The last century has witnessed major changes in how and where Americans work and live—and in the characteristics of our workers. In 1900, the U.S. was an agrarian economy, where about 40% of all employment was in farm work. Just 100 years later, agriculture accounts for less than 2% of total employment, while the distribution and services sector accounts for about 50%. At the same time, the U.S. has become much more urbanized. In 1900, approximately 40% of Americans lived in urban areas; today, the cities are home to more than 75% of the population.

In 1900, the average employee in manufacturing worked more than 50 hours a week. Today, this worker averages just over 40 hours and earns nearly four times as much in real terms. A century ago, only about 20% of the labor force were female; today about 50% of all workers are women.

Educational attainment has risen steadily. In 1910, the median American had barely an eighth-grade education. Now, the median is 12 years of schooling.

By most measures, Americans’ standard of living has risen as well. In 1901, more than three-fourths of the average family’s budget was spent on the necessities of life: food, clothing, and shelter. By 1995, the budget share spent on those basics had fallen to just over one-third. And, in the course of the century, the percent of families that own their homes has tripled.