THE 33RD KINDER INSTITUTE HOUSTON AREA SURVEY

THE CHANGING FACE OF THE HOUSTON REGION
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Thanks for producing the 33rd Annual Kinder Institute Houston Area Survey
Now in its 33rd year, the Kinder Institute Houston Area Survey is the nation’s longest-running study of any metropolitan area’s economy, population, life experiences, beliefs and attitudes. Since 1982, the surveys have measured this region’s remarkable economic and demographic transformations and recorded the way its residents are responding to them. No other metropolitan area in America has been the focus of a long-term research program of this scope. No region more clearly exemplifies the trends that are rapidly refashioning the social and political landscape across all of urban America.
Beginning with the 2012 survey, the annual study now is reaching scientifically selected representative samples of residents from the entire nine-county Greater Houston region. (There used to be 10 counties; since February 2013, San Jacinto County is no longer included in the definition by the U.S. Census of the “Houston-The Woodlands-Sugar Land” metropolitan area.) The 1,353 respondents who were interviewed in the basic 2014 survey included 305 (23 percent) from outside Harris County; 38 percent of all the survey participants were contacted by cell phone.

The interviews were completed between Feb. 12 and March 12 by Social Science Research Solutions (SSRS). This year, an additional 400 interviews were conducted in Fort Bend County, to reach a total of 508 respondents from the Houston area’s second-largest county.

As indicated in the accompanying chart, the 2014 survey confirms that Fort Bend County is even more ethnically diverse than Harris County and has a much more highly educated population.

The responses from all 33 annual surveys are “weighted” to correct for variations in the likelihood of selection and to align the sample more closely with known population characteristics. This procedure helps to ensure that the data will reflect as accurately as possible the actual distributions along the dimensions of race and ethnicity, age, gender, education level, homeownership and other county characteristics. The findings reported here, unless otherwise indicated, reflect the views of the respondents from Harris County only, asking how the (weighted) responses in 2014 differ from those that were given to identical questions by previous representative samples of Harris County residents.

CONTRASTS BETWEEN HARRIS AND FORT BEND COUNTIES IN ETHNICITY AND EDUCATION (2014)

![Chart showing contrasts in ethnicity and education between Harris and Fort Bend Counties in 2014.](chart.png)

Source: Kinder Institute Houston Area Survey (2014).
ECONOMIC OUTLOOKS HAVE BRIGHTENED CONSIDERABLY AND NOT ONLY WITH REGARD TO THE ECONOMY IN GENERAL: AREA RESIDENTS ARE FEELING BETTER ABOUT THEIR PERSONAL ECONOMIC CIRCUMSTANCES AS WELL.

As the overall economy has continued to improve, it is not surprising to discover that Harris County residents today are feeling better about the area’s economic prospects. The official unemployment rates in the county dropped from 8.6 percent in 2010 and 8.4 percent in 2011, to 7.3 percent in 2012, to 6.8 percent in 2013 and to 5.7 percent in January of this year, more than a full percentage point below the national average.

The number of survey participants giving ratings of “excellent” or “good” to job opportunities in the Houston area also dropped during the recession, from 57 percent in 2008 to 35 percent in both 2010 and 2011. Then, as the economy improved, the surveys recorded a significant turnaround, to 48 percent giving positive ratings in 2012, to 58 percent in 2013 and to 60 percent in this year’s survey.
The proportion of respondents who spontaneously cited the economy (including references to unemployment, poverty or the cost of living) when asked what they thought was “the biggest problem facing people in the Houston area today,” increased dramatically from 14 percent in 2008 to 44 percent in 2009 as the recession was taking hold, then dropped to 37 percent in 2012, to 26 percent in 2013, and to 20 percent today. In this year’s survey, 29 percent named traffic as the greatest concern; only 15 percent mentioned crime.
Houston has one of the strongest employment markets in the nation, but this includes large numbers of “poverty-level” jobs that offer little opportunity for advancement. The gap between rich and poor has been expanding across America, predicated above all else on access to quality education.

