

The Kinder Houston Area Survey:

Thirty-Six Years of
Measuring Responses
to a Changing America

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May 2017



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Introduction



For 36 years, the “Kinder Houston Area Survey” has been measuring the continuities and changes in the attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of successive representative samples of Harris County residents. Through intensive 25-minute interviews with a total of almost 44,000 Houston area residents, we have been watching the world change.

No city in the nation has been followed in this way over such a long period of time. Few more clearly exemplify the remarkable trends that are refashioning the social and political landscape across all of America. The coming together of two fundamental transformations has redefined the challenges and opportunities of our time. The good blue-collar jobs have disappeared in the wake of globalization and automation, and today’s economy is generating growing inequalities predicated above all else on access to high quality education and technical skills. At the same time, America is in the midst of an extraordinary demographic transition, as an earlier generation, predominantly Anglo and now aging, is being replaced by a new generation of Americans, who are a mix of all the world’s ethnicities and religions.

Back in 1980, Harris County was 63 percent Anglo, 20 percent African-American, 16 percent Hispanic, and 2 percent Asian. Thirty years later (in the 2010 census), it was 33 percent Anglo, 18 percent African-American, 41 percent Hispanic, and 8 percent Asian. According to census projections for the American population as a whole, soon after 2040 non-Hispanic whites (Anglos) will constitute less than half of the country’s population, and the nation’s overall demographics will look very much like Harris County today.

In this report, we track area residents’ perspectives on the economy, traffic, and crime. We note their declining fear of crime and the ethnic differences in their comfort in calling the police for assistance. We document their continuing positive assessments of life in the Houston area and their growing preference for “walkable urbanism.” We note the paradoxical increase in the numbers who believe, despite well-documented realities, that a high school diploma is sufficient to be successful in today’s economy.

We present additional evidence this year of the steadily improving evaluations of the relations between Houston’s various ethnic communities, even as the surveys also make it clear that Anglos continue to resist the idea of buying a home in a neighborhood where the majority of families are African-American

or Hispanic. In the concluding section, we take advantage of the 36 years of surveys to ask if the systematic changes we have observed over the years in area residents' attitudes toward immigration and homosexuality are the result of earlier generations actually changing their minds in light of new experiences, or are due instead to the coming of age of younger generations who are bringing different views into the public arena.

This work would not have been possible without the continued support of the Kinder Foundation and Houston Endowment Inc., and the help of many friends, col-

leagues, corporations, and organizations throughout the region. Houston has turned out to be one of the most interesting and consequential cities in America. It has been a distinct privilege to have been able, through the Kinder Institute, to track systematically Houston's evolution into the forefront of the nation's ongoing transformations. This is where the American future is going to be worked out.

Survey Methodology

The interviews for the 36th annual "Kinder Houston Area Survey," averaging more than 25 minutes apiece, were conducted between January 24 and March 1, 2017, by SSRS. They reached (59 percent by landline, 41 percent by cell phone) a scientifically-selected representative sample of 827 residents from Harris County, along with (for the fourth year in a row) an additional 400 from Fort Bend County and 402 from Montgomery County, for a total in the 2017 survey of 1,629 respondents.

The responses from all 36 years are "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 each county's population, along such dimensions as race or ethnicity, age, gender, educational attainment, and homeownership. The findings presented here record the ways in which the weighted responses from Harris County in 2017 differ from those

that were given to identical questions by previous representative samples of Harris County residents.

The analyses presented in past reports on the differences among the Houston region's three most populous counties were confirmed in this year's study. Harris, Fort Bend, and Montgomery counties differ dramatically in their ethnic composition, urban density, education levels, and political party affiliations; yet they differ only slightly in their preference for more "walkable urbanism" and in their evaluations of the region's ethnic diversity. In this report, we focus exclusively on the views of Harris County residents, in order to explore the continuities and changes in attitudes and beliefs across 36 years of surveys.

Note that a change from one year to the next of six percent or less might be due to chance variations in the samples. A difference of seven or more points, however, indicates that the surveys are capturing significant shifts in the views being expressed by these changing populations of area residents.

Highlights from Year Thirty-Six

Assessments of Life in the Houston Area

- Despite the continuing downturn in the oil patch and the region's persistently high unemployment rates, area residents remain upbeat in their assessments of local job opportunities and of the quality of life in the Houston area as a whole.
- Traffic is still the biggest problem, while the fear of crime has clearly lessened in recent years. Hispanic immigrants are far more likely than African Americans to say that they would feel comfortable calling the police if they needed assistance.
- In this sprawling, automobile-dependent, multi-centered metropolitan region, more area residents than ever before are calling for compact, walkable alternatives to single-family residential neighborhoods.

Beliefs about the National Economy

- Objective analyses make it clear that the good-paying, low-skilled, blue-collar jobs are disappearing and that some form of post-secondary education is now virtually a prerequisite for landing a decent job in today's high-tech, knowledge-based, global economy.
- Despite these realities, increasing proportions of area residents assert, to the contrary, that success today requires no more than a high school diploma. Blacks and Hispanics are more likely than Anglos to affirm the critical importance of post-secondary credentials.
- The percentage of Republicans who thought the country was headed for "better times" jumped from 34 percent in 2016 to 64 percent in 2017, while optimism among Democrats dropped from 46 percent to 23 percent.



Responding to the Demographic Transition

- The Houston metro area is now the single most ethnically diverse urban region in the country, as measured by how close a given population comes to having an equal distribution among the nation's four major ethnic communities.
- When Anglo, Black, and Hispanic respondents have been asked over the years to rate the relations that generally exist in the Houston area between their group and each of the other two populations, all three communities have been giving increasingly positive ratings.
- Despite these improving evaluations, most Anglos continue to be unwilling to move into a neighborhood in which the majority of families are African-American or Hispanic. Their views on this score have not changed at all since the question was first asked in 2004.

How Attitudes Have Changed, and Why

- Anglo beliefs have shifted significantly over the years of the surveys in two areas in particular—in their increasingly positive attitudes toward immigration and in their growing support for gay rights.
- The 36 years of surveys enable us to ask if these attitude changes are the result of area residents actually changing their minds over time, or if they are due instead to younger generations coming into the public arena with different views.
- Area residents have indeed changed their minds over time about gay rights, but not in their views on immigration. With regard to both sets of issues, younger generations are the primary agents of change, readily taking for granted what earlier generations still find difficult to accept.



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RANDALL PUGH/FLICKR

Assessments of Life in the Houston Area

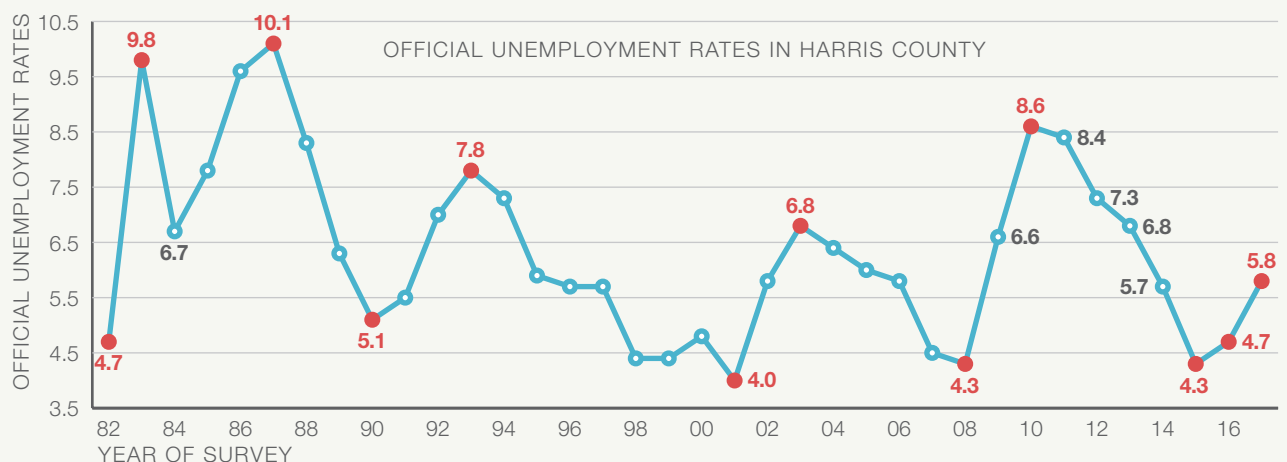
In the three years since the heady days of \$100 oil, the objective indicators of economic well-being in Houston have turned south. Yet the expected decline in area residents' optimistic assessments of their city's economy has yet to materialize. Figure 1 presents the official unemployment rates in Harris County through the past 36 years. The chart offers a vivid reminder of Houston's cyclical economic history.

Collapse and recovery. In May 1982, two months after the first Houston Area Survey was completed, the 80-year oil boom went bust. The price of Texas crude dropped from \$32 per barrel at the beginning of that year to less than \$28 by the end of 1983, while Houston was building and borrowing in the expectation of \$50 oil. The all-important Hughes rig count entered into a “free fall,” plunging from a peak of 4,530 active rigs in February 1982 to fewer than 3,000 in December. The overvalued dollar made American products more expensive abroad, causing a rapid decline in exports from the Houston Port. The value of the Mexican peso also dropped that year,

and far fewer affluent Mexicans were now coming to shop in the city.

