

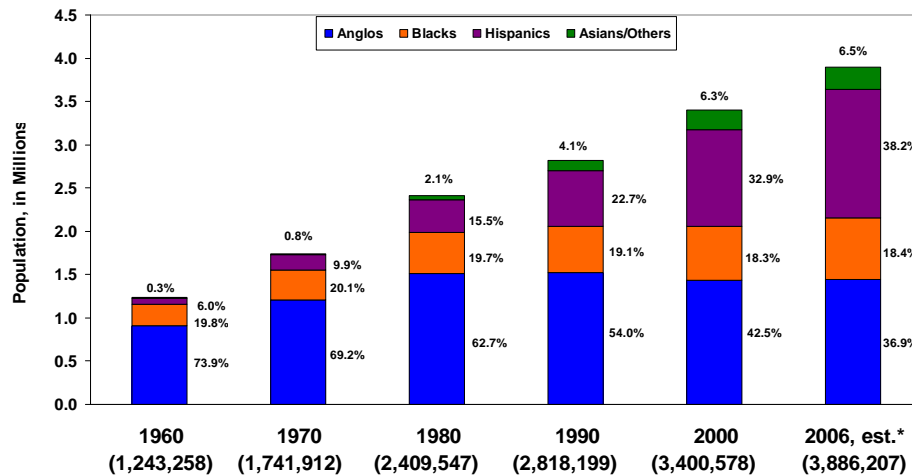
An Historical Overview of Immigration in Houston, Based on the Houston Area Survey

Rice University’s Stephen Klineberg and the Center for Houston’s Future

This paper presents a summary of the history of immigration in Houston, based on research conducted through the Houston Area Survey. Its goal is to present a brief but accurate description of Houston’s new immigrants, an overview of the U.S. policies that encouraged their arrival, and the influence of the new immigrant populations on the development of this region. This paper summarizes two reports by Stephen Klineberg on the Houston research: “Public Perceptions in Remarkable Times: Tracking Change Through 24 Years of Houston Surveys” (2005) and “The Changing Face of Houston: Tracking the Shifts in Immigration Attitudes Through 27 Years of Houston Surveys” (2008).

The 1980’s marked a critical turning point in the demographic changes of Houston. The Anglo population of Harris County increased by 31 percent in the 1960s and by another 25 percent in the 1970s. After the collapse of the oil boom in 1982, however, the county’s Anglo population actually stopped growing and then declined. Yet the region grew by another 17 percent during the 1980s and by 21 percent in the 1990s.

FIGURE 1: THE DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSFORMATIONS OF HARRIS COUNTY (1960-2006)



Source: U.S. Census (www.census.gov); classifications based on Texas State Data Center conventions; total populations are given in parentheses; *from the 2006 Official Population Estimates.

The growth of Harris County’s population during the past quarter-century is thus primarily due to immigration from abroad, as well as to the birth of new babies, often the children of earlier immigrants and of U.S. born Latinos. During the decade of the 1990s, as the Anglo population was falling by more than 6 percent, the African-American population grew by 22 percent, the Latino population by 74 percent, and the Asian population by 76 percent. In the census estimates for 2006, only 37 percent of the 3.9 million people now living in Harris County were Anglos, and more than 38 percent were Hispanics.

What accounts for these dramatic transformations in the ethnic composition of Houston and – to only a slightly lesser extent – of Texas and throughout America? Between 1924 and 1965, under the notorious and viciously racist “National Origins Quota Act,” immigration into America slowed to a trickle, and explicit preference was accorded to Northern Europeans. With this legislation in effect, 98 percent of all immigrant visas went to Europeans alone. In 1965, the Immigration and Nationality Act Amendments (a.k.a. the Hart-Celler Act) opened immigration to the rest of the world for the first time in the twentieth century. More generous limits were established, and visas were no longer allocated on the basis of ethnicity or national origin. Preferences were now to be based primarily on family reunification, with additional priority given to professional skills and proven vulnerability to persecution.

