

# The 2019 Kinder Houston Area Survey

Tracking Responses to the Economic and  
Demographic Transformations through  
38 Years of Houston Surveys





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# Introduction

**F**or 38 years, Rice University's Kinder Houston Area Survey has been tracking systematically the continuities and changes in the perceptions and experiences of successive representative samples of Harris County adults. Through intensive interviews with a total of more than 46,000 Houston area residents, the surveys have been measuring the trends among Harris County residents in their life experiences, attitudes, and beliefs during almost four decades of remarkable economic, demographic, and technological change.

Under contract with Simon & Schuster, a new book exploring the national implications of this research, entitled *Prophetic City: Houston on the Cusp of a Changing America*, is scheduled for publication early in 2020. In this report, we assess the findings from the 2019 survey and look back on 38 years of systematic assessments of attitudes and beliefs to ask about the way the views of area residents have changed in response to new challenges.

Few cities exemplify more clearly than Houston the trends that are refashioning the social and political landscape across all of America. The high-tech, knowledge-based, global economy is generating mounting inequalities based primarily on access to quality education. As urban centers compete for the most talented individuals and the most innovative companies, quality-of-place attributes will increasingly determine the fates of cities. Meanwhile, an epic demographic transformation is underway, as this city and country, once predominantly composed of European nationalities, is rapidly becoming a microcosm of all the world's ethnicities and religions. Nowhere are these new realities more sharply articulated than here in the Houston region.

In this report, we show that area residents are growing more concerned about the pervasive inequalities in economic opportunities and they are more insistent than in earlier years on the need for policies to reduce the income disparities and improve the public schools. Here, at the forefront of the nation's demographic transformations, all of Houston's major ethnic communities have been expressing more favorable attitudes toward immigration, and they are more likely over the years to report that they have close personal friends from all the different ethnicities. We note the importance for Anglos and blacks of age or date of birth, and for Hispanics and Asians, of whether

they are U.S. natives or foreign-born, in accounting for differences among the respondents in their embrace of the new diversity.

We also measure the degree to which the participants in the 2019 survey, more than a year and a half after Hurricane Harvey, have grown less concerned than they were in 2018 about the region's vulnerability to flooding and are less inclined to support specific government interventions intended to mitigate future flooding. And we ask if that lessening of support for specific policies has also softened concerns about climate change and reduced the perceived need for better land-use planning. Finally, we take stock of the ongoing changes in political orientations: Harris County, which has long been evenly split between Republicans and Democrats, is now increasingly aligned with the Democratic Party, and we explore area residents' changing views over the years on the direction in which the country is moving, on the need for criminal justice reform, and on attitudes toward abortion and homosexuality.

This 38-year research program would not have been possible without the continued generous support and steadfast encouragement of the Kinder Foundation and Houston Endowment Inc., along with so many other corporations, organizations, friends, colleagues, and students who have repeatedly affirmed the value of this continuing effort to measure systematically the changing views of Houston area residents as they respond to the new realities. Our heartfelt thanks to all!

## Survey Methodology

The 38th annual Kinder Houston Area Survey was conducted between February 4 and March 14, 2019 by SSRS in Media PA. The intensive 30-minute interviews reached (50 percent by landline, 50 percent by cell phone) a scientifically-selected, randomly-generated, representative sample of 1,000 adults living in Harris County.

The responses from all 38 years of surveys are "weighted" to correct for variations in the likelihood of selection and to align the samples more closely with known population parameters. This helps to ensure that the data we report will accurately reflect the characteristics of the county's overall population along such dimensions as race or ethnicity, age, gender, educational attainment, and homeownership. When asking about changes over time, we assess the similarities and differences in the weighted responses given by successive representative samples of Harris County residents when responding to identically-worded questions that have been positioned similarly in the survey instrument.

No other city in America has been tracked in this way over so many years. Few more clearly exemplify the remarkable changes that are underway across the country.



Joe Wolfmicker



# Highlights from the Thirty-Eighth Year

## The Houston economy since 1982

- For almost four decades, the surveys have measured area residents' subjective assessments of local job opportunities, as the oil boom collapsed and then recovered into the ups and downs of a more problematic economy. In recent years, after oil prices fell from dizzying heights in 2014 to lows in 2015, positive evaluations of the local economy rebounded once again, to reach what now looks like a new, more stable plateau of modest long-term growth.
- Ratings of local job opportunities as excellent or good were expressed by 67 percent of this year's survey participants; the figures were 69, 62, 63, and 67 in the past five years. This may be a good time for Houston to plan seriously for the new investments that will be needed in order to improve the region's prospects for sustained prosperity in today's economy.
- When asked in 2019 to name the biggest problem facing people in the Houston area today, traffic was the predominating concern, just as it has been in the past five years; but this time it was cited by 36 percent of all the respondents, up significantly from 25 percent in the 2018 survey, when 15 percent spontaneously named floods and storms as their dominant concerns.

## The education crisis and the growing inequalities

- The low-skilled, well-paid blue-collar jobs are disappearing in the wake of globalization and automation. Some form of post-secondary education is now required for almost all well-paying jobs, yet only 22 percent of the students who began the eighth grade in Houston-area schools in 2006 had completed any college-level program by 2017, twelve years later.
- The survey respondents in 2019 decisively affirmed, by 67 to 33 percent, the necessity for education beyond high school in order to qualify for a well-paid job. Blacks and Hispanics appear

to be far more aware than Anglos of the new realities and are even more certain about the importance of obtaining such post-secondary credentials.

