Introduction

Although the median household income in Houston in 2014 was roughly $45,700, the city’s income is not evenly distributed, either by household or by geography. For example, more than 20 percent of Houston’s households earned double the median income or more (approximately $91,000), while another 20 percent earned half the median income or less (approximately $22,800).

There is also considerable disparity in household income across racial and ethnic groups. For example, non-Hispanic whites are far more likely to have higher household incomes, whereas non-Hispanic blacks and Hispanics are most likely to have low household incomes.

Through the maps presented below, we seek to show where Houston’s economic opportunities and challenges are concentrated. Those familiar with the city’s demography and economy will not be surprised by these maps. But what is striking is the consistency across each of the maps, which suggests that there are multiple layers to Houston’s social and economic disparities.

Any attempts to reduce economic and social disparities in Houston will have to accommodate the very consistent geography of inequality and tackle multiple dimensions simultaneously.

To see the overlapping patterns for yourself, click on each of the links below. The maps will appear in separate windows so that you can compare across the different outcomes.
Racial/Ethnic Composition

Race is an important axis of social stratification in the United States. While race in and of itself does not cause disparity, it is closely related to disparate social and economic outcomes. In Harris County, the residential concentration of specific racial/ethnic groups takes on a very distinct spatial pattern. Non-Hispanic whites are heavily concentrated around the edges of the county, particularly to the west. Asians share a similar spatial pattern, but their numbers are much smaller suggesting that they are more likely to have neighbors of a different race. In contrast, Hispanics and non-Hispanic blacks fill in the central portion of the county, particularly to the north, south and east. Although Hispanics have geographically expanded as their population has grown, non-Hispanic blacks remain concentrated primarily in two wedges to the northeast and southeast of Downtown (see The Shifting City: Houston’s History of Unequal Racial Change).

Non-Hispanic White
Non-Hispanic Asian

Hispanic Population Concentration: The Percentage of Residents that Identified as Hispanic in Combination with any Reported Race

Source: Decennial Census, 2010
Employment and Education

Employment and education offer opportunities to reduce economic disparities, but these outcomes too are subject to disparities that can be viewed starkly in geographical terms. Unemployment is generally low in Harris County, but it is concentrated at detrimentally high levels in neighborhoods in the northeast and southern portions of the center of the county. In those same areas we see low levels of employment participation – the percentage of all local residents (not just those who are actively looking for a job) who are employed.

Low levels of educational attainment are concentrated within the same portions of the county. This is true across the four available age categories. However, the sharpness of this aspect of disadvantage declines dramatically with age: the areas with
low levels of educational attainment are much more
geo"graphically concentrated for adults ages 45 to 64 than for 18-
to 24-year-olds.

Unemployment

Employment Participation
Economic Status

The economic status of a neighborhood has many consequences for the quality of resources available to residents and is therefore an important aspect of understanding the nature of spatial disparities in Houston.

Harris County is characterized by significant income inequality, which can be seen in geographical terms across the county. High median income roughly reflects the places where non-Hispanic white residents are concentrated. The concentration of poverty provides an almost perfect mirror image. Those locations that have both high poverty and high unemployment are concentrated in the northern, eastern and southern portions of the city, which is located within the core of Harris County.
Despite the close connection between poverty and public assistance receipt, generally speaking, the spatial patterns are somewhat different. The percentage of residents who receive public assistance is more evenly distributed across neighborhoods. However, this spatial disconnect between poverty and public assistance may also signal that residents of some communities are less likely to get the support that they need. The receipt of food stamps assistance – separate from public assistance – is far more common and more closely reflects the economic landscape of Harris County.

Median Income
Potentially Vulnerable Populations

There are other population characteristics, in addition to race/ethnicity, that may be relevant to understanding disparities in Houston. We start by examining where military veterans, families with children under the age of 5, and households without a vehicle are concentrated.

Each of these populations has special needs that may need to be addressed through additional supports, be it connections to mental wellness centers, extra childcare facilities, or easily accessible public transportation.

Veterans comprise the largest shares of all residents in places around the edges of the county. Services directed towards veterans are needed throughout much of the county but may be most efficiently located across the northern and southeastern boundaries of the county as well as within its center.

The highest concentrations of households with young children extend beyond the center of the county, particularly to the north and east. This would suggest a need to add childcare facilities in those areas, however, additional considerations regarding where these households travel for work may be needed to best serve childcare needs.

Finally, workers without a vehicle are most concentrated in the center of the county, as well as in a cluster to the southwest. How these pockets overlap with current public transportation access will help determine any need that remains even after the most recent bus and light-rail improvements.
Veterans

Veteran Concentration: The Percentage of Residents that are a Veteran

Veteran Concentration among All Local Residents (%)

- < 5 (min = 0.0)
- 5 - 10
- > 10 (max = 14.9)

Source: American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year period estimates, 2010-14

Families with Children Under the Age of 5

Need for Childcare: Concentration of Households with Children Under the Age of 5

Percentage of all Households with at least one Child Under the age of 5 (%)

- < 15 (min = 0.0)
- 15 - 25
- 25 - 35
- > 35 (max = 75.7)

Source: American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year period estimates, 2010-14