Between February 1982 and February 1983, Houston's unemployment rate more than doubled, surging from 4.7 to 9.8 percent. There was a brief improvement in 1984, and then the second major blow, when the falling price of oil hit bottom in late 1986 at less than \$10 per barrel, the recession spread from the energy sector to the entire economy, and unemployment grew to more than 10 percent. In the 1987 survey, 86 percent of area residents gave negative ratings (only “fair” or “poor”) to local job opportunities,

FIGURE 1 The official unemployment rates in Harris County across thirty-six years (February, 1982–2017)



Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. Unemployment rates are not seasonally adjusted.

72 percent spontaneously cited the economy as the biggest problem facing people in the region (see Figure 3), and half of the respondents said living conditions in the Houston area were getting worse.

One of every seven jobs that were in Houston in 1982 had disappeared by 1987. Houston was in the midst of the worst regional recession experienced in any part of the country at any time since World War II, in a city that had known only economic boom from its beginnings until that fateful date in May, when the world that Houston inhabited changed forever. A new chapter in this city's history was about to begin.

During the years to follow, there would be three more boom-and-bust cycles: the unemployment rates hit successive peaks in 1993, 2003, and in the "Great Recession" of 2008–2010. The economy improved steadily after that, as the price of Texas crude soared to more than \$100 a barrel before declining sharply once again in late 2014. In the years since then, the long season of low energy prices has continued to depress upstream oil production.

The good blue-collar jobs in the city's oil field production and manufacturing industries had largely disappeared in the 1980s; now geologists and petroleum engineers were being laid off as well. Harris County's unemployment rate grew from 4.3 percent in February 2015, to 4.7 percent in 2016, and to 5.8 percent in 2017. For the first time in many years, Houston's unemployment level is now more than a full percentage point higher than it is in America as a whole (at 4.7 percent in February of this year).

Subjective assessments. Despite the stubbornly high unemployment rates, there has been no decline in the

past three years in area residents' assessments of the local economy. In every year, as indicated in Figure 2, the survey participants have been asked to evaluate job opportunities in the Houston area ("excellent, good, fair, or poor").

The lowest ratings in the past 36 years were given in the depths of great oil-bust recession: By the time of the 1987 survey, 11 percent gave positive evaluations to job opportunities. By 1990 the region had emerged from the recession, only to enter into a nationwide downturn and then the economic expansion of the "stock market bubble" and the "dot.com boom" in the 1990s. The positive ratings of job opportunities increased steadily from 25 percent in 1993 to 68 percent in 2000. The recession of 2001–2003 brought another bust, to be followed by yet another recovery; there was a drop again, from 58 percent in 2007 to 35 percent in both 2010 and 2011, during the years of the "Great Recession."

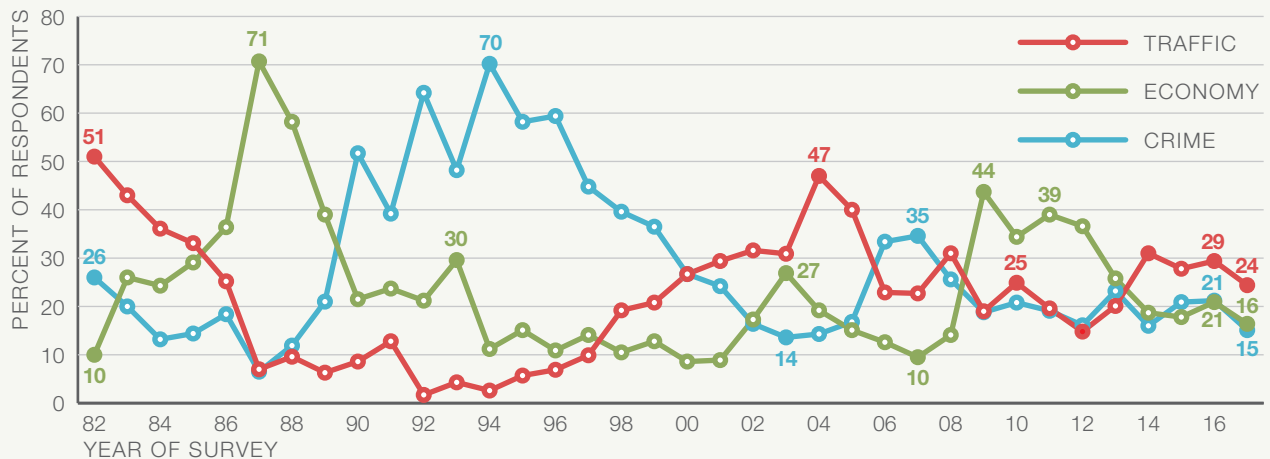
As the economy improved once more, the 2012 survey recorded a significant turnaround in area residents' subjective evaluations of local job opportunities, increasing to 48 percent positive ratings that year, and then to 60 percent in 2014 and to 69 percent in 2015. As the giddy peak of \$100 oil in 2014 gave way to prices that were falling into the \$20s and \$30s, optimism about the local job situation dropped to 62 percent in the 2016 survey. During the past year, the local unemployment rate increased by a full percentage point, but the positive ratings of job opportunities remained virtually unchanged—at 64 percent in the 2017 survey. It will be interesting to see if the continued confidence voiced by area residents today in their assessments of the local economy is confirmed by an actual drop in the unemployment rates in the months ahead.

FIGURE 2 Positive ratings of job opportunities in the Houston area (1982–2017)



FIGURE 3

“What would you say is the biggest problem facing people in the Houston area today?” (1982–2017)



The biggest problem. 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 across the years of Harris County residents who spontaneously named traffic, the economy, or crime as the biggest problem in Houston. The data provide another graphic reminder of the upheavals that have marked this region’s history during the past 36 years.

In the booming years of the early 1980s, traffic congestion was the dominant concern, but during the recession of the mid-1980s, area residents were preoccupied with economic issues. The percentages naming the economy as the most serious problem facing people in the Houston area peaked at 71 percent in early 1987. In the 1990s, worries about crime were predominant, mentioned by a whopping 70 percent in 1994. In the years since then, the numbers citing crime or personal safety as the biggest problem in Houston decreased to 16 percent in 2014 and then up slightly in the past two years before declining to just 15 percent in 2017.

Meanwhile, as economic concerns have lessened and population growth continues apace, traffic congestion is now the dominant preoccupation. The proportion of area residents who named traffic as the preeminent concern grew from single digits in the early 1990s to 47 percent in 2004;

the traffic woes faded during the years from 2009 to 2012, when economic anxieties once again predominated. In the 2017 survey, traffic congestion was cited as the biggest problem by 24 percent of Harris County residents, as it was by 29, 28, and 31 percent in the past three years. In this rapidly growing, automobile-dependent metropolitan region, concerns about traffic and calls for more roadways and more alternative modes of transportation are likely to be the “new normal” for many years to come.

The declining fear of crime. As we have seen, the proportions of area residents citing crime or personal safety as the biggest problem facing people in the Houston area have decreased steadily since the 1990s. Crime was mentioned by fewer people this year than at any time since 2003. The evidence of lessening concern about

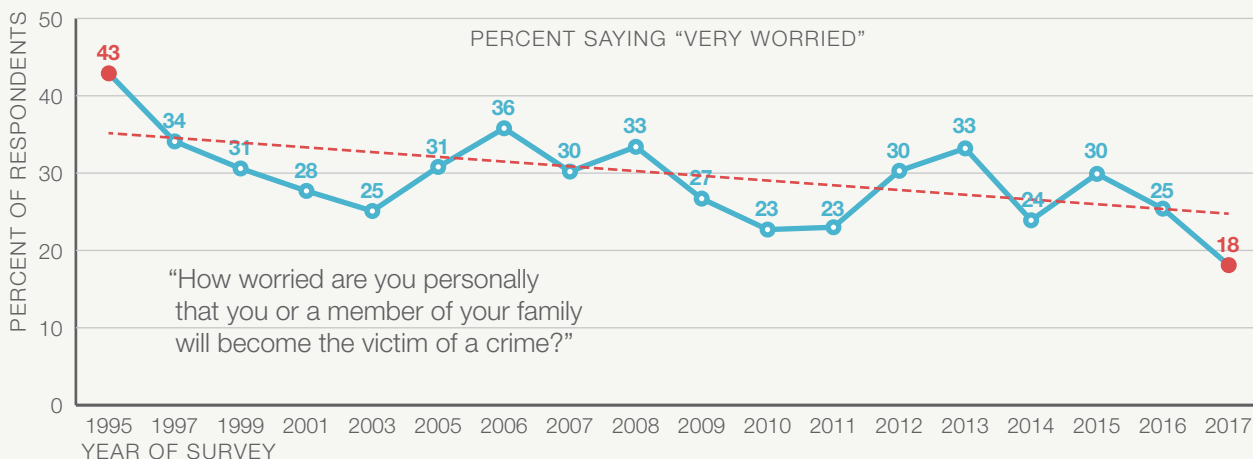


RANDALL PUGH/FICKR

FIGURE

4

The fear that self or family will become the victim of a crime (1995–2017)



personal safety is confirmed in a more direct question. Ever since 1995, area residents have been asked, “How worried are you personally that you or a member of your family will become the victim of a crime?”

As indicated in Figure 4, the overall proportions of survey participants who said they were “very worried” about becoming the victim of a crime have fluctuated over the years, but the numbers overall have clearly 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, another jump to 33 percent in 2013, and now consistently dropping from 30 percent in 2015, to 25 percent in 2016, and to 18 percent in 2017. That is the lowest figure the surveys have recorded in all the years since the question was first asked in 1995.