The act’s proponents did not expect it to bring much change either in the quantity of immigrants or in their composition, but the effects were dramatic. Soon after the new law was enacted, the number of newcomers in America grew rapidly, ending the fifty-year hiatus on large-scale immigration, and the European proportion fell precipitously. During the 1990s, more than 12 million immigrants came to America, of whom only 11 percent were from Europe: 88 percent of the new immigration was coming from Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Caribbean. The United States, which throughout all of its history was an amalgam of European nationalities, is suddenly becoming a microcosm of the world — the first nation in history that can say, “We are a free people, and now we come from everywhere!”

Age and Ethnicity in Houston Today

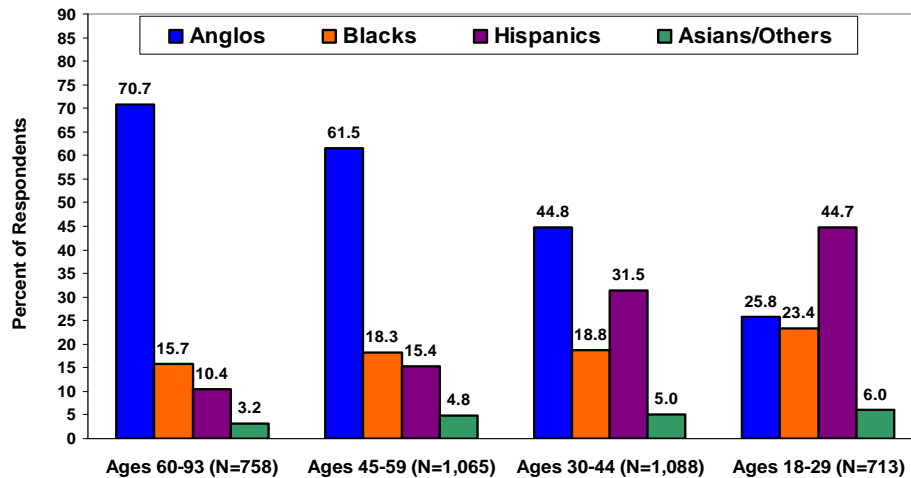
The region’s ethnic changes are particularly dramatic when age is taken into account. More than 40 percent of all Houston’s Latino and Asian immigrants are recent arrivals, having come here since 1995, and migrants in general are likely to be younger than long-term residents. Across America, today’s seniors are predominantly Anglos, as are the 76 million baby boomers, who were born between 1946 and 1964 and are now aged 44 to 62. In the next 25 to 30 years, the number of Americans over the age of 65 will literally double. Meanwhile, the younger cohorts who will replace the baby-boom generation are disproportionately non-Anglo and considerably less privileged. The “aging of America” is thus a division not only by generation, but also by socioeconomic status and ethnic background. Nowhere is this ongoing transformation more clearly seen than in the age distributions of the Harris County population.

As Figure 2 indicates, of all the residents of Harris County who are sixty years old or older, 71 percent are Anglos and only 10 percent are Hispanics. Of all those aged eighteen to twenty-nine, however, 45 percent are Hispanics and just 26 percent are Anglos. More than two-thirds of Houston’s young adults, who will be the citizens and voters, the workers and taxpayers of Harris County in the twenty-first century, are African American and Hispanic. Furthermore, of all the 199,534 children currently enrolled in HISD classes, from kindergarten to senior year in high school, 60 percent are Latinos and 28 percent are African Americans.

These are the populations that are by far the most likely to be living in poverty (fully 79 percent of all HISD students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch programs), and these

are the families that have been the least well served historically by the city's educational institutions and its social-service and health-care delivery systems. Clearly, if the socio-economic disparities with Anglos are not reduced, if too many of Houston's "minority" youth remain unprepared to succeed in the knowledge economy of the twenty-first century, it is difficult to envision a prosperous future for the region as a whole. On the other hand, it is equally clear that if the education and income gaps can be bridged, Houston will be in a position to capitalize fully on the advantages of having a young, multi-cultural and multi-lingual workforce, and will be well positioned for competitive success in the global economy of the twenty-first century.