- We have asked the survey participants over the years if they thought the public schools had enough money, if it were used wisely, to provide a quality education, or whether the schools will need significantly more money. In 1995 and 1997, clear majorities believed that the schools had all the money required. In subsequent years through 2009, the respondents were evenly divided on this issue. When we asked the same question again in 2018, area residents had changed their minds: By 56 to 42 percent, they were now clear in asserting that the schools will need more money if they expect to provide a quality education.
- The survey questions measuring economic well-being remind us of the financial insecurity that is so pervasive in the Houston area. Almost four out of ten of the survey participants in 2019 said they did not have \$400 in savings to draw on in case of an emergency. One-fourth of all area residents do not have health insurance and one-third said they had difficulty during the past year paying for the groceries to feed their families or covering the costs of housing. Partly in response to these persistent inequalities, the respondents in growing numbers are now calling for public policies to reduce the financial inequities and strengthen the safety net.

### Feeling more at home with Houston's burgeoning diversity

- In the census of 1960, fully 74 percent of the Harris County population was composed of non-Hispanic whites, 20 percent were African Americans, and 6 percent were Hispanics. During the past 30 years, this historically black/white southern city has been transformed into one of the most ethnically diverse metropolitan regions in the entire country.
- Previous reports on this research have documented the continually increasing numbers of U.S.-born Anglos who express support for the new immigration. Here we present the responses of blacks and Hispanics as well, and we find that the positive attitudes toward immigration in general have been increasing steadily in all ethnic communities.
- In alternating years since 2002, we have asked the respondents about close personal friendships or romantic relationships with people from other ethnicities. In all four communities and with regard to all of the other major ethnic groups, the numbers who say they have close interethnic friendships have been growing significantly across the board.
- Among Anglos and African Americans, a key determinant of both cross-ethnic friendships and of



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Osborn/flickr

romantic relations is the respondents' age or year of birth: Younger respondents have been growing up in a world of thriving interethnic friendships; they take for granted what most older Houstonians are less ready to accept. For Hispanics and Asians, the most powerful determinant of interethnic friendships is whether they are first-generation immigrants or the U.S.-born children of earlier waves of immigrants.

