The Fortieth Year of the Kinder Houston Area Survey: Into the Post-Pandemic Future

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Introduction.

For the past four decades, Rice University’s Kinder Houston Area Survey (KHAS) has been tracking systematically the continuities and changes in the attitudes, beliefs, opinions, and experiences of successive representative samples of Harris County adults. Through intensive interviews reaching a total of more than 48,000 area residents, the surveys have revealed important shifts in perspectives during this period of remarkable economic and demographic change. In this report, we summarize the most consequential changes and ask about their implications for public policy initiatives going forward.

In January 2020, Simon & Schuster published Prophetic City: Houston on the Cusp of a Changing America, which assesses the national implications of the first 38 years of this research program. The book explores the way area residents have responded to three fundamental new realities that have been transforming American society, and are nowhere more clearly seen than in Houston: (a) the burgeoning inequalities in a global knowledge-based economy that is now increasingly dependent on technical skills and post-secondary educational credentials; (b) the epic demographic transformation in the ethnic composition of the Houston, Texas, and American populations; and (c) the new importance of quality-of-place attributes in determining the fates of cities.
The final interviews for the 2020 survey were completed last year just days before Houston was hit by the yearlong health pandemic, economic shutdown, collapse in oil prices, and the killing of George Floyd, which prompted a new sensitivity to systemic racism and concerns about the deepening inequalities in general. The 2021 survey enables us to ask in what specific ways and to what measurable extent Harris County residents have been personally impacted by the events of this remarkable year.

The first question in each annual iteration of the survey asks the respondents what they would say is “the biggest problem facing people in the Houston area today.” In every set of interviews since 2013, the dominating concern in response to that opening question has been traffic congestion, cited spontaneously by 30 to 35 percent of the survey respondents; the frustrations over traffic typically have been followed by mentions of crime (at 15 percent) and the economy (13 percent).

In the 2021 survey, however, traffic was cited by just 13 percent, with crime at 14 percent. Concerns about the economy had grown to 20 percent, and the spontaneous mentions of the COVID-19 pandemic and of public health issues more generally, after having been barely mentioned at all in any of the previous surveys, were now at the very top of the list. Concerns about public health were cited by fully one-fourth of all the respondents. It was evident that the survey this year was going to be particularly interesting.
A New Survey Methodology.

When the Kinder Houston Area Survey was launched in 1982, landline telephone interviews were the gold standard for collecting survey data. Since then, the internet, cell phones, and smart devices have drastically altered people’s preferred modes of communication, and by extension, the conduct of telephone-survey research.

Only 40 percent of American households today have landline phones, down from 90 percent in 2004. During the same years, the steady rise in commuting times along with the increase in flexible work schedules have interfered with the conventional late-day windows of availability to reach the majority of working adults. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, for younger generations, telephone communication is becoming much less common.

To accommodate these changes, we, too, have had to change our approach to surveying Harris County residents over the years. Starting in 2015, we began randomly calling cell phones in addition to landlines. Over time, spam filters and unrecognizable phone numbers as identified via caller ID have dissuaded the majority of cell phone users from answering their calls. Moreover, approximately 10 percent of Texas residents today have cell phones with an area code from another state, and so cannot be included in a sample that relies on telephone calls to establish contact.

Recognizing these accelerating changes in technology and communication, we have once again revamped our approach. Instead of drawing the sample of respondents from landlines and from cell phones that have a Harris County area code, we transitioned this year to an “address-based sample.” We began by identifying all addresses associated with a housing unit in Harris County from the U.S. Postal Service’s computerized delivery sequence file. We sent letters to a random sample of the addresses and invited an adult in each household to participate in the survey.

In this way, we were able to ensure that every adult living in Harris County will have an equal chance of being included in the sample—regardless of whether or not they regularly use a telephone. The randomly selected adults were provided with a URL and invited to complete the survey via the web. They were also given a toll-free number that they could use if they preferred to be interviewed by phone. To augment this approach, we also used public telephone records to ascertain the telephone numbers associated with the addresses in our sample; we called a subset of those numbers and did the interviews over the telephone.

The fortieth annual Kinder Houston Area Survey was conducted between January 18 and March 29, 2021, by NORC at the University of Chicago. The survey reached a representative sample of 1,051 adults living in Harris County, of which 84 percent completed the survey by web and 16 percent by telephone. The response rate for the survey, indicating the completion rate among all eligible respondents, was 17 percent. Of the 1,051 respondents in the sample, 59 percent were female and 41 percent were male; their average age was 47; 31 percent were Anglo, 19 percent were Black, 27 percent were Hispanic, and 18 percent were Asian. The unusually large number of Asian participants in the 2021 sample enables us to include the Asian data when exploring the ethnic differences in this year’s survey.

