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The Kinder Houston Area Survey — 2012

Perspectives on a city in transition

Through more than three decades of systematic research, the annual Kinder 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 region in America has been the focus of a long-term research program of this scope. None more clearly exemplifies the trends that are rapidly refashioning the social and political landscape of urban America.

Beginning with the 2012 survey, the research is reaching representative samples of residents from the entire 10-county Greater Houston metropolitan region. The 1,610 survey respondents interviewed this year included 344 (21%) from outside Harris County; 31% were contacted by cell phone. The interviews were conducted between Feb. 16 and March 27 by the Philadelphia-based firm Social Science Research Solutions (SSRS). In addition, the data from all 31 annual surveys have now been weighted to ensure that the survey findings reflect as accurately as possible the actual populations of all area residents across the years.

Analyses of the data make it clear that the survey participants differ 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, residing in Harris County or in the other nine surrounding counties, etc. It will be important to understand and appreciate such differences as we work together to build Houston's future.

Here, we consider the population as a whole — and, unless otherwise indicated, just the respondents from Harris County — to ask how the responses obtained in 2012 differ from those given to identical questions by previous representative samples of Harris County residents. Presented below are some of the most important findings.

A. Harris County residents are feeling at least a little bit better about the local economy in general ...

- The proportion of survey participants who spontaneously pointed to unemployment, poverty or the cost of living when asked to name “the biggest problem facing people in the Houston area today” jumped from 14% in the 2008 survey to 44% in 2009, 34% in 2010 and 39% in 2011. Today by 37%, the economy continues to be the predominant concern of area residents.

Highlights from this year's survey

- Economic outlooks may have brightened somewhat during the past year, but Harris County residents report no improvement at all in their personal financial situations.
- The survey participants are concerned about the perceived unfairness of the growing inequalities and they back government programs to restore a more broad-based prosperity.
- The surveys reveal a significant increase in the numbers of area residents who support mass transit and in their preference for a less automobile-dependent, more urbanized lifestyle.
- The respondents are growing more optimistic about the region's ethnic diversity and less antagonistic in their attitudes toward undocumented immigrants.
- The interviews delineate the public's conflicting views about the need for government programs and the countervailing imperative to reduce the federal deficit.





- The percentage of Harris County adults who believed that the country as a whole is headed for “better times” reached 45% in 2009 and then declined to 38% in 2010, 35% in 2011 and 39% in this year’s survey. The numbers foreseeing “more difficult times” increased from 53% in 2009 to 59% in 2010, to 61% in 2011 and 58% in 2012.
- The one important change in economic assessments was with regard to evaluations of job opportunities in the Houston area. The official unemployment rates in Harris County grew from 4.3% in February 2008 to 6.6% in 2009, to 8.6% in 2010 and 8.4% in 2011, and then improved dramatically, dropping to 7.3% in February 2012. In close convergence, the percent of survey respondents giving positive evaluations (ratings of “excellent” or “good”) to Houston’s job opportunities dropped from 57% in 2008 to 45% in 2009 and to 35% in both 2010 and 2011. This year’s survey recorded a significant increase, to 48%, in the proportions giving positive ratings to the local job market.

B. But they feel no better at all about their personal economic prospects.

- The 2012 survey recorded no improvement whatsoever compared to 2011 in the respondents’ reports of their personal financial situations, although things are somewhat better today than they were in 2010, when personal well-being fell to record lows. The proportion who said their economic circumstances had been *getting better* in the past few years dropped from 42% in 2008 to 33% in 2009, to just 21% in 2010. In 2011, 29% reported improving conditions, as did 27% in this year’s survey.
- With regard to outlooks on the personal future, the numbers of area residents who thought they personally would be *better off* three or four years down the road also dropped slightly, from 57% in 2009 and 2010, to 56% in 2011 and to 54% in 2012.
- In a powerful indication of how uneven the economic tides have become even as the overall economy recovers, there was no improvement in the proportion of area residents with children at home who said they had at least some difficulty buying the groceries to feed their families during the past year. In 2012, 32% said they had problems paying for food in the past 12 months; this number was as high as ever before in the interviews, more than matching the previous record of 30% in 2010.

C. Area residents perceive a more problematic national economy, where generational advance is less assured and income inequalities appear to be increasing unfairly.

