The USA is closing in on a milestone that seemed unthinkable 25 years ago. Sometime in mid-October, we will become a nation of 300 million Americans.

We will then embark on a relatively quick journey to 400 million. Target date: around 2040.

How did this young country get so big so quickly? Immigration, longevity, a relatively high birthrate and economic stability all have propelled the phenomenal growth. The nation has added 100 million people since 1967 to become the world's third-most-populous country, after China and India. It's growing faster than any other industrialized nation.

The biggest driver of growth is immigration -- legal and illegal. About 53% of the 100 million extra Americans are recent immigrants or their descendants, according to Jeffrey Passel, demographer at the Pew Hispanic Center. Without them, the USA would have about 250 million people today.

The newcomers have transformed an overwhelmingly white population of largely European descent into a multicultural society that reflects every continent on the globe. Some arrived as war refugees. Most came in search of better opportunities in a country that has strong civil rights and a stable economy. Once here, they had babies, which helped the nation maintain a birthrate that is higher than that of Europe and Japan.

For a country that has equated growth with prosperity throughout much of its history, 300 million is prompting soul-searching about everything from the consumption of natural resources and sprawl to border control and traffic jams. The Census Bureau's population clock will hit the momentous number barely a month before midterm elections in which illegal immigration is a volatile issue.

Growth is visible

Half of Americans say their communities have grown a lot in the past five years, but more than three-fourths say growth is a minor problem or no problem where they live, according to a USA TODAY/Gallup Poll taken in early June. Yet more than half say it will be a major problem for the country as a whole. Almost half attribute population growth to immigrants.

Lee Atkinson, 57, lives in Chesapeake, a city in Virginia's fast-growing Tidewater area near Norfolk and Virginia Beach. "The increase in people is creating an employment problem and increased demand for social services, and I'm not sure that the financial support is there," says Atkinson, owner of an occupational safety consulting company.
He worries that services and infrastructure are not keeping pace with population growth. "Nobody wants to build new highways. Nobody wants to maintain the ones we've got. We don't want to spend any money on it. More people are going to place more demands."

Oddly, most Americans don't have a clue how many people actually live in the USA or how many are expected to. Twenty-nine percent guessed the population at 200 million or less, and 19% put it at 1 billion or more. Twelve percent came within 50 million of guessing correctly.

There might be more awareness by year's end. Hoopla is mounting around the 300 million event. Some baby-food marketers plan to use it in their marketing campaigns. The Census Bureau and leading demographers are fielding calls from media worldwide.

"The world is watching," says William Frey, demographer at the Brookings Institution. He has gotten calls from British broadcasters asking which hospital the 300 millionth American will be born in and from parenting magazines trying to pinpoint the exact day of the event (Frey's estimate is Oct. 17).

Several publications want to know what race and ethnicity No. 300 million is likely to be. There is no way to pinpoint that person because the number is an estimate, not an exact accounting of the population. It could be a newborn. It could be an immigrant entering the country.

Carl Haub, senior demographer at the non-profit Population Reference Bureau, says a baby born in October probably will be white and not Hispanic because births from non-Hispanic white women still account for the majority. Frey disagrees. The elusive 300 millionth American is more likely to be Hispanic, he says, because Hispanics accounted for almost half the population gains in the past four years. "Eighteen percent of the gains are Anglos; the other 82% are something else," he says.

On the brink of decline

The USA is alone among industrialized nations in its relatively rapid population increase. The populations in Japan and Russia are expected to shrink almost one-fourth by 2050. Germany, Italy and most European nations are not making enough babies to keep their populations from sliding.

"There's a fertility malaise in (other) industrialized countries," Haub says. "Europe and Japan and South Korea and Taiwan are getting desperate."

Women have to give birth to an average 2.1 babies to offset deaths and keep the population even. The birthrate in Western Europe is 1.6. It's even lower -- 1.4 -- in Italy, Spain and other southern European countries.

Germany, where leaving children in day care is not socially embraced, is proposing a family allowance that would pay mothers 67% of their partner's net income up to 1,800 euros ($2,304) a month for up to a year after childbirth.

The USA would hardly grow in the next 50 years except for Hispanic immigrants, who have a higher birthrate than non-Hispanic whites. White women, who give birth to 56% of the children born here, have an average 1.85 babies. Blacks average about two, Asians 1.9 and Hispanics 2.8. The overall birthrate is slightly above two.

When the U.S. population was at 200 million in 1967, women had an average of three children, and the government expected the population to hit 300 million as early as 1990. By the 1980s, the birthrate had tumbled, and government estimates projected that the country wouldn't get there until the 2020s. The flow of immigrants turned those projections on their heads.

Why would a country want more babies? For industrialized nations, numbers mean economic
and cultural power. To remain globally competitive, countries need workers. In addition to injecting innovation in the workplace, the young help meet the needs of the elderly through the taxes they pay, Haub says.

The nation is getting older as the oldest boomers turn 60 this year. People also are living longer. Since 1970, life expectancy at birth jumped about seven years to a record 77.9 years. The share of the population age 65 or older grew from 9.9% to 12.4%. The median age is up from 28.1 to 36.2 years.

Some experts argue that more people cause more problems. Brian Dixon, director of government relations for Population Connection, a grass-roots advocacy group formerly called Zero Population Growth, says the challenges for nations facing little growth or actual declines aren't as difficult as those confronting the USA.