In the 2013 survey, 73 percent agreed that, “for a person to be successful in today’s world, it is necessary to get an education beyond high school.” Fewer than one in four believed instead that “there are many ways to succeed with no more than a high school diploma.” The belief that post-secondary education is necessary for a person to succeed in today’s economy was even more widely held by Latinos (at 81 percent) and African-Americans (78 percent) than it was by Harris County’s non-Hispanic whites, of whom just 63 percent asserted the necessity for education beyond high school.

In the years between 2011 and 2013, even as the overall economy improved, there was no change in the proportion of area residents who reported that they personally had been doing better financially during the previous 12 months. The figures were 28 percent in 2011, 27 percent in 2012 and 26 percent in 2013; but in 2014 for the first time since 2011, the survey recorded a significant increase, to 34 percent, in the number of survey participants who said their personal economic circumstances had been getting better in the past few years.

There was a similar, albeit less robust, turnaround in the respondents’ outlooks on their personal future. In 2010, 57 percent said they thought they would be better off three or four years down the road. Despite the improving economy, that level of optimism dropped consistently to just 51 percent in 2013, but then increased to 55 percent in this year’s survey.
Even as area residents’ personal circumstances are now generally beginning to improve, it is important to note that almost one-fifth (18 percent) of the respondents in the 2014 survey said that paying for the groceries to feed their families was a “very serious” or “somewhat serious” problem for them during the past year; only two-thirds (67 percent) said it was “not a problem.”

Most area residents continue to recognize that people can lose their jobs or fall into poverty through no fault of their own, and that government has an important role to play in strengthening the safety net and fostering economic fairness. By 62 percent, the respondents in this year’s survey agreed that “Government should take action to reduce income differences between rich and poor in America”; this was up from 59 percent agreement in 2012 and from 45 percent in 2010. When asked in 2014 about raising the minimum wage, even if it might lead to fewer jobs, 48 percent were strongly in favor and another 23 percent were slightly in favor; only 28 percent were opposed.

71 PERCENT OF THE SURVEY RESPONDENTS IN 2014 STRONGLY FAVORED OR SLIGHTLY FAVORED RAISING THE MINIMUM WAGE.

SUPPORT FOR RAISING THE MINIMUM WAGE (2014)

“So some people say the minimum wage should be raised to help low-income workers get by. Others say raising the minimum wage will lead to fewer jobs. Given these arguments, do you strongly favor, slightly favor, slightly oppose, or strongly oppose raising the minimum wage?”

- Strongly/Slightly in favor: 71
- Strongly/Slightly opposed: 28
- Don’t Know: 1

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Area residents are clearly feeling better about life in the Houston region. The percent of survey participants who said they were “somewhat” or “very” worried that they or a member of their family will be the victim of a crime dropped from 69 percent in last year’s survey to 62 percent today. Fully 36 percent in 2014 said that the control of air pollution in the Houston area was “excellent” or “good,” an increase from 32 percent in 2012 and from just 19 percent in 2010. Another 36 percent in this year’s survey said that the quality of living conditions in the Houston area has been getting better over the past few years, up from 33 percent in 2013 and from 27 percent in 2012.

More broadly, when asked how they would rate the Houston area in general as a place to live, decisively and increasingly (from 70 percent in 2001 to 77 percent in 2014), the respondents have given ratings of “excellent” or “good.” In alternating years, the survey participants were asked to compare Houston to most other metropolitan areas in the country: 78 percent in 2005 thought this region was a “slightly better” or a “much better” place in which to live; the positive evaluations grew to 90 percent in the 2013 survey.
The Houston region also is one of the most sprawling, least dense, most automobile-dependent metropolitan areas in the county. It is particularly interesting therefore to find in these surveys continued evidence across a variety of questions that area residents now are evenly divided in their support for improved transit or expanded highways and for living in single-family residential areas or in more urbanized neighborhoods with a mix of developments. In the 2014 survey, 51 percent said they would prefer to live in “a single-family home with a big yard, where you would need to drive almost everywhere you want to go,” and 47 percent would opt instead for “a smaller home in a more urbanized area, within walking distance of shops and workplaces.”

