The 2020 Kinder Houston Area Survey

Tracking the Changes in Public Perceptions — on the Brink of a Health Pandemic, an Economic Shutdown, and a Collapse in Oil Prices
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Introduction.

For 39 years, Rice University’s Kinder Houston Area Survey (KHAS) has been tracking systematically the continuities and changes in the attitudes and beliefs, opinions and experiences, of successive representative samples of Harris County adults. Through intensive interviews that have reached a total of more than 47,000 area residents, the surveys have revealed some important shifts in the perspectives of area residents during this period of remarkable economic and demographic change. In several consequential and surprising respects, the data make it clear that area residents are seeing the world differently today than they did just 10 or 15 years ago.

A book assessing the national implications of the first 38 years of this research, entitled Prophetic City: Houston on the Cusp of a Changing America, will be released in June 2020. It explores the way area residents have responded to the ongoing societal changes — the burgeoning inequalities in a global knowledge-based economy that is now increasingly built on technical skills and educational credentials, the unfolding epic demographic transformation, and the new
importance of quality-of-place attributes in determining the fates of cities.

In this report, we present the findings from the 39th annual survey, which was conducted during February and early March of 2020, before there were clear signs of an impending crisis. Since then, of course, the lives of area residents have been severely disrupted by an unprecedented double attack on the community’s health and economic well-being. Along with the rest of the world, Houstonians are coping with a global pandemic on a scale that was last experienced more than a century ago, in the time of the Spanish Flu of 1918; and they are following the “stay-at-home” imperatives and the social distancing required to combat the coronavirus, at the cost of shutting down the overall economy.

The shutdown has resulted in excess supply and collapsing demand in the oil patch—a devastating additional blow to the Houston economy—and it has generated levels of unemployment and hardship not seen in America since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Next year’s KHAS will be well positioned to measure quantitatively the actual impact of these unfolding developments on the experiences and perspectives of area residents. This report reviews the findings from the 2020 survey, the 39th annual assessment of the changing perspectives of area residents, to clarify where Houstonians are today in their evolving attitudes and beliefs, as the economy slowly reopens and they come to grips with the difficult short- and long-term challenges that lie ahead.

Survey Methodology.

This ongoing research began in 1982 as part of a class project at Rice University. The fifteen-minute telephone interviews have grown to an average length of more than thirty minutes. They reach annually a scientifically-selected sample of one thousand adults residing in Harris County, with (in recent years) additional surveys conducted in Fort Bend and Montgomery counties and oversamples in Houston’s Asian communities. Some survey questions are included every year, others in alternating years; some are asked every few years, when a shift in opinion or lack of a shift would be significant to note; and some appear and disappear periodically to explore specific issues. No other city in America has been tracked in this way over such a long period of time.

The interviews for this year’s survey were conducted between January 28 and March 12, 2020, by SSRS, one of the nation’s premier survey research organizations, operating out of Glen Mills PA. The randomly generated phone numbers reached (51 percent by landline, 49 percent by cell phone) a representative sample of 1,001 adults residing in Harris County. The responses are “weighted” each year to correct for variations in the likelihood of selection and to align the samples more closely with known population parameters.

The weighting process helps to ensure that the data reported here will accurately reflect the characteristics of Harris County’s overall 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 from one year to the next.
Highlights from the Thirty-Ninth Year.

The Houston economy before the pandemic.

- In every year, for almost four decades, the surveys have measured area residents’ subjective assessments of local job opportunities, as the oil boom collapsed in the 1980s and Houston recovered into the ups and downs of a more problematic economy. After oil prices fell from dizzying heights in 2014 to lows in 2015 and 2016, the optimistic evaluations rebounded once again, to reflect what seemed like a stable plateau of modest long-term growth.

- In the 2020 survey, 69 percent gave positive ratings to job opportunities in the Houston area. Within days after the final interviews for this year’s survey, the efforts to contain the coronavirus pandemic by shutting down the local economy and extinguishing the demand for oil and gas meant that Houston will face daunting challenges in the months ahead.
The intergroup inequalities.

- The coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated the region’s already striking inequalities. Almost four out of ten survey participants in 2019 said they did not have $400 in savings to meet an emergency expense. One-fourth in 2020 indicated that they had no health insurance and one-third had difficulty during the past year paying for the groceries to feed their families.

- African Americans and Hispanics are more likely than Anglos and Asians to be infected by and to die from the COVID-19 virus. They are also less likely to have college degrees, to report household incomes above $37,500, or to have any health insurance. They are far more often among those who are unable to come up with $400 to deal with an unexpected emergency, and they are more likely to report that their state of health is only fair or poor.

- The ethnic inequalities have particularly serious implications for Houston’s future. Of all the young people in Harris County, those under the age of twenty, more than 70 percent are African American or Hispanic. If too many young people of color continue to be relegated to underfunded inner-city schools, and remain unprepared to succeed in today’s global, knowledge-based economy, it is difficult to envision a prosperous future for Houston.

Rethinking some basic assumptions about poverty and the public schools.

- The surveys suggest that area residents are increasingly convinced that people are often poor in America through no fault of their own, and they are calling in growing numbers for government policies to reduce the inequities and to advance educational opportunities.

- Back in 1995 and 1997, solid majorities believed that Houston’s public schools had enough money, if it were used wisely. The 2018 survey brought a striking reversal, a consequential shift, confirmed two years later: In 2020, by 55 to 39 percent, area residents were now convinced that the schools will need significantly more money to provide a quality education.