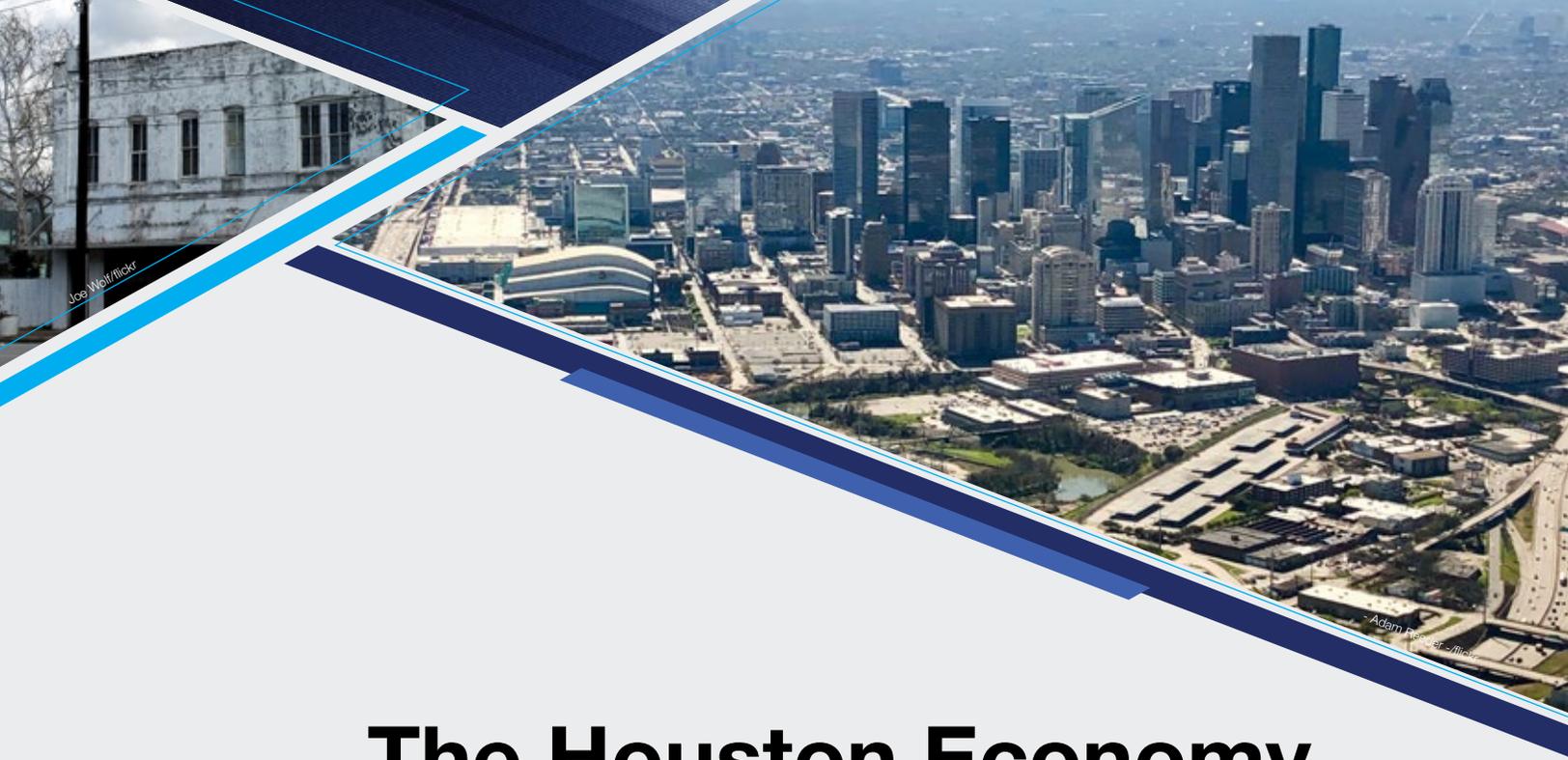
### After Harvey

- Hurricane Harvey was the worst rainfall event ever to hit the continental United States, but more than a year and a half has passed since the storm made landfall in August 2017. The survey respondents are less likely today than in 2018 to mention concerns about flooding when asked to name the biggest problem facing people in the Houston area.
- Even though more than three-fourths of the respondents in 2019, the same proportion as in 2018, said it was virtually certain that Houston will experience more severe storms in the next ten years, they were less inclined today than in 2018 to call for prohibiting construction in flood-prone areas or for raising taxes to buy out homes that have repeatedly flooded.
- At the same time, little change has occurred in area residents' broader perspectives on flooding issues. The

survey participants in 2019 were every bit as concerned as they were in 2018 about the impact of climate change, and they were even more insistent on the need for better land-use planning to guide development in the Houston area.

### Continuity and change in political orientations

- The residents of Harris County, long evenly split between Republicans and Democrats, have become increasingly affiliated with the Democratic Party in recent times. The partisan differences in beliefs about the direction of the country have moderated, with Republicans becoming somewhat less optimistic and Democrats less pessimistic, over the past year.
- Support for alternatives to mandatory prison sentences for nonviolent drug offenders has increased in the years since 2011, but the partisan divisions have also grown. After a seeming convergence in the 2016 survey, Democrats are now much more likely than Republicans to call for criminal justice reform and for ending the practice of mass incarceration.
- The new Democratic (and more secular) direction can also be seen in the sea-change that has taken place among the survey participants in their support for gay rights and, to a lesser extent, in their support for abortion rights as well.



# The Houston Economy across the 38 Years

**W**hen we conducted the first survey in this series as a class project at Rice University in March of 1982, it turned out to be at the height of Houston's economic boom. Corporations such as Hughes Tool Company, Cameron Iron Works, Compaq Computer, Conoco, Exxon, Silver Eagle Distributors, Continental Airlines, Pennzoil, and Texaco were providing steady incomes and pensions to a broad spectrum of Houston residents. Almost 50 percent of all U.S. oil refining was taking place in the petrochemical plants along the Ship Channel, including the plastic products, technical equipment, and industrial chemicals at the heart of the industry. Meanwhile, the Texas Medical Center and the Houston Port were in the midst of their own spectacular growth.

Figure 1 gives the official unemployment rates in Harris County during February in each of the 38 years, along with the survey participants' negative ratings (fair or poor) of local job opportunities. The data provide a vivid reminder of the economic upheavals the Houston area has undergone, while also documenting the remarkable convergence between the objective data as recorded each year by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and the subjective impressions of the local economy as given by successive representative samples of Harris County residents.

The 1982 survey reflected the booming economy. In March of that year, more than three-fourths of the respondents (76 percent) rated job opportunities in the Houston area as excellent or good; 47 percent said their personal financial situations were getting better and 63 percent thought they would be even better off three or four years down the road. Two months later, the oil boom collapsed. The price of a barrel of Texas crude dropped from about \$32 in early 1982 to less than \$28 by the end of 1983, but Houston had been building and borrowing in the expectation of \$50 oil. Within 18 months, a region that had known only growing prosperity recorded a net loss of nearly 100,000 jobs.

Figure 1

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. Unemployment rates are not seasonally adjusted. Kinder Houston Area Survey (1982–2019).

