The Houston Area Survey — 2010
Perspectives on a City in Transition

Through almost three decades of systematic research, the annual Houston Area Survey has measured this region’s remarkable economic and demographic transformations and recorded the way area residents are responding to them. No other metropolitan area in America has been the focus of a research program of this scope. None more clearly exemplifies the trends that are rapidly refashioning the social and political landscape of urban America.

In February 2010, Rice University officially launched the Institute for Urban Research (IUR) to provide a permanent home for the annual surveys, stimulate other metropolitan research, sponsor educational programs and engage in public outreach.

The interviews for the 29th Houston Area Survey, reaching a scientifically selected representative sample of 750 Harris County residents — including 100 respondents contacted by cell phone — were conducted by the Center for Public Policy at the University of Houston between February 3 and March 17, 2010. Analyses of the survey data across the years make it clear that area residents differ significantly in their experiences and attitudes by whether they are rich or poor, black or white, immigrant or native-born, young or old, urban or suburban, male or female, religious or secular, Democrat or Republican, etc. It will be important to understand and appreciate such differences as we work together to build Houston’s future.

General conclusions: The challenges facing urban America today

- To prosper in the new high-tech, knowledge-based, global economy, this city and nation will need to nurture a far more educated workforce and fashion policies that can reduce the growing inequalities and prevent the rise of a new urban underclass.
- To attract the most innovative companies and talented individuals, Houston will need to grow into a considerably more aesthetically and environmentally appealing urban destination and develop the research centers that will fuel the engines of growth in the new economy.
- If this region is to flourish in the twenty-first century, it will need to develop into a much more unified and inclusive multicultural society, one in which equality of opportunity is truly made available to all area residents and all of its communities are empowered to participate as full partners in shaping Houston’s future.

Highlights of this year’s survey

- When asked how things were going for them, only 20% of the respondents in 2010 said that their financial situation was getting better. This is the lowest proportion of respondents saying that their circumstances were improving than ever recorded in all 29 years of surveys.
- Such financial concerns are influencing area residents’ attitudes toward jobs, immigration and the role of government, but they have not dampened enthusiasm for Houston as a place to live nor for its efforts to provide more urban lifestyles.
- Harris County residents appear to be increasingly comfortable with the demographic transformations of the region. Growing percentages believe that Houston’s burgeoning diversity will be a source of great strength for the city, and their support for gay rights continues to grow across all questions and survey years.

For further information or to support the IUR, please contact:

Stephen L. Klineberg and Michael Emerson, Co-directors
The Institute for Urban Research at Rice University
713-348-4132 or iur@rice.edu
http://iur.rice.edu
Here, we consider the Harris County population as a whole, and ask how the responses obtained in 2010 differ importantly from those given to identical questions by previous representative samples of Houston-area residents. Below are some of the most interesting findings:

A. Harris County residents have become considerably more pessimistic about their personal financial situations, even as tentative signs of national economic recovery become evident.

• The official unemployment rates in Harris County grew from 4.1% in February 2008 to 6.3% in 2009 to 8.5% in 2010. Simultaneously, the proportion of respondents giving positive evaluations (ratings of “excellent” or “good”) to “job opportunities in the Houston area” declined from 57% in 2008 to 49% in 2009 and to 38% in this year’s survey.

• When asked to name “the biggest problem facing people in the Houston area today,” the proportion who spontaneously mentioned the local economy (unemployment, poverty or the cost of living) jumped from 15% in the 2008 survey to 44% in 2009 and 38% in this year’s survey. (The step-point decline from last year to this is attributable to the slight increase, from 20% in 2009 to 26%, in the proportion naming traffic as the biggest problem.)

• The numbers who said that their personal situations had been getting worse in the past few years grew from 21% in 2008 to 27% in 2009 and to 32% in 2010. The proportion saying things were getting better for them declined from 40% in 2008 to 32% to just 20% in this year’s survey. That percentage is lower than ever recorded in all of the 29 years the survey has been asked periodically how they would rate “the Houston area during the next three to four years will be better than they are today; just 16% thought conditions will worsen.

• Perhaps most significantly, the survey respondents have been asked periodically how they would rate “the Houston area in general as a place to live.” The percent saying “excellent” or “good” has grown consistently over the years, from the already high figure of 63% in 1983 and 75% in 2008 to 82% in 2010.

E. New questions this year: On pensions, term limits, drug policies and local food.

• The survey participants were evenly divided on what to do about the city’s unfunded pension obligations: 43% supported “raising taxes to put more money into the funds so the benefits can be paid”; 40% called instead for “cutting back on the benefits that were originally promised to the employees.”

• The Houston respondents were more decisive with regard to term limits. By 56% to 29%, they were clear that, if the term limits placed on Houston’s elected officials were to be changed from “three two-year terms,” it would be better to have a limit of “two four-year terms,” rather than “three three-year terms.”

