own, but they still have a distinct sense of ethnic identity. Language is an important defining factor (e.g.  Hungarians usually consider those people fellow Hungarians who can speak the language) but a common language does not always entail ethnic identity: Germans and Austrians, Russians and Ukrainians, Serbs and Croats speak highly similar languages and still think of themselves as different ethnic groups. The Chinese, on the other hand, speak a variety of very different regional dialects and still consider themselves part of the same ethnic group. Jews constitute a unique group since they often speak different languages and live in different parts of the world but still preserve a sense of ethnic identity.

Out of the major races in the US, blacks are exceptional since they cannot be subdivided into distinct ethnic groups. Their ancestors were brought into America from various parts of West Africa, and during centuries of slavery, they mixed and intermarried to such an extent that they lost their original mother tongues and most of their customs as well. Keeping any sense of ethnic identity was also strongly discouraged by the white slave-owners, who feared that the cultural unity of any group of slaves might result in organized opposition to suppression. As a result, most American blacks (except for recent immigrants from Africa) speak English as their mother tongue and are Christian. Their distinctive culture survived mostly in music.

Another particular group in the modern US are the [Hispanic](#) or [Latino](#) people, who came to the US from Spanish-speaking countries of Latin America and the Caribbean (there is a slight difference between the two terms though: the term 'Latino' suggests Latin-American origin, therefore it includes immigrants from Portuguese-speaking Brazil too, whereas the term 'Hispanic' suggests a Spanish mother tongue regardless of geographic origin, therefore it includes Filipinos from Asia). Ordinary people tend to think of them as another race, but social scientists reject the idea, since the physical traits of Hispanics are varied. They can be of any race: there are white (e.g. descendants of Spanish colonizers), black (e.g. descendants of former slaves), Native American (e.g. people from Mexico, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador and other countries) and even Asian Hispanics (e.g. people from the Spanish-speaking Philippines, mentioned above). Therefore the US Census Bureau defines Hispanics as a "cultural origin group", suggesting that their unifying element is not their physical appearance but their common cultural heritage: the Spanish language and the Catholic religion.

Races in the US based on Census 2000 Data

Population by Race and Hispanic or Latino Origin for the United States: 2000

<i>Subject</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>% of Total</i>
RACE		
Total population	281 421 906	100.0
One race	274 595 678	97.6
White	211 460 626	75.1
Black or African American	34 658 190	12.3
American Indian and Alaska Native	2 475 956	0.9
Asian	10 242 998	3.6
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	398 835	0.1
Some other race	15 359 073	5.5
Two or more races	6 826 228	2.4
HISPANIC OR LATINO AND RACE		
Total population	281 421 906	100.0
Hispanic or Latino (of any race)	35 305 818	12.5
Not Hispanic or Latino	246 116 088	87.5

The chart above shows, among other things, that of the total number of Americans in 2000, about 75 percent considered themselves White, 12 percent Black, 12.5 percent Hispanic, almost 4 percent Asian, and so on. The phrase "considered themselves" is important, for all these figures are based upon self-identification. In other words, Americans themselves chose which groups they wished to be identified with. With the exception of one group, American Indians, there are no official definitions that can be used to tell which American belongs to which category. The fundamental rule is: you are what you say you are.

One of the novelties of the 2000 Census was that people were given the opportunity to describe their identity by specifying two or more races rather than only one. As the chart above shows, almost 7 million people (2.4% of the total US population) did so. This of course complicates the evaluation of the results: demographers have provided charts in which they have provided a "minimum-maximum range" for each group – the minimum figure being the number of those who entered only one race, and the maximum the total number of all those people who listed that particular race or group, either alone or in combination with others. Another complication is that Hispanic or Latino origin is not a racial category, therefore there are two separate lists of figures describing how people identified their race and whether or not they identified themselves as Hispanics. The uncertainty concerning the racial identity of Hispanics is also reflected by the fact that more than 40% of Hispanics reported "Some other race" in their responses.

The following chart undertakes a comparison between the figures of the two last censuses in 2000 and in 1990:

Difference in Population by Race and Hispanic or Latino Origin, for the United States: 1990 to 2000

Subject	1990 Census		Census 2000		Difference between 1990 and 2000	
	Number	% of total	Number	% of total	Numerical difference	% difference
RACE						
Total population	248 709 873	100.0	281 421 906	100.0	32 712 033	13.2
White	199 686 070	80.3	211 460 626	75.1	11 774 556	5.9
Black or African American	29 986 060	12.1	34 658 190	12.3	4 672 130	15.6
American Indian and Alaska Native	1 959 234	0.8	2 475 956	0.9	516 722	26.4
Asian	6 908 638	2.8	10 242 998	3.6	3 334 360	48.3
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	365 024	0.1	398 835	0.1	33 811	9.3
Some other race	9 804 847	3.9	15 359 073	5.5	5 554 226	56.6
HISPANIC OR LATINO AND RACE						
Total population	248 709 873	100.0	281 421 906	100.0	32 712 033	13.2
Hispanic or Latino (of any race)	22 354 059	9.0	35 305 818	12.5	12 951 759	57.9
Not Hispanic or Latino	226 355 814	91.0	246 116 088	87.5	19 760 274	8.7

Note: The race figures of 1990 and 2000 Census are not directly comparable, since in 1990 people did not have an opportunity to specify two or more races. In the chart above, the replies in 2000 coming under the heading of “Two or more races” were therefore omitted. _