## The official unemployment rates and negative ratings of job opportunities (1982–2019)

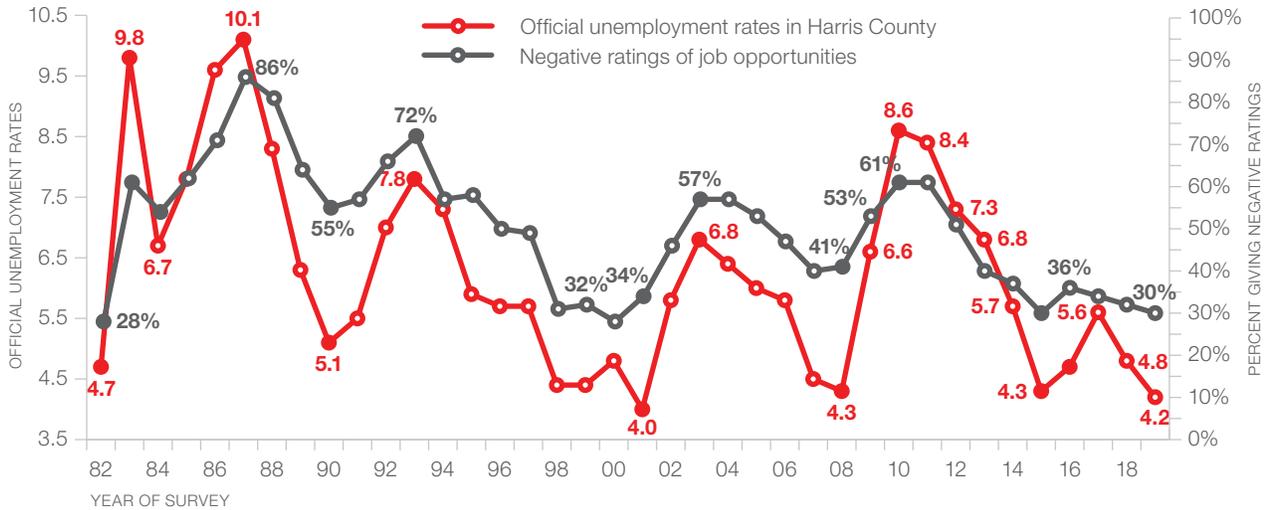
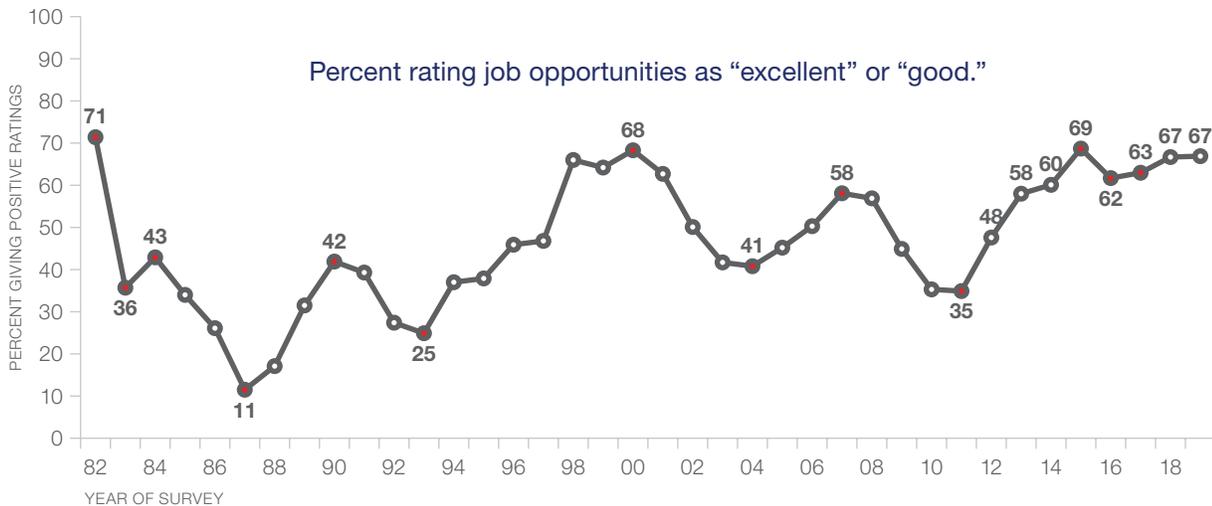


Figure 2

Source: Kinder Houston Area Survey (1982–2019).

## Positive ratings of job opportunities in the Houston area (1982–2019)



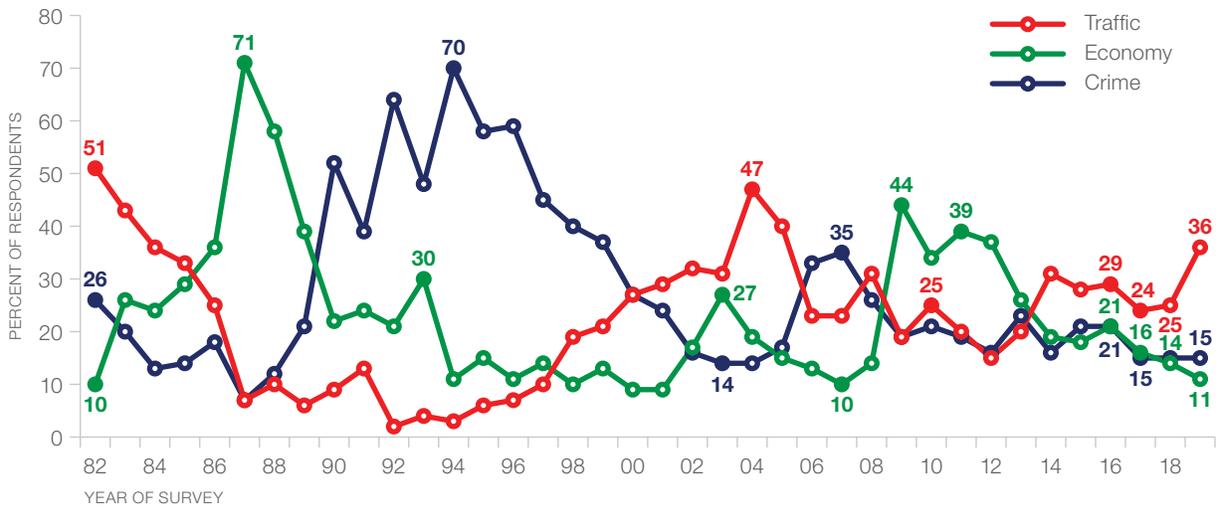
There was a slight improvement in 1984; then came the second major blow when the falling price of oil hit bottom in late 1986 at less than \$10 a barrel. By the time of the 1987 survey, one out of every seven jobs that had been in Houston in 1982 had disappeared; 86 percent of the survey participants gave negative ratings to job opportunities, and 72 percent spontaneously cited poverty, unemployment, and homelessness as the biggest problems facing people in the region.

As the economy diversified and overbuilding made Houston's cost of living cheaper than almost anywhere else in the country, rapid population growth resumed in the 1990s, but now it was primarily due to the influx of immigrants from Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Caribbean. The regional economy would experience several more wild swings over the next decades, pretty much tracking with the rest of America. As indicated in Figure 1, the local unemployment rates hit successive

Figure 3

Source: Kinder Houston Area Survey (1982–2019)

## What is “the biggest problem facing people in the Houston area today?” (1982–2019)



peaks in 1993, 2003, and during the Great Recession of 2008–2010.