"Figuring out a pension system has to be easier than dealing with the health crisis of polluted air or how we're going to address increases in childhood asthma," he says. "Is there going to be enough open space, enough parkland, enough housing, enough jobs? What does it mean for our quality of life?"

Immigration should not be viewed as a domestic issue, Dixon says. "Immigration is really foreign policy," he says. "What can the U.S. do to ease problems in the developing world that drive people to leave?" The goal, he says, should be to keep people in their native lands.

The United States all but shut its door to immigrants in the 1920s after a record wave of immigration that lasted about 30 years. The Depression and World War II followed. Then baby boomers were born from 1946 to 1964, arriving in a mostly white country that had very few recent immigrants.

Everything changed when President Lyndon Johnson signed the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965. The policy opened U.S. shores to the Third World. "That was probably the single most important demographic event of the last 50 years," Haub says.

The act had less to do with attracting more immigrants than keeping immigration laws in line with the civil rights movement. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were designed to stop racial and ethnic discrimination -- inherent in past immigration laws, which set quotas based on national origins. After 1965, race, religion, color and national origin were disregarded.

The end of the Vietnam War brought Asian refugees. In 1964, the United States ended the bracero program, which had allowed Mexican farmworkers to come to this nation to work and return home. By 1970, the Mexican economy had nosedived and more Mexicans came to stay -- many illegally. Without the influx, Passel says, diversity would never have reached current levels: 15% Hispanic and 5% Asian compared with 5% Hispanic and 1% Asian in 1970.

"Our growth, were it not for that, would be barely enough to keep population constant," says Joel Darmstadter, senior fellow at Resources for the Future, a non-partisan research group that specializes in natural resources. His research shows that prosperity puts more pressure on natural resources than sheer population growth.

"It's not immigrants who are going to buy those expensive houses in Phoenix or Tucson," Darmstadter says. "To view immigration as the heavy in the problems of water use or energy use is a copout."

Plenty of space

It's difficult to imagine the country running out of space when there is open desert as far as the eye can see 30 minutes south or west of Phoenix.

The town of Maricopa, Ariz., is a dot in the breathtaking expanse of the Sonoran Desert. Not
long ago, farmer Kelly Anderson, its first mayor, could rumble down state Highway 347 in his tractor, meet a buddy and hang out in the middle of the two-lane road for a chat and a beer without disrupting traffic.

Now, growth is galloping toward it across hundreds of square miles of arid soil, cotton fields and cattle feed lots. Maricopa's population has quadrupled since 2000 to more than 17,000. It's expected to reach 116,000 -- Phoenix was that size in the early 1950s -- by 2010 and top 300,000 by 2025.

Non-native palm trees appear on the horizon in every direction, a telltale sign of approaching subdivisions. Tanker trucks douse construction sites with water to dampen dust stirred up by bulldozers, a reminder of the natural resources gobbled up by growth.

What's happening in once-remote Maricopa is replicated across the country. The USA is getting more crowded -- 83 persons per square mile in 2004 vs. 70.3 in 1990 -- but it's far less dense than other nations such as France (287), China (361), Germany (609) and Japan (835). Arizona is getting denser: 50.5 in 2004 vs. 32.3 in 1990. That's still far less than other parts of the country, including California (230), Pennsylvania (277) and New Jersey (1,173).

Some regions haven't been touched by the nation's population surge. Parts of states in the Great Plains have suffered population losses and bemoan the exodus of their young. Nebraska's density (22.7) and North Dakota's (9.2) have barely budged this decade.

"We're still using a fraction of the national space," says Robert Lang, director of the Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech. "By 2050, the settled space will be more developed. A lot of places are literally out of land. ... They're having to go up rather than out, but there'll still be the Great Plains and vast stretches of the Intermountain West."

Fueled by a sunny climate, plentiful land and cheaper housing, fast and furious growth has been a fact of life around Phoenix for decades.

Maricopa, Casa Grande, Goodyear, Buckeye and other small towns on the edge of the metro area are going through the same kind of boom that transformed closer-in suburbs such as Chandler and Glendale from specks on the map in 1970 to cities whose populations top 200,000 today.

"I've lived in northeast Pennsylvania, and declining growth is worse than rapid growth," says Jack Tomasik, planning director for the Central Arizona Association of Governments. "But rapid growth definitely has its drawbacks."

The boomtowns hope to create the infrastructure needed to sustain growth, something they've seen some bigger neighbors struggle with.

That's why Buckeye, Goodyear, Litchfield Park and Avondale joined forces and put up money to speed the widening of I-10, the first time Arizona communities have done such a thing, Buckeye Mayor Bobby Bryant says. They're drafting plans to lure jobs and businesses, not just housing.

"You need to accept growth," Casa Grande Mayor Charles Walton says. "It's coming whether you want it or not."

Yet a future of whirlwind growth nags at him. He worries that it ultimately will harm the quality of life of future generations.

"I think I can tolerate it in my lifetime," he says, "but I feel very sorry for my grandchildren."

**GRAPHIC:** GRAPHIC, Color, Frank Pompa, USA TODAY, Source: Census Bureau USA TODAY research (Line graph) GRAPHIC, Color, Frank Pompa, USA TODAY, Reported by Paul Overberg and Melanie Eversley
coordinated by Chris Fruitrich, Source: Census Bureau
Population Reference Bureau and World Book (Maps, bar graphs, pie chart)
GRAPHIC, Color, Frank Pompa, USA TODAY, Source: USA TODAY/Gallup Poll of 1,002 people nationwide, June 9-11 (Bar graph)

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