The 2018 Kinder Houston Area Survey:
Tracking responses to income inequalities, demographic transformations, and threatening storms

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2018 KINDER HOUSTON AREA SURVEY

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Introduction

For 37 years, Rice University’s “Kinder Houston Area Survey” has been measuring the continuities and changes in the perceptions and experiences of successive representative samples of Harris County adults. Through intensive 30-minute interviews reaching a total of more than 45,000 Houston area residents, the surveys have been tracking systematically the trends in life experiences, attitudes, and beliefs during a period of remarkable economic and demographic change.

In this report, we measure the survey participants’ perspectives on the local economy and their concerns about flooding and resilience after enduring one of the worst rainstorms in American history. We note the growing partisan divides in beliefs about the American future and explore the paradoxical increase in the belief, despite well-documented realities, that a high school diploma is sufficient to be successful in today’s economy, even as support for more funding for the public schools and concerns about unequal opportunities are also increasing.

We present additional evidence from this year’s survey that here, at the forefront of the nation’s demographic transformations, area residents continue to express increasingly positive attitudes toward immigration and more favorable feelings toward gays and lesbians, Muslims, and undocumented immigrants. We measure the degree to which the respondents were directly impacted by Hurricane Harvey, and we ask how that experience has affected their assessments of various policy proposals intended to mitigate future flooding, as well as their concerns about climate change and their generalized trust in others. Finally, we make use of four years of “oversample” interviews in Fort Bend and Montgomery counties to document the way the Greater Houston region’s three most populous counties differ in their demographic characteristics, their support for government programs seeking to redress the inequalities, and the importance they attach to transit, walkability, and land-use planning.
This research program would not have been possible without the continued generous support and steadfast encouragement of the Kinder Foundation and Houston Endowment Inc., and of so many other corporations, organizations, and good friends throughout the Houston region. Colleagues in the Rice sociology department and at the Kinder Institute for Urban Research have also contributed importantly to this continuing commitment to measure systematically the changing views of Houston area residents. Our heartfelt thanks to all!

Survey Methodology

The interviews for the 37th annual “Kinder Houston Area Survey,” averaging more than 30 minutes apiece, were conducted between January 23 and March 1, 2018 by SSRS in Media PA. They reached (60 percent by landline, 40 percent by cell phone) a scientifically-selected representative sample of 807 residents from Harris County, along with an additional 350 from Fort Bend County and 350 from Montgomery County, for a total this year of 1,507 participants.

The responses from all 37 years of surveys have been “weighted” to correct for variations in the likelihood of selection and to align the sample more closely with known population characteristics. 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 compare the ways in which the weighted responses of Harris County residents in 2018 differ from those that were given to identical questions by previous representative samples of county residents.
Perspectives on Life in the Houston Area

- The surveys track area residents’ subjective assessments of the local economy through modest decline and recovery, as oil prices fell from dizzying heights in 2014 to lows in 2015 and 2016, and then rebounded, if only slightly, in 2017.

- Traffic, as in the past five years, was most often named as the biggest problem facing Houstonians in all three counties, especially by Fort Bend residents. Respondents in the three counties were equally likely (by 12 to 14 percent) to name the devastation of Hurricane Harvey as the biggest problem in the Houston area today, despite the substantial differences in the degree to which their populations were directly impacted by the storm itself.

- Ideological perspectives shape respondents’ views of the ongoing social changes, and the partisan divides in beliefs about the American future are sharper this year than ever before.

Education and the Growing Inequalities

- The low-skilled, blue-collar jobs in America are disappearing in the wake of globalization and automation. Some form of post-secondary education is now required for most well-paying jobs, yet only one-fifth of the 70,000 Houston area children who began eighth grade in 2004 had completed any post-high-school program by 2015, eleven years later.

- Despite these troubling statistics, increasing proportions of area residents appear to believe that success today requires no more than a high school diploma. Blacks and Hispanics, particularly Hispanic immigrants, are considerably more likely than Anglos to affirm the critical importance of post-secondary credentials.

- However, when asked specifically about the requirements for obtaining a well-paying job, clear majorities of area residents recognize the need for education beyond high
school. The survey participants are also more inclined today than ten years ago to believe that the public schools will need significantly more money to provide a quality education, and by wide margins they favor “increasing local taxes in order to provide universal preschool education for all children in Houston.”