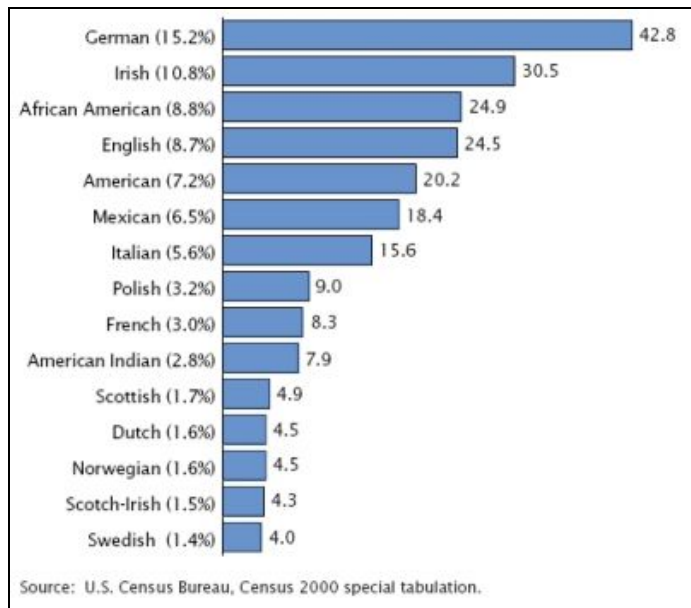
This chart reveals, among other things, that the two fastest-growing groups are Hispanics and Asians: in merely 10 years, the number of Hispanics grew by more than 50%, while that of Asians almost by 50%. In contrast, the number of Whites increased by merely 6%, and the increase of Blacks was also significantly lower, about 16%. If present population trends continue, White Americans will cease to constitute the majority by about 2050 (their proportion will fall below 50%), and there will no longer be a racial “majority” in the US any more, only a society of various minorities.

These national figures do not indicate how the various groups are represented in the individual states, cities, or communities. As might be expected, they are not evenly distributed across the nation. In [Mississippi](#), for example, African Americans make up about 36 percent of that state’s population, whereas in [Wyoming](#) or [Utah](#) they represent less than 1 percent. In the nation’s capital, [Washington, D.C.](#), Blacks form the majority, with 60 percent of the population, while the figure for Phoenix or San Diego is well below 10 percent. In [Texas](#) about one in every three Americans (32 percent) is Hispanic, and in [New Mexico](#) almost every second (42 percent) is. In the city of [San Francisco](#), every third resident is of Asian origin, and they make up about 10% in the two largest American cities, [New York](#) and [Los Angeles](#).

Ancestry

Since 1980, the census no longer asks people about where their parents were born, but asks more general questions about their “**ancestry**” (“What is this person’s ancestry or ethnic origin?”) and lets people decide for themselves. In 2000, about 80% of the respondents specified at least one ancestry, and 22% of them specified two ancestry groups (see chart on the right). In the chart, there is a list of the most often selected ancestry groups, showing how many millions of Americans identified with each, with their proportion within the overall population in brackets.

It would be a mistake, however, to suppose that all these people necessarily feel a strong emotional attachment to their national or ethnic origins. The 5th largest group is American, chosen by over 20 million people, which obviously means that these respondents did not have any particular ethnic identity. English, the 4th largest group chosen by almost 25 million people, also suggests a very generic identity since the majority of English immigrants came to the US in colonial times. All in all, the total number of people choosing a specific European ethnic origin significantly declined from 1990, while the number of people choosing African-American, Hispanic,

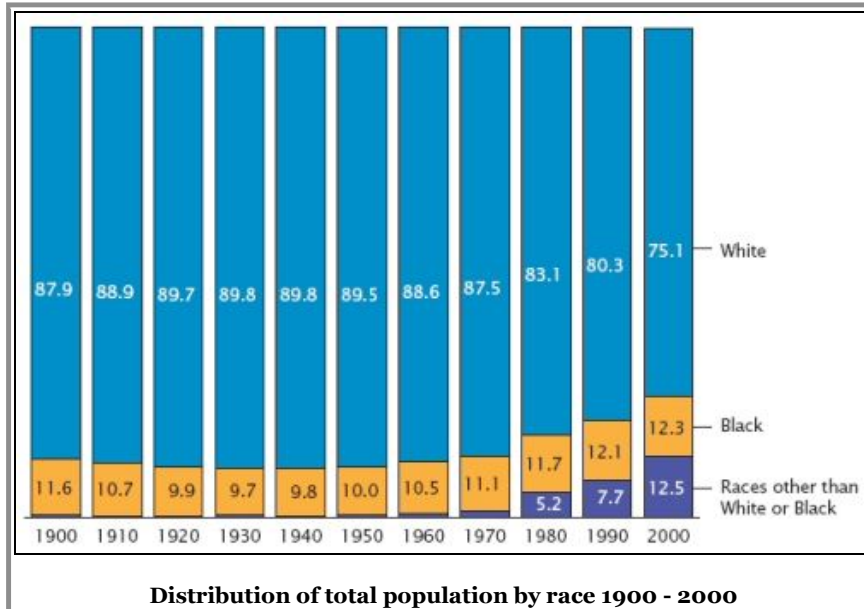


Latino, or various Asian ancestries increased. All this suggests that distinct ethnic identities are slowly declining among non-Hispanic whites, while the identity of non-white groups (Hispanics and Asians) remains strong.

Whites

White Americans still constitute the largest racial group within American society with more than 200 million people in 2000, and their absolute number has been growing steadily all through the 20th century, but their proportion within the overall population has declined from 87% in 1970 to 75% in 2000. This is due to two main reasons: the lower birth rate among white families and the low level of white immigration in recent decades. After the Immigration Act of 1924 introduced national-origin quotas for European immigrants (see [History of immigration](#)), mass white immigration was significantly restricted, and it was surpassed by Asian and Latin American immigration after World War II, which changed racial proportions considerably. The low level of recent European immigration to the US is illustrated by the fact that out of the 31 million foreign-born people counted in 2000, less than 5 million were born in Europe.