FIGURE 2: THE PROPORTIONS IN FOUR AGE GROUPS WHO ARE ANGLO, BLACK, LATINO, AND ASIAN OR OTHER (2002-2007, COMBINED)

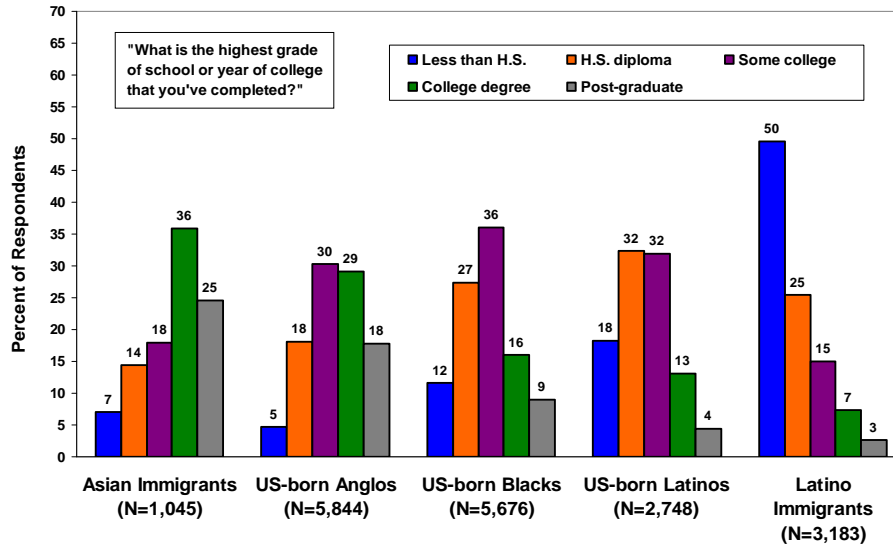


Polarized Educational Attainment among the Immigrants

The current immigration differs from all previous immigrant streams in American history, not only in its predominantly non-European origins, but also in its striking socio-economic disparities. One group (mostly from Asia and Africa) is coming to Houston and America with higher levels of educational credentials and professional skills than ever before in the history of American immigration. Another, larger group (mostly Hispanic) is arriving with striking educational deficits relative to the rest of the population.

As indicated in Figure 3, the two Houston Area Asian Surveys (conducted in 1995 and in 2002), which reached representative samples of 500 Asian residents in Harris County, found that 61 percent of all the Asian immigrants in the Houston area have college or postgraduate degrees, compared to just 47 percent of the U.S.-born Anglos. In sharp contrast, more than 50 percent of the Hispanic immigrants in the county, who constitute almost 60 percent of all Hispanic adults currently residing in the region, do not have high school diplomas. Fewer than 10 percent have college degrees.

FIGURE 3: EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT IN FIVE HOUSTON COMMUNITIES (1994-2007)



The success that so many Asian immigrants have achieved in Houston and America is primarily due to the fact that they come from families in their countries of origin whose educational and occupational attainments far exceed the average for U.S.-born Anglos. The immigrants from Africa have come with even higher levels of education than the Asians. Fully 69 percent of the African immigrants (most coming from Nigeria) have college degrees and 35 percent of them have post-graduate educations.