All of the analyses presented in this report have been “weighted” to correct for variations in the likelihood of selection and to align the sample more closely with known population characteristics of Harris County residents. This helps to ensure that the data we report will reflect as accurately as possible the actual distributions in the county’s population along such dimensions as race or ethnicity, age, gender, educational attainment, and homeownership.

When asking about changes over time, we assess the weighted responses given by successive representative samples of Harris County residents responding to identically worded questions that have been positioned similarly in the survey instrument. No other city in America has been tracked in this way over so many years. Few exemplify more clearly than Houston the remarkable changes that are underway across the country as a whole.
The Houston economy since 1982.

- In every year for the past four decades, the surveys have measured area residents’ subjective assessments of local job opportunities, as the oil boom collapsed in the early 1980s and Houston recovered into the ups and downs of a much more volatile economy. In recent years, the optimistic evaluations have rebounded to reflect what seemed like a stable plateau of modest long-term growth.

- In the 2021 survey, after the yearlong health pandemic and the economic shutdown, the percent of area residents giving positive ratings (“excellent” or “good”) to local job opportunities dropped, but only by seven points from last year, suggesting that area residents are growing more confident that the economic shutdown will be ending soon.

- When asked how they were doing financially, the percent reporting that their economic situations were getting better dropped by 13 points from last year. But when asked how they thought things would be for them three or four years down the road, there was no decline at all from 2020 in their confidence that they will be doing better in the years ahead.
The ethnic divides in vulnerabilities to the pandemic.

- The inequalities in basic resources are stark and consequential in Harris County. More than a third of all area residents indicated that they would not be able to come up with $400 to meet an emergency expense; one-fourth said they have no health insurance; more than a fourth said they had difficulty paying for housing. All such hardships, not surprisingly, were far more prevalent among Blacks and Hispanics than among Anglos and Asians.

- In questions about the respondents’ current levels of stress and emotional problems, in contrast, there were no differences across the ethnic communities. Anglos and Asians were just as likely as Blacks and Hispanics to report that they have been feeling more stress these days and have often been bothered by emotional problems. Blacks and Hispanics, however, were far more likely than Anglos and Asians to report having to run the risk of exposure to the virus in their daily lives.

- In all three major ethnic communities, a higher proportion of respondents this year compared to 2020 reported that they were “very worried” about crime and about their overall state of health these days.

Assessments of ethnic and racial discrimination.

- The positive ratings of relations among ethnic communities in the Houston area declined in all groups from last year; this was especially the case among Blacks. And for the first time, Anglos and Hispanics were significantly more likely than African Americans to agree with the general statement that Blacks are still a long way from having the same chance in life as Whites.

  In all three groups, the proportions agreeing that the criminal justice system is biased against Blacks increased dramatically from last year to this—presumably reflecting their deepening sensitivity to racial injustice. Moreover, the numbers reporting that they have often felt discriminated against in Houston dropped significantly among both Anglos and Hispanics this year, while it increased among Blacks.

- The deepening sensitivity to discrimination particularly on the part of Black Houstonians was also evident in several questions that were asked for the first time this year. Blacks were far more likely than Anglos or Hispanics to assert that people often seemed suspicious of them simply because of their race, that Blacks are frequently discriminated against in Houston, and that they are often unfairly stopped by the police.
A call to action in a newly energized community.

- Consistently, area residents are calling for more government action to address the growing inequalities. Fully 80 percent, up from 66 percent last year, asserted that most poor people in the U.S. today are poor because of circumstance they can’t control, and far more respondents than ever before in these surveys assert that government has a responsibility to help reduce the inequalities and, more generally, to do more to solve the country’s problems.

- Despite the anti-immigrant rhetoric so often promulgated in the American media, increasing proportions of Anglo respondents express support for granting illegal immigrants a path to citizenship and they assert that the U.S. should admit more or the same number of immigrants in the next ten years as in the last ten. Most strikingly, support for allowing the children of undocumented immigrants to become U.S. citizens grew to 88 percent in this year’s survey, up from 76 and 79 percent in previous years.