Within the country, the proportion of the white population is the highest in rural states of the northern regions of the US. Whites make up more than 90% of the population in relatively sparsely populated states like [Maine](#) and [New Hampshire](#) in New England, [Iowa](#), [Minnesota](#), and [Wisconsin](#) in the Midwest,



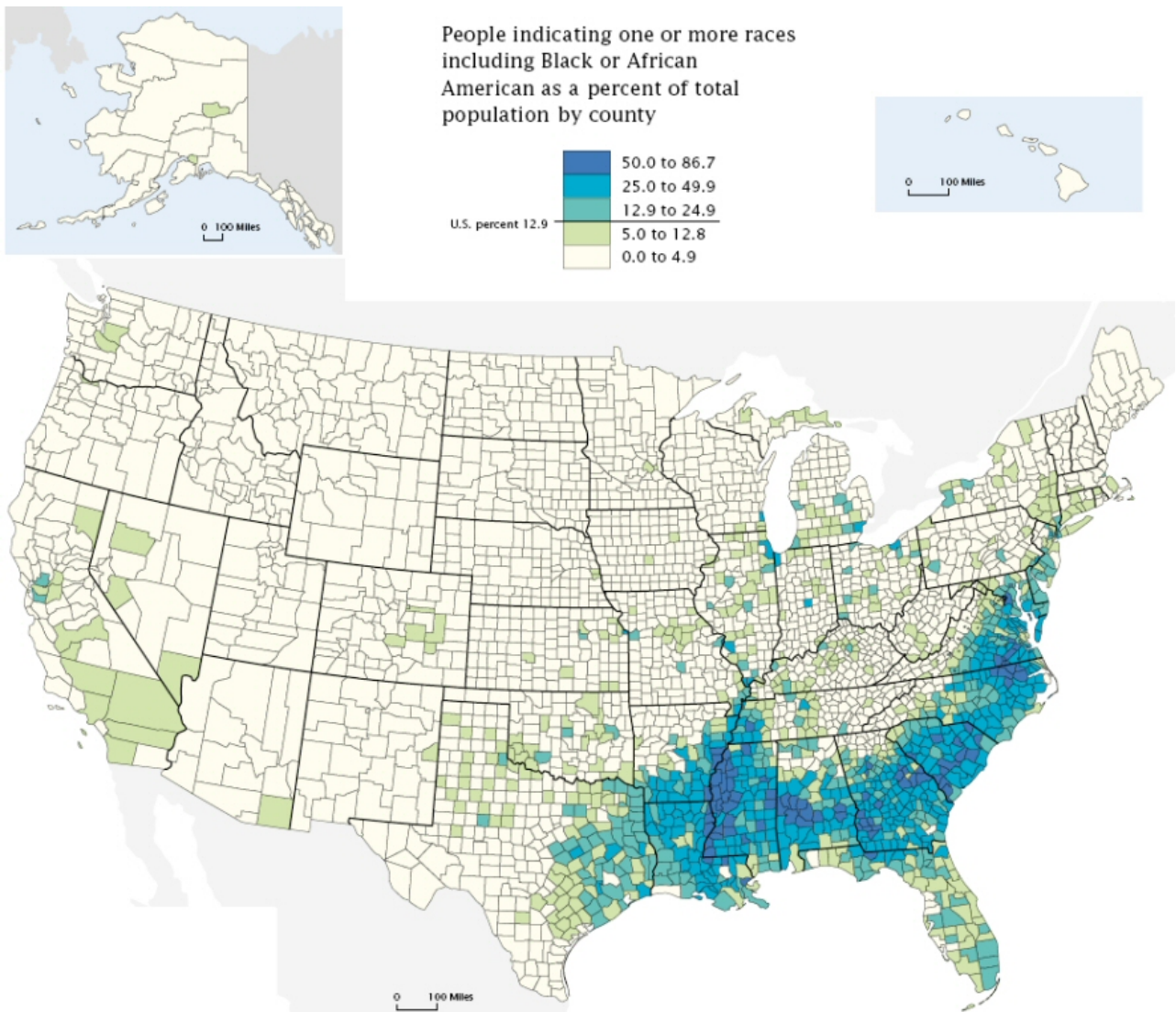
[Montana](#), [Idaho](#), and [Utah](#) in the West, or [West Virginia](#) and [Kentucky](#) in the South. Out of the regions, the Midwest has the highest proportion (85%) of whites. In a simplified way, the proportion of whites gets smaller as one travels further south or closer to the coasts in the US. They make up less than 40% of the population of [Hawaii](#), and at least one person out of three is non-white in states like [California](#), [Georgia](#), [Louisiana](#) and [Mississippi](#).

On the whole, the white American population has become more homogeneous by the end of the 20th century. Even though millions of white people register a wide range of ancestries on their census forms, they have far more distant connections to these ethnic groups and their cultures than their parents or grandparents had. The great majority of them are second-, third-, or fourth-generation immigrants, which means that they speak no other language than English and the ethnic traditions do not play an important role in their life. Simply speaking, they are far more American than German, Irish, Italian, Polish etc. in their cultural attitudes, not to mention the fact that many of them have a mixed ancestry. Their ancestry is largely an interesting curiosity for them or a romantic attachment to a faraway country they do not know much about.


The “Americanization” of white Americans has also reduced or obliterated the cultural differences that once created a lot of distrust and hatred among various white ethnic groups. Catholic and Jewish whites have been accepted as equal members of society, and Anti-Catholicism or Anti-Semitism plays very little role in contemporary American public life. Perhaps the only ethnic and/or religious group that is regarded with considerable suspicion are Arab and Muslim Americans, which is an unfortunate but logical consequence of the [September 11, 2001](#) terrorist attacks.

