THE 34TH ANNUAL KINDER HOUSTON AREA SURVEY
PERSPECTIVES ON A CITY IN TRANSITION
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PERSPECTIVES ON A CITY IN TRANSITION
I am pleased to report the results of the 2015 Kinder Houston Area Survey, the nation’s longest-running study of any metropolitan region’s economy, population, life experiences, beliefs and attitudes. No other urban area in America has been the focus of a long-term research program of this scope. Houston exemplifies, as few cities do, the remarkable trends that are refashioning the social and political landscape across all of urban America.

The purpose of these continuing surveys is to measure systematically the way the general public is responding to the region’s economic and demographic transformations; to explore the bases for individual differences in attitudes and beliefs; and to make the research findings readily available as a meaningful resource for the general public, civic and business leaders, and scholars everywhere in the shared pursuit of solutions to our most pressing urban challenges.

In this report, we track Harris County perspectives on the local economy, traffic and ethnic diversity. We present a preliminary analysis of the similarities and differences across Harris, Fort Bend and Montgomery counties in their demographic patterns, experiences and beliefs. We conclude with an updated assessment of area residents’ changing attitudes toward abortion rights, same-sex marriage and the death penalty.

It has been a tremendous privilege to be able to work closely with so many good friends and colleagues over the years to develop this evolving chronicle of our times and to add the latest chapter to a story that is as complex and interesting as are Houston-area residents themselves.

Stephen L. Klineberg, Ph.D.
DIRECTOR, KINDER HOUSTON AREA SURVEY (1982–PRESENT)
FOUNDING DIRECTOR, KINDER INSTITUTE FOR URBAN RESEARCH

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

Social Science Research Solutions (SSRS), the Philadelphia-based research firm, conducted the interviews for this year’s survey between Feb. 2 and March 4, 2015. They reached (70 percent by landline, 30 percent by cell phone) a scientifically selected representative sample of 809 residents from Harris County. In a special focus this year, the firm completed an additional 399 interviews in Fort Bend County and 403 in Montgomery County, for a total of 1,611 systematic interviews.

The responses from all 34 annual surveys are “weighted” to correct for variations in the likelihood of selection and to align the sample more closely with known population characteristics. This procedure helps to ensure that the data will reflect as accurately as possible the actual distributions along such dimensions as race and ethnicity, age, gender and education levels. The findings reported here, unless otherwise indicated, reflect the views of respondents from Harris County only, asking how the weighted responses in 2015 differ from those that were given to identical questions by previous representative samples of Harris County residents.
ECONOMIC OUTLOOKS

Oil price dips notwithstanding, assessments of the local economy have continued to improve, as traffic woes increase.

The drop in crude oil prices in recent months has clearly tempered the exuberance Houstonians were feeling last year about the local economy. The 2015 survey found no evidence, however, that the job losses in upstream production have had any discernible effect as yet on the outlooks of most area residents.

OBJECTIVE INDICATORS

The Houston area is still among the fastest growing urban regions in the country. The official unemployment rates in Harris County, as seen in Figure 1, dropped from 8.4 percent in February 2011 to 6.8 percent in 2013, to 5.7 percent in 2014 and to 4.3 percent in 2015; this is still more than a full percentage point below the national average.

SUBJECTIVE EVALUATIONS

The public’s subjective impressions mirror these official figures. In every year, as indicated in Figure 2, the survey participants have been asked to evaluate job opportunities in the Houston area. The number giving positive ratings (“excellent” or “good”) dropped from 57 percent in 2008 to 45 percent in 2009 and to 35 percent in both 2010 and 2011, during the years of the Great Recession.

As the economy improved, the 2012 survey recorded a significant turnaround, with a 48 percent jump in positive ratings that year, and then another significant increase to 58 percent in 2013. In this year’s survey, 69 percent gave positive evaluations to local job opportunities, a figure no different statistically from the ratings given at the very height of the oil boom back in 1982 (at 71 percent), before there was any hint of the pending collapse in oil prices.