- The respondents were asked to compare the overall standard of living that they have had or expect to have with their parents’ standard of living. The proportion who said they were doing better than their parents declined from 65% in 2008 to 57% in 2010 and 58% in 2012. The 2011 interviews found a similar trend: the percent who were confident that young people in America will eventually have a higher standard of living than today’s adult Americans dropped from 46% in 2007 to 35% in 2011.
- When asked about the suggestion that, “People who work hard and live by the rules are not getting a fair break these days,” 71% in this year’s survey agreed with that assessment, as did 71% in 2010. These recent figures represent a significant increase from the 61% who felt that way in 2008 and from 56% in 2002.
- On the other hand, with regard to the statement, “If you work hard in this city, eventually you will succeed,” the proportion in agreement also grew — from 79% in 2005 to 88% in 2009 and 86% in 2011. Houstonians’ traditional optimism about “eventual success” remains firm, but it is now increasingly tempered by the recognition that simply being prepared to “work hard and live by the rules” offers much less assurance that they will succeed in today’s economy than was the case in earlier years.
- In this year’s survey, 41% said that most people receiving welfare benefits are “really in need of help,” up from 30% two years earlier; 52% in 2012 asserted instead that most welfare recipients are “taking advantage of the system,” compared to 58% who felt that way in 2010. Similarly, 72% in 2011 said that most poor people in the U.S. today are poor because of “circumstances they can’t control,” up from 66% in 2007 and from 49% in 1999. Only 24% last year believed that most Americans in poverty are poor because “they don’t work hard enough,” down from 35% in 1999.
- In 2012, 59% agreed with the suggestion that “the government should take action to reduce income differences between rich and poor in America,” up significantly from 45% who felt that way in 2010. When asked about “federal health insurance to cover the medical costs of all Americans,” the proportion who were in favor dropped from 78% in 2006 to 60% in 2010, but then grew again to 67% in this year’s survey.

D. A large and growing proportion of Harris County residents support improvements in mass transit and would choose a less car-centered, more urbanized lifestyle.

- In the 2012 survey, 56% of the participants from Harris County said that the development of a much improved mass

transit system is “very important” for the future success of the Houston area. This is not much different from the 60% who felt that way in 2000, but up significantly from 1991 and 1993 when only 46% thought improvements in mass transit were very important for the Houston future.

- By 51% to 44%, a clear majority in Harris County want more taxpayer money to be spent on improving rail and buses rather than on expanding existing highways. The numbers have not changed since the question was first asked in 2007. For the respondents in the surrounding counties, the figures were reversed, if only slightly, with 47% calling for transit improvements and 50% for better highways.
- Survey participants this year were asked whether we should “continue to use 25 percent of the funds from Metro for street improvements and other nontransit projects, or should all Metro funds be dedicated to transit improvements?” A solid majority of Harris County residents, by 55% to 40%, want all Metro funds to be used for transit, and by 61% to 33%, the surrounding counties were even more emphatic in their opposition to using the funds for nontransit purposes. When a comparable question was asked back in 1995 (“What about using funds from Metro to finance other city services?”), 53% were in favor and 39% were opposed.
- In recent years, respondents have been asked what they would prefer if they were free to choose any kind of housing in the Houston area. The proportion who said they would like to live in “a single family home with a big yard, where you would need to drive almost everywhere you want to go,” dropped from 59% in 2008 and 58% in 2010 to just 47% in this year’s survey. In 2008 and 2010, 36% and 39% said they would opt instead for a “smaller home in a more urbanized area, within walking distance of shops and workplaces.” In 2012, the percentage of Harris County residents who would choose a more urbanized lifestyle jumped to 51%.
- The survey participants living in the city of Houston 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, 52% of Anglo city dwellers said they were “very” or “somewhat” interested in moving to the suburbs, compared to just 26% of those in the suburbs who were interested in someday moving to the city. Interest in suburban living has declined during these years while the urban allure increased, so that today the figures are reversed: 33% of all Anglo suburbanites in this year’s survey expressed an interest in someday moving to the city, but only 28% of city residents in 2012 said they would be “very” or “somewhat” interested in moving to the suburbs.

E. Perceptions of ethnic relations are improving and, at least among Harris County residents, attitudes toward undocumented immigrants are becoming less antagonistic.