African-Americans

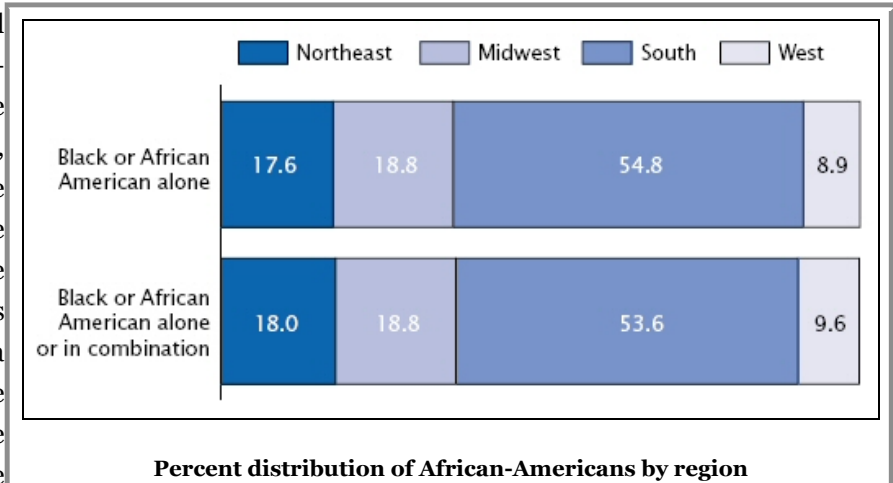
According to the 2000 Census, blacks make up slightly more than 12% of society, with almost 35 million people. If one adds the number of those who listed ‘Black’ as one of their racial identities, the figure is close to 13%, or over 36 million people (since American society has traditionally considered people with mixed racial ancestry ‘black’, the higher figure is perhaps more relevant). This proportion is slightly higher than during most of the 20th century, but not significantly: in 1900, blacks already made up 11% of American society. The slight increase is due partly to the higher than average birth rate of African-American families, and partly to the immigration of blacks from Africa and the Caribbean.



More than half of all African-Americans still live in the [South](#). Blacks make up the largest minority in former slave-owning states, for example 36% in [Mississippi](#), 33% in [Louisiana](#), 30% in [South Carolina](#), 29% in [Georgia](#) and 26% in [Alabama](#), but their proportion is over 15% in all Southern states. Outside the South, they are concentrated mostly in the inner cities of metropolitan areas. Out of major US cities, African-Americans constitute more than 60% of the population in Detroit (82%), New Orleans, Baltimore, Atlanta, Memphis, and Washington D.C., and they make up around 40% of Philadelphia, Chicago, as well as Brooklyn and Bronx within New York City. The lowest proportion of Blacks can be found in the rural states of the [Midwest](#), the [West](#) and [New England](#): for example, they make up less than 1% of [Montana](#)'s, [Idaho](#)'s and [Maine](#)'s population. If we consider absolute numbers instead of proportions, five states have a Black population above 2 million: [New York](#), [California](#), [Texas](#), [Florida](#) and [Georgia](#), all of them highly urbanized states.

It is a common mistake of  Hungarian students to lump blacks together with other non-white racial minorities who have immigrated to the US relatively recently. While their social circumstances and some of their problems are doubtless similar, the history of blacks is very different from that of Hispanics or Asians. Blacks are historically the oldest racial minority in the US. Between the early 17th and the early 19th centuries, millions of Blacks were captured in West Africa, brought to North America, and sold as slaves. Many of them came not directly from Africa but from various Caribbean islands, where lots of slaves worked too. They were mostly employed in the large agricultural **plantations** (huge farms where typically only one kind of crop was grown, usually for sale, such as cotton, tobacco, or sugar cane) of the South,

especially in the fertile coastal states – the **Deep South** – along the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico. In 1808, Congress banned the importation of slaves into the US, so afterwards the overwhelming majority of blacks were born in the country. As a result, blacks are probably the most ‘native’ racial group in the present US after the Native



Americans, since most of their ancestors have lived in the country for more than two centuries – something the majority of whites cannot claim about themselves. Their mother tongue is exclusively English (though many speak it with a characteristic African-American accent) and their religion is typically Protestant Christian (the overwhelming majority of Southern blacks are **Baptists**).

How is it possible then that such an old minority is still considered disadvantaged in modern American society? The main reason is the centuries of slavery and racial discrimination by the white majority. The **Civil War** (1861-1865), the most devastating war in the history of the US, broke out exactly because Southern states seceded from the Union to preserve their economy and lifestyle based on slavery. The victory of the North brought an end to slavery in all of the states. Three Constitutional amendments were passed and ratified between 1865 and 1870. The **Thirteenth Amendment** abolished slavery, the **Fourteenth Amendment** gave blacks the rights of citizenship, and the **Fifteenth Amendment** gave them the right to vote.

Despite these constitutional changes, most blacks remained poor and uneducated, and official discrimination against them continued in all Southern states. One form of discrimination was **racial segregation**, or the physical separation of people of different races. Until the 1950s and 1960s, Blacks were not allowed into many public places such as restaurants, hotels, theaters, and schools. There were separate railway carriages, buses, restrooms and facilities marked “colored only” for blacks, and they could be arrested and jailed if they entered places reserved for whites. Such state laws that maintained and enforced racial segregation were popularly called **Jim Crow laws**. This practice was legalized by the Supreme Court in 1896 in in the **Plessy v. Ferguson** case when the Court ruled that racial segregation was legal as long as “**separate but equal**” facilities were provided. The landmark case **Brown v. the Board of Education** in 1954 was the first successful challenge to legalized segregation of blacks and whites. The Supreme Court unanimously ruled that maintaining separate but equal schools for blacks and whites was unconstitutional because separate schools can never provide the same educational opportunities (see **Landmark cases**).

There were other forms of racial discrimination: most Southern states had laws which were intended to prevent Blacks from voting at elections (e.g. they were required to pass difficult **literacy tests** or had to pay a certain amount of **poll tax** which many poor blacks could not afford). Most rural Blacks had no land on their own, therefore they usually worked as **sharecroppers**. Others had low-paid manual jobs in the cities (e.g. factory workers, household servants etc.). The better-paid and more respectable jobs were unavailable to them partly because they lacked the necessary skills and education, and partly because whites refused to work under a black boss. Because of the hopelessness of their situation, from the early 20th century more and more blacks, especially young males, decided to flee from the South and look for opportunities in the large industrial cities of the East Coast, the Midwest and the West. But they

encountered unofficial discrimination in the north too: black **ghettos** (districts in a large city where predominantly one minority group lives, usually characterized by overcrowded conditions and shabby, run-down houses) developed in most large American cities, e.g. in New York, Washington D.C., Philadelphia, Chicago, Los Angeles, and elsewhere. But outside the South, blacks were concentrated in big cities and hardly any lived in the countryside.