- In the 2020 survey, 70 percent were in favor of increasing local taxes to provide universal preschool education for all children. Houston’s ability to make meaningful investments, building on the public’s growing recognition of the critical importance of access to quality education, from cradle to career, will determine the city’s prospects in the years ahead.

The growing sense of community solidarity.

- The economic downturn now facing the city will challenge the feelings of solidarity and trust that have also been increasing in recent years. The belief that most people can be trusted grew from 31 percent in 2014 to 42 percent in this year’s survey. The respondents in 2020 were also less afraid of crime and less in favor of the death penalty than in all previous years.

- Despite the divisive political rhetoric and anti-immigrant outbursts, area residents of all ethnicities are increasingly embracing Houston’s diversity. In the 2020 survey, they were calling more firmly than ever for policies to welcome refugees, and expressing more positive feelings in general toward Muslims, undocumented immigrants, and gays and lesbians.

- The surveys confirm the remarkable nationwide shift in the public’s support for gay rights: The proportion of Harris County residents who were in favor of homosexuals being legally permitted to adopt children grew from 17 percent in 1991 to 62 percent today, and their support for gay marriage increased from 34 percent in 1993 to 63 percent in 2019.

Paradoxical perspectives on abortion rights.

- In sharp contrast with the growing support for gay rights, Houstonians’ attitudes toward abortion rights have remained remarkably stable. Across all the years of the surveys, area residents have continued to espouse a position that is both anti-abortion and pro-choice.

- The pro-life respondents continue to be more likely than the pro-choice respondents to say that they will vote on the basis of that one issue alone, but the difference between the two groups in single-issue voting was smaller in the 2020 survey than in previous years.

The enduring impact of Hurricane Harvey.

- The storm called Harvey was the worst rainfall event ever to hit the continental United States, but more than two and a half years have passed since the hurricane
made Houston landfall in August 2017. The survey respondents were less likely in the 2019 survey than in 2018 to think spontaneously about storms and flooding when asked to name the biggest problem facing people in the Houston area; but the numbers grew back in 2020, indicating that area residents are still very much aware of the region’s continued vulnerability.

More than three-fourths of the respondents in all three surveys said it was virtually certain that Houston will experience more severe storms in the next ten years compared to the past ten years, and they were only slightly less likely in 2020 than in 2018 to call for prohibiting any additional construction in flood-prone areas.

Harris County residents in 2020 were every bit as concerned as they were in 2018 about the impact of global warming, and they were more convinced than ever before that human activities, and not natural climate cycles, are the primary cause of climate change.

The 50/50 preference for walkable urbanism.

- In this sprawling automobile-dependent metropolitan region, it is interesting to note that area residents are evenly divided in their preference for a single-family home in a low-density neighborhood or a smaller home within walking distance of shops and workplaces.

- The preference for walkable urbanism is consistently associated with smaller families and with more support for transit than for highways. Because urban settings entail the sharing of public spaces with people from different backgrounds, that preference is also associated with more positive attitudes toward the burgeoning ethnic and cultural diversity of urban places.

- Finally, one-fourth of area residents said stray dogs and cats were a serious problem in their neighborhoods, and two-thirds called for more spending to address this important issue, one that has clear implications for the livability and safety of Houston’s residential areas.
The Houston Economy before the Pandemic.

In March 1982, the first survey in this series was conducted as a one-time class project at Rice University, to measure the perceived social costs of the city’s phenomenal growth. Houston was in the midst of spectacular boom, brought about by the tenfold increase in the value of oil. More than 80 percent of all Houston’s primary-sector jobs were thought to be associated directly or indirectly with the price of oil. No other region in the country came close to Houston’s concentration of refining companies, petrochemical plants, oil and gas distribution systems, and ocean-going tankers. The city became synonymous with oil, much as Pittsburgh was with steel or Detroit with automobiles.

In May 1982, two months after that survey was completed, the oil boom went bust. In a confluence of forces similar to what is happening in today’s pandemic, a global recession had unexpectedly suppressed the demand for petroleum products just as new supplies were coming onto world markets, and the
continually rising price of oil suddenly collapsed. By the end
of 1983, this booming region recorded a net loss of more
than 100,000 jobs. It was clear that it would be good to
conduct the survey again with a new class the following
spring to measure the public’s 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 39 and counting.

One indication of the economic upheavals Houston has
experienced is seen in Figure 1, showing the respondents’
successive evaluations of job opportunities in the Houston
area. In 1982, almost three-fourths (71 percent) thought
Houston’s employment prospects were excellent or good;
47 percent said their financial situations were getting
better (just 16 percent said worse), and 63 percent were
confident that they would be even better off three or four
years down the road. Two months later, the world that
Houston inhabited changed forever.

During the ensuing years, the recession spread from the
energy sector to the entire economy, and unemployment
grew to more than 10 percent. By the time of the 1987
survey, one out of every seven jobs that had been in
Houston in 1982 had disappeared; 86 percent of the
survey participants that year gave negative ratings
to job opportunities (only 11 percent offered positive
evaluations), and 72 percent spontaneously cited economic
fears (e.g., poverty, unemployment, homelessness) when
asked to name the biggest problem facing people in the
Houston region.

As the economy diversified and the overbuilding during the
1980s made Houston’s cost of living cheaper than almost
anywhere else in the country, rapid population growth
resumed, but now it was no longer non-Hispanic whites
who were pouring into the city from everywhere else in the
country. The growth since the 1980s was primarily due to
the influx of immigrants from Asia, Latin America, Africa,
and the Caribbean, and Houston transformed into one of
the most ethnically and culturally diverse metropolitan
areas in America.

