Main Idea
Economic growth changed the social and cultural life of Americans.

Key Terms
productivity, standard of living, affluence, baby boom

Reading Strategy
Organizing Information As you read Section 2, re-create the diagram below and describe three changes that occurred in American life as a result of the strong economy or the growth of technology.

Changes in American life

Read to Learn
• what factors helped the economy grow during the 1950s.
• how the era's prosperity affected American society and culture.

Section Theme
Continuity and Change The economic growth of the 1950s brought great changes to the nation.

Preview of Events

1945
1947
William Levitt starts first suburban development

1950

1955
Polio vaccine given to school children

1956
Elvis Presley gains national popularity

1960

American Story

During the prosperous 1950s, many Americans left the cities to settle in the suburbs, hoping for a better life for themselves and their children. “Suburbia”—with its great distances between home, school, shopping areas, and downtown—gradually became not only a place but also a lifestyle. One suburban resident observed: “Before we came here, we used to live pretty much to ourselves... Now we stop around and visit people or they visit us. I really think [suburban living] has broadened us.”

A Booming Economy

After World War II, many experts predicted America’s economy would level off or decline as production of war goods decreased. Instead, after a few years of adjustment, the economy began to grow rapidly and steadily. Between 1945 and 1960, the total value of goods and services produced in the United States increased about 250 percent.

Some of this amazing growth resulted from the burst of military spending during the Korean War. Government spending on housing, schools, welfare, highways, and veteran benefits also spurred the rapid economic expansion. Technological advances contributed to economic growth as well. Business, industry, and agriculture adopted new technology and new production methods.
resulting in greater productivity—the ability to produce more goods with the same amount of labor. The demand for new technology led to greater investment in research and in the education and training of scientists, engineers, and technicians.

The computer was one of the 1950s’ technological advances. Unlike today’s small personal computers, early computers were immense, weighing tons and filling whole rooms. Although first used only by the military and the government, computers soon appeared in large corporations. By 1955 International Business Machines (IBM) was the leader in the field, with orders for 129 of its big computers.

**Higher Incomes**

The economic boom of the 1950s raised the standard of living—a measure of people’s overall wealth and quality of life—of millions of Americans. Between 1945 and 1960, personal income—the average income, earned or unearned, of every individual in the nation—increased from $1,223 to $2,219. By the end of the 1950s, Americans had the highest standard of living in the world.

Prosperity and steady economic growth also led to new optimism. Economists began to think it was possible to maintain prosperity and growth permanently. Americans felt confident that the government could, when necessary, take steps to avoid serious recessions, or downturns in the economy.

**Reading Check** Comparing How did the computers of the 1950s differ from modern computers?

**A Changing Nation**

Economic growth and prosperity brought many changes to America. These included a growth in population, increased affluence, or wealth, suburban expansion, and a greater demand for consumer goods.

**The Baby Boom**

Like the economy, the family enjoyed great growth during the postwar years. During the 1950s the nation’s population rose from 150 million to 179 million, an increase of nearly 20 percent. People called the nation’s soaring birthrate a baby boom.

Several factors encouraged the baby boom. Husbands and wives who had postponed having children during the Depression and World War II started having families. With higher incomes, couples felt they could afford to have more children. In addition, better health

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![Graph Skills](image)

Many Americans moved to the suburbs during the 1950s.

Comparing How did the percentage of suburban dwellers change from 1920 to 1960?
By the early 1950s, medical science had made great strides in combating childhood diseases. Antibiotics and vaccines helped control diseases such as diphtheria, influenza, and typhoid fever. A vaccine for polio, however, continued to escape the medical profession. Polio became the era's most dreaded disease because the disease left many of its victims paralyzed for life.

After many years of research, scientist Dr. Jonas Salk developed the first safe and effective vaccine against polio. After it was tested, the Salk vaccine was administered to schoolchildren beginning in 1955. The threat of polio has been almost completely eliminated. Salk was hailed as a hero not only for developing the vaccine, but also for refusing to patent the vaccine. The medical pioneer's last years were spent searching for a vaccine against AIDS.

Suburban housing developments appealed to many Americans. In addition to affordable homes, they offered privacy, isolation from urban problems, space for cars, and a sense of belonging to a community formed by people similar in age, social background, and race.

Though affordable, the suburbs did not offer opportunities for home ownership to everyone. Many American cities had growing populations of middle-class minorities, particularly African American and Hispanic American, who longed to escape the noise and the crime of the cities. However, the developers of the nation's postwar suburbs often refused to sell homes to minorities.

**Expanding Suburbs**

During the 1950s, 75 percent of new home construction took place in the suburbs. The new suburbs were usually located on the fringes of major cities.

William Levitt introduced mass-produced housing based on experience he had gained building houses for the navy. He started his first suburban development, called Levittown, on Long Island, New York, in 1947. Levittown included more than 17,000 identical houses, built from materials precut and preassembled at a factory and then erected quickly on designated lots. Other builders adopted Levitt's methods or used their own techniques for rapid construction, creating a massive house-building boom.

**A Nation on Wheels**

The car made suburban escape possible. People needed cars to get to work, to go shopping, and to run errands. For suburban families, cars were not a luxury but a necessity.