FIGURE 1: THE OFFICIAL UNEMPLOYMENT RATES IN HARRIS COUNTY (FEBRUARY FIGURES, 1982–2015)

THE BIGGEST PROBLEM

Meanwhile, as economic concerns have lessened and population growth continues apace, traffic is becoming the dominant preoccupation. The open-ended question that begins each survey asks: “What would you say is the biggest problem facing people in the Houston area today?” Figure 3 depicts the percentages among successive samples of Harris County residents who spontaneously named traffic congestion, the economy or crime. The data provide another graphic reminder of the upheavals that have marked Houston’s history during the past 34 years.
Traffic congestion was the dominant concern during the booming years of the early 1980s, whereas area residents were preoccupied with economic issues during the recession of the mid-1980s. The percentages naming the economy as the most serious problem peaked at 71 percent in early 1987. During the 1990s, worries about crime were predominant, mentioned spontaneously by 70 percent of area residents in 1995. Since that year, the numbers citing crime or personal safety as the biggest problem decreased steadily, to just 16 percent in 2012.

Meanwhile, the proportion of area residents who named traffic as the dominating concern grew again from single digits in the early 1990s to 47 percent in 2004; traffic woes faded during the years from 2009 to 2012, when economic anxieties once again predominated. Now, as the economy has improved and with Houston’s population still surging, traffic has once again taken over as the dominating concern among area residents. Traffic congestion was cited as the biggest problem by 28 percent of Harris County residents in 2015 and by 31 percent in 2014, up from 20 percent in 2013 and 15 percent in 2012. Just 18 percent in this year’s survey named the economy and 21 percent cited crime as the biggest problem facing people in the Houston area today.

TRAFFIC AND ITS SOLUTIONS

In alternating years, the survey participants who had lived in the Houston area for three or more years were asked directly whether they thought traffic had generally been getting better, worse or stayed about the same. In the 2015 survey, almost two-thirds of all Harris County residents (65 percent) said it was getting worse, up from 56 percent who felt that way in 2013, from 53 percent in 2011 and from 59 percent in 2009. The proportion of respondents who thought traffic was getting better dropped from 16 percent in 2009 to just 6 percent in this year’s survey.

As Figure 4 indicates, the respondents were also asked which of three proposals they thought would be the best solution to traffic problems in the Houston area. By far the most widely preferred solution, chosen by 43 percent this year, was “making improvements in public transportation, such as trains, buses and light rail.” Another 27 percent called for “developing communities where people can live closer to where they work and shop.” Only 26 percent of Harris County residents thought that the traditional solution, “building bigger and better roads and highways,” would be
an effective way to reduce traffic congestion in the Houston region. Moreover, support for more roads and highways as the preferred solution seems to be declining, while the call for more “new urbanist” communities is growing. It will be interesting to track the continuing evolution of these attitudes in the years ahead.

OTHER QUALITY-OF-LIFE INDICATORS
Despite their palpable concerns about traffic, more respondents in 2015 (38 percent) than at any time in the past 10 years assert that living conditions in the Houston area have been improving. In addition, as indicated in Figure 5, there were slight declines in the percentage of area residents who said they were “very concerned” about either air pollution or crime. Life in the Houston area does indeed seem generally to be getting better.


“Very worried” that you or a member of your family will become the victim of a crime.

“Very concerned” about the effects of air pollution on your family’s health.

Living conditions in the Houston area have “gotten better.”
INTERETHNIC RELATIONS

Following a downturn last year in assessments of ethnic relations, Harris County residents today are once again more optimistic about the region’s burgeoning diversity.

THE DEMOGRAPHIC REVOLUTION

During the oil-boom years of the 1960s and 1970s, Houston’s surging population growth was brought about primarily by the in-migration of non-Hispanic whites, who streamed into this energy capital from all other parts of the country. After the collapse of the oil boom in 1982, the net increase in Houston’s Anglo population slowed and then declined. The rapid population growth of the past three decades is attributable almost exclusively to the influx of Asians, Latinos and African-Americans.

In 1980, Harris County was 63 percent Anglo and 20 percent African-American. This biracial Southern city has quite suddenly become the single most ethnically and culturally diverse large metropolitan region in the country. According to the most recent ACS five-year estimates (2009–2013) from the U.S. Census, Harris County is now 41 percent Hispanic, 19 percent African-American, 8 percent Asian, and just 32 percent Anglo.