- Area residents are also increasingly in support of stronger government programs to reduce the inequalities in America, to expand welfare benefits, and to ensure access to health care.

In the Midst of a Demographic Revolution

- In 1960, 74 percent of the Harris County population was composed of non-Hispanic whites; today just 31 percent of area residents are Anglos. Hispanics comprised 6 percent of the population in 1960; now 42 percent are Hispanics, and 8 percent are Asians or others, up from 2 percent in 1980. In the space of just 30 years, the Houston region has been transformed into one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse metropolitan areas in the entire country.

- Despite today’s divisive political discourse, when area residents are asked in the privacy of their homes about immigrants’ contributions to the American economy or about welcoming endangered refugees, they continue to express increasingly favorable attitudes.

- In alternating years during the past decade, the surveys have asked respondents to describe their feelings (on a ten-point scale) toward gays and lesbians, undocumented immigrants, and Muslims or the followers of Islam. In all three cases, the proportions giving positive ratings have increased consistently and significantly over the years.

Assessing the Impact of Hurricane Harvey

- Respondents were asked about the harm (particularly to their homes and vehicles) that they personally experienced as a direct result of Hurricane Harvey; 55 percent had no personal impact, 28 percent reported home damage and 13 percent said their personal vehicle was damaged as a result of the hurricane.

- The surveys asked about a variety of proposed interventions to mitigate future flooding. The proposals received varying but mostly strong support from area residents across the board. The respondents who were not directly impacted by the hurricane were generally no different in their views on these initiatives from those who were personally harmed by the storm.

- Compared to past years, area residents in 2018 are more convinced that the threat of climate change is “a very serious problem” and is mainly caused by human activities rather than by normal climate cycles, and they express somewhat higher levels of generalized trust. The experience of the hurricane may well have helped to reinforce these changing beliefs.

County Differences in a Multi-Centered Metropolis

- Fort Bend County has become one of the most ethnically diverse counties in America, whereas Montgomery County is still predominantly comprised of Anglos (and Republicans).

- The three counties also differ in their income and education levels and in their religious and political orientations, yet they diverge only slightly in their evaluations of the region’s ethnic diversity and in their call for alternatives to automobile dependency.

- The residents of Montgomery County are less inclined to support more government efforts to address the region’s income inequalities and Harris County respondents are more firmly in favor of mass transit, but the differences are modest. Area residents throughout the region, in both suburb and city, are seeking more opportunities for “walkable urbanism.”
The local economy. Texas crude was selling for more than $100 per barrel in late 2014; the price collapsed to less than $30 by late 2015. Regional unemployment levels stood at 4.3 percent in February 2015, then rose to 4.7 percent in 2016 and to 5.9 percent in early 2017. With oil prices now stabilizing at around $60 per barrel, the economy is rebounding once again, but at a much slower pace than earlier in the decade. According the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Houston area unemployment rate in February 2018 was 4.8 percent, a significant improvement from the year before. Nevertheless, local unemployment is still considerably higher than in the nation as a whole (at 4.4 percent) and in the State of Texas (4.1 percent).

Technological improvements and stabilized prices in the oil patch have brought about a recovery that has come with a slower-than-usual expansion of jobs. New investments across the board will be needed in the years ahead, to ensure much wider access to quality education and technical training and to undertake continuing improvements in the quality-of-life attributes that will enable Houston to attract the talent needed to grow its economy in the years ahead.

The modestly improving prospects for the region as a whole are reflected in survey questions measuring the public’s subjective sense of how the local economy is doing. In every year, the survey participants have been asked how they would evaluate “job opportunities in the Houston area.” Their negative responses (ratings of only “fair” or “poor”) have closely tracked over the 37 years of surveys the actual ups and downs of the region’s official unemployment rates.