The social and political situation of African-Americans changed dramatically as a result of the [civil rights movement](#). The movement was a national campaign by African-Americans in the 1950s and 60s to achieve equal civil rights for Blacks in American society: they wanted to put an end to segregation, demanded fair housing, equal employment opportunities, and fair voting laws for Blacks. The movement used the methods of nonviolent resistance and demonstrations. Until his assassination in 1968, Baptist minister [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#) (1929-68) provided leadership and strategy for the mass movement. He followed the example of the passive resistance of [Mahatma Gandhi](#) during the independence movement in India, and supported nonviolent tactics such as peaceful demonstrations, **protest marches**, **boycotts** of segregated facilities (e.g. public transportation where Blacks had to sit at the back), and **"sit-ins"** at restaurants where Blacks were not allowed. He was convinced that Blacks can achieve their purposes best if they draw the nations' attention to the injustice of their social situation. He consistently called whites "brothers", and, despite numerous threats and attacks against him, he urged blacks to reject violence which would only incite hatred between races. Perhaps his most famous public appearance was in 1963, at the historic [March on Washington D.C.](#), where he delivered his ["I have a dream" speech](#), a moving expression of his faith in universal human brotherhood. (For an audio recording of the speech, [click here](#)) He was murdered by a racist white man in Memphis in 1968, causing nationwide shock and a huge wave of anger among blacks. King is one of the most widely respected historical figures in the US today, and since 1986, his birthday is a national public holiday.

Other, more radical black leaders advocated violent revolution against the "white man's society". Perhaps the most famous of these black leaders was [Malcolm X](#) (1925–65), who was involved in the [Nation of Islam](#) movement (also called **Black Muslims**), which urged blacks to convert to a peculiar form of Islam as a way to reject Christianity forced on them by white slave-owners. Malcolm X (who dropped his original surname because it was given to his ancestors after their white slave-owner) also publicly urged blacks to violent self-defense. In 1964, however, he broke with the Black Muslims, and began to preach peace between races. He was murdered by his former comrades in New York City in 1965. After his death, his earlier aggressive ideology was continued for a while by the left-wing black nationalist movement of the [Black Panthers](#).

The civil rights movement achieved important legal successes in the 1960s. Between 1963 and 1965, Congress prohibited the use of a poll tax and literacy tests in federal elections. The most important law was the [Civil Rights Act of 1964](#), which forbade the administration of voting laws in a discriminatory manner, prohibited discrimination in public accommodations such as restaurants and hotels and also outlawed job discrimination by employers and unions. As a result of these new laws, voter registration among blacks has significantly increased (although the percentage is still well below the similar figure for Whites). More and more Blacks have been elected to public office, for example mayors of large cities, or Representatives in federal Congress.

There were other, more controversial laws and government policies in the 1960s that were meant to eliminate or compensate for discrimination. In the area of employment, the government has tried to correct job discrimination through [affirmative action](#) programs. The term itself comes from legal language and it means something like 'positive action' to correct wrongdoings of the past. The government programs under that name require government employers (e.g. federal agencies) and encourage private

ones to hire and promote more blacks, women, and members of other disadvantaged groups who had been given fewer opportunities in the past. The ideal purpose of affirmative action was that the proportion of blacks and women in important position (e.g. in government offices, among college graduates, university professors, among business leaders etc.) should approach their overall proportion in society. Supporters of the policy insist that some form of **preferential treatment** is necessary to compensate for historical disadvantages and also to break down the negative prejudices and long-standing discrimination against minorities and women in the job market. Critics of affirmative action condemn it as a form of **reverse discrimination** against white males, whereas the correct purpose of such a program should be non-discrimination against any social group.

Affirmative action programs have been repeatedly attacked in federal courts concerning their constitutionality, and the Supreme Court has passed several decisions about such cases. The Court has declared fixed **quotas** (e.g. a certain number of college places or jobs reserved exclusively for disadvantaged groups) unconstitutional, but did not reject the principle of affirmative action, ruling that race and gender may legally be “taken into account” in the selection applicants.

There are also heated debates about the impact of affirmative action on the social advancement of blacks. There is no doubt that the social situation of blacks has significantly improved since the 1960s. More blacks have attained middle-class jobs, more hold elected political positions, more own their homes, more live in the suburbs. Improved educational opportunities have been a key factor in these changes. In 1960 the proportion of high school graduates was only half as much among blacks as among whites, and by 2000 this difference has been reduced to 72% among blacks versus 84% among whites. But the disadvantages still show among college graduates: only 14% of Blacks have college degree as opposed to 26% of Whites (part of the reason probably is that blacks cannot afford the high tuition in higher education; for details, see [Life in College and University](#)).