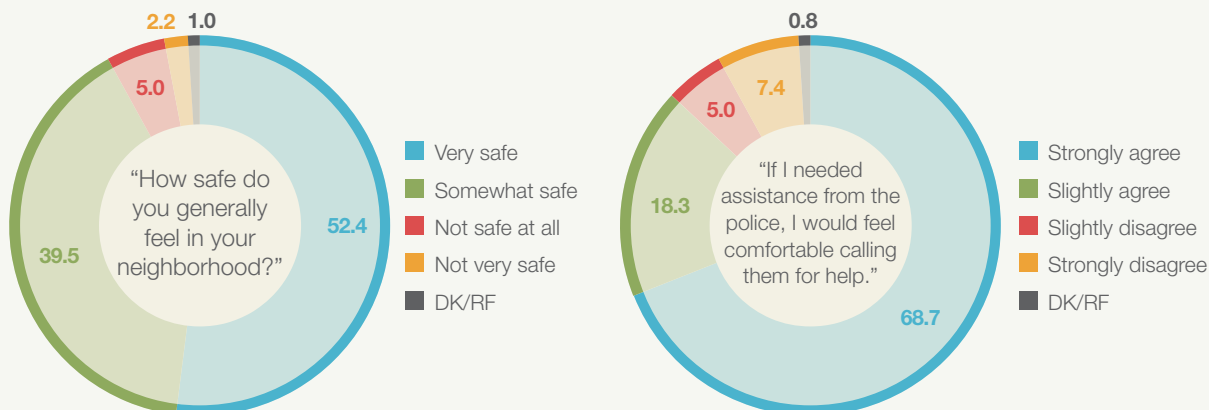
Further confirmation of the area residents’ confidence about personal safety comes from two new questions included in this year’s survey. As seen in Figure 5, area residents were asked how safe they generally feel in their neighborhood. Fully 52 percent said they felt “very safe,” and another 40 percent said “somewhat safe.” Only 7 percent of all area residents said they did not feel safe in their neighborhoods.

Respondents in this year’s survey were also asked about their relations with the police. Police-community relations have been problematic in recent years, fueled both by the national “Black Lives Matter” movement that has arisen in response to police shootings of unarmed African Americans, and by concerns about the impact of the increase in detentions and deportations on immi-

FIGURE

5

Perceptions of personal safety and of comfort in seeking police assistance (2017)





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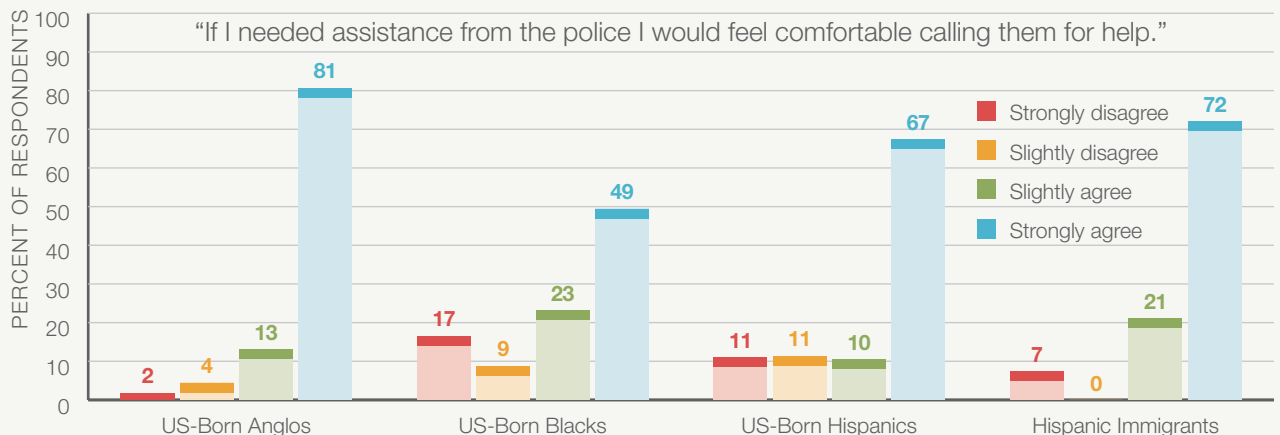
grants' willingness to call the police to report a crime or when they need assistance. A new question in 2017 asked respondents about this statement: "If I needed assistance from the police, I would feel comfortable calling them for help." Fully 69 percent of all the survey participants "strongly agreed" with that assertion; another 18 percent "slightly agreed." Just 12 percent disagreed.

Figure 6 shows how four different communities answered this question. Not surprisingly, U.S.-born Anglos were the most at ease in their relations with the police: 94 percent either strongly or slightly agreed that they would feel comfortable calling the police for help. Unexpectedly, however, the population that was next highest in expressing comfort in calling the police for help was com-

posed of Hispanic immigrants. Fully 72 percent of all the foreign-born Hispanic respondents in this year's survey strongly agreed that they would readily call the police if they needed assistance. Only 7 percent disagreed.

In sharp contrast, fewer than half of the U.S.-born African Americans strongly agreed that they would feel comfortable calling the police; and more than one-fourth (26 percent) disagreed, indicating that they were indeed reluctant to contact the police for assistance. At least as of early in the year 2017, it is clear that the African-American community is experiencing the most problematic relations with the local police department. Not yet, at any rate, is there evidence from these surveys of a growing mistrust of the police on the part of Hispanic immigrants.

FIGURE 6 Ethnic differences in feeling comfortable when seeking police assistance (2017)





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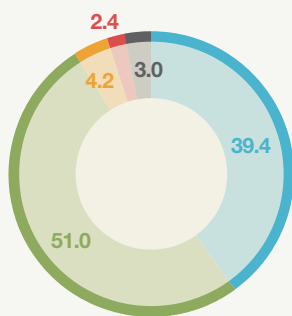
Life in the Houston region. Perhaps in part because of area residents’ declining fear of crime, their abiding confidence in the local economy, and their approval of the many quality-of-life improvements in the region, the survey participants continue to express distinctly positive feelings about the Houston area in general as a place to live. Figure 7 presents the findings from three different questions that were included in 2013, 2016, and 2017.

In 2013, respondents were asked: “Compared to most other metropolitan areas in the country, would you say

that the Houston area is a much better place, a slightly better place, a slightly worse place, or a much worse place in which to live?” A remarkable 90 percent affirmed that living in Houston was better than in most of the other metropolitan areas they could think of. When asked in 2016 to evaluate “the Houston area in general as a place to live,” 81 percent gave ratings of “excellent” or “good.” In 2017, more than two-thirds of all area residents said they would stay in the Houston metro area even if they could choose to live anywhere else.

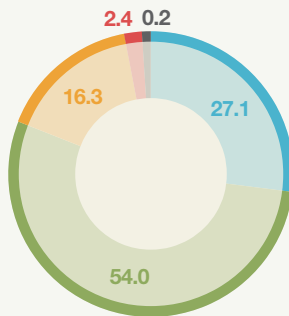
FIGURE 7 Overall assessments of life in the Houston area (2013, 2016, 2017)

“Compared to most other metro areas in the country, would you say that the Houston area is a ... place in which to live?” (2013)



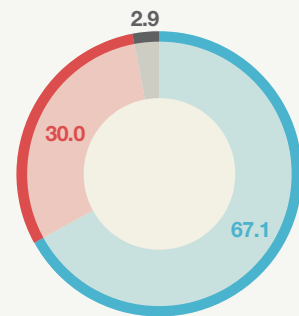
■ Much better ■ Slightly better
 ■ Slightly worse ■ Much worse ■ DK/RF

“How would you rate the Houston area in general as a place to live?” (2016)



■ Excellent ■ Good ■ Fair
 ■ Poor ■ DK/RF

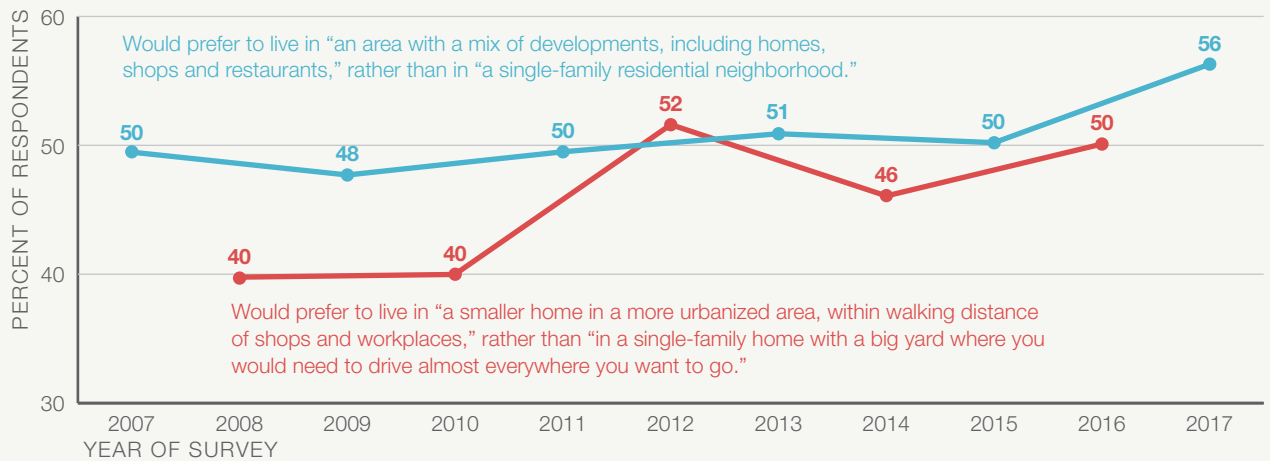
“If you could choose, would you stay in the Houston metro area or move away?” (2017)



■ Stay ■ Move Away
 ■ DK/RF

FIGURE 8

The preference for “walkable urbanism” among Harris County residents (2007–2017)



This year’s survey recorded a further movement in area residents’ preferences for the way they would like to live in this sprawling, car-dependent metro region. Figure 8 records the responses on two questions asking about the kind of homes and neighborhoods the survey participants said they would prefer. By 56 to 40 percent, area residents in 2017 were significantly more likely than at any time since the question was first asked in 2007 to say that they wanted to live in “an area with a mix of developments, including homes, shops and restaurants,” rather than “in a single-family residential neighborhood.” Similarly, compared to a “single-family home with a big yard, where you would need to drive almost everywhere you want to go,” the preference for “a smaller home in a more urbanized area, within walking distance of shops

and workplaces” grew from 40 percent in 2008 and 2010 to 50 percent more recently.