As indicated in Figure 1, the percent giving positive ratings (“excellent” or “good”) to local job opportunities stood at 68 percent in early 2015, reflecting the still-booming fortunes of the oil patch in 2014. When prices plummeted
in 2015 and 2016, upstream companies stopped hiring and job losses grew. The recovery today has brought a slight but palpable improvement in area residents’ assessments of the local economy. Positive ratings of job opportunities increased from 63 percent in 2017 to 67 percent in this year’s survey. The proportions reporting that their personal financial situations have been improving grew from 29 to 35 percent since last year, and the numbers saying that the quality of living conditions in the Houston area has been “getting better” grew from 36 to 40 percent.

The biggest problem. The first question in each year’s survey asks the respondents what they would say is “the biggest problem facing people in the Houston area today.” Figure 2 shows the responses in this year’s survey from the region’s three largest counties.
Traffic congestion remains the dominating preoccupation throughout the region; this has been the case in all the past five years of surveys (2014–2018). The respondents from Fort Bend County have consistently been the most preoccupied with the woes of traffic congestion. In this year’s survey, traffic was mentioned spontaneously by 34 percent in Fort Bend County, compared to 26 percent in Harris and 20 percent in Montgomery. Concerns about the economy and crime were the next most frequently named problems in all three counties.

The responses this year required a new coding category. As seen in Figure 2, equal proportions (it was 13 percent in Harris County, 14 percent in Fort Bend and 12 percent in Montgomery) spontaneously named the devastation wrought by Hurricane
Harvey as the biggest problem facing people in the Houston area today. Note that the same proportions in all three counties mentioned the hurricane, even though the storm had a far more devastating impact on homes and vehicles in Harris County than it did in Fort Bend or Montgomery counties. It looks as if simply having lived through the hurricane and its aftermath during the many weeks of saturation coverage in the media had powerful effects on area residents’ preoccupations, whether or not they personally experienced any actual damage to their homes or vehicles as a direct consequence of the storm itself.

The partisan divides. When survey participants are asked to evaluate how well the national economy is doing, their answers are inevitably influenced by “motivated beliefs,” by interpretations of social reality that reinforce cherished assumptions. Figure 3 documents the deepening political divisions in this connection. The respondents have been asked over the years if they believed the country was headed for “better times” or “more difficult times.”

In 2017, the survey revealed a striking reversal in the outlooks on the American future expressed by Republicans and Democrats after Donald Trump’s election in 2016. This year’s survey found an even stronger separation, with 71 percent of all area Republicans today asserting that the country is headed for “better times” and 76 percent of Democrats convinced instead that “more difficult times” now lie ahead. This is the largest partisan divide on the question in all the years of the surveys. More than ever, it seems, our experience of the world is a function of the objective realities as they are filtered through our subjective interpretations.
This mixture of objective and subjective understandings is also evident when area residents are asked about the changing requirements for success in today’s increasingly high-tech, knowledge-based, global economy. In a national shift that began around 1980 and has accelerated since then, the availability in America of well-paying blue-collar jobs, requiring only modest levels of formal education and technical skills, has fallen precipitously, a consequence of outsourcing and automation, compounded by political paralysis and government inaction.

**Access to good jobs in the new economy.** As the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce has shown, in 1973 one-third (32 percent) of all the 91 million jobs that existed in America were available to high school dropouts and another 40 percent required no more than a high school diploma. As indicated in Figure 4, however, by 2010 fully 60 percent of the 143 million jobs now required some kind of post-secondary training. In 2020 that figure will grow to 65 percent. Meanwhile, a cohort study tracking the fates of the 70,000 students in all the Region IV public schools who were enrolled in the eighth grade in 2004 reported troubling statistics: Only 68 percent of the eighth graders actually graduated from high school and by 2015, eleven years later, just 21 percent had received any post-secondary credential of any sort.

Figure 5 presents the responses given by four different ethnic communities during the years since 2013 to the question of whether success in today’s world requires education beyond high school, or “are there many ways to succeed with no more than a high school diploma?” The surveys record a consistent decline among all four groups in their belief that education beyond high school is necessary to be successful today. Why has the belief that high school is sufficient for success in America gained such traction in recent years, even as it seemingly flies in the face of the objective evidence?
By 2020, 65% of all American jobs will require education beyond high school.

