The 32nd Kinder Institute
Houston Area Survey

Tracking Responses to the Economic and Demographic Transformations
Proud to support the Kinder Institute for Urban Research on the release of the 32nd Kinder Institute Houston Area Survey.

Bank of America Merrill Lynch is honored to join in recognizing your extraordinary achievements.
Through 32 years of systematic research, the annual Kinder Institute 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. No city 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 is now reaching representative samples of residents from the entire 10-county Houston metropolitan region. The 1,304 respondents who were interviewed in 2013 included 313 (24%) from outside Harris County; and 34% of all the survey participants were contacted by cell phone. The interviews were conducted between Feb. 7 and March 6 by Social Science Research Solutions (SSRS).

The responses from all 32 annual surveys are “weighted” to ensure that the data reflect as accurately as possible the actual populations of all area residents across the years. The findings reported here, unless otherwise indicated, present the views of the respondents from Harris County only, asking how the responses obtained in 2013 differ from those that were given to identical questions by previous representative samples of Harris County residents.
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% in 2010 and 8.4% in 2011, to 7.3% in 2012 and to an estimated 6.8% 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 from 57% in 2008 to 45% in 2009 and to 35% in both 2010 and 2011. Then, as the economy improved, the 2012 survey recorded a significant turnaround, back to 48% giving positive ratings, and then another major increase, to 58% in this year’s survey.

The proportion of survey participants who spontaneously named unemployment, poverty, or the cost of living when asked what they thought was “the biggest problem facing people in the Houston area today,” jumped dramatically from 14% in 2008 to 44% in 2009, and then held steady, at 39% in 2011 and 37% in 2012. The number citing the economy as Houston’s biggest problem dropped to just 26% in this year’s survey; 21% named traffic and 23% said crime was the greatest concern.

As the economy has improved since 2011, the latest survey recorded a significant turnaround with 58% of respondents today giving ratings of “excellent” or “good.”
Houston has one of the strongest job markets in the nation, but the “rising tide” no longer lifts all boats. The gap between rich and poor has been expanding across America, predicated above all else on access to quality education, and the public understands this. In the 2013 survey 73% agreed that, to succeed 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.”

As a result of this new reality, there has been no change, even as the overall economy has improved, in the proportion of area residents who report that they have been doing better financially during the past 12 months. The surveys also indicate no lessening in the proportion (it was 24% in 2013) who said that they have had difficulty during the past year buying the groceries to feed their families.

The number of survey participants who reported that their personal economic circumstances had been getting better in the past few years dropped from 45% in 2007 to just 21% in 2010. In 2011, 28% reported improving conditions, but there has been no change since then: The figure was 26% in this year’s survey. Similarly, there has been no turnaround in the respondents’ outlooks on their personal future. In 2011, 56% thought they would be better off three or four years down the road. Despite the improving economy, that level of optimism actually dropped, to 51%, in this year’s survey.

The traditional “blue collar path” to financial security has now largely disappeared.
Area residents are pleased with Houston’s improving quality of place, but large proportions would prefer a more urban, less car-centered lifestyle.

The continuing concerns about the local economy are reflected in growing support for government initiatives to redress the inequalities. In 1996 only 41% thought that “government should do more to solve our country’s problems.” The number increased to 50% by 2013. In the 2009 survey, 51% agreed that “government has a responsibility to help reduce the inequalities between rich and poor in America.” In the 2013 survey, 58% took that position. In 1994, 69% asserted that welfare benefits generally “encourage poor people to stay poor and dependent”; and 24% believed instead that welfare “gives poor people a chance to get started again.” The figures were 47% and 45% in this year’s survey.

Many Houston area residents originally came here because of employment opportunities, and then were pleasantly surprised by the region’s many improving amenities – e.g., its low cost of living, the quality of its venues for sports, arts and culture, the enhancement of its green spaces, the continuing revitalization of its urban centers. When asked to compare Houston to most other metropolitan areas in the country, 78% in 2005 thought this region was a “slightly better” or “much better” place in which to live. The positive evaluations grew to 90% in this year’s survey.

Houston is arguably the most sprawling, least dense, most automobile-dependent major city in America. It is the epitome of the new and now-dominant form of urban settlement in America, known as the “MCMR” (the Multi-Centered Metropolitan Region). The Houston area contains some 15 to 18 important “activity centers,” concentrations of employment, retail outlets and residences that are spread over an area of more than 10,000 square miles, larger than the entire state of New Jersey.

The surveys have documented a strong preference for the option of “walkable urbanism.” Only 47% of the respondents in 2012 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.” More than half (51%) would opt instead for “a smaller home in a more urbanized area, within walking distance of shops and workplaces.”
In 2013, fully half of respondents indicated an interest in living in “an area with a mix of developments, including homes, shops and restaurants.”

When asked a slightly different question this year, half of the respondents (by 50% to 48%) 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.” The figures have been consistent across the years in reflecting basically a 50/50 split since 2007, the first time that question was asked.

Not surprisingly, such residential preferences differ according to where respondents are actually living. Fully 63% of the respondents whose homes were inside Loop 610 expressed a preference for the more urban, mixed-use alternative, compared to 59% of those residing outside the Loop but still in the City of Houston and to 42% in the unincorporated areas of Harris County.