When asked a slightly different question in 2013, one-half of the respondents (51 to 47 percent) said they would prefer to live in “an area with a mix of developments, including homes, shops and restaurants,” rather than “a single-family residential area.” Area residents also divide evenly on the question of how best to spend taxpayer transportation money: 49 percent in this year’s survey said the region should spend more to “improve rail and buses”; 46 percent called for more spending to “expand existing highways.”

By 2030, the Houston-Galveston Area Council forecasts that Harris County will add another 1 million residents and another 3.5 million will move into the nine-county area as a whole. How will the region accommodate that growth? Few today would call for implementing comprehensive zoning regulations in Houston, but 69 percent in this year’s survey agreed that “We need better land use planning to guide development in the Houston area”; only 28 percent asserted instead that “People and business should be free to build wherever they want.” No zoning does not have to mean no planning.

If viable alternatives to car-centered sprawl are not made more widely available for the 50 percent of area residents who would choose them, there can be little doubt that much of the region’s remaining farmlands, prairies, forests and marshes will disappear into subdivisions and parking lots, and traffic will continue to worsen. The challenge today is not in finding people who would like to live in more compact, urbanized communities, but in building places across the region that can accommodate them.
In just the past three decades, the Houston area has been transformed from an essentially biracial Southern city into the single most ethnically and culturally diverse large metropolitan region in the nation. The demographic transformations are particularly striking when age is taken into account. The most recent census report (2012) found that it is only among the Harris County residents who are over the age of 65 that non-Hispanic whites today represent a majority of the population.

More than half (51 percent) of all area residents who are under the age of 20 are Latinos, and another fifth (19 percent) are African-Americans. Fewer than 23 percent of the young people in the county are Anglos. In HISD during the 2012-2013 year, 87 percent of the 203,354 students were Latino or black and more than 80 percent met the federal criteria for free or reduced-price lunches. It is not surprising that such rapid and profound transformations might be accompanied by signs of conflict and anxiety.
In every year since 1992, the survey participants have been asked to evaluate “the relations among ethnic groups in the Houston area.” The proportion saying, “excellent” or “good” grew steadily among all ethnicities, from an average of 21 percent and 23 percent in the early 1990s to 40 percent in 2000 and 42 percent in 2011, then to 49 percent in 2012 and 50 percent in 2013. In this year’s survey, however, the positive ratings overall fell to 43 percent.

The declining evaluations of ethnic relations occurred in all groups: The positive ratings dropped for Anglos from 59 percent in 2013 to 53 percent in 2014, for blacks from 44 to 37 percent and for Latinos from 43 to 35 percent. These changing evaluations should serve as important reminders that although Houston’s burgeoning diversity may well become a great asset for this major port city, helping to build the bridges to the global economy, it also can become the basis for deepening social and economic divides. Much depends on how this generation of leadership speaks to these compelling new realities.

At the same time, attitudes toward immigration and diversity have continued to improve consistently over the years. The proportion of area residents who thought the increasing diversity in Houston will eventually become “a source of great strength for the city,” rather than “a growing problem,” increased from 55 percent in 1996 and 61 percent in 2006 to 69 percent in 2010 and 2012 and to 68 percent in this year’s survey. In 2013, 61 percent asserted that the increasing immigration into this country today “mostly strengthens” (rather than “mostly threatens”) American culture, up significantly from 47 percent in 2011.