ASSESSMENTS OF ETHNIC RELATIONS

In every year since 1992, the survey respondents have been asked to assess the overall relations among racial or ethnic groups in the Houston area today. The proportion of area residents giving positive ratings (“excellent” or “good”) has increased steadily in all of Houston’s ethnic communities across the years, but there was a significant downturn in the ratings last year. As indicated in Figure 6, the positive evaluations dropped for all three major ethnic groups between 2013 and 2014.

In this year’s survey, the assessments have generally improved. From 2014 to 2015, the positive ratings increased slightly for Anglos from 53 to 56 percent; they were stable among blacks at 37 and 36 percent, and they improved significantly for Hispanics, rising from 35 percent last year to 46 percent in 2015.

IMMIGRANT ATTITUDES

More generally, virtually all the relevant measures of attitudes and beliefs over the years reveal a population that seems clearly to be coming to grips with the new demographic realities and even embracing the region’s ethnic diversity. Confirming the findings reported last year on questions measuring attitudes toward undocumented immigrants and beliefs about the impact of immigration on the local economy, the alternating survey items included in 2009, 2011, 2013 and 2015 also reveal generally improving assessments of the new immigration.

As indicated in Figure 7, the proportion of area residents who would like the United States to admit more or the same number of immigrants in the next 10 years as were admitted in the last 10 years grew from 54 percent in 2009, to 69 percent in 2013 and to 72 percent in 2015. The percent in favor of “granting illegal immigrants a path to legal citizenship if they speak English and have no criminal record” has continued to increase, up from 64 percent in 2009 to 71 percent in 2011 and to 72 percent in this year’s survey.

In 2015, 59 percent asserted that the increasing immigration into this country today “mostly strengthens” (rather than “mostly threatens”) American culture, consistent with the 60 percent who felt that way in 2013, and up significantly from 47 percent in 2011 and 52 percent in 2009. As the number of new immigrants has declined in recent years and area residents have had several decades of experience with Houston as an immigrant destination, concerns about the impact of these newcomers seems to be fading across the board.
A direct comparison of these counties finds three contrasting communities that, nevertheless, show widespread agreement on critical issues.

In a special focus this year, identical questions were asked of representative samples of approximately 400 residents each from Fort Bend and Montgomery counties, so that direct comparisons can be drawn 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 Houston region.

### Figure 8: Ethnicity and Education in the Three Counties (ACS 2009–2013 Five-Year Estimates)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Asians/Others</th>
<th>Latinos</th>
<th>Blacks</th>
<th>Anglos</th>
<th>Graduate or professional degree</th>
<th>Bachelor’s degree</th>
<th>Some college Associate’s degree,</th>
<th>High school degree</th>
<th>Less than high school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Harris</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>41.4</td>
<td>32.1</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>44.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fort Bend</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>23.9</td>
<td>35.6</td>
<td>29.5</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>25.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montgomery</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>69.9</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>21.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Demographic Comparisons**

As indicated in Figure 8, the most recent census data confirm that Fort Bend County is even more ethnically diverse than Harris County, coming just about as close to an even distribution among the four major communities as can be found anywhere in the nation – at 20 percent Asian, 24 percent Hispanic, 21 percent African-American and 36 percent Anglo. In sharp contrast, Montgomery County is 70 percent Anglo, 22 percent Hispanic, and just 4 percent black and 4 percent Asian.

Fort Bend County also has the most highly educated population, with 42 percent of all those aged 25 or older having college degrees, compared to 31 percent in Montgomery County and 29 percent in Harris County. At the other end of the spectrum, 45 percent in Harris County have no more than a high school diploma, compared to 39 percent in Montgomery County and 30 percent in Fort Bend County.
PERSPECTIVES ON THE NEW DIVERSITY

Houston’s burgeoning ethnic diversity is experienced most directly in Fort Bend and Harris counties, and not nearly so much in Montgomery County. Are these demographic differences reflected in the views of the residents of the three counties? Figure 9 presents the comparisons across the counties in residents’ attitudes toward immigration and ethnic relations.

As indicated in Figure 9, the residents of Montgomery County generally express stronger reservations about the new immigration and give slightly lower evaluations to the relations among racial and ethnic groups. The residents of Fort Bend County are somewhat more enthusiastic about the region’s diversity than those in the other two counties. The differences, however, are small and inconsistent.

