

***HOUSTON'S ETHNIC COMMUNITIES, THIRD EDITION:
Updated and Expanded to Include the First-Ever Survey
of the Asian Communities***

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c. 1996**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Two Converging Revolutions

The Houston region today is undergoing two far-reaching transformations, one in the composition of its population, the other in the foundations of its economy. As a main destination for the new immigration, this community is rapidly becoming one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse in America. At the same time, because of worldwide competition and advances in computers and robotics, the many good blue-collar jobs that Houston's oil-based economy generated for almost a century have largely disappeared. This has made it much more difficult for poor citizens of all ethnic backgrounds to work their way out of poverty.

Under the notorious National Origins Quota Act in effect from 1924 to 1965, immigration slowed to a trickle, Asians were effectively banned entirely, and 98 percent of all new visas were allocated to Europeans. In 1965, the law was finally changed. Far more generous limits were established and visas were now allocated not by national origin, but on the basis of family reunification, occupational skills, and proven vulnerability to persecution. After 1965, the number of immigrants to America grew rapidly, and the proportions among them who were Europeans fell precipitously.

By 1990, the U.S. census counted 19.8 million foreign-born residents, the largest number in American history. Of the foreign-born, 44 percent had arrived in the decade of the 1980s, and 83 percent of these recent immigrants came from Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean. The Asian population in America has not only grown substantially in the past quarter century; it has also changed in its composition. In 1970, Japanese Americans comprised 41 percent of all Asian Americans; by 1990, only 12 percent were of Japanese origin. Southeast Asians were only 8 percent of the Asian American population in 1980, but they accounted for 40 percent of all Asian immigration during that decade.

Five of America's largest cities are at the forefront of these demographic transformations: New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami, and Houston. With the ending of the Texas oil boom in 1982, the Anglo population of Harris County effectively stabilized, but the region continued to grow by 17 percent during the 1980s. Between 1980 and 1990, the net increase in the number of Anglos in Harris County amounted to less than 1 percent, and the Black population grew by only 12.5 percent. The number of Hispanics, in contrast,

after having doubled during the 1970s, expanded by another 75 percent in the 1980s. And Houston's much smaller Asian population grew by 129 percent.

At the time of the 1990 census, Harris County's population was 54 percent Anglo, 23 percent Hispanic, 19 percent African American, and 4 percent Asian. The comparable figures for the city of Houston in 1990 were: 41, 28, 28 and 4 percent. Census projections for the current decade anticipate that the figures for the city itself in the year 2000 will be 39 percent Hispanic, 29 percent Anglo, 25 percent Black, and 7 percent Asian.

This ongoing ethnic transformation is occurring at a time of widespread feelings of personal vulnerability and economic insecurity. The income gap between the most affluent Americans and everyone else is now wider than it has been at any time since the end of World War II, and economic outcomes are more decisively determined by educational credentials. In this period of rapid change, a systematic scientific assessment of the life circumstances and perspectives of residents from Houston's four major ethnic communities is especially useful. Objective knowledge can correct myths and help to build the bridges of mutual understanding that a diverse community will need in its efforts to construct a common future.

This report presents the findings of the most comprehensive study yet undertaken to explore through systematic survey research the similarities and differences in experiences, attitudes, and beliefs among Houston's four largest ethnic populations. Using a carefully crafted questionnaire, translated into Spanish, Vietnamese, Cantonese, Mandarin, and Korean, systematic telephone interviews were conducted with scientifically selected representative samples (numbering from 429 to 500) of Harris County residents from the region's Anglo, African American, Hispanic, and Asian communities.

Differences in Age, Patterns of Immigration, and Socioeconomic Status

The surveys make it clear that the "aging" of America is a division along ethnic lines as well as generational ones. Anglos are considerably older than those in the other communities: 44 percent of Anglo adults are age 45 or older; this is true of just 29 percent of Blacks, 25 percent of Asians, and 19 percent of Hispanics. At the other end of the spectrum, 40 percent of all Hispanic adults are under the age of 30, as are 31 percent of Asians and Blacks, but only 18 percent of Anglos. The younger adults who will be primarily responsible for the vitality and competitiveness of region's economy in the twenty-first century are thus disproportionately Black, Hispanic, and Asian.

Virtually all of the population growth that Harris County has experienced in the past fifteen years is due to the arrival of foreign immigrants, primarily from Asia and Latin America. The surveys indicate that 90 percent of all Asian adults now living in Harris County are first-generation immigrants, as are 56 percent of all Hispanic adults. More than 60 percent of the Hispanics and 95 percent of the Asians report that both of their parents were born outside the United States.