The construction of thousands of miles of new highways in the 1950s encouraged the spread of suburbs. Suburban America became a "car culture" in which life centered on the automobile. Southern California came to symbolize suburban life and this car culture. In California, the...
drive-in capital of the nation, a person could go to the movies, eat fast food, do banking, and even attend religious services without leaving the car. One suburban California woman spoke for many other Americans when she explained her need for a car:

I live in Garden Grove, work in Irvine, shop in Santa Ana... my husband works in Long Beach, and I used to be the president of the League of Women Voters in Fullerton.

Air Travel

Americans were also finding it easier to travel by air. The jet engine was perfected in the 1950s, and the first jet-powered commercial aircraft began operation. By the early 1950s, the airliner was on the way to replacing the railroad train and the ocean liner as the preferred transportation for long-distance travel.

A Consumer Society

Americans of the 1950s went on a buying spree. Affluence, the growing variety and quantity of products available, and expanded advertising all played a role in the increased demand for consumer goods. Buying goods became easier, too. Many Americans used credit cards, charge accounts, and easy-payment plans to purchase goods.

Consumers eagerly sought the latest products—dishwashers, washing machines, television sets, stereos, and clothes made from synthetic fabrics. The growing market for bigger and better cars prompted automakers to outdo
one another by manufacturing bigger, faster, and flashier cars. They came out with new models every year, adding stylish features such as chrome-plated bumpers and soaring tail fins.

The advertising and marketing of products on television, on radio, and in magazines created consumer fads and crazes that swept the nation. In the late 1950s, Americans bought millions of hula hoops—large plastic rings they twirled around their waists. Other popular fads included crew cuts for boys, poodle skirts for girls, and a new snack—pizza.

**An American Culture**

By 1949 over 900,000 American households had television sets. These large wooden cabinets had small screens that displayed grainy black-and-white images. During the 1950s an average of 6.5 million sets were produced annually. By the end of the decade, most American families had television.

Television profoundly changed American life. It became the main form of entertainment for many people as well as an important source of news and information. Religious leaders helped spread religious commitment with the aid of modern communications. They had their own radio and television programs, best-selling books, and newspaper columns. **Billy Graham**, a popular Protestant minister and preacher, attracted thousands of people throughout the nation and in other parts of the world. **Fulton J. Sheen**, a Roman Catholic bishop, became a television personality through his weekly program. Protestant minister **Norman Vincent Peale** attracted many thousands of followers with his message of “positive thinking.” Another popular religious leader, Jewish rabbi **Joshua Loth Lieberman**, expressed tolerance for religious differences:

> “Tolerance is the positive and cordial effort to understand another’s beliefs, practices, and habits without necessarily sharing or accepting them.”

Billboards and television commercials proclaimed: “Bring the whole family to church” and “The family that prays together stays together.” Messages like these clearly indicated that post-war society was focused on the family.

Millions of Americans watched the same programs. Families gathered to watch quiz shows such as *The $64,000 Question*. Children tuned in to programs such as *The Mickey Mouse Club* and *Howdy Doody*. Teens kept up with the latest hit songs on *American Bandstand*. Families followed weekly episodes of *I Love Lucy*, *Leave It to Beaver*, and *Father Knows Best*. The images shown in
One of the most popular cars of 1957, the Chevrolet Bel Air sold for about $2,500.

many programs—of happy middle-class families in neat middle-class homes—helped shape Americans’ expectations for their own lives.

Finally, television had an important effect on the consumer culture. Television advertising helped create a vast national market for new products and fashions. Some shows—such as the Philco Television Playhouse—adopted the names of their sponsors, which brought the sponsors prestige.

A new form of music—rock ‘n’ roll—achieved great popularity in the 1950s. Many teens rejected the mellow popular music favored by their parents. They preferred the heavily accented beats and simple lyrics of rock ‘n’ roll.

Rock ‘n’ roll grew from the rhythm and blues music that African American musicians had created years before. It often had some elements of country music. In rock ‘n’ roll, the tempo was quicker, and electrically amplified instruments—mostly guitars—were used.

One of the first rock hits, reaching number one in 1955, was Bill Haley and the Comets’ Rock Around the Clock. Adapting the style of African American performers such as Chuck Berry and Little Richard, Elvis Presley burst on the national scene in 1956. Presley quickly became known as the king of rock ‘n’ roll and was an idol to millions of young Americans. Many young men copied his ducktail haircut and swaggering mannerisms.

For teenagers, the shared experience of listening to the music helped forge a common identity and bond. The differing attitudes of the older and younger generations toward music, as well as other forms of popular culture, later came to be known as the generation gap.

**Reading Check** Analyzing Why did suburban life appeal to many Americans?

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**SECTION 2 ASSESSMENT**

**Checking for Understanding**

1. **Key Terms** Use each of these terms in a sentence that will help explain its meaning: productivity, standard of living, affluence, baby boom.

2. **Reviewing Facts** How did Americans’ per capita income change during the 1950s?

3. **Reviewing Themes**

   **Continuity and Change** Describe the link between television and consumer spending in the 1950s.

**Critical Thinking**

4. **Compare and Contrast** Think about the ways television and the automobile changed the way Americans lived during the 1950s. How would your life be different without them?

5. **Analyzing Information** Re-create the diagram below and identify factors that stimulated economic growth in the 1950s.

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**Analyzing Visuals**

6. **Graph Skills** Examine the graph on page 822. How did the percentage of rural dwellers change from 1920 to 1960?

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**Interdisciplinary Activity**

**Music** Paste photographs or drawings on poster board of the musicians that you think represent the best of modern music. Write captions that include your explanation of why music is an important part of American culture.