The data indicate that generally positive evaluations of the new diversity are almost equally prevalent throughout the Houston region. At the same time, the enthusiasm is far from unanimous, a reminder that societal changes of this magnitude are inevitably experienced with mixed feelings, especially among older Anglos, who came of age in the very different world of the 1960s and 1970s.
LIFE IN THE HOUSTON AREA

When asked to name the biggest problem facing people in the Houston area today (Figure 10), the residents of Fort Bend County (by 40 percent) were significantly more likely than those in either Harris or Montgomery counties (both at 28 percent) to name traffic as the predominating concern. The residents of Montgomery County were somewhat more likely to mention economic concerns, and those in Harris County more frequently cited crime as the biggest problem.

As seen in Figure 11, the surveys document a strong preference across the three counties for more “walkable urbanism” opportunities. When asked what sort of neighborhood they would prefer to live in, the residents of Harris County (consistent with the responses in previous surveys) divided evenly, with 49 percent opting for “a single-family residential area” and 49 percent calling instead for “an area with a mix of developments, including homes, shops and restaurants.” Even in the two far more sprawling, car-oriented counties, four out of 10 respondents expressed a preference for more urbanized neighborhoods.
When asked how often they make use of Houston’s urban amenities – its “museums, nightlife or sporting events” – the proportion who said that they had visited such venues three or more times during the past 12 months ranged from 41 percent in Harris County to 34 percent in Montgomery County. Large proportions of area residents currently own a bicycle, ranging from 38 percent in Harris County to 49 percent in Montgomery County; and many more, especially in Harris County, said they wish they could ride a bicycle more often.

In further confirmation of the extent of agreement across the three counties in their support for alternatives to the automobile, the survey participants were asked which of the three proposals (more roads and highways, developing communities closer to workplaces and shops, or transit improvements) would be the best long-term solution to the area’s traffic problems; Figure 11 indicates that there were no differences across the counties, and the clear preference in all three was for “making improvements in public transportation, such as trains, buses and light rail.” Fewer than a third of the respondents in any of the three counties called instead for “building bigger and better roads and highways.”

IDEOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES

One of the sharpest distinctions among the three counties is in their predominant political ideologies. As indicated in Figure 12, the residents of Harris County, by 45 to 32 percent, are more likely to be Democrats or to think of themselves as closer to the Democratic Party. Montgomery County is the opposite, with 53 percent Republican and just 29 percent Democrat; Fort Bend County is evenly divided at 41 and 41 percent.

![Figure 12: Political Party Affiliation in the Three Counties (2015)](image-url)
These differences in party affiliation are clearly reflected in attitudes toward a wide range of public policy issues (Figure 13). Whether the questions have to do with the role of government, with concerns about the environment, or with support for abortion rights and the death penalty, Harris County residents are more likely to support the positions associated with Democrats, Montgomery County respondents tend to endorse the Republican positions, and Fort Bend County is in between, but generally closer to the views of Harris County than to those of Montgomery County.

**FIGURE 13: COUNTY DIFFERENCES IN PERSPECTIVES ON PUBLIC POLICY ISSUES (2015)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Harris</th>
<th>Fort Bend</th>
<th>Montgomery</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government is trying to do too much that should be left to individuals and businesses.</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Very concerned&quot; about environmental issues in general.</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favor a law making it more difficult to obtain an abortion.</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favor the death penalty for persons convicted of murder.</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
On social issues, area residents remain both anti-abortion and pro-choice, with growing support for gay rights and fading approval of the death penalty.

With no meaningful change over the years of the surveys, most area residents indicate that they are morally opposed to abortion in general. At the same time, they are decidedly pro-choice. In 2015, 58 percent of Harris County residents said they personally believed 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.”

FIGURE 14: ABORTION ATTITUDES IN HARRIS COUNTY
(1999–2015)

Opposed to “a law that would make it more difficult for a woman to obtain an abortion.” Believe that “abortion is morally wrong.”