- Three and a half years after Hurricane Harvey hit Houston with the worst rainfall event ever recorded in the continental United States, area residents were less likely than in earlier surveys to assert that it is almost certain that Houston will experience even more severe storms in coming years. Nevertheless, they were just as likely to call for prohibiting additional construction in Houston’s flood-prone areas. And by bigger margins than ever before, they assert the need for better land-use planning to guide development in the region and they increasingly reject the view that people and businesses should be free to build wherever they want.

Toward a more secular and progressive city.

- As in the nation as a whole, area residents over the years are increasingly less likely to be members of any church; they are less likely to attend religious services or to declare that religion is important in their lives. Their general attitudes over the years have been moving further away from many of the traditional precepts promulgated by organized religions; this is particularly evident, for example, in the public’s growing support for homosexual rights.

- Harris County residents are also becoming more aligned with the Democratic Party. In the years from 1984 to 2005, they were split evenly between Republicans and Democrats. Since then, the proportion of Democrats has grown decisively, opening a gap with Republicans of 20 points during the past few years. In this year’s survey, 45 percent said they felt closer to Democrats, and only 25 percent affirmed their support for the Republican Party.

- After the defeat of Donald Trump in the 2020 election, the proportion of Republicans who thought the country was headed for “better times” dropped by a whopping 50 percentage points, from 69 percent before the election to just 19 percent by the time of the 2021 survey. Meanwhile, the proportion of Democrats who foresaw better times for the country grew from 38 percent last year to 58 percent in 2021—a powerful reflection of the growing partisan divides that make concerted action so much more difficult to achieve in today’s America.
The Kinder Houston Area Survey began as a class project in the spring of 1982. Houston was booming. One million people had moved into the region during the 12 years between 1970 and 1982. More than 80 percent of the city’s primary-sector jobs at that time were associated directly or indirectly with the value of oil. This was basically a one-company town, riding its location near the East Texas oil fields to continued prosperity during the first 82 years of the twentieth century.

Houston was also world-famous for having imposed the least amount of controls on development of any city in the Western World. Houstonians proudly proclaimed themselves to be the epitome of what Americans can achieve when left unfettered by zoning codes, government regulations, or excessive taxation. This was the “Golden Buckle of the Sun Belt,” the free-enterprise city par excellence, the bastion of laissez-faire capitalism. “Who cares if it’s ugly,” the business world seemed to be saying. “So what if it smells? It’s the smell of money. Come on down!”

In an article in 1990, Robert Fisher, then a professor of social work at the University of Houston, captured the city’s dominating philosophy: “The ideological thrust in Houston in the twentieth century has been anti-government, anti-regulation, anti-planning, anti-taxes, anti-anything that seemed to represent, in fact or fantasy, an expansion of the public sector or a limitation on the economic prerogatives and activities of the city’s business community.”
In March 1982, the first “Houston Area Survey” was conducted as a one-time class project at Rice University, seeking to measure the way area residents were balancing the exhilaration of the city’s spectacular growth with mounting concerns about the “social costs” (traffic, pollution, crime) that were being generated by the city’s unfettered growth. Two months after that survey was completed, the oil boom collapsed. A global recession had suppressed the demand for petroleum products just as new supplies were coming onto world markets, and the price of oil suddenly collapsed.

By the end of 1983, this once-booming region recorded a net loss of more than 100,000 jobs. It was clear that we would have to conduct the survey again the following spring to measure area residents’ reactions to the sudden turn of events. Then, as the changes accelerated further, we kept offering the class and conducting the survey in all the years after that, now 40 and counting. Figure 1 gives a picture of the economic upheavals the city has experienced during the last four decades as seen in the survey participants’ successive evaluations of local job opportunities.

In February and March of 1982, 71 percent of area residents thought Houston’s economic prospects were excellent or good; 47 percent in that first survey also reported that their financial situations were getting better, and 63 percent were confident they would be even better off three or four years down the road. Two months after that first survey was completed, Houston’s world turned upside down. The recession continued and deepened through the 1980s, spreading from the energy sector to the entire economy. By 1987, the unemployment rate had grown into double digits,

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and only 12 percent of area residents were still giving positive ratings to local job opportunities. One out of every seven jobs that had been in Houston in 1982 had disappeared. It was the worst regional recession occurring in any part of the country at any time since the end of World War II.

As the economy gradually diversified and as overbuilding during the 1970s and early ‘80s made Houston’s cost of living cheaper than almost anywhere else in the country, rapid population growth resumed in the 1990s, now no longer dominated by non-Hispanic whites, but primarily due to the influx of immigrants from Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Caribbean.