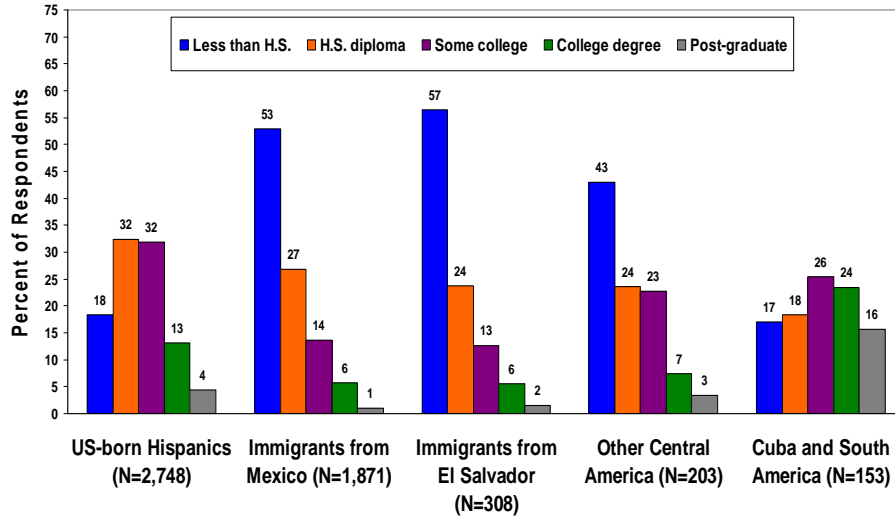
Why are the immigrants from Africa and from most of Asia coming to America with levels of education and professional credentials that are so much higher than those from Mexico, Central America, or Southeast Asia? The answer is that the restrictive immigration laws before reform in 1965 declared Asians to be “inassimilable aliens”; they were effectively banned from coming to America, and Africans were never allowed before 1965 to immigrate freely. As a result, after the restrictive laws were changed, entry into America through family reunification was unavailable to these potential immigrants (although it would be the primary avenue of legal immigration for Mexican nationals).

As we have seen, the only other ways to be eligible for preferential access after 1965 were by virtue of refugee status (the Vietnamese), by qualifying as “professionals of exceptional ability” (Asian Indians, Chinese, Africans), or by having occupational skills that were sorely needed and in demonstrably short supply in the United States (e.g., Filipino nurses). The unprecedented socioeconomic disparities among today’s immigrant communities reflect the checkered history of American immigration policy.

Figure 4 indicates further that the immigrants from Cuba and South America, unlike those from Mexico and Central America, are coming to Houston with considerably higher levels of education than the U.S.-born Hispanics. Fully 36 percent of Cuban and South American immigrants have college degrees, compared to just 16 percent of the Latinos who were born in America. These more highly skilled immigrants, however, repre-

sent just 6 percent of Houston's Hispanic immigrant population. In contrast, the majority of immigrants from Mexico and Central America do not have high school diplomas. According to the Houston surveys and consistent with the U.S. census, fully 72 percent of all the Latino immigrants in Harris County come from Mexico, another 13 percent are from El Salvador, and 8 percent from elsewhere in Central America.

FIGURE 4: EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT IN FIVE LATINO COMMUNITIES (1994-2007)



Thus of all the new immigrants into Houston and America, the very least skilled and the most vulnerable are those arriving from Mexico and Central America. The children of these Latino immigrants are generally attending overcrowded, underfunded inner-city schools. The parents are usually working from dawn to dusk, unable to earn enough to lift their families out of poverty, and with few of the resources needed to help their children succeed in the public schools.

Unless the wider Houston community is prepared to offer the kind of assistance and support that will provide these young people with access to high-quality pre-school and after-school programs and encourage them to continue through high school into some level of advanced education, they run the risk of being relegated to the same menial jobs now held by their parents. There can be little doubt that the ways the lives of Houston's Latino immigrants and their children unfold will profoundly shape the region's future.

Immigrant Assimilation

Americans have never been very comfortable when large numbers of newly-arrived immigrants were in their midst, whether it was the Irish in the 1840s, the Germans who settled in New Braunfels at the end of the nineteenth century, or the Italian, Greek, and Polish peasants who came here in vast numbers at the beginnings of the twentieth. During the middle period of the last century (from 1915 to 1965), as we have seen, immigration slowed dramatically and was no longer a contentious issue. Now suddenly, in just the

past two decades or so, America has become a “nation of immigrants” again. It ought not to be surprising that anti-immigrant sentiments are surging once again across the country.