Similarly, respondents in alternating years were asked about the 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 acceptability of abortion, a majority of all area residents (by 52 percent in 2014, with 47 percent opposed), endorse that strong statement asserting the “right to choose.” This pattern, too, has remained essentially unchanged over all the years of the surveys.
THE “TOLERANT TRADITIONALISTS”
A large portion of area residents thus espouse traditional values for themselves, yet respect the rights of others to make different decisions in their own lives. Of the 809 respondents from Harris County in this year’s survey, 439 (58 percent) asserted their belief that abortion is “morally wrong.” Of those 439 respondents, 244 (56 percent) were nevertheless opposed to “a law that would make it more difficult for a woman to obtain an abortion”; the remaining 195 (44 percent) were in favor of imposing further restrictions on abortion rights. Figure 15 presents some of the most compelling factors that seem to account for the differences between these two groups of anti-abortion respondents.

Why do so many area residents endorse both the anti-abortion and pro-choice positions?

The pattern of relationships depicted in Figure 15 suggests that empathy may have much to do with tolerance in this connection. Women are more likely than men to recognize that some may be forced to make this difficult decision because of the life circumstances in which they find themselves. The respondents with less household income and lower levels of education are more likely to empathize with those who feel compelled to make that decision. This is also the case for blacks and Hispanics (at 55 and 61 percent, respectively), compared to Anglos (at 46 percent).

Social support also seems to make a difference. The anti-abortion respondents who are Democrats are considerably more likely than Republicans to support a woman’s right to choose; and those who are frequent church attenders are far less likely to take the pro-choice position.

**FIGURE 15: THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THOSE WHO SUPPORT THE “RIGHT TO CHOOSE” AMONG THE ANTI-ABORTION RESPONDENTS (2015)**
In sum, although a majority of area residents indicate that they personally believe abortion is “morally wrong,” most are nevertheless unwilling to impose a hard-and-fast rule on all persons regardless of the circumstances in which they may find themselves. That reluctance is one of the reasons why Houston has been able to develop into a modern, progressive and tolerant city.

THE GROWING APPROVAL OF SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

Meanwhile, on virtually all the relevant questions asked over the years, support for gay rights has increased consistently. In alternating years, for example, the survey participants were asked about the statement, “Marriages between homosexuals should be given the same legal status as heterosexual marriages.” The numbers in agreement reached a majority of 51 percent in this year’s survey – up from 43 percent in 2009, 37 percent in 2001 and 31 percent in 1993.


Similarly, as reported last year, the percent who were in favor of homosexuals being legally permitted to adopt children grew from 17 percent in 1991, to 28 percent in 2000, to 38 percent in 2004, to 43 percent in 2012, and to 51 percent in 2014. The number of area residents who consider homosexuality to be “morally acceptable” also has grown consistently, from 21 percent in 1997, to 31 percent in 2005, to 45 percent in 2011 and to 52 percent in this year’s survey.
FADING SUPPORT FOR THE DEATH PENALTY

In 1993, 75 percent of all Harris County residents said they were in favor of “the death penalty for persons convicted of murder.” That number fell gradually to 66 percent in 1999, to 61 percent in 2011, to 57 percent in 2013 and to 56 percent in 2015. When offered the choice of 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 the death penalty dropped from 41 percent when the alternatives were first offered in 2000, to 37 percent in 2010 and to 28 percent in 2014.

THE NINE-COUNTY HOUSTON METROPOLITAN REGION

6.2 MILLION   9,434 SQ. MI.

HARRIS COUNTY
AREA: 1,777 SQ. MI.
POPULATION: 4,225,830

MONTGOMERY COUNTY
AREA: 1,077 SQ. MI.
POPULATION: 485,225

FORT BEND COUNTY
AREA: 885 SQ. MI.
POPULATION: 628,443

SOURCE: ACS 2013 (THREE-YEAR ESTIMATES), U.S. CENSUS BUREAU
Kinder Institute for Urban Research
Bill Fulton, Director
Stephen L. Klineberg, Founding Director
Michael Emerson, Academic Director
Ruth López-Turley, Associate Director of Research
The mission of the Kinder Institute is to:

- Advance understanding of the most important issues facing Houston and other leading urban centers through rigorous research, policy analysis and public outreach; and
- Collaborate with civic and political leaders to implement promising solutions to these critical urban issues.