At a time when educational attainment is an increasingly decisive determinant of economic success, the academic deficits the data reveal in Houston's Black and Hispanic communities loom large indeed. More than 40 percent of all Hispanic adults in Harris County are high school dropouts and another one-fourth have no more than a high school diploma. Only 11 percent of Hispanics and 25 percent of Blacks have completed all four years of college. In sharp contrast, three-fourths of Anglo adults have had some college education, and 41 percent have achieved at least a B.A. degree.

In even sharper contrast, 56 percent of all Asian adults living in Harris County today have college degrees, including 20 percent who have done graduate work beyond college. The success so many Asian immigrants have achieved in America has given rise to the myth of Asians as the "model minority." This widely held image is based on the assumption is that Asians arrived in this country with little money and few skills and that they succeeded solely by virtue of hard work, high intelligence, and strong family values. Hence, at least by implication, African Americans and Hispanics have only themselves to blame if they have not achieved equal success.

The data make it clear, however, that Asians have been relatively successful in Houston primarily because they come from families in their countries of origin whose educational and occupational attainments far exceed the average for native-born Americans. Indeed, the Asians who grew up in their countries of origin and came here as adults have even higher levels of education than do those who grew up in America. When respondents' current occupations are compared with those they report their fathers had, the data show that there has actually been much more upward mobility from one generation to the next among Houston's Anglos, Blacks, and Hispanics than in the Asian community itself.

The myth of the "model minority" not only overlooks the class advantages enjoyed by most of Houston's Asian immigrants. It also lumps together in a single stereotype individuals from 27 different countries, with a wide variety of languages and cultural traditions; and ranging from professionals who came to America under the occupational preference provisions of the immigration laws on the one hand, to poverty-stricken refugees fleeing persecution in Southeast Asia or rural China on the other. The myth thus glosses over the fact that large segments of the Asian population in America are far from prosperous, and makes it less likely that impoverished Asians will be given the help that others receive.

Comparisons among the largest Asian nationalities in Houston confirm the importance of family backgrounds in accounting for the relative success or failure of the different Asian communities. The occupational profiles of fathers and sons or daughters are remarkably similar within each of the Asian communities, indicating little or no upward mobility at all: 44 percent of Houston's Indians and Pakistanis are in professional or managerial positions, but so were 47 percent of their fathers; 28 percent of the Vietnamese have low-skilled production or laboring jobs, as did 30 percent of their fathers.

The evidence points persuasively to a narrowing of economic opportunities in modern society for those who are trying to compete without the requisite educational credentials.

Houstonians of any ethnic background who do not have college educations or high levels of technical training have little chance to succeed in today's economy, no matter how admirable their values or how strong their determination. In a sad break with the traditional immigrant experience earlier in this century, the surveys indicate that today's Hispanics who are the third generation in their family to live in the United States are not staying in school longer than second-generation Hispanics, nor earning higher wages in more desirable jobs. Too many are consigned to lives that offer little hope for a better future.

Families, Economic Outlooks and Political Perspectives

The surveys confirm the decline in marriage among African Americans and the rise of fatherless families. They also indicate that Asians are more likely to live in family units consisting of several adult relatives. The greater "traditionalism" on the part of Hispanics and Asians with regard to the changing roles of women is attributable almost entirely to the more conservative attitudes of Hispanic and Asian men. Asians are generally the most optimistic of the four communities in their outlooks on the American future.

It seems remarkable, in light of the undeniable narrowing of economic opportunities in the American economy today, that so many Houstonians continue to assert a firm belief in the traditional American creed of economic individualism--the belief that it is up to each individual to succeed or fail on his or her own merits and that government has no business trying to shape the outcomes of social and economic competition. Thus even as they express increasing support for the principles of ethnic tolerance, many respondents, particularly in the Anglo community, nevertheless oppose government programs that are intended to implement those principles by promoting greater economic and social equality. As Anglos become more affluent, they are more likely than less successful Anglos to believe that opportunities are equally available to all, and they are less likely to empathize with those who have not succeeded. Similar but weaker trends are found among Hispanics and Asians. Among Blacks, in contrast, there is no relationship at all between household income and attitudes toward government programs that are intended to promote greater economic equality.

