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People are fascinated by the future. Palm readers, astrologers, and crystal-ball-gazers down through the ages have found eager customers for their predictions and visions of the future. Modern-day analysts and forecasters—using computers and sophisticated models instead of tarot leaves and chicken entrails—continue to find willing audiences. The desire to see into the future is seemingly insatiable and certainly has not been diminished by the relatively low success rates achieved by historians and forecasters in the past (see Box 1.1).

The desire to forecast future population trends reflects much more than idle curiosity. At the global level, many are concerned about the earth's ability to feed 9 billion, and hence the several billion people expected to be added to the world's population over the next 100 years. Nations and states are concerned about the economic, social, political, and environmental consequences of population growth and demographic change. At the local level, planning for schools, airports, shopping centers, housing developments, roads, and countless other projects is strongly affected by expected population growth. Indeed, the success or failure of such plans often depends on the extent to which projected growth is realized over time. It is no wonder that population projections are of so much interest to so many people!

Given this high level of interest, the future is unknown and—in most respects—unknowable. Many factors influence population growth and demographic change, often in unpredictable ways. No matter how accurate our data are, sophisticated our methodology, we still cannot “see” into the future. One hundred years ago, who could have predicted the baby boom and bust, the women's movement, the rise in life expectancy, or the dramatic shifts in foreign immigration that occurred in the United States during the twentieth century? Who could have predicted electronic circuits, interstate highways, space exploration, smart phones, or the Internet? For that matter, who could have predicted the appearance of Louis Pasteur, Mark Twain, Facebook, or Lady Gaga? As Winston Churchill noted, “The future is never as plain as it appears after the event.”

We are not completely lost, however. Although individual events may be unpredictable, patterns often change when the effects of individual events are