



THE HOUSTON AREA SURVEY—2010

PERSPECTIVES ON A CITY IN TRANSITION

(APRIL 2010)

Through almost three decades of systematic research, the annual Houston Area Survey has measured this region’s remarkable economic and demographic transformations and recorded the way area residents are responding to them. No other metropolitan area in America has been the focus of a research program of this scope. None more clearly exemplifies the trends that are rapidly refashioning the social and political landscape of urban America.

Partly in recognition of the increasing value and importance of this research, Rice University officially launched the “Institute for Urban Research” (IUR) in February 2010. The new Institute will provide a permanent home for the annual surveys, stimulate other metropolitan research, sponsor educational programs, and engage in public outreach that advances understanding of pressing urban issues and fosters the development of more humane and sustainable cities.

The interviews for the 29th Houston Area Survey, reaching a scientifically selected representative sample of 750 Harris County residents — including 100 respondents contacted by cell-phone — were conducted by the Center for Public Policy at the University of Houston between February 3 and March 17, 2010. Analyses of the survey data across the years make it clear that area residents differ significantly in their experiences and attitudes by whether they are rich or poor, black or white, immigrant or native-born, young or old, urban or suburban, male or female, religious or secular, Democrat or Republican, etc. It will be important to understand and appreciate such differences as we work together to build the Houston future.

Here, we consider the Harris County population as a whole, and ask how the responses obtained in 2010 differ importantly from those given to identical questions by previous representative samples of Houston area residents. Presented below are some of the central findings:

A. Harris County residents have become considerably more pessimistic about their personal financial situations, even as tentative signs of economic recovery become evident.

- * The official unemployment rates in Harris County grew from 4.1% in February 2008, to 6.3% in 2009, to 8.5% in 2010. At the same time, the proportion of respondents giving positive evaluations to job opportunities in the Houston area (ratings of “excellent” or “good”) declined from 57% in 2008, to 49% in 2009, and to 38% in this year’s survey.
- * The proportion of area residents who spontaneously mentioned the local economy (unemployment, poverty, or the cost of living) when asked to name “the biggest problem facing people in the Houston area today” jumped from 15% in the 2008 survey to 44% in 2009 and 38% in this year’s survey.

- * The numbers who said their personal situations had been getting *worse* in the past few years grew from 21% in 2008, to 27% in 2009, and to 32% in 2010. The proportion saying things were getting *better* for them declined from 40% in 2008, to 32%, to just 20% in this year's survey. That percentage today is lower than ever recorded in all of the 29 years of surveys.
- * With regard to outlooks on the personal future, the proportions who thought that they would be *better off* 3 or 4 years down the road dropped from 58% in 2008, to 52% in 2009, to 48% in 2010. And the numbers who believed that their own standard of living would eventually be *higher* than that of their parents declined from 72% in 2008 to 57% this year.

B. Houston area residents today perceive a much more problematic economy, where jobs are less secure and education more important than ever before.

- * Respondents have been asked over the years about this statement: "People who work hard and live by the rules are not getting a fair break these days." In the 2010 survey, 67% agreed with that assessment, up from 57% who felt that way in 2002, 61% in 2004, and 59% in 2008.
- * In this year's survey, 67% agreed that, "There are very few good jobs in today's economy for people without a college education." In 2007, when that question was last asked, 61% agreed.
- * In 2010, 43% agreed that "there are enough good jobs for all welfare recipients who really want to work." Fully 57% concurred with this statement when it was last presented, in 1996.
- * When asked which would be more effective in reducing crime, 79% in this year's survey chose "spending large sums of money to reduce poverty and to keep young people in school," rather than "spending the same money to send criminals to prison and keep them there a long time." In 1999, when that question was last asked, only 50% chose the first alternative.

C. The economic anxieties are reflected in declining support for government initiatives.

- * The proportions who were in favor of "federal health insurance to cover the medical costs of all Americans" declined from 74% in 2006, to 67% in 2008, and to 52% in February 2010.
- * In this year's survey, 54% thought it would be a "very serious problem" for the country "if the gap between rich and poor gets significantly bigger than it is today." That view was expressed by 67% of the survey respondents in 2008.
- * Agreement that, "The government should take action to reduce income differences between rich and poor in America," declined from 50% in 1992, to 44% in 1999, and to 39% today.
- * This year, 48% were in favor of "requiring utilities to reduce their emissions of greenhouse gases, even if this means that electricity rates will rise." In 2007, 66% took that position.
- * In a related question, 37% in the 2010 survey believed that the threat of global warming was "a very serious problem." In 2008, 51% said the threat of climate change was very serious.

D. Despite their economic worries, residents remain upbeat about the Houston region.

- * When asked to assess the "control of air pollution in the Houston area," 50% in 2002 and 47% in both 2006 and 2008 said it was "poor." The percent of area residents who gave that lowest rating to the region's air pollution efforts declined to 35% in 2010.
- * In this year's survey, 30% thought that living conditions in the Houston area have been getting better over the past few years; 28% said conditions were getting worse.
- * Fully 38% said they thought that living conditions in the Houston area during the next 3 to 4 years will be better than they are today; just 16% thought conditions will get worse.

- * Respondents have been asked periodically how they would rate “the Houston area in general as a place to live.” The percent saying, “excellent” or “good” has grown consistently over the years, from the already high figure of 63% in 1983 and 75% in 2008, to 82% in 2010.