Public opinion polls and the media indicate that increasing numbers of Americans (and Houstonians as well) appear to believe that the current immigration is producing a rapidly growing population of inassimilable foreigners. They worry that English will soon lose its status as the nation’s language. They are convinced that poverty will grow, placing ever-greater pressure on America’s already-overburdened taxpayers, and that the country is being swamped by a rising tide it cannot absorb. All the accumulating evidence from the Houston Area Survey, however, points to a quite different set of conclusions.

Over the years, the Houston surveys have interviewed a sufficient number of Latino immigrants to be able to draw reliable comparisons between the immigrants who have lived in the U.S. for nine years or less, those who have been in America for 10 to 19 years, and those who have been here for 20 years or longer. We can compare each of these groups on measures of socioeconomic status (Figure 5) and in their degree of “Americanization” (Figure 6), and contrast them with the U.S.-born Latinos whose parents were born abroad (the 2nd generation) and with the U.S.-born Latinos who report that both of their parents were also born in this country (the 3rd+ generation).

FIGURE 5: MEASURES OF SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS AMONG LATINO IMMIGRANTS BY TIME IN U.S. AND BY GENERATION (1994-2007)

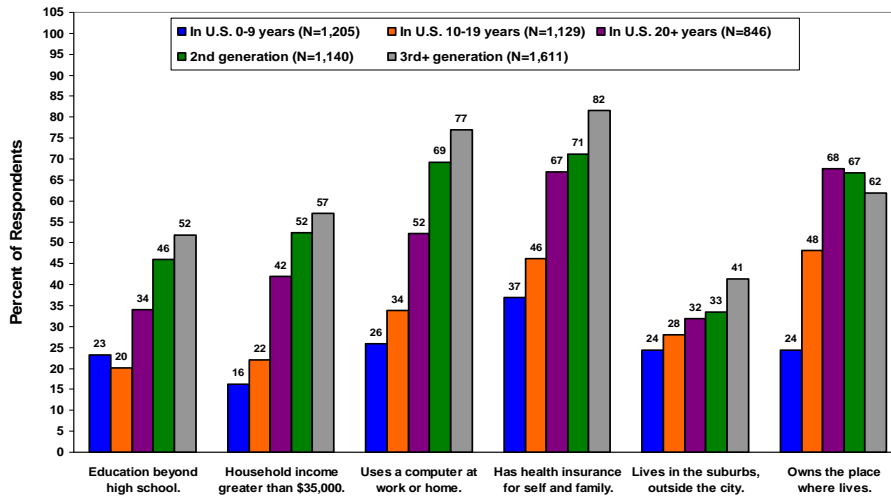
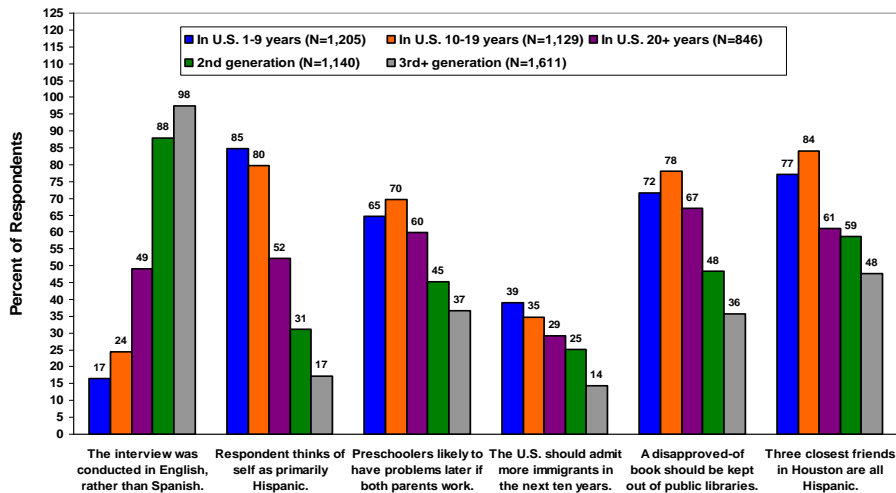


Figure 5 explores a variety of indicators of socioeconomic status. On each and every one of these measures, there is a near-perfect linear relationship between the amount of time the immigrants or their families have lived in the U.S. and their degree of upward mobility. The percent of households with incomes above \$35,000, for example, grows from 16 percent among the most recent immigrants, to 22 percent and to 42 percent among the immigrants who have lived in the U.S. for more than 9 and more than 19 years; the numbers rise to 52 percent in the second generation and to 57 percent in the third generation.