There would be several more wild swings in the region’s job opportunities over the next decades, as the unemployment rates hit successive peaks in 1993, 2003, and in the Great Recession of 2008–2010. During the ensuing years, the local economy steadily improved; positive ratings of job opportunities grew from 35 percent in 2011, to 60 percent in 2014, and 68 percent in 2020. This year brought a sudden drop in the positive evaluations, somewhat smaller than expected, but still a clear reflection of the yearlong recession from which the city is now slowly recovering.

Figure 2 gives the proportion of Harris County residents in recent surveys who reported that their financial situation has been “getting better” during the last few years. Consistently, about one-third of the respondents across the years have said they were doing better; or at least that was true until this year. The 2021 survey recorded a sharp decline in the numbers reporting that their financial situations had been getting better; the positive numbers dropped from 34 percent last year to just 21 percent today. For the first time in all of the past 40 years of surveys, more respondents said their situation was getting worse (25 percent) than said they were doing better (21 percent).

At the same time, as the prospects for recovery from the economic lockdown have improved in recent months, the 2021 survey found no change at all among area residents in the numbers who thought they would be better off three or four years down the road: 57 percent this year were optimistic about their prospects, as were 56 percent in 2020. The dire effects of the economic shutdown may well be lessening for many as businesses are re-opening and vaccination rates increase; area residents are feeling optimistic once again. But the yearlong pandemic has also exacerbated the differential vulnerabilities and the deepening inequalities in the Houston region.
The Ethnic Divides in Vulnerabilities to the Pandemic.

Figure 3 gives four different indicators of economic well-being in Harris County today, depicting striking inequalities across Houston’s four major ethnic communities. The survey participants were asked what they would do if they suddenly had to come up with $400 to meet an emergency expense. One-third of Harris County residents as a whole said they would either have to borrow the funds or would not be able to come up with that kind of money. This was the case for only 13 percent of Anglos and 7 percent of Asians, but for well more than 40 percent of African Americans and Hispanics. Almost half of the members of Houston’s minority communities are living on the edge, just one very small emergency expense away from depleting their savings.

Figure 3

THE PREVALENCE OF ECONOMIC HARDSHIP AMONG HARRIS COUNTY RESIDENTS, BY ETHNIC GROUP (2021)
Houston has one of the greatest conglomerations of medical institutions in the world, but it is also among the U.S. cities with the highest percentage of children without health insurance. Being without insurance means having far less access to early and effective medical treatment. It is therefore particularly significant to note that fully one-fourth of all the respondents in this year's survey said they were uninsured, in numbers ranging from 11 percent among Asians to 41 percent for Hispanics. In addition, more than a fourth of all the survey participants reported total household incomes of less than $37,500. This was the case for 44 percent of Hispanics and 31 percent of Blacks.

In a clear reflection of the housing shortages and eviction fears that have surfaced during the months of the pandemic, 28 percent of the survey participants as a whole said they had a serious problem paying for their housing during the past year. The data once again emphasize the deepening intergroup inequalities and the differential vulnerabilities: 40 percent of Blacks and 37 percent of Hispanics said they were having difficulty paying for their housing, compared to just 17 percent of Anglos and 12 percent of Asians.

Several new questions in this year's survey sought to get a sense of the impact of the pandemic on the personal well-being of area residents, with responses by ethnic group shown in Figure 4. More than 60 percent of the survey participants (73 percent of Blacks) reported that they know someone who has been hospitalized or has died as a result of having COVID-19. Another 60 percent said they were feeling more stress these days compared to a year ago, with the highest rates reported among Anglos.
The pervasive tension that area residents of all ethnicities have experienced in coping with the pandemic is also reflected in the majorities of survey respondents who indicated that they had been bothered during the past year by emotional problems, such as feeling anxious, depressed, or irritable; this was equally the case in all four ethnic communities. Finally, it is interesting to note that African Americans were somewhat more likely than other area residents (at 21 percent compared to 14 percent overall) to report that they had received assistance from government programs or social services, to help them in coping with the pandemic.

Figure 5 explores the final set of survey items that were asked for the first time this year, assessing the impact of the pandemic on the work lives of Harris County residents. The data provide still further evidence (if more were needed) of the much greater vulnerabilities among African Americans and Hispanics. The two minority communities were far more likely than Anglos or Asians to report that they often had to put themselves at risk of exposure to the coronavirus because they couldn’t afford to stay home and miss work.
Blacks and Hispanics were more likely to report that they had experienced a loss of income during the past year, and Hispanics were the most likely of all ethnic groups to have reduced their work hours (though our data cannot ascertain whether this reduction was voluntary or not). When asked whether they had to reduce their work hours to help care for family members who depend on them, such as young children or aging parents, there were fewer differences across the ethnic communities.