- 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 from 21% and 23% in the early 1990s to 40% in 2000 and 2001, to 42% in both 2010 and 2011. This year, the numbers giving positive evaluations jumped to 49%, the highest levels ever recorded in the surveys.
- The percentage who thought that the increasing ethnic diversity in Houston will eventually become “a source of great strength for the city,” rather than “a growing problem,” grew from 55% in 1996 and 61% in 2006 to 69% in both 2010 and 2012.
- In this year’s survey, 49% of Harris County residents believed that “immigrants” to the U.S. generally contribute more to the American economy than they take, and 44% said they take more than they contribute. When a random half of the respondents were asked the same question, but this time with regard to “undocumented immigrants,” the numbers were identical (at 49% and 44%). In the surrounding counties, however, the positive assessments dropped decisively: Just 35% thought undocumented immigrants contribute more to the economy than they take, compared to 47% who gave positive assessments when asked about immigrants in general.
- The proportion of Harris County respondents who asserted that the influx of undocumented immigrants is a “very serious” problem for the Houston area grew from 43% in 2006 to 56% in 2008, and then declined to 47% in 2010 and dropped again to just 36% in 2012. In the surrounding counties, however, 55% believed that undocumented immigration represents a “very serious” problem for the region.
- The percentage of Harris County residents who were in favor of “granting illegal immigrants a path to legal citizenship if they speak English and have no criminal record” dropped from 71% in 2007 to 64% in 2009, and then increased to 66% in 2010 and back to 71% in 2011. In 2012, support for eventual legalization reached 74%, a higher level of approval than ever before in these surveys. In the surrounding counties, fully 68% were also in favor of a path to legalization of that sort.
- The respondents were asked about “allowing the children of undocumented immigrants to become U.S. citi-



zens, if they have graduated from college or served in the military” (the so-called Dream Act). In this year’s survey, fully 82% of those from Harris County were in favor, with just 16% opposed. The comparable figures for the surrounding counties were almost equally decisive, at 79% and 21%.

F. In this presidential election year, Harris County residents are deeply divided between the need for government programs and the need to reduce the federal deficit.

- Respondents this year were asked about the statement, “People like me benefit from government programs.” In Harris County, the survey respondents were split at 49% and 48%. In the surrounding counties, 45% agreed and 53% disagreed.
- When asked which of two alternative policies is most important in the effort to grow the American economy, the responses were also evenly divided: 48% said “we should increase spending on education, research and transportation,” and 49% believed instead that “we should reduce the federal deficit now.” The comparable figures were 41% and 57% in the surrounding counties.
- Despite the large numbers calling for deficit reduction (49% in Harris County, 57% in the other counties), by 69% to 29% the Harris County residents were opposed to “cutting entitlement programs, such as Medicare and Social Security, in order to reduce the federal deficit.” By 77%, respondents in the surrounding counties were even more opposed to cutting entitlements, despite their stronger insistence on reducing the deficit.
- By 44% to 39%, Harris County residents in 2012 were more likely to identify with the Democratic Party than with the Republicans. That preference has grown gradually over the past 30 years, although in 2009 (by 48% to 31%), the Democratic advantage was greater than today. In the surrounding counties this year, in contrast, 51% said they felt closer to the Republican Party and just 37% would choose the Democrats.
- In the other nine counties, even as Houston’s burgeoning diversity continues to spread throughout the region, 68% of the respondents were Anglos; only 12% were blacks and 12% Latinos. The comparable figures for the Harris County

respondents were 34% Anglo, 21% African American and 38% Latino. Party affiliation, of course, is powerfully associated with ethnic background: In this year’s survey, 69% of all the Anglo respondents who had a political party preference were Republicans, whereas 79% of blacks identified with the Democrats, as did 62% of Latinos and 54% of Asians. A big part of the attitudinal differences by county are attributable to these demographic patterns.

General conclusions: The new progrowth agenda for the Houston region in a new century

On Feb. 29, the Kinder Institute released a 24-minute film: “Interesting Times.” The film provides a vivid depiction of the findings from 30 years of systematic survey research. It documents through the Houston experience three of the most critical issues of our time, issues that will have much to do with determining this region’s prospects for success in the high-technology, knowledge-based, fully global economy of the 21st century:

- This city will need to nurture a far more educated workforce and fashion policies that will reduce the growing inequalities and prevent the rise of a new urban underclass.
- To attract the most innovative companies and talented individuals, the region needs to grow into a much more environmentally and aesthetically appealing urban destination, and build the research centers that will fuel the engines of growth in the knowledge economy.
- If Houston is to flourish in the years ahead, it will need to develop into a truly successful, inclusive, equitable and united multiethnic society, one in which real equality of opportunity is made available to all area residents and all of its communities are empowered to participate as full partners in shaping the direction of change for the region.

As the film asserts, Houston is one of the places where the American future is going to be worked out.

For more information on “Interesting Times” or to request a screening of the film, please visit the institute’s website at www.kinder.rice.edu.

The mission of the Kinder Institute for Urban Research is to advance understanding of the most important issues facing Houston and other leading urban centers. The institute conducts scientific research, sponsors educational programs, and engages in public outreach to foster the development of more humane and sustainable cities. The primary goal of the institute is to use its research and outreach programs to inspire informed decision-making and effective urban policy, both in the Houston area and beyond.



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