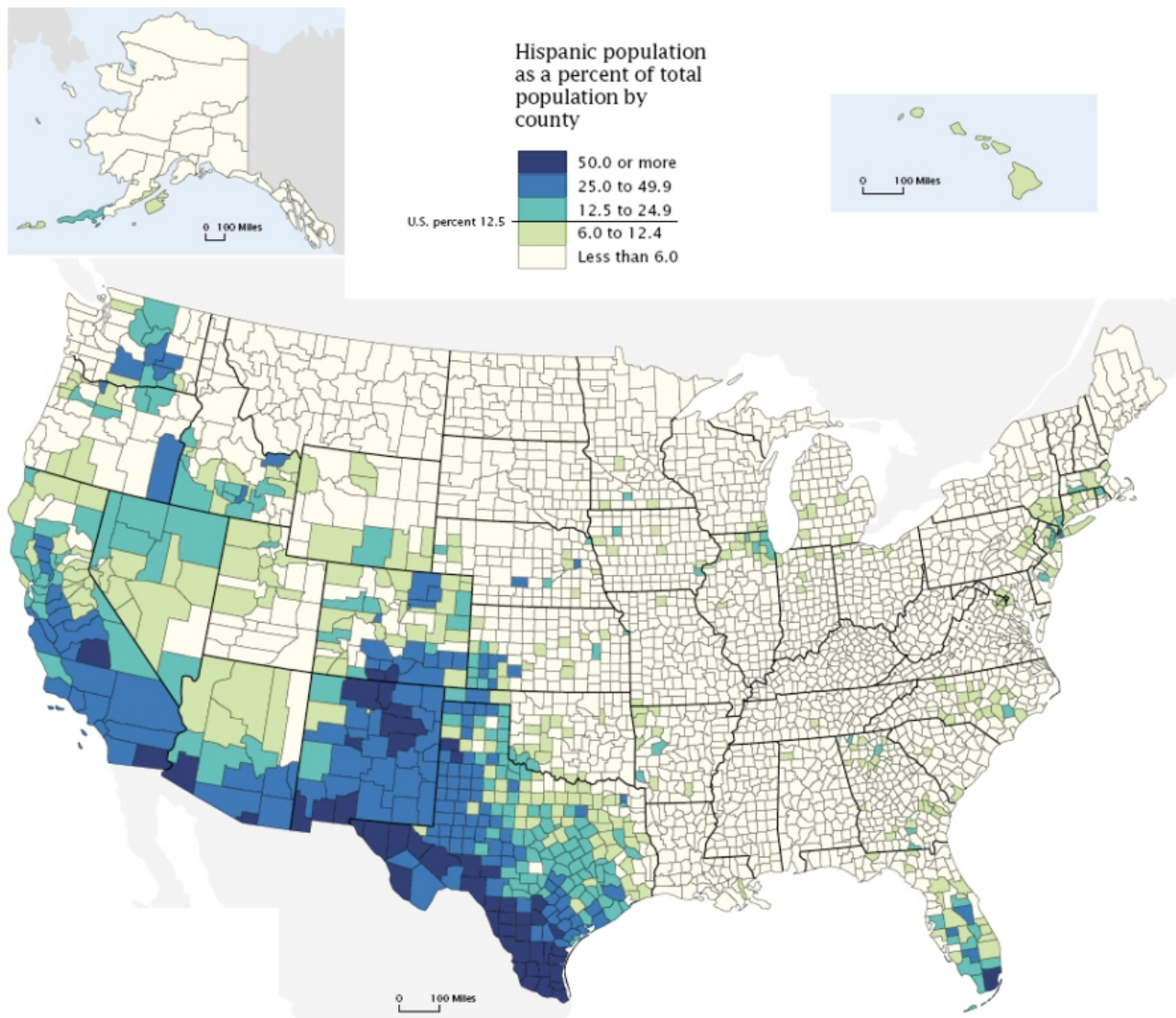
The disparities continue remain wide in income and employment. The median income of blacks was only about two-thirds (c. \$30,400) of the national median income (c. \$44,500) and hardly more than 60% of the median income of non-Hispanic whites (c. \$49,100) in 2002-2004. As a result of the income differences, almost 25% of all blacks lived below the official poverty line, about twice the national figure (12.7%) and three times the proportion among non-Hispanic whites (8.6%).

Part of the reason for poverty is the lack of stable black families. More than two-thirds of all black children are born to unmarried mothers, and one-third of all single mothers in the US are black. Inner-city young blacks are often involved in illegal drug trade and they join criminal gangs that often fight among themselves. As a result, the leading cause of death among young black men between 15 and 35 is murder. The percentage of black adults who were imprisoned in 2000 was 5% as opposed to 0.7% for whites. The poverty and unemployment among America's urban Blacks are reminders that inequalities have not been eliminated.

Hispanics

According to the 2000 census data, the total number of Hispanics has passed 35 million, which means 12.5 percent of the total US population, roughly equal to the proportion of blacks. They are also the fastest growing ethnic minority in the nation: their number has increased by 58% between 1990 and 2000, which means almost 13 million additional people in ten years. Based on the population trends, it is certain that Hispanics have become the largest minority group in the US in the early 21st century, due primarily to

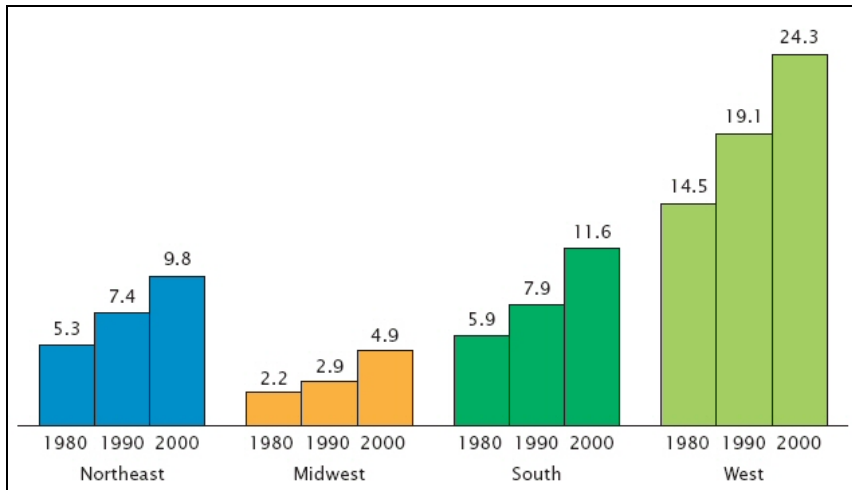
intensive immigration from Latin America, but the birth rate of Hispanic families is also among the highest in the US.