Similarly, the proportion of Latinos with access to a computer in their home or place of business increases progressively from 26 percent for the most recent immigrants to 77 percent in the third generation. The percent with health insurance rises from 37 to 82 percent, the likelihood of living in the suburbs rather than the city grows from 24 to 41 percent, and when asked if they own or are renting the place where they live, the Latino immigrants who have lived in the U.S. for 20 years or longer are slightly more likely (at 68 percent) to own their own homes than even the U.S.-born Latinos. In sum, despite the narrowing of the “blue-collar pathway” to economic security, the new immigrants appear to be moving up and out of poverty as quickly as the Italian and Greek immigrants did at the turn of the last century.

Figure 6 shows further that with each immigrant cohort and across a wide variety of areas, “Americanization” increases as well. Once again, all of the evidence points compellingly to a progressive movement into the American cultural mainstream. Thus, for example, the proportion of Latinos who conducted the interviews in English rather than Spanish grows from 17 percent among the most recent immigrants to 49 percent of those who have lived in the U.S. for 20 years or more, to 98 percent (!) of the third-generation. The numbers who think of themselves as “primarily Hispanic” drops from 85 percent among the most recent immigrants to 17 percent in the third generation

FIGURE 6: INDICATORS OF ASSIMILATION AMONG LATINO IMMIGRANTS BY TIME IN THE U.S. AND BY GENERATION (1994-2007)



The attitude questions also reflect an increasing endorsement of the more secular and “modern” mainstream positions. The longer the Latino immigrants or their families have lived in this country, the less inclined they are to agree with the claim that “preschool children are likely to have problems later in life if both of their parents work,” or that “a book that most people disapprove of should be kept out of the public libraries.” The percent urging that more immigrants be admitted into the U.S. declines from 39 percent among the most recent newcomers to just 14 percent in the third generation. When asked to name their three closest friends in Houston, the proportion who report that all three are Hispanic falls from 84 percent among the Latino immigrants who have lived in the U.S.

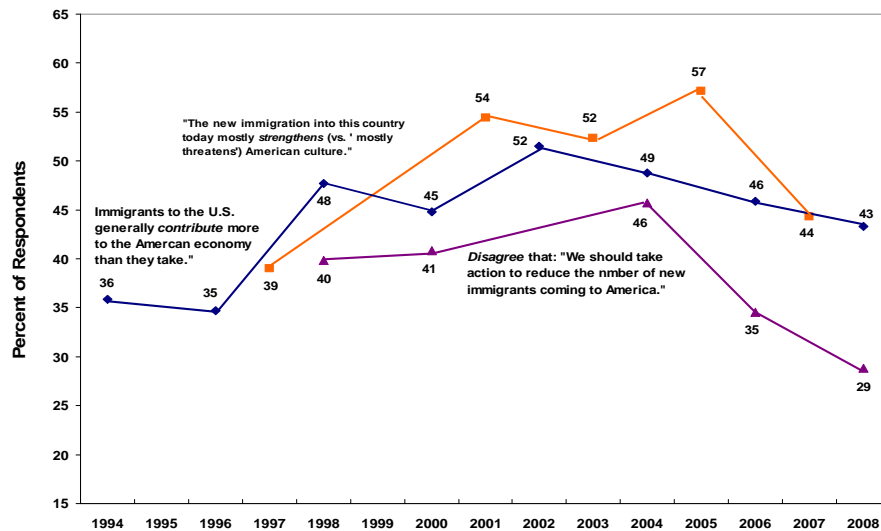
for 10 to 19 years, to just 61 percent of those who have been in the country for 20 years or more, and to 59 and 48 percent among the U.S.-born Latinos.

