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Statistical Brief

Residential Energy Uses

Americans use a variety of energy sources to heat their houses, apartments, and mobile homes. Natural gas, electricity, fuel oil, coal, and wood are all used as energy sources. Some of these sources have become more prevalent, some less in recent years.

This Brief examines the different energy sources Americans used to heat their residences in 1989 and how they've changed since 1950. Data come from the 1950 Census of Housing and the 1989 American Housing Survey.

While gas and electricity use has risen, fuel oil use has fallen.

Construction of vast natural gas pipeline networks, a relatively low cost, and widespread availability likely have helped make gas the most commonly used home heating fuel. About 55 percent of homes used gas as the primary heating fuel in 1989, up sharply from 29 percent in 1950.

Electricity is the second most common house heating fuel. Its use too has risen dramatically—from under 1 percent of occupied units in 1950 to 25 percent in 1989. The shift of the population from colder to warmer climates probably is a reason for this rise—electricity use is highest in the South, lowest in the Northeast.

The use of fuel oil and other liquid fuels, on the other hand, has dropped sharply—from 23 percent of occupied units in 1950 to only 14 percent in 1989. Fuel oil use peaked in 1960 when about one-third of residences used this as the main heating fuel.

Use of coal and wood for home heating is now rare.

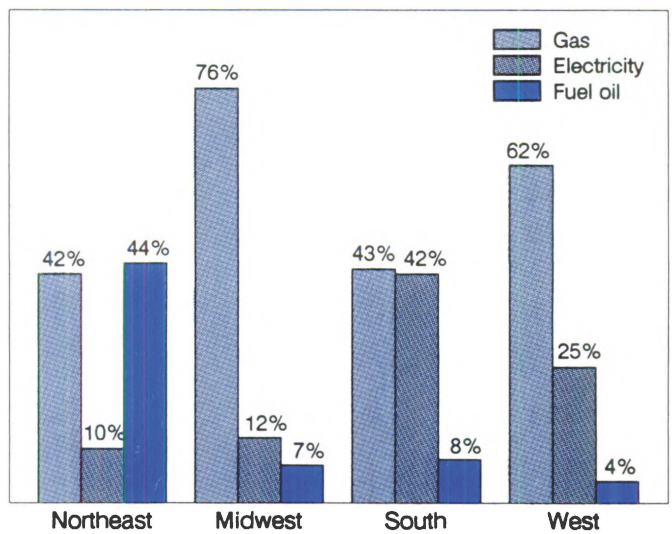
Coal has just about disappeared as a home heating source—almost no homes used coal for heating in 1989. Yet, as recently as 1950, about one-third of occupied units used it. On the other hand, wood use has made a comeback of sorts. Wood was used to heat 10 percent of all homes in 1950, but only 1 percent by 1970. As a result of energy shortages in the 1970's, wood use rose to 5 percent in 1989.

About 9 in 10 newly built units use either electricity or gas.

The 6.4 million occupied units built in the last 4 years used electricity and gas for heating about equally. About 6 percent of these new units used fuel oil or other liquid fuel. If this trend continues, liquid fuel may go the way of coal as a home heating fuel.

Gas the Leading Home Heating Fuel in All Regions Except Northeast

Percent of occupied housing units using specified fuel as main fuel for house heating, by region: 1989



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Choice of home heating fuel differs among regions.

Where we live determines, to some degree, the fuel we use. Most homes in the Northeast use either fuel oil or gas, making this region more vulnerable to disruption or price volatility of oil supplies than any other. In the South, much new construction uses electrical energy to power reverse-cycle or heat pump systems, a particularly practical choice given the relatively mild climate. Over one-half of all units in the Nation using electricity for heat were found here.

The Midwest was predominantly a one-fuel region; gas was used to heat about three-quarters of all occupied units. In the West, gas was also the most commonly used fuel—62 percent of all homes in this region used gas. Electricity was used by another 25 percent, mostly in areas with plentiful hydroelectric power or mild winters.

Some households use a secondary fuel.

Two in ten households used a second fuel for heating. Wood and electricity were the two most common.

Gas and electricity are the leading fuels used for heating water and cooking.

More than half of all households used gas for water heating; another 37 percent used electricity for that purpose.

For cooking, nearly all occupied units used either electricity (58 percent) or gas (42 percent).

One in five occupied units use only electricity.

About 60 percent of all the units that use only electricity are located in the South.

The South has a high proportion of units that use only electricity—over 33 percent. It's more common for newly built units to use only electricity: nationally, 4 in 10 are all-electric.

More information: *American Housing Survey for the United States in 1989,* Current Housing Reports, Series H150/89. For sale by U.S. Government Printing Office. Contact Customer Services at the Census Bureau for ordering information (301-763-4100).

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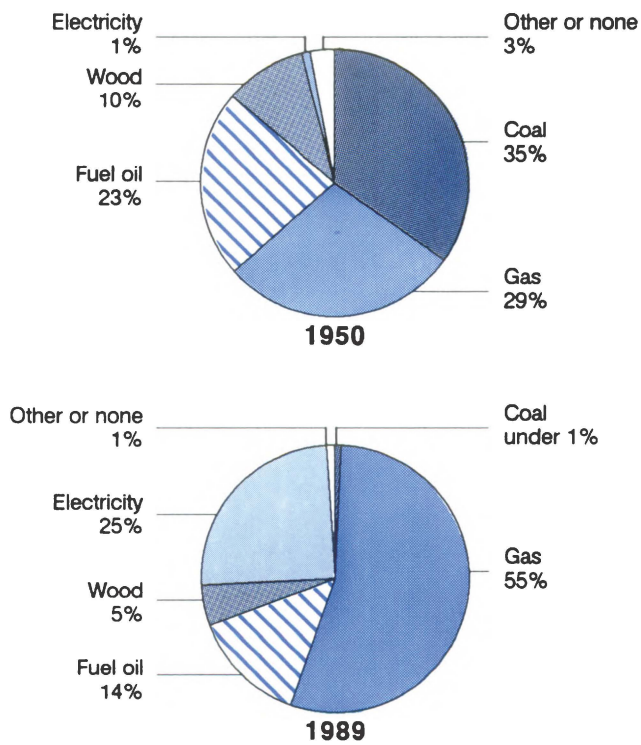
This Brief is one of a series that presents information of current policy interest. It may include data from businesses, households, or other sources. All statistics are subject to sampling variability as well as survey design flaws, respondent classification errors, and data processing mistakes. The Census Bureau has taken steps to minimize errors, and analytical statements have been tested and meet statistical standards. However, because of methodological differences, you should use caution when comparing these data with data from other sources.

Gas and Electricity Have Become the Leading Home Heating Fuels

Percent of occupied housing units using specified fuels as primary fuel for house heating



Note: Percentages do not add to 100 due to rounding.

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