Among the survey participants in the nine surrounding counties, 43% said they would choose the opportunity to live in an area with a mix of developments, rather than in a single-family residential area. These are remarkably high numbers for this sprawling, car-dependent city, further underscoring the substantial demand for more urban alternatives that now cuts across the entire metropolitan region.

In the course of the next 20 years, the Houston-Galveston Area Council forecasts that Harris County will add another one million residents, and another 3.5 million will move into the ten-county area as a whole. How will the region accommodate that growth? If meaningful alternatives to car-centered suburban sprawl are not made more widely available for those who would choose them, much of the county’s remaining farmlands, prairies, forests, and marshes will surely disappear into subdivisions and parking lots. The challenge today is not in finding people who want to live in more compact, urbanized communities, but in building places across the region that can accommodate them.
During the oil-boom years of the 1960s and 1970s, Houston's surging population growth was brought about primarily by the in-migration of Anglos, the non-Hispanic white Americans who were streaming into this energy capital from all other parts of the country. After the collapse of the oil boom in 1982, however, the Anglo population stopped growing and then declined. Houston's rapid growth during the past three decades is attributable almost exclusively to the influx of Asians, Latinos and African Americans. In 2010 the U.S. Census counted 4.1 million people in Harris County, of whom 33% were non-Hispanic whites, 41% were Hispanic, 18% African-American, and 8% Asian or other. Houston has suddenly become the most ethnically diverse metropolitan region in the country.

Attitudes toward immigration and diversity have improved significantly over these years. The proportion of area residents who would like to see the United States admit more or the same number of immigrants in the next ten years as were admitted in the last ten years grew from 37% in 1995 to 68% in 2013. The percent in favor of “granting illegal immigrants a path to legal citizenship if they speak English and have no criminal record” increased from 64% in 2009 to 83% in 2013. In 2013, 61% asserted that the increasing immigration into this country today “mostly strengthens” (rather than “mostly threatens”) American culture, up from 51% in 2009.

In every year since 1992, the respondents have been asked to evaluate “the relations among ethnic groups in the Houston area.” The proportion saying “excellent” or “good” grew from 21% in the early 1990s to 40% in 2000, and to 49% in 2012. In 2013, the number increased further to 51%, representing the most favorable views ever recorded in all the years of the surveys.

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There has been no change in abortion attitudes, but support for gay rights has grown consistently and significantly across the 32 years of surveys.

Over all 32 years, the surveys have asked about the acceptability of abortion and homosexuality. The proportion who believe that abortion is “morally wrong” has remained unchanged—at 55% in 1993, 61% in 1999, and 59% in 2013. At the same time, 60% of the participants in this year’s survey said they were opposed to “a law that would make it more difficult for a woman to obtain an abortion.”

A large portion of area residents thus espouse traditional values for themselves, yet respect the rights of others to make different decisions in their own lives. It is because of these “tolerant traditionalists” that Houston is today a modern, generally progressive city, rather than a traditionalistic one.

On issues relating to homosexuality, in contrast to abortion, significant change has occurred across the board. The number of area residents who consider homosexuality to be “morally wrong” dropped from 59% in 1997 to 43% in this year’s survey. In 1997, only 32% agreed that “marriages between homosexuals should be given the same legal status as heterosexual marriages.” Support for same-sex marriage grew to 37% in 2001 and to 46% in 2013.

Increasingly, homosexuality is coming to be seen as a part of the natural variation in the human condition, and not so much as a personal choice subject to moral censure. In 2009, 39% said that “homosexuality is something people cannot change,” rather than “something people choose.” That belief grew to 44% in 2011 and to 52% in this year’s survey.
Moreover, on virtually all the relevant items, support for gay rights is considerably stronger among younger respondents, but age has little or no impact on any of the questions asking about abortion attitudes. This, too, may help explain why abortion attitudes have remained basically unchanged for 30 years, while support for gay rights has grown substantially.

Anglo adults today who are under the age of 60 are more likely than older Anglos to report having close personal friends who are Asian, Latino or African-American. They are also far more likely to say that they have been in a romantic relationship with someone who was non-Anglo. On virtually every measure of attitudes toward immigration and the new diversity, as exemplified in the chart below, the surveys indicate clearly that younger Anglos are more comfortable with the profound demographic transformations that are underway across the region and throughout America.

Younger Anglos have grown up in a taken-for-granted world of ethnic and cultural diversity that differs importantly from the experience of the Anglos who came of age in the America of the 1950s and 1960s. The consistent generational shifts in attitudes and beliefs that the surveys reveal bode well for Houston’s efforts to build a truly successful, inclusive, and united multiethnic future as the twenty-first century unfolds.

Younger Anglos are more comfortable with and more approving of the new ethnic diversity than their older counterparts.

Ethnic attitudes by age among Anglos (2007-2013, combined)

Younger Anglos grew up in a taken-for-granted world of ethnic diversity, differing importantly from older Anglos.
These photos by preeminent aerial photographer Alex MacLean, showing the east side of downtown Houston in March 1978 and 33 years later, reflect remarkable investment in urban revitalization.
The mission of the Kinder Institute for Urban Research at Rice University 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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