These are compelling indications of movement into the American cultural mainstream. The increasing internalization of the language and culture of America is as much a function of length of time in this country among Latinos today as it was a century ago for the Germans in Texas or the Swedes in Minnesota. The public's fear of being swamped by inassimilable foreigners is based on impressions formed from the media, including talk radio and Cable TV, and on observations of newly arrived Latino immigrants, without the ability to see how immigrant families actually fare over time.

The Rise of Anti-Immigrant Attitudes

Through the year 2005, the Houston surveys recorded growing approval of the burgeoning immigration that has so decisively been transforming the ethnic composition of this region and revitalizing the local economy. In 2006 and 2007, all the relevant measures showed declining support, and they have declined further in this year's survey. As seen in Figure 7, the proportion saying that the new immigration mostly "strengthens American culture," grew from 39 percent in 1997, to 54 percent in 2001, to 57 percent in 2005, and then dropped dramatically to 44 percent in 2007. Conversely, the numbers saying that the increasing immigration mostly "threatens American culture" increased from 31 percent in 2005 to 43 percent in 2007.

FIGURE 7: CHANGING ATTITUDES TOWARD IMMIGRATION IN AMERICA (1994–2008)

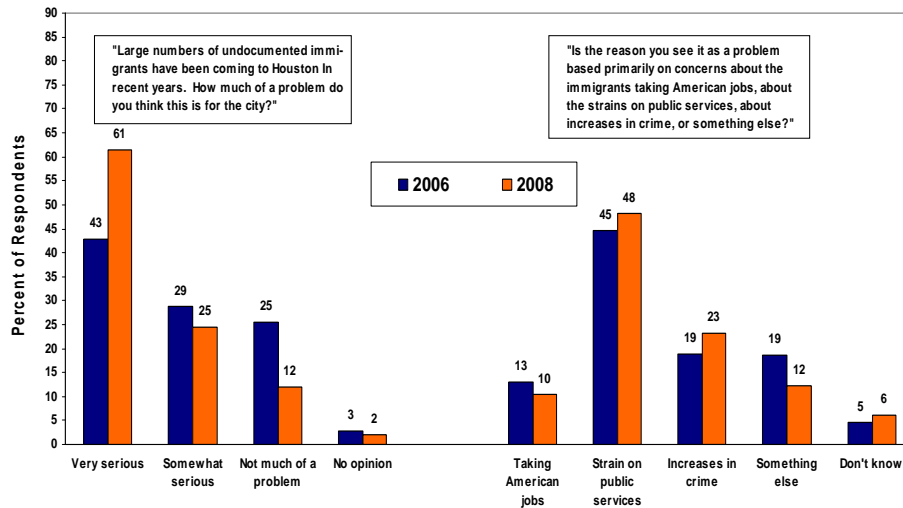


The proportion of respondents who *disagreed* with the suggestion that “we should take action to reduce the number of new immigrants coming to America” grew slowly from 40 percent in 1998 to 46 percent in 2004. The numbers rejecting the call for more restrictions on immigration dropped to 35 percent in 2006 and to 29 percent in 2008. The percent who *agreed* that we should take action to reduce the number of new immigrants, grew from 48 percent in 2004, to 58 percent in 2006, and to 63 percent in this year's survey. Similarly, the proportion of area residents who believed that immigrants generally

contribute more to the American economy than they take, grew from 39 percent in 1997 to 52 percent in 2002, and then fell gradually to 49 percent in 2004, to 46 percent in 2006, and to 43 percent today.