These changing preferences seem unlikely to be reversed in the years ahead, since they reflect the very different life circumstances of area residents today. When Americans built the suburbs and fled the cities during the years after World War II, more than two-thirds of all U.S. households had children living at home. In the 2010 census, that figure was less than one-third, and by 2020 the census projects that only about one-fourth of all households in America will have children still living at home; another one-fourth will consist of persons living alone.

Families with children are being replaced across America by empty nesters wanting shorter commutes, by

young creatives postponing marriage and having fewer children, and by the increasing numbers of single-person and elderly households. It is not surprising therefore that area residents everywhere in the Houston region are calling for more “walkable” alternatives and for “complete streets,” able to serve the needs not only of motorized vehicles, but of bikers and pedestrians as well. Developers are responding to these demands by building more transit-oriented walkable communities, not just in Houston’s Downtown but also in the urbanizing “town centers” throughout this far-flung metropolis.



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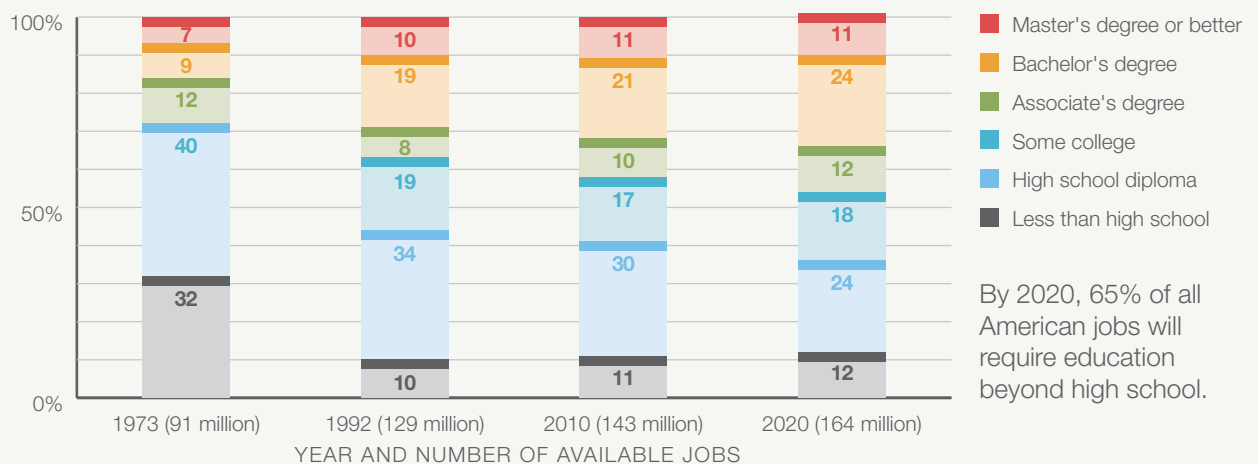
Beliefs about the National Economy

The broadly-shared prosperity of the postwar years has given way to growing inequalities in the new era of intensifying worldwide competition, declining unionization, advances in computers and robotics, and government policies that reflect the increasing concentration of political power in the hands of the wealthiest Americans. These converging forces have created a fundamentally new kind of opportunity structure.

In today's economy, if you are doing a job that I can train a low-skilled third-world worker to do, and I pay that third-world worker \$15 a day to do the job, I'm not going to pay you \$15 an hour. And if you are doing work that I can program a computer to do, I will soon be replacing your job with an intelligent machine. The new economy is the consequence of inexorable forces that are unlikely to be reversed, no matter how much we might try to renegotiate trade agreements or halt technological advances. That old saying, "What you earn depends on what you have learned," has never been as true as it is today.

The objective realities. Figure 9 draws on analyses from the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce to document the inexorable decline in the number of blue-collar jobs that require only modest levels of education and technical skills. According to the nationwide figures, 32 percent of all the 91 million jobs that existed in America in 1973 were available to high school dropouts and another 40 percent called for no more than a high school diploma. In 2010, 60 percent of the 143 million jobs required a post-secondary credential. By 2020, that figure will rise to 65 percent.

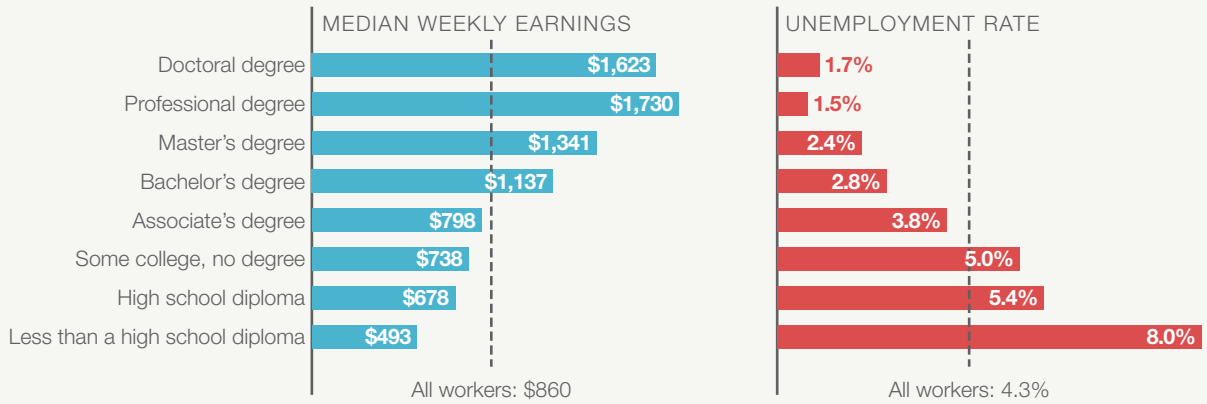
FIGURE 9 Changes in the education requirements for jobs across America (1970–2020)



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2014. "Recovery: Job Growth and Education Requirements through 2020." Retrieved from cew.georgetown.edu/recovery2020, on July 27, 2015.

FIGURE 10

Earnings and unemployment rates by educational attainment in the U.S. in 2015



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey (2015).

In today's high-tech, knowledge-based, global economy, some form of post-secondary education—a minimum of one or two years in a community college after high school—is virtually a prerequisite for landing a decent job. Given these new realities, it is sobering to realize, as a recent study has found, that of all the eighth graders in Houston area schools in the year 2004, only 68 percent actually graduated from high school and just 21 percent had obtained any kind of post-secondary certificate or degree by 2015, 11 years later. If Houston is unable to turn these figures around, to ensure significantly greater access to quality education (from cradle to career, from birth through college) for all of its residents, it is difficult to envision a prosperous future for the region as a whole.

Figure 10 gives further evidence of the increasingly close relationship between educational attainment and a person's ability to find a job that will pay enough to support a family. Data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics show that unemployment rates drop as educational attainment grows, shifting from 8.0 percent for high school dropouts, to 3.8 percent for those with post-secondary credentials, to just 1.5 percent among those with professional degrees. In similar fashion, weekly earnings rise in parallel with increasing levels of education.