By 1990 the region had recovered from the recession,
only to enter into the nationwide downturn early in the
decade, followed by a short-lived economic expansion
brought about by the stock market bubble and the dot.
com boom. The positive ratings of job opportunities grew
steadily from 25 percent in 1993 to 68 percent in 2000. The
recession of 2001–2003 brought another bust, followed by
yet another recovery; then a drop again, from 58 percent in
2007 to 35 percent in both 2010 and 2011, during the years
of the Great Recession.

The job prospects improved once again in the 2010s: The
proportion of positive evaluations grew to 58 percent in
2013 and to 69 percent in 2015. As the giddy peak of $100 oil in 2014 gave way to more modest prices, optimism about the local job situation dropped slightly, to 62 percent, then settled on a steady level of optimism in the four years since then, registering 69 percent in this year’s survey, almost as high as the ratings given at the height of the oil boom back in 1982. That was in February and early March, before the clear inklings of an impending economic shutdown, made worse in Houston by the collapse in the global demand for petroleum products.

The official unemployment rate in Texas at the end of March 2020 was 4.7 percent, up from 3.5 percent in February. During that period, Texas employers had shed a net 50,900 jobs, recording the first monthly job loss since 2017. In Harris County, the March unemployment rate grew to 5.2 percent, up from 3.8 percent in March 2019. Unemployment is projected to increase even more dramatically in the months ahead; Houston will be hit particularly hard by the catastrophic plunge in oil prices, which dropped from $63 per barrel in January 2020, fell briefly into unprecedented negative territory, and is now settling in at around $15 per barrel, far below the price at which American companies can make a profit.

Along with the rest of the nation and the world, Houston seems inevitably to be heading into a major recession. In the six weeks leading up to the end of April 2020, 30 million Americans filed for unemployment insurance. Those numbers will continue to grow in the coming months. And, as is always the case, the less affluent are the most vulnerable. The coronavirus has laid bare the dimensions of the city’s deepening inequalities in access to health care and economic opportunity, and it has underscored the dire consequences for Houston’s minority communities.
The Intergroup Inequalities.

Figure 2 presents five different indicators of economic well-being in Harris County. The survey participants in 2019 were asked what they would do if they suddenly had to come up with $400 to deal with an unexpected emergency. Almost four out of ten said they would either have to borrow the funds or they would not be able to come up with that kind of money right now: 39 percent of all Harris County residents indicated that they are essentially living on the edge, just one small emergency expense away from financial collapse.

Despite having the Texas Medical Center, the greatest conglomeration of medical institutions in the world, Houston is also among the major American cities with the highest percentage of children without health insurance: One-fourth (24 percent) of the participants in this year’s survey said they and their families were uninsured. Almost one-third reported total household incomes of less than $37,500. In the 2020 survey, 35 percent of area residents said they had a problem in the past year buying the groceries they needed to feed their families. In the 2018 survey, 35 percent said they had difficulty paying for housing.
All this was before the coronavirus pandemic shut down the economy. Especially hard hit, of course, are Houston’s low-income communities of color, who have far less access to the resources needed to mitigate the economic effects of the shutdown, while coping with their greater predispositions to diseases of all kinds. People of color, in Houston and across America, are getting the COVID-19 disease at higher rates than other Americans. In Harris County, half of all the reported deaths from the epidemic have been African Americans, even though they account for only one-fifth of the county’s population. The survey data presented in Figures 3 and 4, depicting some of the ethnic disparities found in recent surveys, help to make it clear why that discrepancy comes as no surprise.

Figure 3 shows the differences among five different ethnic communities on measures of their overall economic vulnerability. In today’s knowledge-based, high-tech, global economy, educational attainment has become the most important determinant of a person’s ability to find a decently-paying job. If you have no more than a high school diploma, and you have no special skills, for example, as an artist, an athlete, or a performer, you are unlikely to be able to earn enough to support a family. And yet those with high school or less constitute 35 percent of African Americans in Harris County, 49 percent of U.S.-born Hispanics, and 78 percent of Hispanic immigrants.

Not surprisingly, the ethnic disparities in household income and in food insecurity reflect the differences in educational attainment. More than half (52 percent) of Hispanic immigrants in this year’s survey reported total household incomes of less than $37,500, and 54 percent of all U.S.-born Hispanics said they had difficulty paying for the groceries to feed their families during the past year.

Figure 4 explores some additional intergroup disparities—in area residents’ access to health care and in their self-reported health conditions. Just 16 percent of U.S.-born Anglos and 30 percent of Asians said they could not come up with $400 to meet an emergency expense, but this was the case for 56 percent of U.S.-born African Americans and 61 percent of Hispanic immigrants. Most in Houston’s minority communities are living on the edge, just one relatively small emergency expense away from depleting their savings.

Having health insurance coverage is one of the best guarantees of access to early and effective medical interventions. It is therefore particularly significant to note that, whereas fewer than 12 percent of Anglos and Asians said they were uninsured, this was the case for 19 percent of blacks, 30 percent of U.S.-born Hispanics, and 44 percent of Hispanic immigrants.
The survey participants were asked directly about their current health status: “Would you say that your overall state of health these days is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?” Just as we would now expect, the contrasts between Anglos and Asians on the one hand and blacks and Hispanics on the other are striking and consequential: Just 16 percent of the Anglo and Asian respondents, but close to twice as many blacks and Hispanics (at 31, 28, and 31 percent) — despite their younger ages — said that their current state of health was only fair or poor.