Two additional questions, replicating survey items asked in previous years, give additional indications of the impact the pandemic has had, at least temporarily, on the sensitivities and concerns of Harris County residents. As indicated in Figure 6, the survey participants have been asked over the years how worried they were that they or a member of their family will become the victim of a crime. The overall percentage saying they were “very” or “somewhat worried” jumped decisively from 47 percent in 2020 to 60 percent in 2021. Note, however, that the numbers in 2019 were even higher (at 65 percent) than in this year’s survey, so this was a return to the fears of past years, rather than evidence of the effects of the pandemic itself. Though we do not show break-outs by ethnic group, it is worth noting that Hispanics have generally felt more vulnerable to being the victim of a crime than either African Americans or Anglos.

With regard to self-reported health, the impact of the yearlong pandemic is clear. The survey respondents were asked if their overall state of health these days was excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor. The proportion saying “fair” or “poor” was never higher than 23 or 24 percent in all the years since the question was first asked in the 2001 survey. In this year, however, amid the pandemic, 30 percent of Harris County residents now gave negative ratings to their overall state of health. Again, we do not show break-outs by ethnic group, but African Americans and Hispanics have consistently reported worse health outcomes than Anglos and the differences were particularly pronounced in this year’s survey.
In all the years since 2012, the survey participants have also been asked how they would rate the relations among racial or ethnic groups in the Houston area. Figure 7 indicates that only 43 percent overall in the 2021 survey gave positive ratings (“excellent” or “good”), compared to 55 percent in 2020. The drop-off in positive evaluations occurred in all three groups, but it was particularly striking among Anglos: 70 percent rated ethnic relations in the Houston area as “excellent” or “good” in 2020; the numbers dropped to just 54 percent in this year’s survey.

**Figure 7**

**POSITIVE RATINGS OF RELATIONS AMONG ETHNIC GROUPS (2012–2021)**

- **Anglos**:
  - 2012: 51%
  - 2021: 45%

- **Hispanics**:
  - 2012: 51%
  - 2021: 30%

- **Blacks**:
  - 2012: 40%
  - 2021: 25%
Blacks, too, recorded a drop in their appraisal of ethnic group relations from 30 percent saying “excellent” or “good” in 2020 to just 25 percent in 2021. This was by far the lowest percent of positive evaluations given by any ethnic community to interethnic relations in Houston across all the years of the surveys. The deepening concerns about racial justice during the past year clearly have influenced the assessment of ethnic relations across all groups.

Figure 8 shows the percent by ethnic group who agreed with the assertion that “Black people in the U.S. are still a long way from having the same chance in life that White people have.” Just last year, that was the view of only 52 percent of all the survey participants. In the span of a year, the overall number increased to 66 percent. The dramatic increase in agreement with that assessment was clearly evident among Anglos and Hispanics, and 80 percent of the Black
respondents in the 2020 survey agreed with that negative view. Surprisingly, however, agreement among African Americans on this relatively pessimistic assertion dropped in the 2021 survey to just 63 percent.

Some part of that decline may be reflecting the increasing optimism among African Americans in general about the opportunities available to Blacks in America today, despite their sensitivity to continued discrimination. The surveys point to a powerful generational shift among Blacks in their assessments of opportunity in America today. Agreement with the assertion that African Americans are still far from having the same chance in life as white Americans was powerfully associated with age. It dropped from 72 percent among Blacks who were aged 60 and older to just 45 percent among those aged 18 to 29, the generation that came of age during Barack Obama’s eight years in office.

In Figure 9, we show the responses to a more direct question about differential treatment today. Respondents were asked whether they thought the criminal justice system in Houston is biased in favor of Blacks, biased against Blacks, or generally gives Blacks fair treatment. In 2015, the last time the question was asked, the overall proportions asserting that the system is biased against Blacks jumped from 32 percent to 54 percent in the 2021 survey.

The percent in all three communities who agreed that the justice system is biased against Blacks increased significantly during the past year, presumably a reflection of how deeply affected all Americans have been by the vivid pictures and detailed reporting of the killing of George Floyd and so many other African Americans over the past year at the hands of the police. Agreement with that assertion reached 85 percent among the African American respondents, the highest levels ever recorded on this question in all the years of the survey.