In the years after that, the local economy continued to improve steadily, until the price of Texas crude soared to the giddy heights of \$100 a barrel by 2014, before declining sharply, falling to below \$30 by the end of 2015, when once again, office space in brand-new commercial buildings and large, stately homes were available for rent at bargain prices. The region’s unemployment rate was 4.3 percent in February 2015; it rose to 4.7 percent in 2016 and to 5.6 percent in 2017, before falling once again to 4.8 in 2018 and to 4.2 in February 2019. As indicated in Figure 2, the percentages of Harris County residents giving positive ratings to local job opportunities have held steady in the low to mid 60s from 2015 through 2019.

Oil prices have stabilized at around \$60 per barrel, and the economy is growing once again, but at a much slower pace than earlier in the decade, and more slowly than in other Texas cities or in the nation as a whole. The data give the distinct impression that the local economy has arrived at a steady state: In the past five years, there has been no consistent change in assessments of job opportunities. It seems clear that Houston’s economic success in the years ahead will depend to a large degree on a willingness to make significant investments in the industries and the quality-of-life attributes that will build prosperity in the twenty-first century economy.

Houston’s business leaders have identified the kinds of investments that these times require. Oil and gas companies will need to evolve toward the incorporation of new energy systems, exploiting the state’s abundance of wind and solar, and they will need to develop effective ways to capture the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions that are generated by the burning of fossil fuels. The Texas Medical Center will need to grow into a significant biotechnology cluster, moving beyond health care to become the third coast for the life sciences, along with San Francisco and Boston. The four-mile-long innovation corridor being developed in Midtown will need to build more high-tech incubators and attract new venture-capital investments.

Houston’s remarkable ethnic diversity will continue to be a major asset in drawing immigrants from all over the world and in consolidating the city’s position in the global economy, with the Houston Port serving as a major gateway into the worldwide marketplace. Undergirding all of these initiatives is the need to nurture a much more highly educated workforce ready to do the jobs of the knowledge economy. And in order to convince more of the best trained minds to choose Houston as the place to live and work, continuing improvements will be needed in the region’s overall quality of place—its resiliency in the face of severe storms, its air and water quality, its parks, bayous and recreation areas, its venues for sports, arts, and culture, its centers of walkable urbanism; its mobility and



Donald Rogers/flickr

transit. Much has been accomplished along these lines, but much more will be needed in the years ahead.

Houston's changing fortunes are also reflected in the open-ended question that begins each survey interview, asking the respondents: "What would you say is the biggest problem facing people in the Houston area today?" Figure 3 depicts the proportions who spontaneously named traffic, the economy, or crime as Houston's biggest problem. The data provide another graphic reminder of the upheavals that have marked this region's history during the 38 years of surveys.

In the booming years of the 1970s and early 1980s, when an average of 260 vehicles were being added every day to Houston's streets and freeways, traffic congestion was the dominating concern, continuing well into the recession years. Not until the full force of the oil-boom collapse had registered in the prolonged downturn of the mid-1980s did the survey respondents become preoccupied with economic issues. The percentages naming the economy as the most serious problem in the Houston area peaked at 71 percent in early 1987, at precisely the lowest point in the recession.

By the 1990s, the recovery was underway and worries about crime, fueled by the crack cocaine epidemic, were now predominating, mentioned spontaneously by 70 percent of area residents in 1995. In the years since

then, the numbers citing crime as the biggest problem in Houston decreased steadily, to 16 percent in 2014 and then up slightly in the next two years before declining to just 14 percent in 2018 and 15 percent in 2019. When asked specifically, later in the interviews, if they were worried that they or a member of their family will become the victim of a crime, the proportion of survey participants who said they were very worried dropped from 43 percent in 1995 to 33 percent in 2008, 30 percent in 2015, and 25 percent in the 2019 survey.

Meanwhile, as economic concerns have lessened and population growth continues apace, traffic congestion has once again become

the dominating preoccupation. The percentage of area residents who spontaneously named traffic as Houston's biggest problem grew from single digits in the early 1990s to 47 percent in 2004; concerns about traffic faded during the recession years between 2009 and 2012, when economic anxieties once again predominated. Starting in 2015, however, traffic congestion was once again cited as the biggest problem by pluralities of 28, 29, 24, and 25 percent in each of the ensuing years. In the 2019 survey, the proportion naming traffic as the most serious problem jumped to 36 percent. There were no meaningful changes in the proportions mentioning crime, at 15 percent this year, or the economy, down slightly to 11 percent in 2019, from 14 and 16 percent in the previous two years.

The 11-point jump this year in spontaneous mentions of traffic as the biggest problem facing people in the Houston area seems clearly to have been due, at least in part, to the drop from 15 percent in the 2018 survey to 7 percent this year in the numbers who named flooding as the dominating problem. Now that Houston's vulnerability to flooding is losing some of its subjective salience and immediacy, traffic has reemerged as by far the greatest preoccupation, the most obvious long-term challenge to Houston's quality of life, as growing numbers keep trying to find a way to get around in this sprawling, automobile-dependent metropolis.



# The Education Crisis and the Growing Inequalities

**P**roblematic as it is, traffic congestion is clearly not the most critical factor that will determine Houston's prospects in the twenty-first century. That distinction surely belongs to the challenge of preparing today's young people for the jobs that will be generated in the new knowledge-based, global economy. In a nationwide shift that began around 1980 and has accelerated since then, the availability in America of well-paying blue-collar jobs, requiring only modest levels of formal education and technical skills, has fallen precipitously, as a consequence of outsourcing and automation, further compounded by political denial and government paralysis.

As reported by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 32 percent of all the jobs that existed in America in 1973 were available to high school dropouts and another 40 percent required no more than a high school diploma. In sum, almost three-quarters of all American jobs in the 1970s required no more than a high school degree. By 2020, in sharp contrast, 65 percent of all the available jobs will require some kind of post-secondary training. Yet according to a recent analysis, of all the students in Houston-area schools who were enrolled in the eighth grade in 2006, only 22 percent had obtained any post-secondary certificate or degree by 2017, twelve years later.