Hispanics have a long history in the Southwestern region of the US, especially in [New Mexico](#), [California](#), and [Texas](#), where the earliest European settlements were founded by Spanish colonizers in the 17th and 18th centuries. After the United States conquered these areas in the [Mexican War](#) of 1846–48, English-speaking settlers moved into the region, and the original Hispanic inhabitants soon became outnumbered by the ‘**Anglos**’ (the term for English-speaking non-Hispanic whites in the region). Spanish-speaking colonies came under US control after the [Spanish-American War](#) in 1898, when Cuba and Puerto Rico in the Caribbean as well as the Philippines in the Western Pacific were taken from Spain, but the inhabitants of these countries did not immigrate to the US until the second half of the 20th century.

The proportion of Hispanics remained insignificant in the US until the end of World War II. Migrant Mexican workers regularly crossed the border north to work on farms, especially during harvest time, but most of them returned home with their earnings. They provided cheap and hard-working labor force for American farmers, therefore the restrictive immigration laws passed in the 1920s did not hinder the movement of people from the American continent (see [History of immigration](#)), encouraging more Mexicans to come. Large-scale immigration began after the war, when Mexicans were attracted by the job opportunities in the prospering economies of [California](#) and [Texas](#). They were followed by Hispanics from

the Caribbean and the Philippines. The overall number grew very quickly: the 1980 census (the first one



that asked people about Hispanic origin) counted almost 15 million Hispanics, or more than 6% of US population at the time. Since then, their number has grown by more than 50% in every decade (see proportion of Hispanics by region since 1980 above).

The largest group among Hispanics is the **Mexican-Americans** (formerly called Chicanos, but it is considered an

offensive term nowadays). Many of them come illegally, crossing the long and mostly deserted U.S.-Mexican border at night. These **illegal aliens** work on farms at harvest time, on construction sites, as household servants, janitors, or in other hard and menial physical jobs Americans avoid. Mexican-Americans are concentrated along the Mexican border: they make up one-third of the population of [California](#) (that means about 11 million people) and [Texas](#) (almost 7 million), while in sparsely populated [New Mexico](#), they constitute 42% of the state's 1.8 million people. Among all the legal Hispanic residents of the US, almost 60 percent are of Mexican origin, and there are probably millions more who live in the US illegally. The Mexicans are not easily assimilated. They generally have a strong sense of their own culture and often marry among themselves.

Another significant source country for Hispanic immigrants is Puerto Rico, a small island in the Caribbean, which is a possession of the U.S., so **Puerto Ricans** are all US citizens, not immigrants in a legal sense. After World War II, large numbers moved to New York and other large cities in the Northeast and the Midwest. In 2000, they made up almost 10% of the total Hispanic population of the US, but that figure includes all those who live on the island too.

Another easily distinguishable group are the **Cuban-Americans**, who mostly live in southern [Florida](#), primarily in Miami, not far from their land of origin. Many of them were wealthy property owners before [Fidel Castro](#) came into power in Cuba in 1959 and established a Communist regime there, and when they fled from their homeland, they have brought with them their education as well as some of their money. Cubans are by far the most wealthy and prosperous among Hispanics: they have integrated successfully into American society while keeping their cultural roots. In 2000, they made up more than 3% of the total Hispanic population of the US. The rest of the Hispanics trace their ancestry back to various Central or South American countries, or have not specified their origins.

The regional distribution of Hispanics is very uneven. [California](#), [Texas](#), [New York](#), and [Florida](#) together account for two-thirds of the total Hispanic population of the US. Hispanics are highly urbanized: more than 90% of them live in metropolitan areas, and almost 50% live in inner cities (as opposed to suburbs). Hispanics are the least characteristic of the Midwest, where their proportion is below 5%, or rural states in general: their proportion is below 2% in states like [New Mexico](#), [Maine](#), or [Alabama](#).

As it can be seen from these data, Hispanics are concentrated in urban areas, especially in central cities, where, similarly to blacks, they tend to form ethnic neighborhoods, also called '**barrios**'. These areas face similar problems to those of black inner-city neighborhoods: bad, decaying houses, poor schools, few job opportunities, and high crime rates. More than 40% of Hispanics have no high school diploma, while the

same figure among whites is only 15%, and only 10% have earned a Bachelor's degree in college, compared to 26% of whites. The school problems of Hispanic children are increased by the fact that their mother tongue is not English (more than 70% of Hispanic children speak Spanish at home), therefore they face serious difficulties in basic communication tasks.

They also tend to make much less money than the society average: their median income was \$34,300 in 2002-2004, higher than blacks but much lower than whites. Two and a half times as many (22%) Hispanic families live under the official poverty line than the figure among whites (9%).

The increase of Hispanic immigration during the last 40 years has had a dramatic impact on American society, particularly in the Southwest where the greatest settlement has occurred. Spanish has become a major language in Southern [California](#) and [Texas](#), and some cities are officially bilingual. Because many Hispanics hold onto their language and customs, questions are raised about how successfully they will integrate into American society. Many Americans are worried about the 'invasion' of Hispanics because they fear that the country's ethnic identity is endangered. They demand a stronger border control and restrictions on immigration in order to preserve the cultural dominance of the Anglos, but the stream of illegal immigration across the Mexican border continues despite all government efforts.

Asian-Americans

In 2000, Asian-Americans made up more than 4 percent of the American population, with about 12 million people (including those who reported Asian as one of their racial identities). Their number has grown by almost 50% since 1990, which suggests a high level of immigration from Asia.

The history of Asian-American immigration to the US reaches back to the 1850s, when cheap and hard-working Chinese laborers were attracted to [California](#) by the gold rush and by the building of the transcontinental railway. They were followed by smaller groups of Japanese. Asian immigrants were treated with widespread hostility by whites, and after the 1882 their immigration was effectively banned (see [History of immigration](#)). One of the last instances of official racial prejudice occurred in 1942 when, following the [Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor](#), the federal government deported more than 110,000 Japanese-Americans – 70,000 of whom were born in the US – living on the West Coast to “relocation centers” in Arizona, Wyoming and other desolate areas in the West, since they were considered “security risks”, although none of them committed anything illegal. After World War II, other Asian countries (Korea, Vietnam, India, the Philippines etc.) gave the majority of immigrants to the US. According to the 2000 census data, almost one-quarter of all Asians are **Chinese** (24%), followed by **Filipinos** (18%), **Asian Indians** (people from India; 16%), **Vietnamese** (11%), **Koreans** (10%), and **Japanese** (8%).