The Educational Prerequisites for Jobs in America (1970–2020)

FIGURE 4

The Perceived Necessity for Education Beyond High School, in Four Communities (2013–2018)

FIGURE 5


The changing beliefs may be explained in part by the growing presence in secondary schools of community college courses and vocational training, so the distinction between high school and post-secondary studies may be less clear. The survey participants may also be reacting to the deepening burden of college loans and the growing numbers of underemployed college graduates, in contrast to the attention paid to prominent entrepreneurs who have succeeded despite low levels of formal education.

Today’s political discourse may also have played a role in convincing many Americans that if blue-collar jobs have disappeared, it is not because of automation or robotics, but because of unfair trade agreements and excessive environmental regulations. Much less attention is being paid in political discussions these days to the critically important and difficult challenge of expanding access to quality post-secondary education and technical skills in order to strengthen American competitiveness in the new economy.

It is also important to recognize, as Figure 5 indicates, that African Americans and Hispanics have been consistently more likely than Anglos to affirm the importance of...
post-secondary education. Hispanic immigrants are by far the most insistent on this score. If Houston’s African American and Hispanic young people are not getting the education they need to succeed in today’s economy, it is demonstrably not because they do not value that education or recognize its importance. It is because these two communities, which together represent fully 70 percent of all Harris County residents who are under the age of 20 today, are by far the most likely to be living in areas of concentrated disadvantage, with all that such poverty portends for a young person’s ability to succeed in the public schools.

The question recorded in Figure 5 leaves unclear the meaning of “success.” In an effort to remove that ambiguity, a new question was included in this year’s survey. The respondents were asked about this statement: “In order to get a job that pays more than $35,000 a year, you need to have at least one or two years of education beyond high school.” As indicated in Figure 6, a clear majority of area residents, by 54 to 45 percent, agreed with that assertion. Confirming the tendency on the part of Anglos to downplay the importance of post-secondary education, the findings also reveal that only 42 percent of U.S.-born Anglos agreed that a decently-paying job today requires education beyond high school, but this was the view of 59 percent of U.S.-born Blacks, 55 percent of U.S.-born Hispanics, and 60 percent of foreign-born Hispanics.

The survey participants were also asked if the public schools in the Houston area generally “have enough money, if it were used wisely, to provide a quality education,” or whether they believed instead that “in order for the schools to provide a quality education, significantly more money will be needed.” When that question was last asked a decade ago, in 2009, the respondents were evenly divided, by 49 to 45 percent. In this year’s survey, in contrast, there was no longer any ambiguity: By 56 to 40 percent, the survey participants were now clear in their view that the schools will need significantly more money in order to provide a quality education.

Figure 6 also indicates, in a question first asked this year, that Houston area residents overwhelmingly support, by 67 to 30 percent, the commitment to providing universal preschool education for all children in Houston, even if it means “increasing local taxes.” Together these questions about the importance of education show widespread agreement among area residents today on the need to make substantial improvements across the board in access to quality education, from birth to college, from cradle to career. Clearly the time has come for meaningful action on this front. The new economy demands it, and the general public will support it.

**Addressing the inequalities.** The 2018 survey also replicated three questions from previous years asking about the role of government in expanding economic opportunity and reducing the impact of concentrated disadvantage. As shown in Figure 7, area residents on all three items express even more support today than in previous surveys for effective public initiatives along these lines. The proportion of survey participants who agreed that “the government should take action to reduce income differences between rich and poor in America” grew from 45 percent in 2010 to 60 percent in 2012 and to 65 percent today.

The respondents were asked if they thought “most people who receive welfare payments are really in need of help, or are they taking advantage of the system?” The percentages who believed that welfare recipients are legitimately in need of help grew from 31 percent in 2010 to 47 percent in 2018. And 72 percent of the survey respondents today indicate that they are in favor of federal health insurance to cover the medical costs of all Americans, (again) a higher number than ever before in these surveys.
In the Midst of a Demographic Revolution

Figure 8 presents the U.S. census data documenting the truly extraordinary transformations that have been taking place in the ethnic composition of the Harris County population. The nation as a whole is in the midst of an epic transition, as an earlier generation, predominantly Anglo and now aging, is being replaced by a new generation of Americans, largely composed of immigrants and their children, who are a mix of all the world’s ethnicities and religions. Nowhere is this transition more clearly seen than here in Harris County. No metropolitan area in America has been transformed as fully, as completely, as suddenly, and as irreversibly as Houston, Texas.