Area residents clearly recognize the practical importance of access to a quality education. In 2019 the survey participants were asked about this statement: "In order to get a job that pays more than \$35,000 a year, you need to have at least one or two years of education beyond high school." As seen in Figure 4, 67 percent overall agreed with that assertion; fewer than a third disagreed. In 2018, area residents were more evenly divided on this question, at 54 to 46 percent.

Many Houstonians continue to believe that, if only Hispanics and African Americans valued education and understood its importance the way the Anglos and Asians do, we would have no problem: Everyone would get the education they need to succeed in America. So it is important

Figure 4

Source: Kinder Houston Area Surveys (2019)

### The need for education beyond high school to qualify for a well-paid job (2019)

“In order to get a job that pays more than \$35,000 a year, you need to have at least one or two years of education beyond high school.”

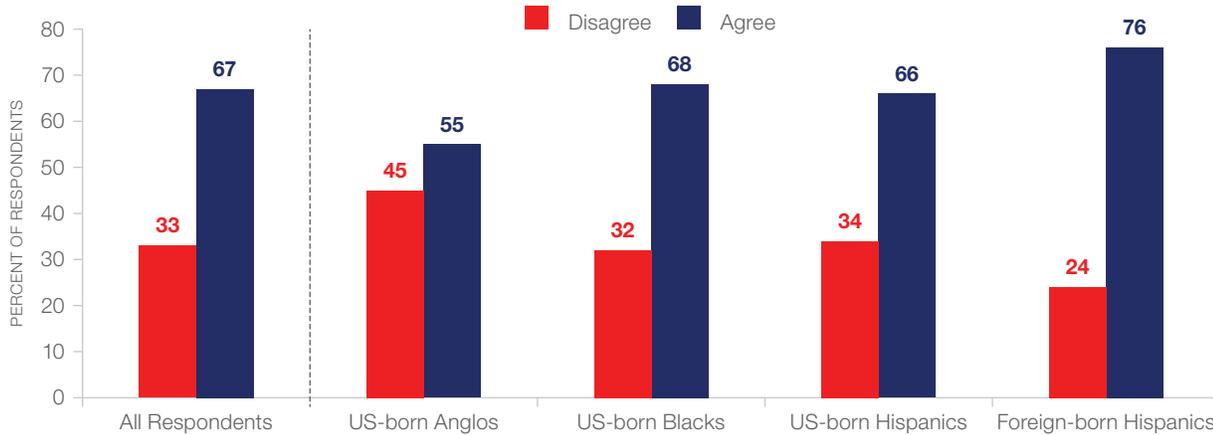
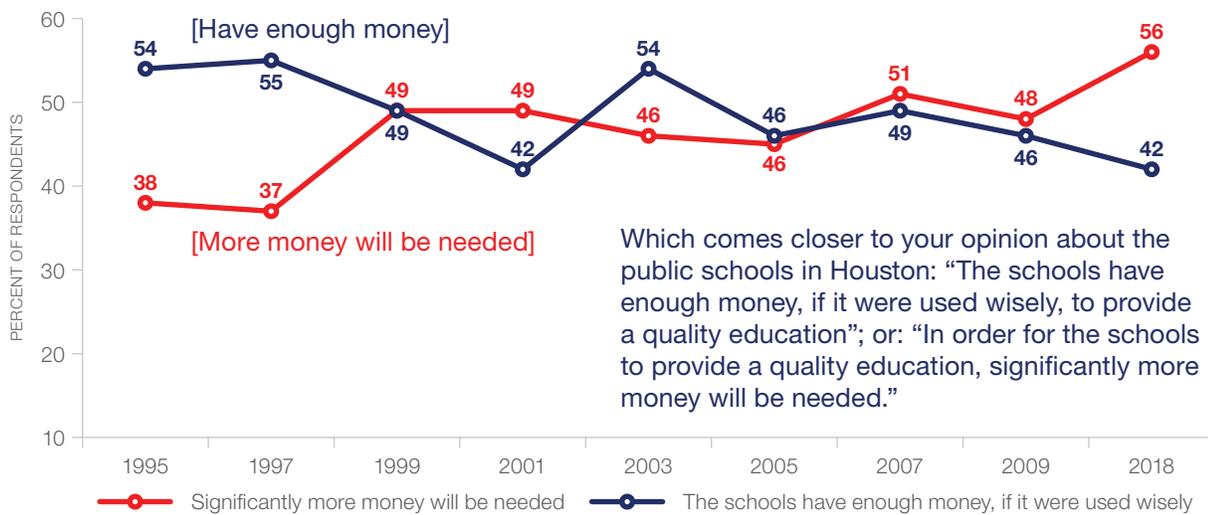


Figure 5

Source: Kinder Houston Area Surveys (1995–2018)