The greatest concentration of Asian-Americans can be found in the West Coast: they make up 12% of the population of [California](#), which means over 4 million people. San Francisco, home of the oldest Chinatown in the US, has the highest proportion of Asians among large cities. Asians – mostly Japanese – also constitute more than 60% of the population of [Hawaii](#). Outside this region, the largest proportion of Asians can be found in large urban centers – 1 million Asians live in [New York](#) State, most of them in New York City – or university towns (e.g. Cambridge, [Massachusetts](#), the location of Harvard University, has 12% Asian population).

The collective term “Asian-American” hides a huge ethnic variety within this category, since each of the above groups speaks different languages, and has different cultural traditions. Perhaps the only common feature among Asians is their determination to fit into and succeed in American society: although there are

Asian ethnic neighborhoods, especially along the West Coast, where the majority of them have settled, they are far less characteristic than similar Hispanic communities. Asians work hard to master the language, start independent businesses, run shops and restaurants, and encourage their children to speak perfect English and excel at school. Asians have been very successful in education: 44% of them had a college degree in 2000, compared to 26% of whites. On the whole, the majority of Asians have integrated into the American middle class far more successfully than either blacks or Hispanics, which is an interesting illustration of how different cultural backgrounds determine the social success of different immigrant groups who otherwise all started out as poor and disadvantaged people in the United States.

Native Americans

In the 2000 census, about 2.5 million people were identified as American Indian tribal members (American Indian, Eskimo, and Aleut), while another 1.6 million identified Indian as one of their racial identities. Even in combination, these two groups represent only 1.5% percent of the entire US population. This small population is divided into more than 300 different tribes in the continental U.S. and some 200 tribes, groups, bands, and villages in [Alaska](#). Most of these tribes and groups have very few members.

The great majority of Native Americans live in the West, where most of their reservations are located. None of them is forced to stay on a reservation any more, and an increasing number decide to move to larger metropolitan areas in search of jobs and careers. Only 10 percent of the Indian reservations have 5,000 or more Indians. The largest is the Navajo reservation which covers some 16 million acres in [Arizona](#), [New Mexico](#), and [Utah](#), and has about 135,000 members living on it. The largest proportion of Native Americans is found in sparsely populated [Alaska](#), where they constitute more than 19 percent. In only five other states – [New Mexico](#), [South Dakota](#), [Oklahoma](#), [Montana](#), and [Arizona](#) – do Indians make up more than 5 per cent of the population. In terms of absolute numbers, the largest Native American populations live in [California](#), [Oklahoma](#) and [Arizona](#).

The last of the Native American groups in the West were forced into reservations after 1876 (see [History of Immigration](#)), and they were not allowed to leave their assigned territories. They were unable to continue their traditional nomadic lifestyle, and they lived in great poverty under federal government control, dependent on the food provisions of the federal [Bureau of Indian Affairs](#). The government made efforts to assimilate the Indians to white America: Christian missionaries opened boarding schools for Indian children outside the reservations, and the adults were given individual land allotments to turn them into farmers. Many sold their allotments to non-Indians, further reducing the amount of land under Native American control. They only received US citizenship in 1924, and forceful assimilation policies were gradually abandoned.

After World War II, the federal government encouraged Indians to move into urban areas as an indirect policy of assimilation. Young Native Americans who lived in cities observed the success the civil right movement of blacks, founded the [American Indian Movement](#) (AIM) in 1968 to encourage Native American cultural identity and draw attention to the past injustices suffered by Indians as well as their present poverty and social problems. They demanded reforms that would give political autonomy to Native American groups and recognize their special cultural needs. Between 1969 and 1973, Indian activists organized several demonstrations to capture public attention (e.g. they occupied Alcatraz island in San Francisco Bay). These efforts have brought a greater degree of sovereignty: the federal government and the federal courts recognized that Native American tribes have special rights on their territories, they do not belong under the state governments. This enabled some tribes to start successful business ventures, for

example open **casinos** in states where **gambling** was otherwise illegal, and improve living conditions, open new schools, hospitals, museums from the income. Tourism is another important source of income and Native American literature and culture has undergone a revival in the past decades. Despite these improvements, many rural Native Americans continue to live in poverty, due mainly to the lack of job opportunities in their remote territories.

Key Concepts


affirmative action
African-American
American Indian
ancestry
Asian
Baptist
barrio
Black
boycott
Caucasian
census
civil rights movement
to commute
Cuban-Americans
Deep South
ethnic group
ghetto
Hawaiian and Pacific islander
illegal alien / illegal immigrant
immigrant
Jim Crow laws
Malcolm X
Martin Luther King Jr.
Megalopolis
metropolitan area
Mexican-American
Native American
one-drop rule
plantation, plantation agriculture
preferential treatment
protest march
Puerto Rican
quota system
race
racial discrimination
refugee
reverse discrimination
rural
to secede

sharecroppers
sit-ins
suburb, suburban, suburbanization
U.S. Census Bureau
urbanization
White

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- The United States in International Context ▶ 
- Population Change and Distribution: 1990 to 2000 ▶ 
- Households and Families: 2000 ▶ 
- The 65 Years and Over Population: 2000 ▶ 
- Overview of Race and Hispanic Origin: 2000 ▶ 
- Ancestry: 2000 ▶ 
- The White Population: 2000 ▶ 
- The Black Population: 2000 ▶ 
- The Asian Population: 2000 ▶ 
- The American Indian and Alaska Native Population: 2000 ▶ 
- The Hispanic Population: 2000 ▶ 
- The Foreign-Born Population: 2000 ▶ 

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