Figure 10 explores the changes over time among Houston’s three largest ethnic communities in their reports of personal experience with discrimination. The survey participants have been asked over the years how often, if at all, they had felt discriminated against in this city because of their race or ethnicity. African American respondents have always been far more likely than Anglos or Hispanics to report that they have “very often” or “fairly often” felt discriminated against in this city; the contrasts have increased over the years, and the numbers jumped decisively from 55 to 63 percent among Blacks from last year to this, while they declined among Anglos and Hispanics.

Figure 11 digs further into the personal experience of discrimination. When the respondents were asked, for example, how often people have acted as if they
were suspicious of them simply because of their race or ethnicity, 58 percent of Blacks said it was something they had “very often” or “fairly often” experienced; this was the case for just 13 percent of all other Harris County residents. More than half (52 percent) of African American respondents said that Blacks are “very often” discriminated against in Houston; only 14 percent of the other survey participants agreed with that assertion.

And when asked how often they had been unfairly stopped by the police because of their race or ethnicity, more than one-fourth of all African Americans said this has happened to them either “fairly” or “very often”; again, that was true for fewer than 5 percent of all other area residents. In total, feelings of discrimination are far more powerfully felt among African Americans than in the other ethnic communities.

Houston (and America) have been confronting for many years the deepening inequalities in opportunity predicated above all else on access to quality education and to jobs that can pay a living wage in this newly global, knowledge-based economy. The deep and widespread inequities have been highlighted and exacerbated by the differential vulnerabilities laid bare by the effects of the pandemic and the economic shutdown during the past year. These realities are becoming increasingly difficult to ignore.
In alternating years between 2009 and 2021, as indicated in Figure 12, the surveys have replicated three questions that ask directly about the role of government in expanding economic opportunities and strengthening the safety net. The percentages in this quintessential “free enterprise,” anti-government city who assert that “government should do more to solve our country’s problems” have grown significantly. Clear majorities now reject the alternative view that “government is trying to do too many things that should be left to individuals and businesses.”

**Figure 12**

**SUPPORT FOR PROGRAMS TO REDUCE THE INEQUALITIES IN AMERICA (2009–2021)**

- “Government has responsibility to reduce inequalities”
- “Poverty is due to circumstances beyond control”
- “Government should do more to solve problems”


Percent of respondents: 78, 52, 51, 85, 80, 58
Even more strikingly, the proportions who assert that “government has a responsibility to help reduce the inequalities between rich and poor in America” increased by a whopping 20 percentage points between 2019 and 2021. And 80 percent said that most poor people in the U.S. today are poor because of circumstances they can’t control and not because they don’t work hard enough. In 2019, only 66 percent took that position.

Figure 13 tracks the views of just the Anglo respondents to questions about immigration. Despite the negative rhetoric in recent years, all three measures of attitudes show a gradual trend toward increasing support for the new immigration that has been transforming this city and nation. All the net growth of Houston since the oil bust of 1982 has been due to the unexpected influx of immigrants from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean. This essentially bi-racial Southern city has been transformed into one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse metro areas in the country. As indicated in the Figure, Anglos are increasingly embracing that remarkable diversity.

Over the years, clear majorities of Anglos in Houston have expressed support for “granting illegal immigrants in the U.S. a path to legal citizenship, if they speak English and have no criminal record,” with the percentages in support growing from the low 60s to the mid-70s. Similarly, Anglo respondents were asked if they thought the U.S. should admit more, fewer, or about the same number of legal immigrants during the next ten years as were admitted in the last ten years: Growing majorities are calling for admitting more or the same number. And when asked about the Dream Act (“allowing the children of undocumented immigrants to become U.S. citizens if they have graduated from college or served in the military”), the already high support among Anglos in 2010 and 2013 increased to 88 percent in the 2021 survey.

Further evidence of a new respect for the role of government can be seen in area residents’ views about preparing for future hurricanes and flooding. As indicated in Figure 14, the percent of area residents who agreed that “the Houston region will almost certainly experience more severe storms in the next ten years” dropped significantly, from 81 percent in 2020 (as in 2018, just six months after the storm) to 59 percent this year. The feelings of imminent vulnerability seem to be fading with the passage of time.

Nevertheless, the proportion of respondents who said they were in favor of “prohibiting any additional construction in areas of Houston that have repeatedly flooded” has stayed high and steady: 68 percent last year, 71 percent this year. Houston’s time-honored resistance to government interference in private
property decisions clearly seems to be giving way to a more pragmatic assessment of what this city needs to do as it seeks to position itself for prosperity in the face of climate change.