### The adequacy of funding for the public schools in Houston (1995–2018)



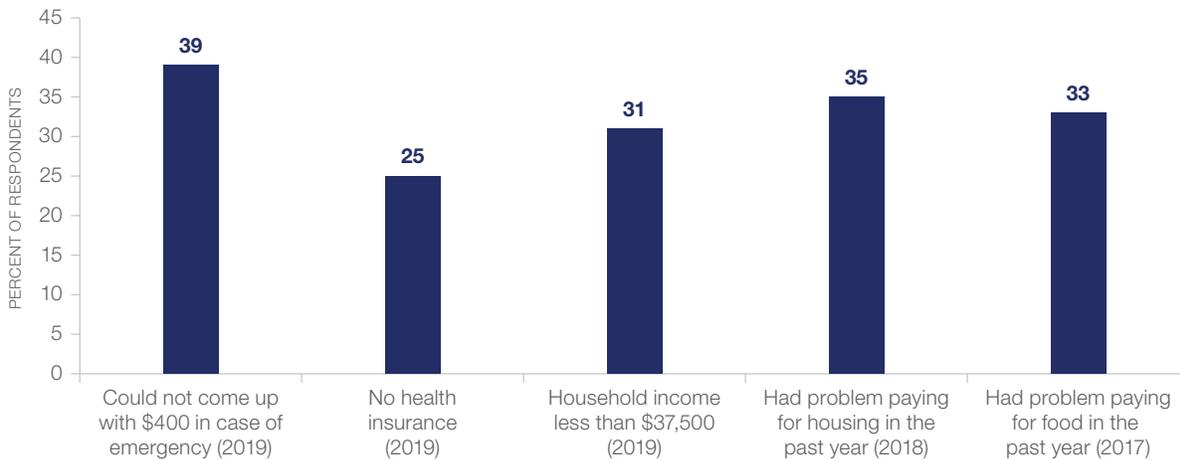
to acknowledge, as indicated in the breakdown of responses by ethnicity in Figure 4, that African Americans and Hispanics, by 68 and 66 percent, respectively, are much more inclined than Anglos, at 55 percent, to affirm the importance of post-secondary education. Hispanic immigrants, by a margin of 76 to 24 percent, are by far the most likely to acknowledge the high levels of educational attainment that are required to qualify for a decent job in America today.

If Houston’s African-American and Hispanic young people are not getting the education they need to succeed in today’s economy, it is demonstrably not because they do not value that education or recognize its importance. It is because these two communities are the most likely to be living in areas of concentrated disadvantage, in overcrowded, underfunded inner-city schools, with all the additional out-of-class barriers that poverty imposes on a young person’s ability to succeed in the public schools—

Figure 6

Source: Kinder Houston Area Surveys (2017–19)

### The prevalence of economic hardship in Harris County today (2017–2019)



the decaying neighborhoods, the constant threats of hunger and homelessness, the unmet social, medical and dental needs, the continuing disruptions as impoverished families keep moving in search of cheaper apartments.

Add to this a clear-eyed view of the new demographic realities—the rapidly aging population of Anglos and the disproportionate numbers of underserved minorities among the children of Houston. According to the latest U.S. Census, more than 70 percent of everyone in Harris County who is under the age of 20 is African-American or Hispanic, and too many are graduating from high school unprepared for college and unqualified for the jobs that will pay a living wage and enable them find a place in the new economy. If the educational deficits are not addressed effectively and soon, the stage will be set for an exploding underclass of Houston citizens who will have been systematically cut off from the chance to earn enough money to support a family in today's high-tech global economy.

The survey participants have been asked over the years if they thought the public schools in the Houston area generally have enough money, if it were used wisely, to provide a quality education; or whether they believed instead that, “In order for the schools to provide a quality education, significantly more money will be needed.” As seen in Figure 5, during the mid-1990s, when the question was first asked, decisive majorities, by 54 and 55 percent to 38 and 37 percent, were clear in their belief that the

schools have all the money they need to provide a good education. During the ensuing ten years, from 1999 through 2009, the respondents were evenly divided in their assessments of the adequacy of school funding.

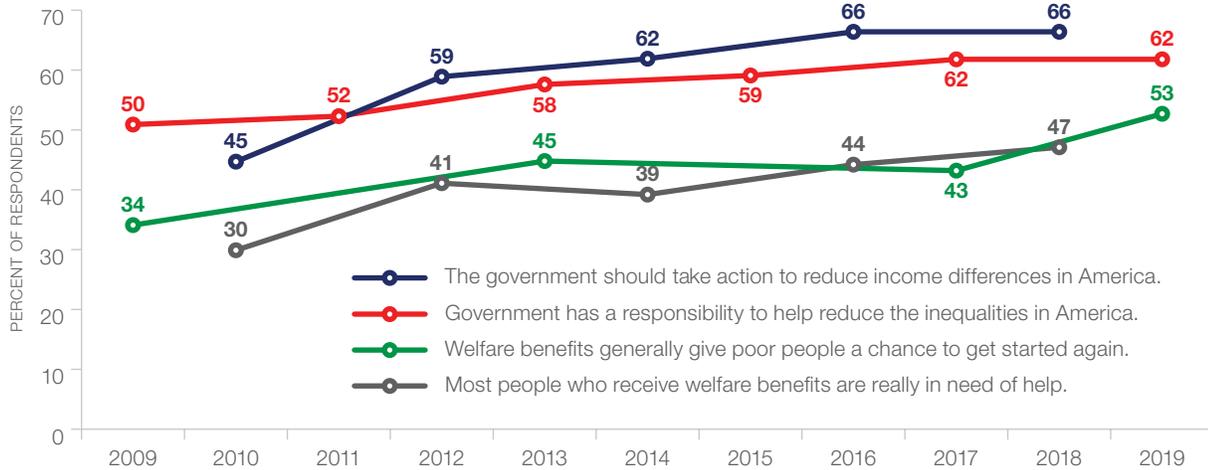
We asked that same question again ten years later. In 2018 a solid majority of area residents (by 56 to 42 percent) were now clear in their view that the schools will need significantly more money in order to provide a quality education. The data underscore a potentially consequential shift among area residents in their understanding of the urgent need for larger and more sustained investments in public education if Houston is to succeed in the new economy.

