

Preface

The Consumer Expenditure Survey is among the oldest publications of the Bureau of Labor Statistics. With information on the expenditures, incomes, and demographic characteristics of households, the survey documents the spending patterns and economic status of American families.

This report offers a new approach to the use of Consumer Expenditure Survey data. Normally, the survey presents an in-depth look at American households at a specific point in time, the reference period being a calendar year. Here, the authors use consumer expenditure data longitudinally and draw on information from decennial census reports to present a 100-year history of significant changes in consumer spending, economic status, and

family demographics in the country as a whole, as well as in New York City and Boston.

By reading about changes in spending patterns, incomes, workforce characteristics, and family demographics, readers can gain insights into how the significant events of the 20th century—World War I, the Depression, the post-World War II expansion, and other economic expansions and downturns—influenced the spending patterns of American households. (The survey was not conducted during or immediately after World War II.)

Nine timeframes are presented independently, with a section titled “Perspective” providing an analytic framework for each period to aid in interpretation. Tables and charts tracing common elements over the 100-year pe-

riod also should aid the reader in the interpretation of trends. However, as would be expected given changes in technology and improved survey methods, questions asked in the Consumer Expenditure Survey have changed over time. Thus, certain items could not be analyzed throughout the 100-year period.

New York City and Boston, two of the Nation’s oldest urban areas, have been chosen for analysis based on the affiliations of the authors. Michael L. Dolfman is the BLS regional commissioner in New York; Denis M. McSweeney is the regional commissioner in Boston. To aid in interpretation and understanding, the findings for both New York City and Boston are benchmarked throughout the report to those of the Nation as a whole.