The growing public recognition of the need to moderate Houston’s traditional free-enterprise philosophy of government and to acknowledge the importance of appropriate regulations on business decisions is confirmed in the third item presented in Figure 13. The 2020 survey found that 74 percent of Harris County residents thought the city needed “better land-use planning to guide development in the Houston area”; that figure had already grown from 67 percent in 2017; it grew significantly further to 85 percent in 2021. The numbers of survey participants who still thought “people and businesses should be free to build wherever they want” dropped from 24 percent last year to just 15 percent today.

Area residents do indeed seem to be seeing the world differently today than they did in the relatively recent past. Last year’s survey found that 69 percent of all area residents, up from just 48 percent in 2011, were convinced that climate change was mainly caused, not by normal climate cycles, but by “human activities” for which all of us are responsible. Consistent with this recognition, when Harris County residents were last asked back in 2009 about their support for “allowing drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska,” the responses were a perfect 50:50 split. In this year’s survey, in contrast, only 34 percent of the survey respondents said they were in favor of drilling in the ANWR; 66 percent were now opposed.
Another important national phenomenon that is also clearly reflected in these surveys is the growing trend toward a more secular America. The Houston surveys have recorded over the years a steady drop in the percentage of respondents who say they are affiliated with any organized religion. The decline in church membership has been driven by the sharp rise in what is known as the “Nones,” the respondents who indicate that they have no religious affiliation.

Figure 15

**THE SECULARIZATION TRENDS AMONG HARRIS COUNTY RESIDENTS (2008–2021)**

- Did not attend religious services in past 30 days
- Religion is not very important
- No religious affiliation


Percent of respondents:
- Did not attend religious services in past 30 days: 37, 22, 70
- Religion is not very important: 8, 10, 26
- No religious affiliation: 0, 10, 22
As seen in Figure 15, when the survey participants were asked over the years about their religious preference (“Is it Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, some other religion, or no religion?”), only 8 percent in 2008 chose “no religion.” The numbers grew steadily, to 13 percent in 2010, 17 percent in 2014, 19 percent in 2018 and 2020, and to 22 percent in this year’s survey.

The other findings presented in Figure 15 offer further confirmation of the trend toward increasing secularization: 70 percent of the respondents this year said they did not attend any religious services in the past month, compared to 53 percent last year, 44 percent in 2012, and just 37 percent in 2008. However, it is unclear from the data how much of the shift in the past year is due to restrictions on in-person worship and fears of contracting COVID-19, and so readers should interpret this with caution. At the same time, more than one-fourth (26 percent) of all Harris County residents asserted in the 2021 survey that religion is not very important in their lives, up from 15 percent in 2018, and 10 percent in 2008.

These findings are in keeping with a variety of attitude changes the surveys have illuminated. Harris County residents are increasingly rejecting some of the traditional moral precepts that continue to be espoused in many religious communities. To cite a prime example, one of the most compelling findings over the years of the surveys has been the steadily increasing proportions of Harris County residents who express support for the rights of gays and lesbians.

The percent of survey participants, for example, who were in favor of “homosexuals being legally permitted to adopt children” grew from 17 percent when the question was first asked in 1991 to 67 percent in 2020. Agreement with the assertion that “marriages between homosexuals should be given the same legal status as heterosexual marriages” increased from 31 percent in 1993 to 65 percent in 2021. And the belief that homosexuality is “morally acceptable” grew from 21 percent in 1997 to 63 percent in this year’s survey.

The surveys also confirm that Harris County residents are becoming not only more secular but also more aligned with the Democratic Party. Beginning in 1984, the survey participants have been asked if they would call themselves a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or something else. Those who did not indicate an affiliation were asked if they thought of themselves as closer to the Republican or the Democratic Party. Figure 16 shows the percentages of area residents over the years who chose Republican or Democrat in answer to either of these two questions.

Through most of the early years of the survey, area residents were evenly divided between the two...
political parties. Back in 2005, 37 percent of the survey participants said they were affiliated with or leaning toward the Republican Party and 35 percent said they felt closer to the Democrats. In the years since then, however, the proportion of Democrats has increased, reaching 52 percent in 2016, 44 percent in 2018, and 45 percent in this year’s survey. Meanwhile, the numbers of Republicans have declined in recent years. From 2012 to 2014, the partisan gap looked as if it might be closing, but it expanded again to reach a differential of almost 20 points by 2021.