The ethnic inequalities have particularly serious implications for Houston’s future. During the past three decades, virtually all the net growth of this city has been thanks to the influx of Hispanics, Asians, and African Americans. This traditionally biracial southern city has
transformed into, by some measures, the single most ethnically and culturally diverse major metropolitan region in the country. And the differences by age are striking: Anglo Houstonians are disproportionately older. The “aging of America” is turning out to be as much a division along ethnic and socioeconomic lines as it is along generational lines.

According to the most recent census estimates, of the 1.4 million residents of Harris County who are under the age of twenty, more than half (53 percent) are Hispanics and another 19 percent are African-Americans; 7 percent are Asians or others, and just over one-fifth (21 percent) are non-Hispanic whites. In the 2018–2019 academic year, 63 percent of the 210,000 students enrolled in one of the 280 schools in the Houston Independent School District were Hispanic and another 23 percent were African-American. Just 9 percent were non-Hispanic whites, and 4 percent were Asians. Fully 79 percent of all these HISD students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches; and we know what concentrated poverty does to a child’s ability to succeed in the public schools.

More than 70 percent of all Harris County residents who are under the age of twenty are African American and Hispanic. If too many of these young people are unprepared to succeed in today’s global, knowledge-based economy, it is difficult to envision a prosperous future for the region as a whole. Houston’s ethnic diversity can be the greatest asset this city could have as it builds the bridges to the global marketplace— or it could end up tearing the community apart and becoming a major liability, reducing rather than enhancing Houston’s competitiveness in the new economy.
Rethinking Some Basic Assumptions about Poverty and the Public Schools.

The widespread prevalence of poverty and homelessness in this affluent metropolitan region was growing more difficult to ignore even before the coronavirus underscored the life-and-death significance of the region’s deepening inequalities. The surveys indicate that area residents have in fact been rethinking some of their basic assumptions about the nature and causes of poverty in America. Houstonians, who once believed in building a city almost exclusively on the basis of short-term private-sector developer decisions, are now increasingly calling for new initiatives that can help to reduce the growing inequalities and advance educational opportunities.

In alternating years since 2009, the surveys have included identical questions measuring support for government programs to expand economic
opportunities and to reduce the impact of concentrated disadvantage. Figure 5 documents the gradual, but consistent, shifts in support for collective actions to address these complex and consequential issues.

The proportions of Harris County residents who agree with the assertion that government should take action to reduce the income differences between rich and poor grew from 45 percent in 2010 to 61 percent in 2020. The percentages who agree that government should see to it that everyone who wants to work can find a job increased from 64 percent in 2011 to 79 percent in this year’s survey. And 72 percent of the survey respondents in 2020 said they were in favor of federal health insurance to cover the medical costs of all Americans, up from 60 percent in 2010.
The respondents were also asked if they believed that most people who receive welfare benefits are really in need of help, or are they taking advantage of the system. The percentages who thought that welfare recipients really do need the help they receive grew from 31 percent in 2010 to 47 percent in 2020. In last year’s survey (not shown in the Figure), 53 percent asserted that welfare benefits generally give poor people a chance to get started again, up from 34 percent in 2009; only 44 percent, compared to 58 percent in 2009, believed instead that such handouts encourage poor people to stay poor and dependent.

Commentators have suggested that one consequence of the pandemic may be a new appreciation of the importance of government investments in general, along with an enhanced commitment to reducing poverty and reversing the unsustainable inequalities the American economy has been generating. As the local economy begins slowly to return to full activity, area residents appear to be more ready today than in previous years to support meaningful steps in these directions.

The survey participants have also been asked over the years if they thought the Houston public schools have enough money, if it is used wisely, to provide a quality education, or whether they believed instead that significantly more money will be needed. As seen in Figure 6, during the 1990s, when the question was first asked, decisive majorities, by 54 and 55 percent to 38 and 37 percent, were clear in their belief that the schools have enough resources. During the ensuing ten years, from 1999 through 2009, the survey respondents were evenly divided in their assessments of the adequacy of school funding.

We asked the identical question again ten years later. In the 2018 survey, for the first time, a solid majority of area residents (by 56 to 42 percent) were now clear in asserting that the schools will need significantly more money to provide a quality education. We included the question once again in 2020 to test the stability of what looked like a sea change in the support for additional funding. In this year’s survey, 55 percent called for more spending and only 39 percent thought the schools had enough money to provide an adequate education. The data document a potentially consequential shift among area residents in their support for larger and more sustained investments in the public schools.

Figure 7 gives the responses to a question about early childhood education, which was first asked in 2018 and replicated in 2020. The survey participants this year—corroborating the striking approval two years earlier—were again in favor, by 70 to 28 percent, of increasing local taxes in order to provide universal preschool education for all children in Houston. The data are clear in underlining area residents’ new-found
widespread agreement on the need to make substantial improvements in access to quality education across the board, from birth to college, from cradle to career. Clearly the time has come for truly meaningful investments along these lines.

One of the moments of truth in American education is third-grade reading: If you're not reading at the third-grade level in third grade, you are four times more likely to drop out of high school. The most powerful predictor of whether you can read at a third-grade level is: Did you start kindergarten ready to learn to read? Rich children in Houston generally enter kindergarten one and a half to two years ahead of poor children. That gap didn’t matter so much when the economy was providing plenty of low-skilled, well-paid, blue-collar jobs. Today, the educational inequalities matter enormously.