Harris County’s surging population growth during the oil-boom years of the 1960s and 1970s was brought about primarily by the influx of Anglos, the non-Hispanic white Americans who streamed into this energy capital from all other parts of the country. After the collapse of the oil boom in 1982, Harris County’s Anglo numbers actually stopped growing and then declined. The region’s continued rapid growth during the past three and a half decades is attributable almost exclusively to immigration from abroad, as well as to new births, often the children of earlier immigrants and of U.S.-born Latinos, Asians, and African Americans.

In 1980, Harris County was 63 percent Anglo, 20 percent African American, 16 percent Hispanic, and 2 percent Asian. By 2010 the U.S. Census counted 4.1 million people living in Harris County, of whom just 33 percent were non-Hispanic whites. According to the most recent estimates, the county’s population is now 42 percent Hispanic, 31 percent Anglo, 19 percent African American, and 8 percent Asian or other.

Immigration attitudes. One of the most consistent and consequential trends recorded in these surveys over the years is the continual improvement in area residents’
The Demographics of Harris County by Decade (1960–2010) and from the ACS Estimates for 2012–2016

**FIGURE 8**

Source: U.S. Census. Classifications based on Texas State Data Center Conventions.

The Changing Attitudes Toward Immigration Among Harris County Residents (2014–2018)

**FIGURE 9**

Source: Kinder Houston Area Survey (2014–18).
attitudes toward the region’s burgeoning diversity and the new immigration. The proportion of area residents who said they were in favor of “granting illegal immigrants a path to legal citizenship if they speak English and have no criminal record” has continued to grow, from 67 percent back in 2010 and 73 percent in 2012 to 75 percent in 2014 and to 82 percent in this year’s survey.

In 2016 and 2018, as also seen in Figure 9, 63 percent of area residents believed that immigrants to the U.S. generally “contribute more to the American economy than they take,” up from 59 percent in 2014, 48 percent in 2012, and 45 percent in 2010. Fully 64 percent in 2016 agreed with the statement that “Refugees who are in danger in their home countries because of their beliefs or their ethnicity should always be welcome in Houston.” Support for that view grew to 75 percent in this year’s survey.

In further evidence of area residents’ increasingly favorable views, Figure 10 indicates that the survey participants, in alternating years since 2010, have been asked to express their feelings toward several 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) toward gays and lesbians grew from 43 percent in 2010 to 50 percent in this year’s survey. Favorable feelings toward undocumented immigrants grew in this same period by 23 points, from 24 to 47 percent, and those giving positive ratings to Muslims or the followers of Islam grew from 35 to 48 percent.

The findings make it clear that, when representative samples of area residents are asked in the privacy of their homes about their views of other groups, the picture that emerges is quite different from the impressions of deepening hostility that are often experienced in electoral campaigns and political rhetoric.
In the face of changing realities, Houston’s business elite has been gradually coming to a new understanding of what today’s pro-business, pro-growth agenda actually entails. The rethinking began, of course, with the protracted economic disaster brought about by the oil-boom collapse in 1982, when the need to diversify the economy became the word of the day. In the depths of that prolonged recession, the city’s business leaders pooled dwindling resources to underwrite a new center for the performing arts (the Wortham Theater, completed in 1988), giving eloquent testimony both to their confidence in the region’s eventual recovery and to their clear recognition of the importance of excellence in the arts for the city’s ability to attract the talent it will need to restore its economic vitality.

A call to grow differently. The city’s image problems were fully evident on October 7, 1999, when the headline in the U.S.A. Today newspaper was, “Houston, cough, cough ... We’ve got a problem, cough, cough!” As the Los Angeles Times proclaimed on that particularly hot and balmy day, “New Smog Capital of America Declared!” For the first time in history, Houston had surpassed Los Angeles in the number of dangerously polluted days recorded during a single year. With support from most of the business community, more stringent regulations were gradually imposed, particularly on the petrochemical industries along the Ship Channel, and the region’s dangerous levels of ozone and particulate pollution have been reduced substantially.