When the survey participants are asked to evaluate the success of current economic policies, their answers are inevitably influenced by what social scientists call “motivated beliefs,” by interpretations of social reality that reinforce people’s cherished assumptions. Figure 17 documents the sharp partisan divides when respondents were asked if they believed that the country was headed for “better times” or “more difficult times.” During the Obama years, Republicans were far less likely than Democrats to espouse optimistic views of America’s future. In February 2017, soon after Trump’s election, the survey revealed a striking reversal, with Republicans expressing greater optimism than Democrats.

The 2018 survey found an even stronger separation, with 71 percent of Republicans asserting that the country was now headed for better times, compared with only 22 percent of Democrats; 76 percent were convinced instead that “more difficult times” now lay ahead. That was the largest gap ever seen on this question, so it was not surprising to find the divide moderating during the ensuing few years, or at least until the next hyper-partisan American election.

In the 2021 survey, following soon after the election of 2020, the changing outlooks on the American future once again took center stage. The proportion of Democrats foreseeing better times ahead increased significantly from 38 percent in early 2020, the last year of the Trump administration, to 58 percent in the 2021 survey, conducted soon after Biden was elected. At the same time, the percentage of Republicans expressing optimism about the country’s future collapsed, dropping precipitously from 69 percent in early 2020 to just 19 percent in this year’s survey. More than ever, it seems, our experience of the world and our expectations for the future are a function not just of the objective realities but also of the ways those realities are filtered through our political orientations.
The findings from this year’s Kinder Houston Area Survey suggest that a clear recovery from the yearlong pandemic and economic shutdown is very much on the horizon. When asked about job opportunities in the Houston area, the surveys found only a slight decline in positive assessments despite the economic downturn in recent months. There was a clear drop in the percent of respondents reporting that they were doing better in the past three years, but no decline at all in area residents’ belief that they will be better off in the years ahead.

Despite that optimistic perspective, this year’s survey underlines in stark terms the deepening economic hardships being experienced in this city, and their close association with the respondents’ ethnic backgrounds. Only the reports of stress and emotional problems were evenly distributed among Houston’s four major ethnic communities.

This year’s survey provides additional indications of a growing awareness across the board of racial injustice and of the structural barriers that diminish the opportunities, especially for impoverished Blacks and Hispanics, to advance in today’s economy. Even in this famously anti-government, free-enterprise city, more area residents in this year’s survey than ever before are now convinced that most poor people in the U.S. today are poor because of circumstances they can’t control, and that government has a responsibility to help reduce the inequalities and to do more to help solve the country’s problems.
The survey respondents in 2021 were less certain than before that Houston will have to cope with even more severe storms in the years ahead, but they are just as prepared to insist on prohibiting additional construction in flood-prone areas. More generally, they firmly assert the need for better land-use planning to guide development and they reject the claim that individuals and businesses should be free to build wherever they want.

This year’s survey also underlines the growing tendency toward increasing secularization in the Houston population, and support for the Democratic Party is growing as well. Also noteworthy is the striking divide in beliefs about where the country is headed, as a function above all of who is in political office. The dramatic drop by 50 percentage points in optimism among Republicans after the election of Biden earlier this year, along with renewed optimism among Democrats, is a powerful reflection of America’s growing partisan divides.

The surveys over the years give a clear impression that Houston-area residents are more prepared than in past years to acknowledge the new realities in Houston and across the country. We have seen from previous surveys that area residents increasingly assert the urgent need to make major additional investments in Houston’s public schools, as education has become the most critical determinant of a person’s ability to find a job that can support a family in this global, knowledge-based economy. The survey participants in 2021 now recognize more clearly than before that most poor people in America today are poor through no fault of their own, and they are calling for stronger programs to redress the growing inequalities.

Area residents are also clearly embracing Houston’s growing diversity. They increasingly support a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. They are feeling more comfortable in a world of thriving friendships across ethnic populations, religious communities, and sexual orientations. And they support more stringent controls on development to mitigate future storms, enhance the area’s quality-of-life attributes, and develop more walkable urban neighborhoods.

It remains to be seen whether the region’s business and civic leaders will be able to build on these changes in public attitudes to make the collective and sustained investments that will be needed to position Houston for prosperity in this time of economic, demographic, and technological transformation. To quote the final words in Prophetic City, “These are the challenges facing all of America. The jury is out, not only for Houston, but for the rest of the country as well.”
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