More than 65 percent of all the jobs in America today require education beyond the traditional high school — not necessarily four years of college, but one or two years of post-secondary training to acquire the technical skills the new economy requires, to address the impending shortage of qualified workers in such worthy occupations as welders, electricians, and health technicians. It seems clear that Houston’s willingness to invest significantly in educational opportunities will be as important in determining the city’s prosperity in the twenty-first century as dredging the Ship Channel was in laying the foundations for its thriving economy in the twentieth century. The surveys make it clear that area residents are more prepared today than in all previous years to call for significant additional investments in public education.
The Growing Sense of Community Solidarity.

As Harris County residents confront the formidable health and economic challenges produced by the coronavirus, they will hopefully be able to build on the sense that we are all in this together, and avoid the temptation to assign blame or to succumb to the “us vs. them” mentality that has recently given rise to anti-Chinese and anti-Semitic outbursts. Here, too, the surveys offer some reasons for optimism.

In alternating years since 2014, the respondents have been asked if, generally speaking, they think most people can be trusted, or that “you can’t be too careful in dealing with people.” As indicated in Figure 8, the proportion of area residents who said that most can be trusted has increased consistently, from 31 percent in 2014, to 37 percent in 2016, to 39 percent in 2018, and to 42 percent in this year’s survey. The shared experience of having lived through a devastating storm and now a terrifying pandemic may have contributed to the growing sense of mutual trust and community solidarity.
The increase in trust has been accompanied by less fear of crime. Only 11 percent in this year’s survey spontaneously mentioned crime when asked to name the biggest problem facing people in the Houston area today. That was a lower number than at any time in the past 39 years.

In alternating surveys since 1995, the respondents have been asked directly if they were concerned about their personal safety. The proportions who said they were very worried about becoming the victim of a crime have fluctuated over the years, but the numbers overall have declined — from 43 percent in 1995 to 25 percent in 2003; then up again to 36 percent in 2006, down to 23 percent in 2011, then another jump to 33 percent in 2013, and since then consistently dropping from 30 percent in 2015, to 25 percent in 2016, to 18 percent in 2017, and to 17 percent in 2020. This year’s figure is the lowest since the question was first asked in 1995.

Further confirmation of the declining fear of crime can be seen (in Figure 8) with regard to attitudes toward the death penalty. When offered the choice among three alternative forms of punishment for persons convicted of first-degree murder — the death penalty, life imprisonment with no chance for parole, or life imprisonment with a chance for parole after 25 years — the percentage choosing capital punishment dropped from 41 percent in 2000, to 37 percent in 2010, to 27 percent in 2016, and to 20 percent in this year’s survey. Back in 1993, when the survey participants were asked directly about their support for the death penalty (not shown here), 75 percent said they were in favor. That number fell to 66 percent in 1999, to 61 percent in 2011, to 57 percent in 2013, to 51 percent in 2017, and then up very slightly to 56 percent in 2019.

In 2020, as seen in Figure 9, we replicated a question last included in the 2003 survey, asking area residents what they thought would be the appropriate punishment for the possession of small amounts of marihuana.
Solid majorities in 1995 and in 2003 (by 62 and 56 percent, respectively) disagreed with the assertion that such possession should not be treated as a criminal offense. By 2020, in a striking reversal, 70 percent now agreed with that suggestion. The decline in punitiveness is consistent with the other evidence showing the growth in empathy and in the acceptance of differences that seems to be developing among Houston area residents.

In addition, one of the clearest and most consistent attitude shifts the surveys have recorded is the growing embrace across the board of Houston’s ethnic diversity and the increasing support for the new immigration that is transforming the city and nation. As indicated in Figure 10, 64 percent of the survey participants in 2016 agreed with the assertion that refugees who are in danger in their home countries should always be welcome in Houston.
Support for that view grew further to 75 percent in 2018 and to 77 percent in this year’s survey.

In alternating years since 2010, the respondents have been asked about their feelings toward different marginalized groups, using a 10-point scale (where 1 means very unfavorable feelings and 10 means very favorable feelings). The proportion expressing positive feelings (a score of 7 to 10) with regard to undocumented immigrants grew consistently in the years from 2010 to 2020, from 24 to 49 percent, and positive ratings of Muslims increased from 35 to 60 percent. In addition (not shown here), the belief that immigrants to the U.S. generally contribute more to the American economy than they take grew from 45 percent in 2010 to 64 percent in 2020. The surveys once again confirm that, when representative samples of area residents are asked about these issues in the privacy of their homes, the picture that emerges is quite different from the impression given by the outbursts of anger and fear so often portrayed in the media.

The national shift in attitudes toward gay rights has been one of the most striking phenomena in the history of public opinion research, and it is powerfully manifested in Houston as well. Figure 11 indicates that the percentage of area residents who said they were in favor of homosexuals being legally permitted to adopt children grew from 49 percent in 2010 and 42 percent in 2012, to 52 percent in 2018 and to 62 percent today. When that question was first asked, back in 1991, only 17 percent were in favor of gay adoptions.