Beliefs about jobs. Figure 11 shows the responses given by Houston's three major ethnic communities when they were asked in the years since 2013 if they thought education beyond high school really was a prerequisite

FIGURE 11

The perceived importance of education beyond high school, by ethnicity (2013–2017)

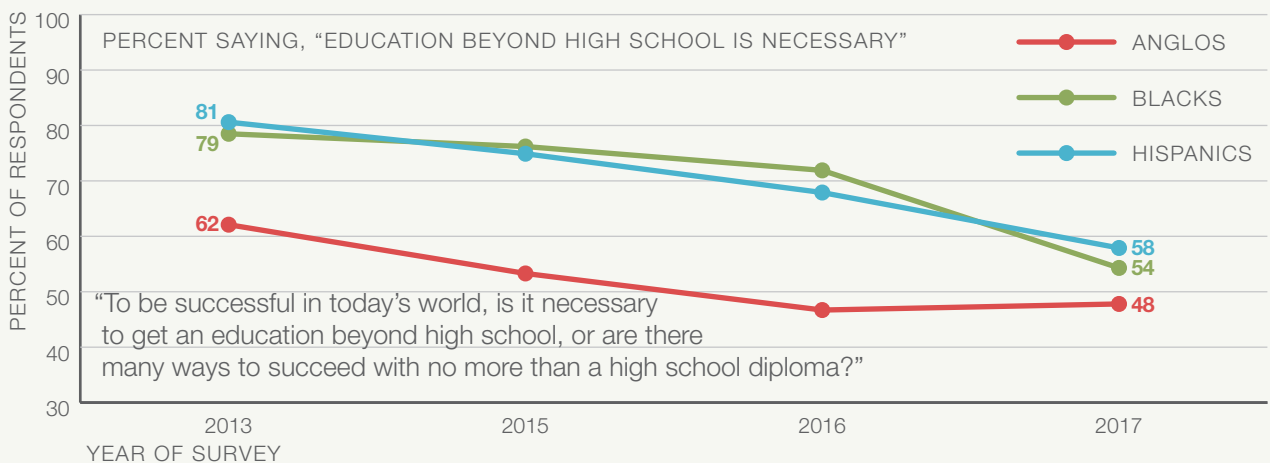
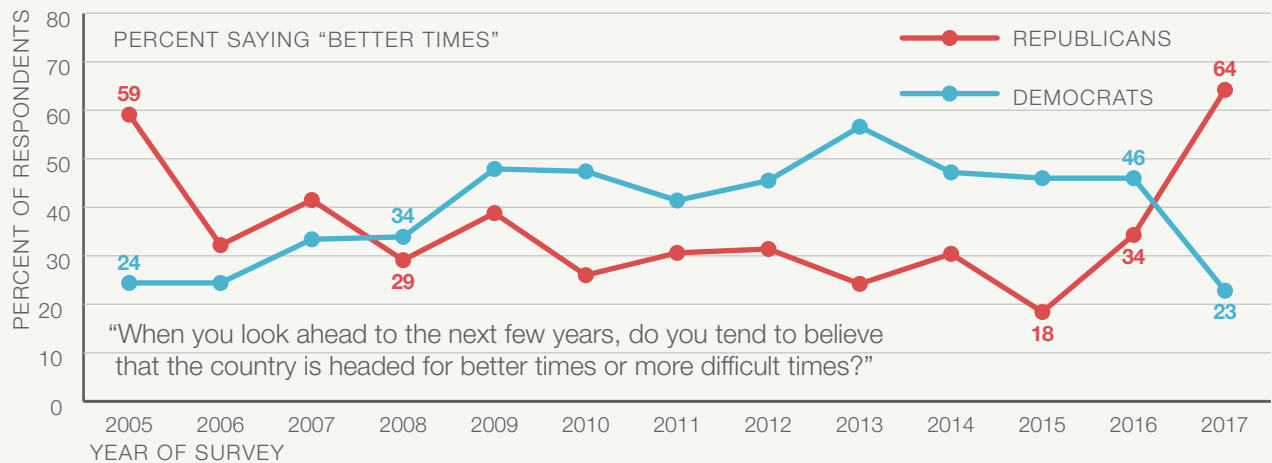


FIGURE 12

Party differences in beliefs about the direction in which the country is headed (2005–2017)



for success in today's economy. The findings document a steady decline in the percentage who answer in the affirmative. A growing number in all three communities have come to believe that "there are many ways to succeed with no more than a high school diploma," and to reject the suggestion that "for a person to be successful in today's world, it is necessary to get an education beyond high school."

The belief that there are many ways to succeed with no more than a high school diploma simply flies in the face, as we have seen, of today's economic realities. That belief may reflect the success enjoyed by a well-known few who have been able to amass fortunes without the benefit of post-secondary education. It may also reflect the evidence that many less educated entrepreneurs and small businesses are succeeding in America. The political rhetoric of the last presidential campaign may well have played an additional role in convincing people that the blue-collar jobs that once existed in the coal mines and on factory floors will soon come back if we just "put America first" in our trade negotiations. Trump voters were far more likely (at 55 percent) than those who voted for Clinton (at 35 percent) to affirm that "there are many ways to succeed in today's economy with no more than a high school diploma."

Figure 11 shows further that Blacks and Hispanics are consistently more likely than Anglos to affirm the importance of

post-secondary credentials. If Houston's Hispanic and African-American residents 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 are by far the most likely to be living in concentrated poverty and to be attending overcrowded, underfunded, inner-city schools that offer too few of the resources that enable young people in general to graduate from high school and go on to college.

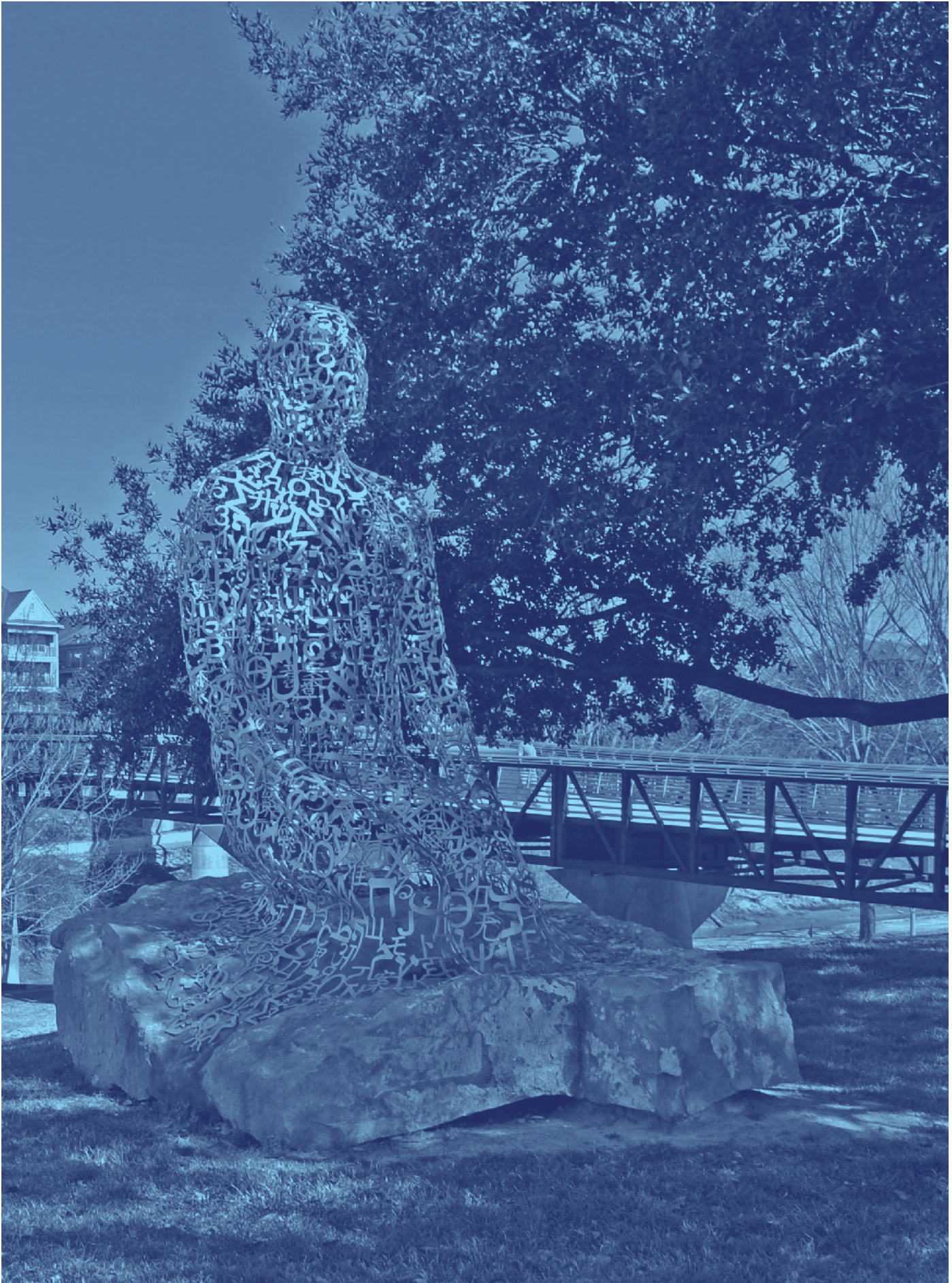
Figure 12 offers a further reminder of the partisan divides that reinforce the stark differences in the way people see the world. Respondents were asked over the years if they tended to believe that the country is headed for "better times" or "more difficult times." Their responses directly reflect the political affiliation of the person in the White House.

During the George W. Bush years, Republicans were far more optimistic about the country's future than Democrats. The patterns were reversed when Barack Obama

was President (2008–2016).

After the election of Donald Trump, the percentage of Republicans who thought the country was headed for better times jumped from 34 percent last year to 64 percent in this year's survey, but the optimistic expectations among Democrats dropped from 46 percent to 23 percent.