Another “wake-up” call came in 2004, when Houston made a bid to host the 2012 Olympics. The U.S. Committee applauded the city’s brand-new light-rail line connecting its new sports venues with the downtown areas; they praised its vision of the Astrodome to be transformed into the largest, air-conditioned, indoor track and field venue on the planet, and they applauded the fine overall
County Differences in Measures of the Impact of Hurricane Harvey on Homes and Vehicles (2018)

Figure 11 presents the responses obtained from the 1,507 survey participants in the three counties when they were asked about the harm, if any, to their homes and vehicles that they

Support for Government Initiatives to Mitigate Local Flooding, by the Degree of Home Damage (2018)

Figure 12 shows the support for various government initiatives to mitigate local flooding, categorized by the degree of home damage. The initiatives include:

- Favor: Requiring all sellers of homes to notify potential buyers or renters if the property they are considering has flooded in recent years.
- Favor: Using public money to protect the industries along the Houston Ship Channel from hurricane surge flooding.
- Favor: Prohibiting any additional construction in areas that have repeatedly flooded.
- Favor: Increasing local taxes to enable governmental agencies to buy out more of the homes that have repeatedly flooded.
- Favor: Prohibiting any additional construction in areas that have repeatedly flooded.
- Favor: Using public money to protect the industries along the Houston Ship Channel from hurricane surge flooding.

presentation of its many plans for further improvement. Yet in the end the committee did not give the city a single vote, declaring that Houston was simply too unattractive to serve as host to the world. In the years since then, a wide variety of new, transformative initiatives have been put into place, such as Discovery Green Park and Bayou Greenways 2020, that have been turning Houston into a more attractive, greener, and healthier metropolitan area, far better positioned for prosperity in the new economy.

Will the effects of Hurricane Harvey turn out to be a wake-up call of equivalent power in shaping today’s “progrowth agenda”? Will the city and county be newly determined to manage the growth in a way that will make the region demonstrably more resilient and less prone to major flooding in the years ahead? As the writer and futurist John McHale once reminded us: What is at stake in these challenges “is not a question of alternatives to growth, but of alternative ways of growing.”
experienced as a direct result of Hurricane Harvey. The 418 respondents (28 percent of the sample) who said their homes were affected were asked about the extent of the damage: 227 (15 percent) said it was only a minor problem that could be repaired within a month, 132 (9 percent) said it was major damage requiring more than a month to repair, and 18 respondents reported that their homes were destroyed. In addition, 197 (13 percent) reported damage to a personal vehicle.

The accompanying image depicts the number of applications across the affected region that were submitted to FEMA for individual assistance by victims of the hurricane. The data show clearly that the actual impact of the storm was far more devastating in Harris County than in Fort Bend, while Montgomery County experienced almost no destruction at all. These county differences are reflected in Figure 11, offering a “validity check” that strengthens confidence in the veracity of the respondents’ accounts of personal damage. Harris County residents were far more likely to report that their homes or vehicles were damaged than were the residents from Montgomery County. Respondents in Fort Bend County, in keeping with the FEMA data, were more likely to say they were impacted than those in Montgomery County but less so than in Harris County.

Figure 12 shows area residents’ reactions to various proposals calling for more stringent government regulations in an effort to reduce the impact of future flooding. The responses are separated by the degree to which the respondents were personally impacted by the hurricane. There were only slight and inconsistent differences among the three levels of impact.

Whether they experienced direct harm from the storm or came through the Harvey experience personally unscathed, the survey participants are equally prepared, by 91 percent overall, to require property owners to notify potential buyers or renters if the property they are considering has flooded in recent years. By 72 percent, they favor using public money to protect the industries along the Ship Channel from hurricane surge flooding, and by the same percentage they support prohibiting any additional construction in areas that have repeatedly flooded. By 56 percent, they are also in favor of increasing local taxes to enable government to buy out more of the homes that have repeatedly flooded. And 66 percent of all area residents agree with the suggestion that, “If local government had imposed more stringent regulations on
development, this would have significantly reduced the damage caused by Hurricane Harvey.”