The proportion of survey respondents who agreed that marriages between homosexuals should be given the same legal status as heterosexual marriages grew from 34 percent when first asked in 1993, to 45 percent in 2011, to 49 percent in 2015, and to 63 percent in the 2019 survey. Favorable feelings toward gays and lesbians (ratings of 7 to 10 on the 10-point scale) grew from 43 percent in 2010 to 48 percent in 2011, to 52 percent in 2013, to 57 percent in 2014, to 60 percent in 2016, and to 63 percent in this year’s survey. And the numbers who said they had a close personal friend who is gay or lesbian grew from 41 percent in 2004 to 60 percent in 2019.

These striking and consistent findings strongly suggest that homosexuality is coming to be understood as part of the natural variation among human beings, and this is making it harder to justify continued discrimination. Houston area residents are growing demonstrably more comfortable in a world where mutual acceptance and personal friendships are thriving across the differences in cultural backgrounds and sexual proclivities.
Paradoxical Perspectives on Abortion Rights.

In sharp contrast with the growing support for gay rights, attitudes toward abortion have not changed at all over the years of the surveys, but here too the data suggest a substantial degree of tolerance for opposing views. In all the surveys since 1988, the respondents have consistently believed that abortion is wrong, but they have been equally consistent in their support for pro-choice policies: Although most area residents are personally opposed to abortion, they nevertheless affirm a woman’s right to make that decision herself.

In the 2019 survey, for example, as indicated in Figure 12, 57 percent asserted that abortion was morally wrong, but 63 percent were opposed to a law that would make it more difficult for a woman to obtain an abortion. A large portion of area residents espouse traditional values for themselves, yet they respect the rights of others to make different decisions in their own lives.
Confirming these generally pro-choice positions, the survey participants were asked in alternating years about this statement: “It should be legal for a woman to obtain an abortion if she wants to have one for any reason.” Despite their reservations about the moral acceptability of abortion, a slight majority of all area residents (by 49 percent in 2020, with 46 percent opposed), endorse that strong statement asserting the right to choose. Responses on this question too have remained essentially unchanged over all the years of the surveys.

Anyone who conducts reliable research on the attitudes and beliefs of the general public will be struck as we have been by how often the generally progressive views recorded in surveys of this sort seem to be at odds with current public policies. The disconnect between public opinion on the one hand and the politically effective opinion that informs public policy is the result of many forces — older, more conservative voters more consistently showing up at the polls; voter suppression through tougher ID laws; the disproportionate power of the donor class; highly motivated single-issue voters dominating local elections; and blatant redistricting.

Citizens who are intensely pro-gun, pro-life, or anti-gay are more likely to vote on those issues alone than are those who support gun control or abortion rights, but who hold a variety of other views with equal conviction. In the 2013 survey, for example, at the same time that the U.S. Congress was defeating every effort to strengthen controls over access to handguns, and the Texas Legislature was pushing for right-to-carry laws, fully 81 percent of the respondents in that year’s survey said they were strongly in favor of requiring a criminal background check on anyone who wants to buy a gun. That policy preference is unlikely to get translated any time soon into legislation, since those who are opposed to such gun restrictions are more likely to advocate for that position and to vote on the basis of that one issue alone than those who are generally (but less fervently) in favor of what they consider to be commonsense regulations.
A similar dynamic, illustrating the differential propensity to vote one’s convictions, can be seen in the findings from the 2016 and 2020 surveys on the differences between pro-choice and pro-life adherents in their voting commitments. The respondents were asked about this hypothetical situation: “Suppose that there was a candidate running for the Legislature whose views you mostly agreed with, but who took a position on abortion rights that you disagreed with completely. Would you certainly not vote for that candidate, probably not, or could you still vote for that candidate?”

Figure 13 indicates that the respondents in 2016 who disagreed with the suggestion that it should be legal for a woman to obtain an abortion for any reason (the pro-life position) were more than twice as likely (at 31 percent) compared with those who agreed with that pro-choice statement (13 percent) to say that they would certainly not vote for such a candidate. Half of the pro-choice respondents (49 percent) in 2016 said they could still vote for a candidate who disagreed with them on abortion rights, but this was the case for less than a fourth (23 percent) of those who took the pro-life position.

When the same question was asked in 2020, the percentage of pro-choice respondents who said they would never vote for a pro-life candidate increased very slightly from 13 to 16 percent. Meanwhile, there was a significant decrease in intensity among the pro-life respondents: 31 percent in 2016 said they would certainly not vote for a pro-choice candidate, but that number dropped to 24 percent in this year’s survey. The intensity gap continues to strongly favor pro-life voters, but the differences are slightly smaller today than they were in previous surveys.

Even as the state of Texas has sought in a variety of ways to enact legislation that severely limits a woman’s access to abortion, the majority of area residents have remained firmly opposed to any law that would make it more difficult for a woman to obtain an abortion and they are fully in support of a woman’s right to make that decision herself. But public policy is more likely to respond to the intensity with which such views are held.
The Enduring Impact of Hurricane Harvey.

Are the effects of the worst rainfall event ever to hit the continental United States now fading from public consciousness, or are area residents as determined as ever to strengthen government controls in an effort to mitigate the effects of future flooding? The 2020 survey replicated several questions asked in the 2018 and 2019 surveys to measure the continuities and changes in concerns about these issues since Harvey made landfall in August 2017. One measure of the top-of-the-mind salience of concerns about impending storms can be seen in the item that begins the interviews: The very first question in the survey each year asks the respondents what they would say is the biggest problem facing people in the Houston area today. Figure 14 charts the issues that have been mentioned most often in each of the past four years.