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Responding to the Demographic Transition

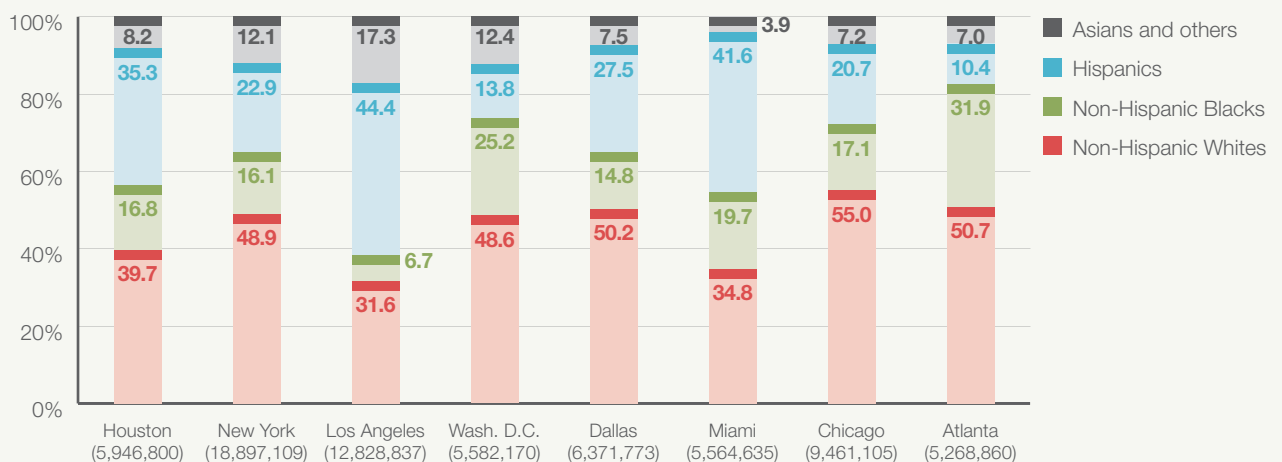
In the course of the past three and a half decades, this traditionally biracial, Southern metropolis has been transformed into the single most ethnically diverse urban region in the entire country. Figure 13 compares the 2010 census figures for the eight most ethnically diverse U.S. metro areas, showing the proportions of their populations that are composed of each of America's four major ethnic communities. Measured by how close a population comes to an equal distribution among the four communities, the Houston region narrowly beats out New York for the title of the most ethnically diverse major metropolitan area in the country.

As is evident in the chart, Los Angeles has a relatively small percentage of African Americans; Chicago has a high number of Anglos; Miami has very few Asians. Note also that Fort Bend County may well be the single most ethnically diverse county on the planet: Its population today is 20 percent Asian, 24 percent Hispanic, 21 percent African-American, and 34 percent Anglo. You can't get much closer to equal fourths than that.

Ratings of specific interethnic relations.

How well are Houston's diverse communities getting along with each other? In alternating years since 1995, the survey participants were asked to rate the relations that generally exist in the Houston area between their group and each of the other two communities. As indicated in Figure 14, the ratings without exception grew increasingly positive over the years among all three popula-

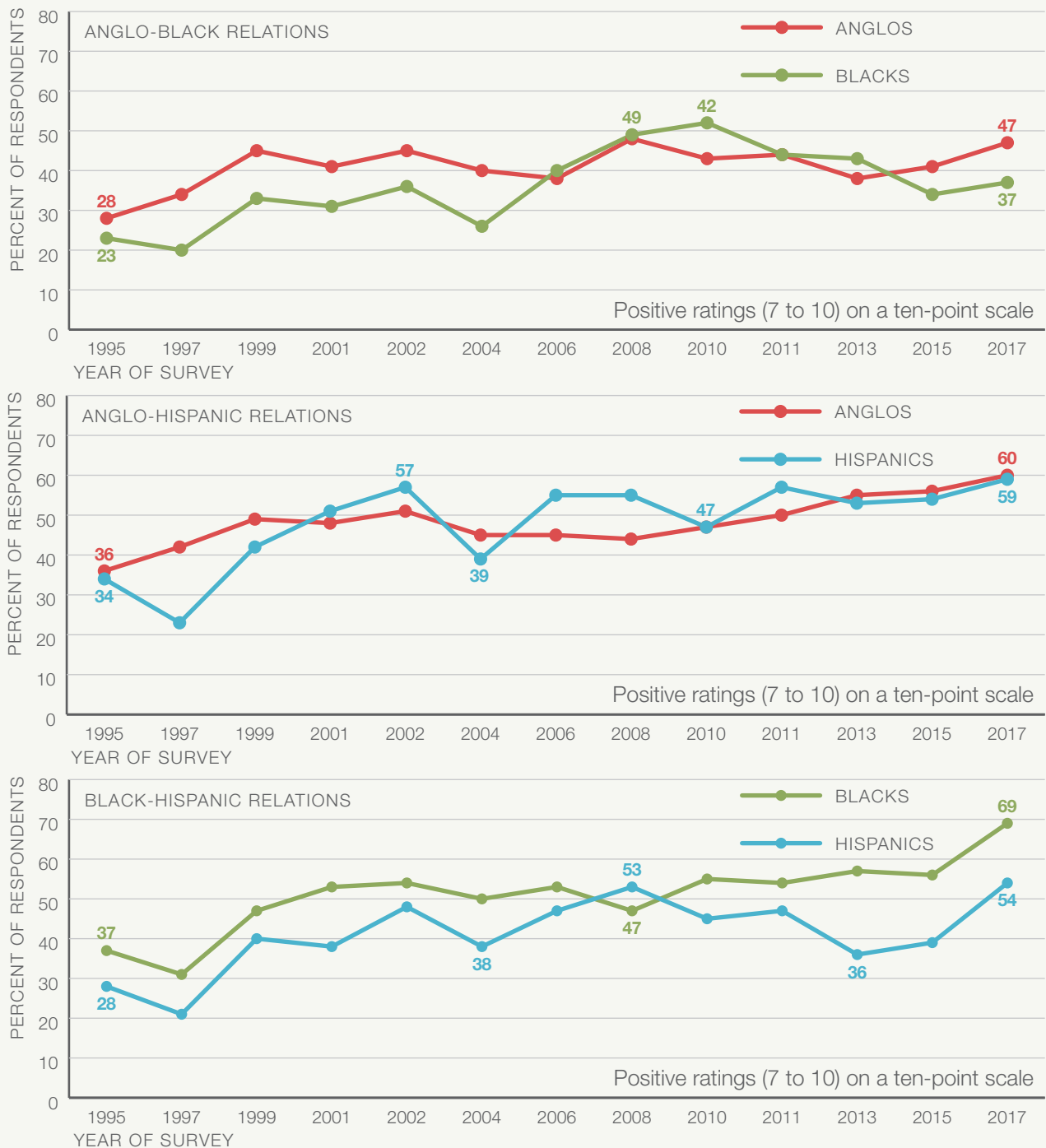
FIGURE 13 The demographics of the eight most diverse large metro areas in America (2010)



Source: U.S. Census 2010

FIGURE 14

Positive ratings of the relations between specific ethnic communities in the Houston area (1995–2017)



tions. (Improving evaluations were also found among Houston’s Asian communities who were interviewed in sufficiently large numbers to yield reliable findings in the special “Houston Area Asian Surveys,” conducted in 1995, 2002, and 2011.)

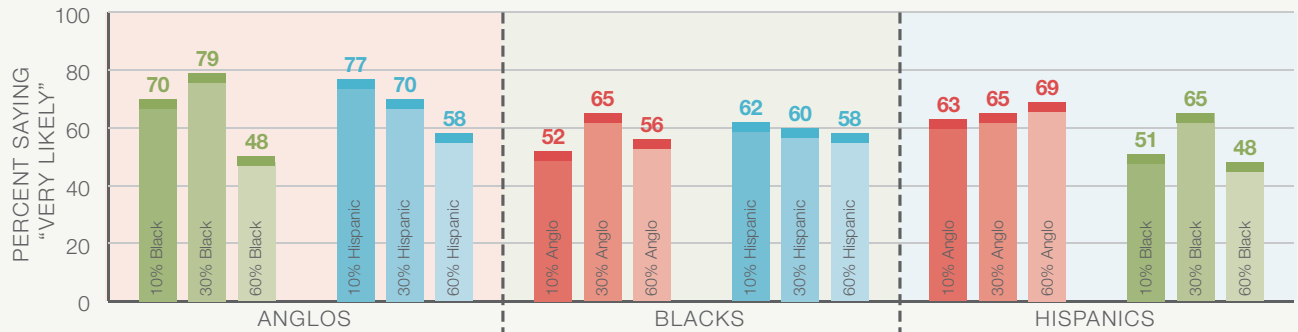
There are interesting intergroup differences in evaluations of the same relationships. Anglos generally give higher ratings to Anglo-Black relations than do African

Americans themselves. Anglos and Latinos give similar ratings of Anglo-Hispanic relationships, but African Americans evaluate Black-Hispanic relations more positively than do Hispanics. In addition, Blacks assess their relationships with Latinos more favorably than they do their relations with Anglos, whereas Hispanics give higher ratings to their relations with Anglos than to their relations with Blacks.

FIGURE 15

A neighborhood's racial composition and the likelihood of buying a house (2016–2017)

“Imagine that you are looking for a new house and you find one that you like much more than any other house. It has everything you’ve been looking for: it’s close to work, and within your price range. Checking on the neighborhood, you find that the schools are of high quality, the crime rate is low, and the neighborhood is ... How likely or unlikely do you think it is that you would buy the house?”



Residential segregation. Despite these overall positive and improving evaluations, Anglos continue to resist moving into integrated neighborhoods. In 2004, and then again in 2016 and 2017, respondents were asked to imagine that they were looking for a house and found one they liked much more than any other house: “It has everything that you’ve been looking for, it’s close to work, and within your price range.” Because high crime rates and poor schools are often cited as reasons for not wanting to live in an area with many racial minorities, the question went on to say, “Checking on the neighborhood, you find that the schools are of high quality and the crime rate is low.”