More than 75 percent of the participants in this year’s survey also agreed that, “It is almost certain that the Houston region will experience more severe storms during the next ten years compared to the past ten years.” As shown in Figure 13, the survey replicated two questions about climate change that have been asked periodically over the past ten years: The data indicate clearly that area residents’ beliefs have changed significantly. Back in 2010, only 39 percent of area residents thought that the threat of climate change was a “very serious problem.” That concern grew to 46 percent in 2016 and then jumped again in this year’s survey to 52 percent; only 22 percent in 2018 thought that climate change was “not a very serious problem.” In addition, when asked what they believed to be the primary cause of climate change, 64 percent in this year’s survey said it was “mainly caused by human activities.” Only 58 percent took that position in 2015; just 48 percent in 2011.

The respondents in 2018 were also asked if, generally speaking, they thought that “most people can be trusted,” or that “you can't be too careful in dealing with people.” The proportion of area residents who said that most can be trusted also increased consistently, from 31 percent in 2014, to 37 percent in 2016, and to 39 percent this year. The shared experience of having lived through such a devastating storm may well have contributed to area residents’ evolving views about community solidarity and climate change.
For the past four years, the surveys have asked identical questions of representative samples of residents from Fort Bend and Montgomery counties, enabling us to draw direct comparisons with the attitudes and beliefs of the respondents from Harris County. The differences help to define the contrasting contexts through which area residents are experiencing the dramatic changes that have been taking place throughout the Greater Houston region.

**Demographic differences.** We noted earlier that the Anglo population in Harris County has been declining gradually during the past three decades, while the numbers of Hispanics and Asians have been expanding rapidly. In Fort Bend and Montgomery counties, the number of Anglos has continued to grow, but not nearly as rapidly as the populations of Asians, African Americans, and Hispanics.

Figure 14 gives the Census figures for the past quarter century. In 1990 Fort Bend County was 54 percent Anglo, 20 percent African American, 20 percent Hispanic, and 7 percent Asian and other. Today, it boasts a more even distribution among America’s four major ethnic communities than almost anywhere else in the nation. The latest estimates from the U.S. Census indicate that the county is now 21 percent Asian and others, 24 percent Hispanic, 20 percent African American, and 35 percent Anglo. Montgomery County, in contrast, is still predominantly Anglo, at 69 percent in the latest estimates, but it was 81 percent Anglo in 2000 and 88 percent in 1990.

Figure 15 provides additional information on the three counties from the latest estimates of the U.S. Census. Fort Bend County is not only more diverse than Harris and Montgomery counties; it is also more highly educated and more affluent: 44 percent have college degrees and 59 percent report household incomes of more than $75,000. The residents of Harris County have about the
The Demographics of Fort Bend and Montgomery Counties by Decade and the ACS Estimates for 2012–2016

FIGURE 14

Source: U.S. Census data. Classifications based on Texas State Data Center Conventions.

County Differences in Income, Education, and Percent Foreign-Born (ACS Estimates for 2012–2016)

FIGURE 15


County Differences in Religiosity and Party Affiliation (2015–2018, Combined)

FIGURE 16

same percentages with college degrees as in Montgomery County, but a higher proportion have no more than a high school diploma and report household incomes of less than $25,000. More than a quarter of the residents in Harris and Fort Bend counties are foreign-born, compared to just over a tenth of those from Montgomery County.

The surveys allow us to ask about religion and politics, which by law are questions that cannot be included on the U.S. Census forms. As seen in Figure 16, the residents of Montgomery County are more likely to be Protestants and less likely to say that they have “no religion.” Fort Bend County residents are the most likely to identify with “other religions,” such as Muslim, Buddhist, or Hindu, and they are more likely to report having attended a religious service in the past 30 days. With regard to political affiliations, Fort Bend County is evenly divided, by 42 and 39 percent, between Republicans and Democrats. The residents of Montgomery County, at 52 to 29 percent, are mainly Republicans, whereas Harris County residents, by 47 to 32 percent, are more likely to be Democrats.

**Attitudinal similarities.** In light of these quite striking demographic differences, one might expect equally sharp county divisions in residents’ attitudes toward diversity and immigration, in their support for government programs, and in their calls for transit and “walkable urbanism.” There are few meaningful differences across the counties in measures of their overall comfort with the region’s burgeoning diversity and in their receptivity to immigration. The region as a whole is increasingly embracing its remarkable diversity. On two other dimensions, however, county differences prevail.