Only one percent of area residents in February 2017 thought about flooding and storms when asked to name the most important issue in the Houston
region. Shortly after that great rainfall event, however, in early 2018, 16 percent spontaneously named flooding as the biggest problem. A year later, attention to storms and resiliency had faded to just 7 percent. Instead of a further decline this year, fully 11 percent in 2020 mentioned flooding as the biggest problem. Area residents have evidently not forgotten, even two and a half years after the big storm, how vulnerable the region is and remains in the face of severe rain events and sea-level rises.

Further evidence of the stability of these concerns can be seen in Figure 15. The survey respondents in each of the past three years were asked about their expectations regarding severe storm events in Houston. In almost identical numbers, overwhelming majorities (at 76, 75, and 77 percent) agreed with the statement: “It is almost certain that the Houston region will experience more severe storms during the next ten years compared to the past ten years.”

In the 2018 survey, 71 percent of the respondents were in favor of prohibiting any additional construction in flood-prone areas, but only 56 percent in the 2019 survey agreed with that assertion. We were not surprised to see this resurgence of area residents’ traditional resistance to government interference in developer decisions, and we expected it to be even clearer one year later. Instead, 65 percent of the survey participants in 2020 called for an end to any additional construction in areas that have repeatedly flooded.

The data in Figure 16 further confirm the ongoing changes in the way area residents now see the world. In 2010 39 percent thought the threat of climate change was a very serious problem. The numbers grew to 46 percent in 2016, to 52 percent in 2018 and 51 percent in 2020. Instead of any lessening of concern today as memories of Harvey have receded, the perceived seriousness of climate change remains as strong as ever.

Meanwhile, when asked what they thought was the primary cause of climate change, there was a striking
unidirectional movement across the surveys since 2011. In that year, 48 percent believed that human activities were primarily responsible for climate change and 47 percent thought it was the result of normal climate cycles. The numbers who affirmed the causal impact of human activities grew to 58 percent in 2015, 65 percent in 2018, and 69 percent in 2020, with just 23 percent still putting the blame on normal climate cycles.

Area residents are more prepared today than in past years to acknowledge the region’s deepening vulnerability to severe storms. They appear to be more inclined in general to recognize the need for new forms of public intervention, not only to improve the region’s resiliency, but also to address the many other challenges the region will face in the months and years ahead.
The 50/50 Preference for Walkable Urbanism.

Figure 14 presented the responses to the open-ended question that begins the survey interviews. The findings over the past four years not only underlined the unexpected increase from last year to this in the proportion naming storms and floods as the biggest problem in the Houston area today. They also emphasized the overriding importance of traffic congestion as the dominating concern in the minds of area residents. That was not always the case.

Back in 1987, in the depths of that oil-boom collapse, 71 percent cited the economic crisis (poverty, unemployment, homelessness) as the biggest problem in Houston. In the mid-1990s, crime was the great concern, mentioned spontaneously by 70 percent in the 1995 survey, in the midst of the crack-cocaine epidemic. In the more recent surveys, as economic anxieties have lessened and crime receded, traffic congestion became the dominant concern. In 2020, 30 percent thought of traffic as the biggest problem; 13 percent named...
the economy; 11 percent mentioned crime, and another 11 percent cited the danger of storms and floods.

The preoccupation with traffic woes may help to explain area residents’ somewhat surprising responses when asked how they would most like to live in this sprawling far-flung metropolitan region. As indicated in Figure 17, the respondents in 2019 as in past years were evenly divided (by 50 and 48 percent) in their preference for living in a single-family residential area, or in an area with a mix of developments, including homes, shops, and restaurants. In 2020, 53 percent said they preferred a single-family home with a big yard, “where you would need to drive almost everywhere”; but 44 percent would opt instead for a smaller home, in a more urbanized area, within walking distance of shops and workplaces.
The overall 50-50 preference for walkable urbanism reflects not only concerns about traffic congestion and long commutes, but also the changing life circumstances of area residents themselves. When Americans built the suburbs and fled the cities during the years after World War II, more than two-thirds of U.S. households (according to the 1970 census) had children living at home. In 2010 that was true for less than a third, and by 2020 the census projects that only about one-fourth of all American households will have children at home; another one-fourth will consist of persons living alone; and the fastest growing age segment of all consists of men and women over the age of eighty.

Families with three or more children are being replaced by empty nesters wanting shorter commutes, by millennials postponing marriage and having fewer children, and by increasing numbers of single-person and elderly households. No wonder so many are calling for more walkable alternatives and for complete streets, reconfigured to accommodate not only motorized vehicles, but also bikers and pedestrians. Real-estate developers are slowly responding to the new demands by building more transit-oriented, walkable communities, not only in Houston’s downtown areas, but also in the urbanizing town squares and centers that are sprinkled throughout this far-flung multi-centered metropolitan region.

The living preferences are also partly a reflection of area residents’ growing comfort with Houston’s ethnic and cultural diversity. Just as the move out to the suburbs in the 1960s and 1970s was prompted by more than a desire for bigger spaces to accommodate larger families, but was also motivated by the fear of urban crime and discomfort with life in the inner core; so the new interest in urban alternatives today is motivated by more than traffic woes and smaller households. Living in denser, more walkable areas means sharing public amenities, interacting in common spaces with people from different socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds. Its attraction for area residents is therefore likely to depend in part on their comfort with the burgeoning diversity of urban places. The relationships depicted in Figure 18 support that hypothesis.