Figure 8 indicates further that the percent of area residents who believe that the influx of undocumented immigrants constitutes a “very serious” problem for Houston grew from 43 percent in 2006 to 61 percent today. Consistently, in both years, the reason for the concern has to do with “strains on public services (such as schools and hospitals),” rather than worries about “the immigrants taking American jobs” or about “increases in crime.” In addition, respondents were asked for the first time in this year’s survey to indicate their feelings about eight different groups in the Houston area (including Muslims and Gays), using a 10-point scale — with “9” or “10” indicating warm feelings, and “1” or “2” indicating unfavorable feelings toward the group. The highest ratings were given to Asians (mean = 8.10). By far the lowest ratings were given to “undocumented immigrants” (mean = 4.07).

FIGURE 8: BELIEFS ABOUT UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS (IN 2006 AND IN 2008)

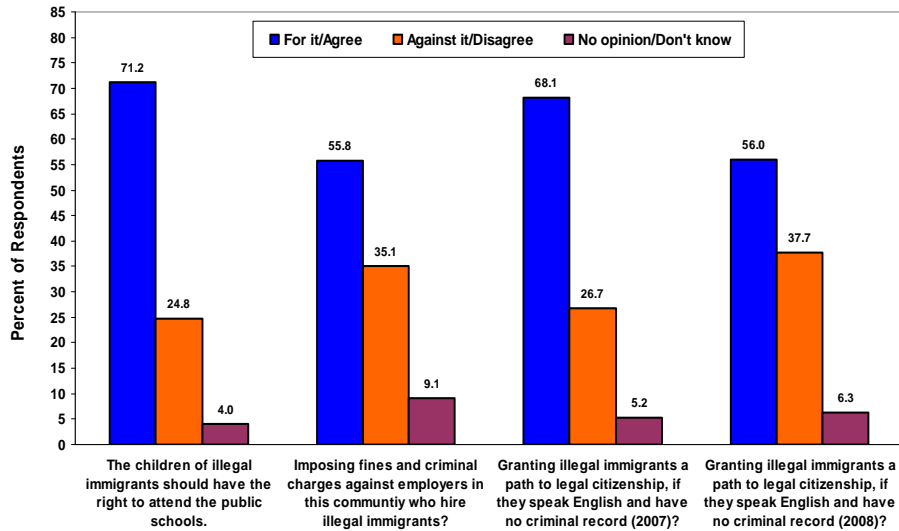


Furthermore, as seen in Figure 9, the percent of area residents who favor “granting illegal immigrants a path to legal citizenship if they speak English and have no criminal record” dropped from 68 percent in last year’s survey to 56 percent in 2008. Two other questions asked in 2007 reflect the underlying ambivalence about immigration that pervades American outlooks. By 71 to 25 percent, the survey respondents in 2007 agreed that “the children of illegal immigrants should have the right to attend the public schools.” At the same time, by 56 to 35 percent, area residents were also in support of “imposing fines and criminal charges against employers in this community who hire illegal immigrants.”

Because of this deep ambivalence, the messages conveyed by community leaders and the media will be particularly consequential with regard to immigration issues. The voices that predominate in the media, on Cable-TV, talk radio, and the Internet, will influence the weight the public gives to the various dimensions of these complex issues. What we

hear from these sources disproportionately emphasizes the negative aspects of the new immigration, and gives very little attention to the evidence of progressive assimilation and upward mobility. The simmering anti-immigrant backlash of recent years, already fueled by concerns over the large numbers of new immigrants coming into our communities, has been stoked further by the messages in the media.

FIGURE 9: POLICIES TOWARD “ILLEGAL” IMMIGRANTS IN THE U.S. (2007 AND 2008)



As the older Anglos in the Houston area move inexorably into retirement, the young people, who will be the region’s citizens and workers, taxpayers and voters, will be increasingly non-Anglo and increasingly Hispanic. How the public responds to that diversity will do much to determine whether the region’s ongoing demographic transformation will become a significant asset for this port-city as it positions itself for prosperity in the global economy, or whether it will instead become a major liability, reducing rather than enhancing the region’s competitiveness and setting the stage for serious social conflict. It will be important to continue tracking the evolution of area residents’ attitudes and beliefs with regard to these consequential issues in the years ahead.