This was followed by one of six statements randomly assigned to the respondents, specifying further that the neighborhood in which the house is located was composed alternatively of 10, 30, or 60 percent of one of the two other ethnic groups and that the inverse proportion of the neighborhood was made up of the respondent’s own ethnicity. (For example, one-sixth of the Anglo respondents were asked about a neighborhood that was 10 percent Black and 90 percent Anglo; another one-sixth were asked about one that was 60 percent Hispanic and 40 percent Anglo.) After being presented with one of the six vignettes, respondents were asked, “How likely or unlikely do you think it is that you would buy this house?”

Figure 15 shows the combined results from 2016 and 2017 for the Anglo, Black, and Hispanic respondents. The data make it clear that Anglos are significantly less willing to buy a house in a neighborhood that is 60 percent Black or Latino, even when informed that the schools in the neighborhood are of high quality and the crime rate is low. More than 70 percent of Anglos say they would be “very likely” to move into a neighborhood that is 10 percent or 30 percent Black, but that figure drops to 48 percent when the proportion of Black families reaches 60 percent. A similar, but less dramatic, fall-off, from 70 to 58 percent, occurs when the neighborhood changes from 30 to 60 percent Hispanic.

The Anglo respondents are much less likely to say that they would buy an otherwise desirable house as the proportion of either Blacks or Latinos in the neighborhood increases, and those responses have not changed at all since 2004, when the identical set of questions was asked. On the other hand, Figure 15 indicates that the neighborhood’s composition has no consistent impact on the housing preferences of either Hispanics or Blacks. It seems undeniable that Houston’s persistently high levels of residential segregation are at least in part a reflection of the continuing preferences and concerns of Anglo Houstonians themselves.



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How Attitudes Have Changed, and Why

Even if Anglos are no more likely today than in 2004 to feel comfortable moving into a neighborhood in which the majority of families are African-American or Hispanic, they have nevertheless changed significantly in their general attitudes toward immigration and in their comfort with diversity more generally. As indicated in Figure 16, no matter how the questions are worded, the findings consistently show positive shifts in area residents' assessments of the impact of immigration on life in the Houston area.

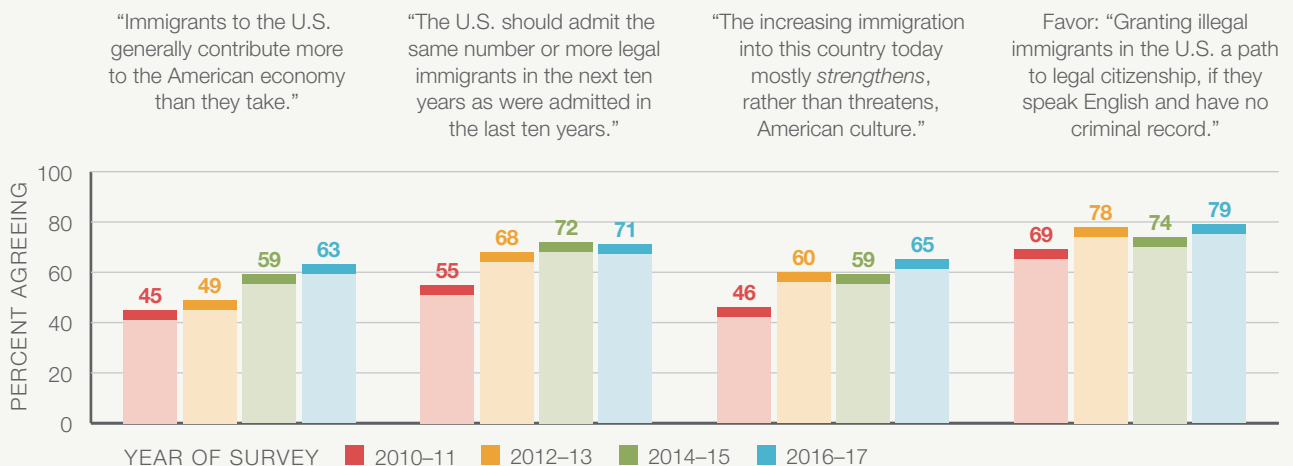
Embracing the new immigration. Fully 63 percent of the survey respondents in 2016, up from 45 percent in 2010, thought that immigrants to the U.S. generally “contribute more to the American economy than they take.” In 2015 and 2017 more than 70 percent wanted the U.S. to admit the same number of legal immigrants or more in the next ten years as were admitted in the last ten years; the figures were 68 percent in 2013 and 55 percent in 2011. The proportion of area residents who thought that the increas-

ing immigration into this country today mostly strengthens, rather than threatens, American culture was 65 percent in 2017, up from 46 percent in 2011. That same period saw an increase from 69 to 79 percent in the proportions in favor of “granting illegal immigrants a path to legal citizenship, if they speak English and have no criminal record.”

What might account for these increasingly positive responses? The fear of being overwhelmed by newcomers

FIGURE 16

Attitudes toward immigration among Harris County residents (2010–2017)



may have dampened considerably as the actual net number of new immigrants has declined virtually to zero in recent years. The nation’s ability to assimilate newcomers into mainstream America continues to be one of its greatest strengths. As the U.S.-born children of earlier immigrants now enter into a world of thriving interethnic friendships and increasing rates of intermarriage, Anglos may be growing more comfortable with their place in the new multiethnic America, where no one group is automatically empowered and all communities are now “minorities.”

Also in play is what is known in the social sciences as “the psychology of inevitability,” the human tendency to make the best of things that you know are virtually certain to occur. As the 76 million members of the predominantly Anglo Baby Boom generation (aged 53 to 71 in 2017) move inexorably into senior status and continue to shrink in numbers, the United States will become a progressively more multiethnic society. Despite their reservations, Anglo Americans increasingly recognize that, like it or not, the demographic transition is going to happen. The recognition of that unstoppable destiny may be helping to move the general public toward a growing acceptance of the new diversity.

Support for gay rights. Area residents’ rising comfort with diversity in general may also help to account for their increasing acceptance of homosexuality. The surveys (and the national polls) have found virtually no change at all in attitudes toward abortion rights. Across the 36 years, Houston area residents have consistently indicated that they personally disapprove of abortion but support a woman’s legal right to make that decision herself. Meanwhile, virtually every question about gay rights shows a consistent movement toward growing acceptance.

As indicated in Figure 17, the number of area residents who consider homosexuality to be “morally acceptable” has increased consistently, from 21 percent in 1997, when the question was first asked, to 35 percent in 2009, to 45 percent in 2011, and to 56 percent in 2017. In alternating years, 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 clear majority of 60 percent in this year’s survey—up from 43 percent in 2009, and 31 percent in 1993. The percent 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 42 percent in 2012, and to 57 percent in 2016.

One explanation for the changing attitudes may have to do with the perceived nature of homosexuality itself. In alternating years, the survey respondents were asked this question: “Do you believe that homosexuality is something people choose or something they cannot change?” The percentage of area residents who said that homosexuality is an unchanging human condition rather than a personal choice grew from 38 percent in 2009 to 53 percent today.

If homosexuality is understood to be part of the natural variation among human beings, then it is no longer a moral issue and becomes instead a question of a person’s degree of comfort with diversity in general. The position area residents take on this question is indeed a powerful predictor of their attitudes toward gay rights in general. Another important predictor is having a friend who is homosexual. In 2017, 56 percent of area residents said they did indeed have a close personal friend who was gay or lesbian, up from 41 percent in 2004.

FIGURE 17 Support for gay rights among Harris County residents (2009–2017)

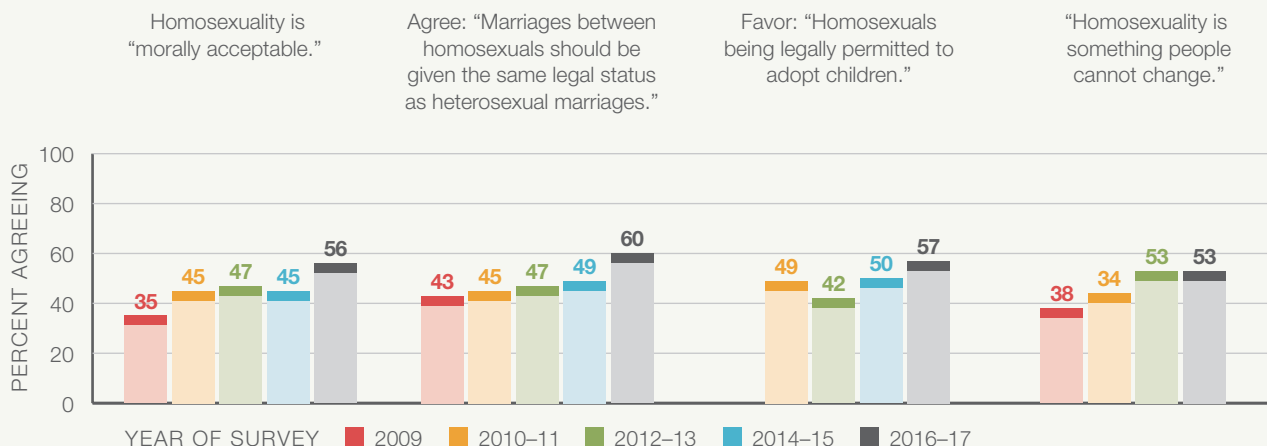
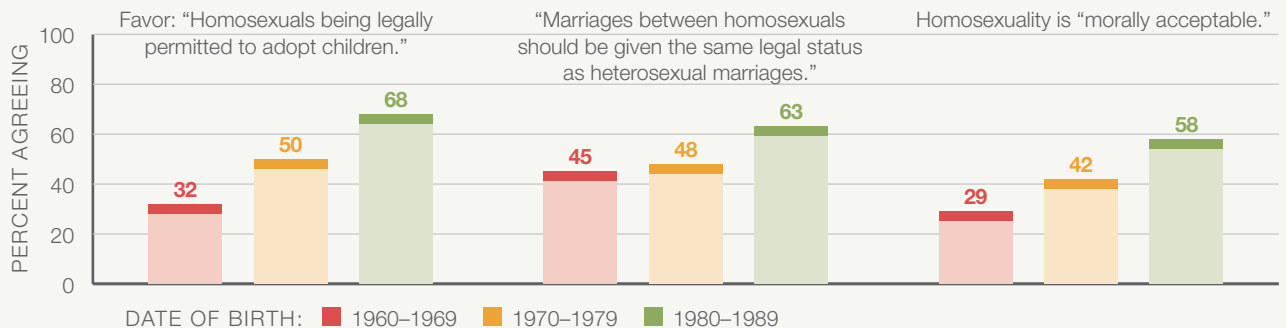