The Anglo respondents in 2018 and 2020 who said they would prefer to live in a smaller more urbanized home within walking distance of shops and workplaces were also more likely than those who preferred a single-family neighborhood (by 60 to 43 percent) to believe that immigrants to the U.S. generally contribute more to the American economy than they take, and (by 69 to 61 percent) to approve of homosexuals being legally permitted to adopt children. They were also much more inclined (by 63 to 33 percent) to call for more spending on rail and buses rather than on expanding existing highways.
and they were more likely to live in smaller households and to have fewer children.

Similarly, when asked in 2017 and 2019 about the kind of neighborhood they would prefer, the Anglo respondents who opted for an area with a mix of developments, rather than a single-family residential neighborhood, were more likely to believe that the increasing immigration into the U.S. today mostly strengthens, rather than threatens, American culture; they were more inclined to agree that marriages between homosexuals should be given the same legal status as heterosexual marriages; and they were less likely to have children.

As the ongoing changes in family structures and lifestyles continue to evolve in the years ahead, and as the more tolerant attitudes take root, American cities will slowly but inevitably respond with policies that mirror the preferences and demands of their citizens. Social change, as always, happens first at the individual level, years, even decades, before it is translated into public policy and eventually transforms the community as a whole.

As a final note, the 2020 survey sought to develop a preliminary picture of a too-often neglected problem in many Harris County neighborhoods — the challenge of dealing with stray dogs and cats. As indicated in Figure 19, the participants in this year’s survey were asked about the importance of the issue. Fully one-fourth (25 percent) said that stray dogs or cats were a somewhat serious or very serious problem in their neighborhood. Only half of all area residents (52 percent) said that strays were not a problem in their communities.

Stray animals make it more difficult and dangerous for children to walk to school or to play in neighborhood parks, and they undermine the utility of the city’s hike and bike trails along its bayou greenways. Local nonprofits and municipal agencies are working hard to develop long-term solutions that can make Houston’s stray population more manageable and reduce the suffering of homeless animals. But its shelters are overwhelmed; its spay-and-neutering programs are inadequate; its efforts to transport Houston strays from local animal shelters to homes in midwestern and northern states are sorely in need of additional funding.

Meanwhile, Figure 19 also indicates that 64 percent of the survey participants say they are in favor of spending more tax money to reduce the number of strays in Houston neighborhoods. Here, as in so many other respects, Harris County residents seem to be well ahead of public officials in calling for more humane and progressive initiatives to address the critical issues.
Concluding Note.

The Houston surveys have documented significant change over the years in area residents’ understanding of the region’s major challenges and in their support for new initiatives that can improve the city’s prospects. Now, suddenly, the world has been turned upside down: Houston has to cope simultaneously with a global health crisis, an economic shutdown, and a precipitous collapse in the price of oil. The effort to bring the coronavirus pandemic under control will require the development of much-improved medical treatments, a more extensive testing regime, better contact tracing and enforced isolation, and the widespread distribution of an effective vaccine. According to most experts, all that will take some 12 to 18 months.

During this period, as Houston grapples with mounting costs and shrinking budgets, it will be important to keep a focus on the broader issues the region needs to address as it seeks to build toward a better future. The 39 years of the Kinder Houston Area Survey have emphasized three of the most compelling long-term challenges. To wit:

- **The knowledge economy.** In order to prosper in today’s high-tech, global economy, Houston will need to make significant investments in new centers of industry and innovation, to develop emerging technologies in such areas as wind and solar manufacturing, data analysis, and the life sciences. Above all, it will need to drastically improve its public schools and nurture a far more educated workforce, and it will need to find effective ways to reduce the inequalities that have resulted from the combined effects of world-wide competition, declining unionization, advances in computers and robotics, and concentrated political power. The coronavirus has accentuated the region’s growing inequities and laid bare their dire consequences. The surveys have shown that area residents are more prepared than in past years to support government initiatives to reduce the disparities in life chances and to significantly increase investments in the public schools.

- **Quality-of-place attributes.** To attract the talent that will grow its economy, the city will need to evolve into a more aesthetically and environmentally appealing urban destination. It will need to continue making major improvements in its parks and bayous, its mobility and transit systems, its air and water quality, its venues for sports and the arts, and its resilience in the face of increasingly severe storms and rising sea-levels. The surveys have shown how much area residents value these quality-of-life amenities and recognize the critical need to mitigate future storms. In addition, as their life circumstances and comfort levels evolve, many are seeking homes in the walkable, transit-oriented neighborhoods that are sprinkled throughout this traditionally automobile-dependent, sprawling metropolis.

- **The demographic transformation.** If this region is to flourish in the years ahead, it will need to evolve into a much more united, equitable, and inclusive multiethnic society, one with real equality of opportunity for all area residents in all communities, positioned to capitalize fully on its remarkable ethnic and cultural diversity. Here, too, the surveys have shown that area residents, increasingly over the years, are embracing Houston’s diversity and feeling more at home in a world of thriving friendships across ethnic populations, religious groups, and sexual orientations. And they have developed a deeper sense of community solidarity and mutual trust.

It remains to be seen whether Houston’s business and civic leaders can build on the attitude changes the surveys reveal and can summon the political will to undertake the investments needed to position the region for sustained prosperity in a new era of economic, demographic, and technological transformation. As the city copes with the short-term health and economic challenges the coronavirus has generated, it is good to be reminded of the way area residents themselves have changed over the years in their appreciation of the broader issues and in their support for the longer-term initiatives that these times demand.
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