The data in Figure 17 indicate generally weaker support in Montgomery County for government efforts to address issues of poverty and inequality. Compared to Fort Bend or Harris counties, the residents of Montgomery County are consistently more opposed to government programs designed to reduce the inequalities in America. In keeping with their more Republican leanings, they are also less in favor of federal health insurance to cover the medical costs of all Americans. They are more inclined to believe that government is trying to do too many things that should be left to individuals and businesses, and less likely to believe that government should do more to solve our country’s problems. They more often assert that people who receive welfare benefits are taking advantage of the system, and that such benefits encourage poor people to stay poor and dependent.
There are also county differences when the survey participants are asked how they would like to live in this sprawling automobile-dependent metropolitan region. Figure 18 shows that Harris County residents are more inclined than those in the surrounding counties to call for urbanized alternatives, but the differences are more modest than one might have expected. Thus only 11 percentage points separate the respondents from Harris and Montgomery counties in their belief that “the development of a much improved mass transit system” is “very important” for the future success of the Houston region.

The county differences are slightly larger when the respondents are asked about the kinds of homes and neighborhoods they would prefer to live in. Almost half (49 percent) of Harris County respondents, compared to 30 percent of those in Montgomery County, said they would prefer “a smaller home in a more urbanized area, within walking distance of shops and workplaces,” rather than “a single-family home with a big yard, where you would need to drive almost everywhere you want to go.” By 54 to 40 percent, Harris County residents were also more likely to prefer to live in “an area with a mix of developments, including homes, shops, and restaurants,” rather than in “a single-family residential neighborhood.” When those wanting to live in an area with a mix of developments were asked if they actually lived in an neighborhood like that today, 73 percent in Harris County, but only 56 percent in Montgomery County, answered in the affirmative.

Finally, it is interesting to note that significantly higher proportions of residents in the more conservative Fort Bend and Montgomery counties (where zoning codes have been used to shape urban growth) are calling for “better land-use planning to guide development in the Houston area.” In more “liberal” Harris County, on the other hand, the area’s residents (having rejected zoning on several occasions) were more likely to assert instead that “people and businesses should be free to build wherever they want.”

Source: Kinder Houston Area Survey (2010–18).

The Greater Houston Metropolitan Region

Population: 6.8 Million
Area: 10,072 Sq. Miles

Montgomery County
Population: 556,203
Area: 1,077 Sq. Miles

Fort Bend County
Population: 741,237
Area: 885 Sq. Miles

Harris County
Population: 4.6 million
Area: 1,777 Sq. Miles

Source: ACS 2016 One-Year Estimates, U.S. Census Bureau
For almost four decades, the Kinder Houston Area Survey has been taking the pulse of the region as it responds to the new realities of our time. No metro area in the nation has been tracked in this way over such a long period.

Few cities more clearly exemplify the trends that are refashioning the social and political landscape across America. A new high-tech, knowledge-based, global economy is generating mounting inequalities based primarily on access to quality education. An epic demographic transition is underway, as this nation, once predominantly composed of European nationalities, becomes a microcosm of all the world’s ethnicities and religions. And quality-of-life attributes now increasingly determine the fates of cities.
The surveys measure the changes that have been taking place in the way area residents understand the new realities, in the kinds of policies they would support, and in the attitudes and beliefs that they have developed. The findings should remind the many civic leaders in Houston who are working to address the new regional challenges that public attitudes are shifting in their direction.

According to these systematic surveys, Houston area residents as a whole, despite growing political divides, are more willing today to support government programs intended to reduce urban inequalities, to address the needs of minorities and the poor, and to improve the public schools, including universal preschool for all children in Houston. They are more ready to embrace and celebrate the region’s ethnic diversity, to support the actions needed to strengthen resiliency and mitigate future flooding, and to invest in the area’s overall quality of life and urban amenities.

As suggested earlier, it is not a question of alternatives to growth, but of alternative ways of growing. The findings from the Houston surveys suggest that area residents may be more prepared than at any time in the past 37 years to support the public policy initiatives that will be needed if this region is to thrive in the years ahead.
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Mission

The Kinder Institute for Urban Research builds better cities and improves people’s lives by bringing together data, research, engagement, and action.