FIGURE 18

Support for gay rights among Anglo Baby Boomers (born 1946 to 1964) in four periods



Support for gay rights among successive cohorts of Harris County Anglos, all aged 25–35



What accounts for the changes? The surveys indicate unmistakably that area residents' attitudes have changed over the years with regard both to their beliefs about immigration and to their support for gay rights. Are these attitude shifts the result of area residents actually changing their minds over time in light of the new realities, or are they due instead to the younger generations supplanting earlier ones and coming into adulthood with new experiences that have shaped their views in durable ways that differ from those of the earlier generations?

The 36 years of Houston surveys provide a rare opportunity to answer this question. They enable us to track the attitudes of the Baby Boom generation—the 76 million (largely Anglo) Americans who were born between 1946 and 1964—whose members were interviewed on identical survey questions when they were in their prime working years during the 1990s and 2000s, and on to middle age and later in the more recent surveys.

Alternatively, we can compare the answers given to identical questions by three successive generations of Anglo Houstonians, when all three were interviewed at the same point in their lives, when they were 25 to 35 years old—the later Baby Boomers (born 1946–1964), followed by the

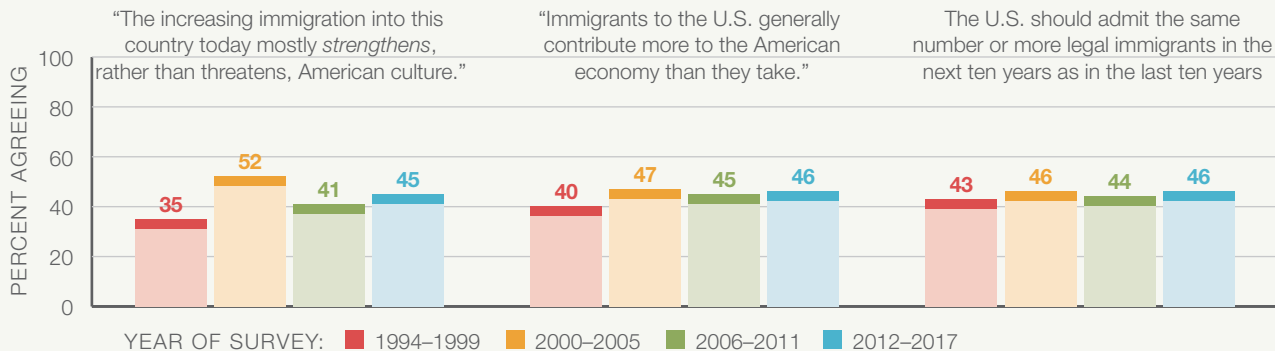
Gen-Xers (born 1965–1980), and the Millennials (born after 1980). Figure 18 presents the findings for the Anglo respondents on both sets of comparisons with regard to questions about gay rights.

On issues of homosexuality, the findings strongly suggest that both processes of change are occurring. The members of the Baby Boom generation are indeed answering the questions differently in the more recent surveys from the way they did when they were asked the same questions in the 1990s. Only 29 percent in the 1990s, for example, were in favor of homosexuals being legally permitted to adopt children, but that was true of 54 and 51 percent in more recent years. The percentages in favor of gay marriage grew from 38 percent in the early years to 50 percent in the surveys asked in 2012–2017. And the belief that homosexuality is morally acceptable increased across the years from 29 percent to 45 percent.

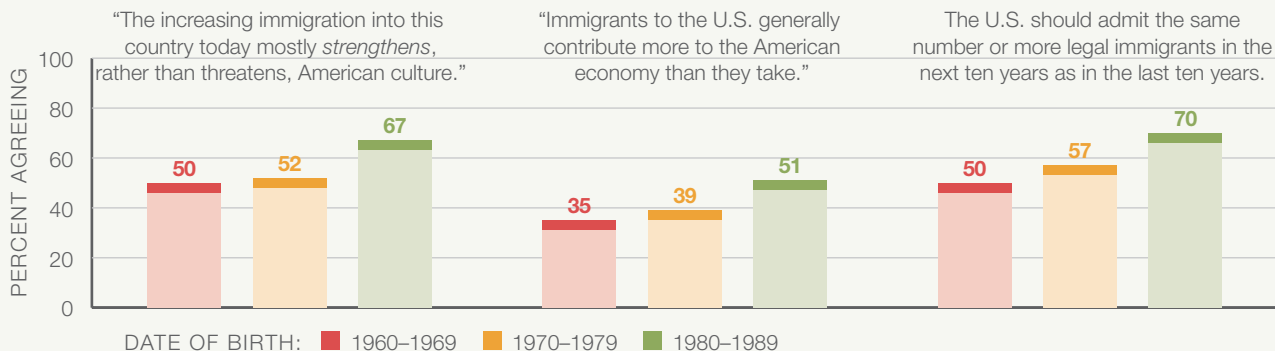
The importance of cohort replacement is even more evident in these data. The younger generations are coming into adulthood with significantly more favorable attitudes toward gay rights than did the earlier generations. Thus 68 percent of the 25- to 35-year-old respondents who were born in 1980 to 1989 were in favor of gays being legally

FIGURE 19

Attitudes toward immigration among Anglo Baby Boomers (born 1946–1964) in four periods



Attitudes toward immigration among successive cohorts of Harris County Anglos, all aged 25–35



permitted to adopt children, compared to 50 percent of those born in 1970 to 1979, and to just 32 percent of the earlier generation (born in 1960 to 1969). The same clear pattern can be seen on the other two questions depicted in Figure 18.

Thus, with regard to gay rights, members of the Baby Boom generation have indeed been changing their minds in light of new experiences. It is also evident that each new generation of Houstonians is coming into the public arena with a much stronger commitment to gay rights than previous generations. Figure 19 explores the impact of these same processes with regard to attitudes toward immigration.

The primacy of cohort replacement. Members of the Baby Boom generation, while changing their minds about gay rights, have not changed at all on questions about diversity or immigration. The findings depicted in the upper half of Figure 19 show clearly that Baby Boomers are giving precisely the same answers to questions about immigration when they were asked in the mid-1990s, in the early and mid-2000s, and from 2012 to 2017.

Across the years of surveys, virtually identical percentages agree about whether immigration strengthens or threatens American culture, about immigrants’ contributions to the American economy, and about the number of legal immigrants the U.S. should admit in the next years.

Meanwhile, with regard to all three of these questions, successive generations of area residents are bringing sharply different views into the public arena. One of the most powerful predictors among Anglos of support for immigration and comfort with diversity is the respondent’s year of birth. Older Anglos grew up in the America of the 1960s and 1970s. That was a different world from the 1990s and 2000s, when younger generations were coming of age.

There is a law of human nature that states, “What I am familiar with feels right and natural. What I’m unfamiliar with feels unnatural and somehow not quite right.” The younger generations of Anglo Houstonians readily take for granted what earlier generations still find difficult to accept. The ongoing processes of generational replacement will clearly help to smooth the city’s transition into the multiethnic world of the 21st century.

Conclusion

The coming together of two fundamental transformations has redefined the challenges and opportunities of our time. Today's economy is generating growing inequalities predicated above all on access to quality education and technical skills, and America is in the midst of an extraordinary transition in the ethnic composition of its population. Nowhere are these two trends more clearly seen or more sharply articulated than in Houston.

If the education and income gaps can be bridged, this city will be able to capitalize fully on the advantages of having a young, multi-lingual, and multi-cultural workforce and will be well positioned for competitive success as a major international player on the world stage. But if most area residents continue to live and work in largely segregated ethnic enclaves, and if they remain divided by a widening gap in economic opportunities, Houston's burgeoning diversity may well reduce rather than enhance its prospects for success and give rise to serious social conflict.

Hidden beneath the gridlock of American politics and obscured by the overheated rhetoric in mainstream culture, individuals and organizations throughout the region have been working quietly and effectively to address the inequalities and to bring more beauty and justice into Houston's communities. Here, at the forefront of these transformations, Houston area residents are endeavoring to build something that has never existed before in human history—a truly successful, inclusive, equitable, and united multiethnic society, positioned for prosperity in the global, knowledge-based economy of the 21st century. ■



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2017 Kinder Houston Area Survey Donors

The Kinder Institute thanks the following contributors for their designated support of Dr. Stephen Klineberg's work on the 2017 Kinder Houston Area Survey.

Funding includes multi-year gifts from the following generous individuals:

Reinnette and Stan Marek

Kathryn and Hank Coleman

Additional funding is provided by the following:

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