E. New questions this year: On pension funds, term limits, drug policies, and local food.

- * The survey participants were evenly divided on what to do about the city’s unfunded pension obligations: 43% supported raising taxes to put more money into the funds so the benefits can be paid; 40% called instead for reducing the benefits originally promised to the employees.
- * The Houston respondents were clearer about term limits. By 56% to 29%, they declared that, if the term limits placed on COH elected officials were changed from “three 2-year terms,” it would be better to have a limit of “two 4-year terms,” rather than “three 3-year terms.”
- * Fully 69% agreed with the statement that, “Individuals in possession of small amounts of illegal drugs should be fined rather than sent to jail.” Just 26% disagreed with this suggestion.
- * When asked how important they felt it was to be able to buy locally grown food, 42% said it was “very important,” another 41% said “somewhat important,” and 16% said that access to locally grown foods was “not important” to them.

F. Harris County residents now clearly support a more urban lifestyle.

- * “During the next 20 years,” the respondents were told, “Harris County will need to build new housing, shops, and workplaces for more than a million additional residents.” When asked about the best way to accommodate that growth, 80% called for “redeveloping older urban areas to build the new housing and shops where services, streets, and sewer lines already exist.” Only 15% preferred to “continue to build new suburbs on the edge of existing suburbs.”
- * In the 2010 survey, 73% agreed with the assertion that “we need better land-use planning to guide development in the Houston area”; 21% believed instead that “people or businesses should be free to build wherever they want.”
- * In this year’s survey, the respondents were asked directly what they considered to be the best way to spend our transportation dollars: 52% thought the money should be used “to improve rail and buses,” and 42% called for more spending “to expand existing highways.”
- * When asked what they would choose if they could live in any kind of housing in the Houston area, 57% said they would prefer “a single-family home with a big yard, where you would need to drive almost everywhere you want to go.” Fully 41% called instead for “a smaller home in a more urbanized area, within walking distance of shops and workplaces.”
- * Respondents living in the city were asked how interested they would be in someday moving to the suburbs, and those in the suburbs were asked about moving to the city. In 1999, when the questions were first asked, 46% of Anglo city dwellers were “very” or “somewhat” interested in moving to the suburbs, compared to just 28% of those in the suburbs who were interested in moving to the city. Today, the figures are equal, at 25% and 23%, respectively.

G. There have been few changes in attitudes toward immigration in general, but area residents remain conflicted, especially with regard to undocumented immigrants.

- * In this year’s survey, 47% believed that immigrants to the U.S. generally take more from the American economy than they contribute, but 44% think they contribute more than they take.
- * In 2010, 61% said the local police should take an active role in identifying undocumented immigrants; 34% thought that responsibility should be left mainly to the federal authorities.

- * The proportion of area residents who believed that the influx of undocumented immigrants constitutes a “very serious” problem for Houston grew from 43% in 2006, to 61% in 2008, and then declined to 52% in this year’s survey.
- * The percent in favor (“if cost were not a factor”) of “building a 2,000-mile security fence along the U.S.-Mexico border to stop all undocumented immigration,” grew from 50% in 2006, to 55% in 2008, and to 62% today.
- * The percent of area residents who support “granting illegal immigrants a path to legal citizenship if they speak English and have no criminal record” declined from 68 percent in 2007 to 56 percent in 2008, and then increased slightly, to 59%, in 2010.
- * On the other hand, when the respondents in this year’s survey were also asked about “allowing the children of undocumented immigrants to become U.S. citizens, if they have graduated from college or served in the military,” 81% were in favor, with just 16% opposed.

H. More generally, the data suggest an increasing acceptance of the burgeoning diversity.

- * According to the U.S. Census, the population of Harris County in 1980 was 63% Anglo. Today non-Hispanic whites comprise fewer than 35% of the county’s population. One indication of that remarkable change can be seen in the rise of multiracial churches. When the respondents were asked in 2000 if more than 80 percent of the people in the religious service they attend are of their particular ethnic background, 73% said, “yes.” In 2010, that figure had dropped to 65%, indicating a significant increase in the number multiethnic congregations.
- * The proportion of survey participants who thought the increasing ethnic diversity in Houston will eventually become “a source of great strength for the city,” rather than “a growing problem for the city,” increased from 60% in 2006, to 65% in 2008, to 69% in this year’s survey.

I. The growing comfort with diversity is accompanied by mounting support for gay rights.

- * The belief that homosexuality is primarily “a matter of personal choice,” not an inborn trait or something caused by the social environment, declined from 41% in 2008 to 34% in 2010.
- * The numbers in favor of “homosexuals being legally permitted to adopt children” increased steadily from 19% in 1991, to 37% in 2004, to 43% in 2008, and to 52% in the 2010 survey.
- * Support for “allowing gays and lesbians to serve openly in the military” grew from 52% in 2000, to 64% in 2008, and to 73% in 2010.
- * Significantly, during these same years there has been no change, and if anything a slight *decrease*, in support for abortion rights. The proportions who agreed that, “It should be legal for a woman to obtain an abortion if she wants to have one for any reason,” declined from 56% in 2006, to 54% in 2008, to 50% today. The percent opposed to “a law that would make it more difficult for a woman to obtain an abortion” fell from 63% in 2001 to 54% in 2009.
- * Moreover, support for gay rights was consistently stronger among the younger respondents, but there was no relationship between age and any of the measures of abortion attitudes.

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