African Americans, even as they succeed in their own lives, remain firmly committed to public initiatives designed to improve the lives of the poor. They are also more pessimistic than less affluent Blacks about the American future and more likely to report that they have personally felt discriminated against in Houston.

Since the two American political parties differ importantly in their views on the role of government in affecting economic outcomes, it is not surprising to discover that Anglos in Houston are predominantly Republicans and Blacks overwhelmingly Democrats. Asians generally lean toward the Republican Party, Hispanics toward the Democrats. Both of these communities are still today less likely to participate in the political process. The new ethnic diversity is being experienced first in the classrooms of America; it will be felt next in the workplace; and slowly but inevitably it will be reflected in the ballot box as well.

Public Assessments of the New Diversity

Anglos tend to differ consistently from Asians and Hispanics, and most of all from African Americans, in their conviction that discrimination against minorities no longer exists in this country. They therefore believe that government action giving preferential assistance to some groups over others is unjustifiable. Anglos are also distinctive in their support for harsh measures designed to reform the welfare system or to discourage illegal immigration, and in their overwhelming belief that the problems facing America today are primarily the result of a decline in moral values rather than of economic pressures.

Anglos and Blacks are more opposed than Hispanics or Asians to continued high levels of immigration and more convinced that the new immigration has had a negative impact on the American economy. Respondents were asked to evaluate the relations that generally exist in the Houston area between members of their community and each of the other three ethnic populations. African Americans perceive the most tension in their relationships with other communities. The lowest ratings of all were given to Black-Asian relationships; Anglo-Black relations were next, followed by Hispanic-Asian relations. The most positive ratings were given by Anglos and Asians to the relations that exist between their two communities.

The same basic anxieties seem to be responsible for the perception of tensions in interethnic relationships regardless of which groups are involved. Economic anxieties, high levels of empathy for the poor and minorities, the sense that opportunities for success in America are narrowing, and heightened concerns about crime and immigration appear to combine in shaping expressions of concern about interethnic relations in Houston. Conversely, those who generally feel satisfied about economic opportunities and about the overall quality of life in the Houston area are also likely to give positive ratings to intergroup relationships.

While anti-immigrant sentiments are readily apparent in this region, they are less pronounced here than in other areas that are experiencing similar demographic transformations. The annual Houston surveys indicate that respondents in recent years generally express increasingly positive evaluations of interethnic relationships in Houston. Area residents from all four ethnic populations clearly believe that Houston's increasing ethnic diversity, brought about by the new immigration, will be a distinctly positive asset and a source of strength for the community as a whole. These generally positive sentiments, if they are sustained, can help this region to become a model for the nation of successful transition into a multiethnic world-class center of international commerce in the global economy.

Conclusions

It is well known that the most effective way to reduce interethnic hostility is to provide people from different communities with opportunities to learn and work together as equals. Houston will clearly need to encourage the development of many more neighborhoods, workplaces, religious groups, and schools that reflect the racial and ethnic diver-

sity of the wider community and that can serve as exemplars of positive intercultural interaction and mutual understanding.

No efforts to improve interethnic relations will ultimately succeed, however, unless Houston's citizens are also prepared to face difficult and critical issues. Ways must be found soon to create many more good blue-collar jobs, to develop more equitable and effective health and welfare policies, and to provide more adequate funding for the educational institutions and social agencies that serve large portions of the city's poor. In the current environment, this will constitute a formidable political challenge.

Affluent Anglos are more likely than other Harris County residents to be living in the largely segregated and protected suburban communities that surround the city of Houston. Many are able to provide their children with private schools, private recreation, private child-support systems, and private security. They are unlikely to believe that they stand to benefit personally and directly from major increases in public investments.

In addition, the citizens who are most likely to vote or to contribute to political campaigns are disproportionately white, middle-class, and middle-aged. They are generally less inclined than minority and younger voters to support new social programs designed to help other people's children. And periods of economic stress and financial insecurity rarely occasion public eagerness for new and costly initiatives designed to help those who are less fortunate.

Without decisive public and private intervention, the income gaps between rich and poor, educated and deprived, Anglos and minorities, will continue to widen. It is not yet clear that Houston will be able to muster the unprecedented degree of sustained commitment that will be required to prevent further expansion of the inequalities that divide communities and intensify intergroup hostility. Only through a determined and effective long-term community-wide effort will this region truly be able to capitalize on its diversity and ensure that all of its citizens are prepared for lives of common purpose, personal fulfillment, and positive leadership in the new millennium that lies ahead.