• Fully 69% agreed that “Individuals in possession of small amounts of illegal drugs should be fined rather than sent to jail.” Just 25% disagreed with this suggestion.

• When asked how important they felt it was to be able to buy locally grown food, 42% said it was “very important,” and another 41% said “somewhat important” 16% said that access to locally grown food was “not important” to them.

F. Harris County residents now clearly support a more urban lifestyle.

• “During the next 20 years,” the respondents were told, “Harris County will need to build new housing, shops and workplaces for more than a million additional residents.” When asked about the best way to accommodate that growth, 80% called for “redeveloping older urban areas to build the new housing and shops where services, streets and sewer lines already exist.” Only 15% preferred to “continue to build new suburbs on the edge of existing suburbs.”

• In the 2010 survey, 73% agreed with the assertion that “We need better land-use planning to guide development in the Houston area,” 21% believed instead that “People or businesses should be free to build wherever they want.”

• When asked what they considered to be the best way to spend our transportation dollars, 52% said the money should be used “to improve rail and buses” and 42% called for more spending “to expand existing highways.”

• The survey participants were asked what they would choose if they could live in any kind of housing. 57% said they would prefer “a single-family home with a big yard, where you would need to drive almost everywhere you want to go.” But 41% called instead for “a smaller home in a more urbanized area, within walking distance of shops and workplaces.”

• Respondents living in the city were asked how interested they would be in someday moving to the suburbs, and those in the suburbs were asked about moving to the city. In 1999, when the questions were first asked, 46% of Anglo city dwellers were “very” or “somewhat” interested in moving to the suburbs, compared to just 28% of those in the suburbs who were interested in moving to the city. Today, the figures are equal, at 25% and 23%, respectively.

G. There have been few changes in attitudes toward immigration; area residents remain conflicted, especially with regard to undocumented immigrants.

• In this year’s survey, 47% believed that immigrants to the U.S. generally take more from the American economy than they contribute, and 44% said the immigrants generally contribute more than they take.

• In 2010, 61% thought the local police should play an active role in identifying undocumented immigrants, 34% believed instead that such responsibility should be left mainly to the federal authorities.

• The proportion of area residents who thought that the influx of undocumented immigrants constitutes a “very serious” problem for Houston grew from 45% in 2006 to 61% in 2008 and then declined to 52% in this year’s survey.

B. Houston area residents today perceive a much more problematic economy, where jobs are less secure and education more important than ever before.

• Over the years, the survey participants have been asked about this statement: “People who work hard and live by the rules are not getting a fair break these days.” In the 2010 survey, 67% agreed with that assessment, up from 59% who felt that way in 2008, 61% in 2004 and 57% in 2002.

• In this year’s survey, 67% believed that “There are very few good jobs in today’s economy for people without a college education.” In 2007, 61% agreed with that statement.

• In 2010, 43% agreed that “There are enough good jobs for all welfare recipients who really want to work.” In 1996, 57% concurred with that assertion.

• When asked which of two proposals would be more effective in reducing crime, 79% chose “spending large sums of money to reduce poverty and keep young people in school,” rather than “spending the same money to send criminals to prison and keep them there for a long time.” In 1999, 56% endorsed the first alternative.

C. The economic anxieties are reflected in declining support for government initiatives.

• The proportions who were in favor of “federal health insurance to cover the medical costs of all Americans” declined from 74% in 2006 to 67% in 2008 and to 52% in February 2010.

• In this year’s survey, 54% thought it would be a “very serious problem” for the country “if the gap between rich and poor gets significantly bigger than it is today.” That view was expressed by 67% in 2008.

• Agreement that “The government should take action to reduce income differences between rich and poor in America” fell from 50% in 1992 to 44% in 1999 and to 39% today.

• This year, 48% favored “requiring utilities to reduce their emissions of greenhouse gases, even if this means that electricity rates will rise.” In 2007, 66% approved of that proposal.

• In a related question, only 37% of the respondents in the 2010 survey believed that the threat of global warming was “a very serious problem,” down from 2008, when 51% took that position.

D. Despite their economic worries, residents remain upbeat about the Houston region.

• When asked to evaluate the “control of air pollution in the Houston area,” 50% in 2002 and 47% in both 2006 and 2008 said it was “poor.” The percent of area residents who gave that lowest rating to the region’s air pollution efforts declined to 35% in 2010.

• In this year’s survey, 30% thought that living conditions in the Houston area have been improving over the past few years; 28% said conditions were getting worse.

• Fully 38% thought that living conditions in the Houston area during the next three to four years will be better than they are today; just 16% thought conditions will worsen.

• Perhaps most significantly, the survey respondents have been asked periodically how they would rate “the Houston area in general as a place to live.” The percent saying “excellent” or “good” has grown consistently over the years, from the already high figure of 63% in 1983 and 75% in 2008 to 82% in 2010.