With regard to immigration itself, the percent in favor of “granting illegal immigrants a path to legal citizenship if they speak English and have no criminal record” increased from 66 percent in 2010 to 74 percent in 2012, to 83 percent in 2013 and 75 percent in 2014. In this year’s survey, 59 percent believed that immigrants to the U.S. generally contribute more to the American economy than they take, up from 49 percent in 2012 and 45 percent in 2010.
Only 24 percent in the 2014 survey thought “the number of undocumented immigrants who are living in the Houston area” constituted a “very serious problem.” A comparable question asked in previous years found 37 percent in 2012, 47 percent in 2010 and 56 percent in 2008 asserting that the “large numbers of undocumented immigrants who have been coming to Houston in recent years” was a “very serious problem” for the city. The survey participants also were asked to express their feelings about undocumented immigrants on a 10-point scale (where “1” means “very unfavorable feelings” and “10” means “very favorable feelings”). The proportion expressing positive feelings (a score of six to 10) grew from 31 percent in 2010 and 35 percent in 2012 to 45 percent in this year’s survey.

The actual number of new immigrants coming into America has declined in the past few years, and area residents have had several decades of experience with the benefits that immigrants bring to the communities into which they move. Whatever the reasons, concerns about the impact of the many undocumented immigrants in the region seem to have faded decisively. The general public may well be more prepared today than at any time in the past 30 years to support initiatives that can lead to meaningful comprehensive immigration reform.
On virtually every question the surveys have asked about gay rights, a significant change has been taking place across the board. For example, the proportion of area residents who believed that homosexuality is “morally wrong” dropped from 59 percent in 1997 to 43 percent in 2013. In 1997, only 31 percent agreed that “marriages between homosexuals should be given the same legal status as heterosexual marriages.” Support for same-sex marriage grew to 37 percent in 2001 and to 47 percent in 2013.

The most striking shift of all has occurred with regard to gay adoption. In 1991, when the question was first asked, only 17 percent of area residents said they were in favor of “homosexuals being legally permitted to adopt children.” That support grew to 28 percent in 2000, to 35 percent in 2002, to 49 percent in 2010, and to 51 percent in this year’s survey.
HOUSTON AREA RESIDENTS ARE MORE PREPARED THAN IN PAST YEARS TO SUPPORT ALTERNATIVE SENTENCING FOR CRIMINAL OFFENSES.

The surveys have recorded a gradual and continuing drop in support for the death penalty across the years. In 2014, only 28 percent favored the death penalty over life imprisonment for persons convicted of first-degree murder; the comparable figures were 30 percent in 2012 and 37 percent in 2010. In this year’s survey, 39 percent said they were in favor of life imprisonment with no chance for parole and another 29 percent (up from 14 percent in 2010) asserted that life imprisonment with a chance for parole after 25 years was the most appropriate penalty for persons convicted of first-degree murder.

In the 2014 survey, 72 percent (it was 69 percent in 2012 and 65 percent in 2010) agreed that “Individuals in possession of small amounts of illegal drugs should be fined rather than sent to jail.” A significant increase has also occurred across the years, reaching 65 percent in 2014, in the proportion of area residents who were in favor this year of “making marijuana legally available for medical purposes,” up from 57 percent in 2010 and from 50 percent in 1997.
CITY OF HOUSTON RESIDENTS ARE OVERWHELMINGLY IN FAVOR OF TERM LIMITS FOR CITY OFFICIALS, BUT THEY MAY BE MORE OPEN TO CHANGING THE TERMS THEMSELVES.

Finally, by 73 to 17 percent, city residents in the 2014 survey were firmly in favor of continuing the term limits placed on elected city officials in Houston. At the same time, however, they may be changing their minds about which kinds of term limits would be best. In 2008, the last time the question was asked, only 41 percent of city residents favored changing the limits to two 4-year terms, and a clear majority (55 percent) wanted the terms to stay as they are. In this year’s survey, however, fully half (49 percent) thought it would be better to have a limit of two 4-year terms in place of the current arrangement, limiting office holders to three 2-year terms.
THE NINE-COUNTY HOUSTON METROPOLITAN AREA
The mission of the Kinder Institute for Urban Research is to advance understanding of the most critical issues facing Houston and other leading urban centers. The institute conducts scientific research, supports educational programs and engages in public outreach with the goal of fostering informed decision-making and the development of more humane and sustainable cities.