The formidable inequalities in school attainment are reflected, not surprisingly, in deepening disparities in family incomes and in measures of economic well-being more generally. Figure 6 presents five different indicators of poverty as measured in the surveys. The interviews in 2019 asked the representative sample of Harris County residents what they would do if they suddenly had to come up with \$400 to deal with an unexpected emergency. Almost four out of ten (39 percent) said they either would have to borrow the money or they would simply not be able to come up with that kind of money right now. Just 60 percent of Harris County residents said they had enough in savings to meet a \$400 emergency expense. These Houston figures are similar to those recorded in the national polls.

Figure 7

Source: Kinder Houston Area Surveys (2009–2019)

## Support for programs to reduce the inequalities in American society (2009–2019)



The Texas Medical Center is the greatest conglomeration of medical institutions in the world, but Houston is also among the major American cities that have the highest percentage of children without health insurance. Fully one-fourth of all the participants in the 2019 survey said they and their families did not have health insurance. Almost one-third reported total household incomes of less than \$37,500. In the 2018 survey, 35 percent said they had difficulty paying for housing, and 33 percent in 2017 said they had a serious problem buying the groceries they needed to feed their families during the past year.

The widespread prevalence of poverty and homelessness in this affluent metro area is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. In alternating years between 2009 and 2019, as indicated in Figure 7, the surveys have replicated four questions that ask about the role of government in expanding economic opportunities and in reducing the impact of concentrated disadvantage.

The proportions who agree that the government should take action to reduce income differences between rich and poor in America grew from 45 percent in 2010 to 62 percent in 2014 and to 66 percent in 2018.

The percentages who assert that government has a responsibility to help reduce the inequalities grew from 50 percent in 2009 to 62 percent in this year's survey.

The respondents were also asked if they believed that most people who receive welfare benefits are really in need of help, or are taking advantage of the system. The percentages who thought that welfare recipients really need the help grew from 30 percent in 2010 to 47 percent in 2018. And 53 percent of the survey respondents in 2019, up from 34 percent in 2009, claimed that welfare benefits generally give poor people a chance to get started again; only 44 percent in 2019 asserted instead that such handouts encourage poor people to stay poor and dependent.





# Feeling More at Home with Houston's Burgeoning Diversity

**T**hroughout its history, Houston was essentially a bi-racial Southern city dominated and controlled by white men. In 1960, Harris County was 70 percent Anglo and 20 percent African American. In the space of the last thirty years, it has been transformed into one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse metro areas in the country. By 2016, the census estimates indicate that Anglos now comprised 31 percent of the county's total population; Hispanics were 42 percent, blacks were 19 percent, Asians and others were 8 percent.

All of the region's ethnic groups are now minorities, all of them called upon to build something that has never existed before in human history—a truly successful, inclusive, equitable, and united multiethnic society that will be Houston, and Texas, and America as the twenty-first century unfolds. The surveys suggest that area residents are adapting pretty well in the process of navigating this remarkable transition.

One of the most consistent and consequential trends the surveys have recorded is the continuing improvements in support for immigration and the increasingly positive attitudes toward Houston's diversity. The proportion of U.S.-born Anglos in Harris County, for example, who said they were in favor of granting illegal immigrants a path to legal citizenship if they speak English and have no criminal record has continued to grow, from 56 percent in 2010 and 60 percent in 2012 to 65 percent in 2016 and to 71 percent in this year's survey.

Figure 8 shows the changes on three additional questions, which we have been asking since the 1990s. The proportion of U.S.-born Anglo respondents who believed that immigrants generally contribute more to the American economy than they take grew from 30 percent in 1994 to 48 percent in 2018. The numbers asserting that the increasing immigration into this country today mostly

Figure 8

Source: Kinder Houston Area Surveys (1994–2019)

### Attitudes toward immigrants among U.S.-born Anglos in Houston (1994–2019)

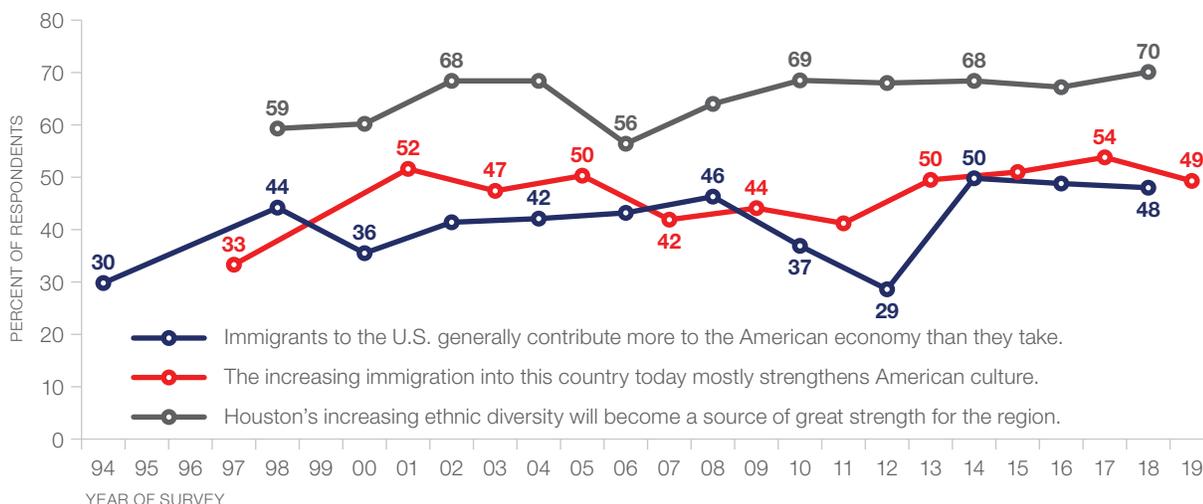
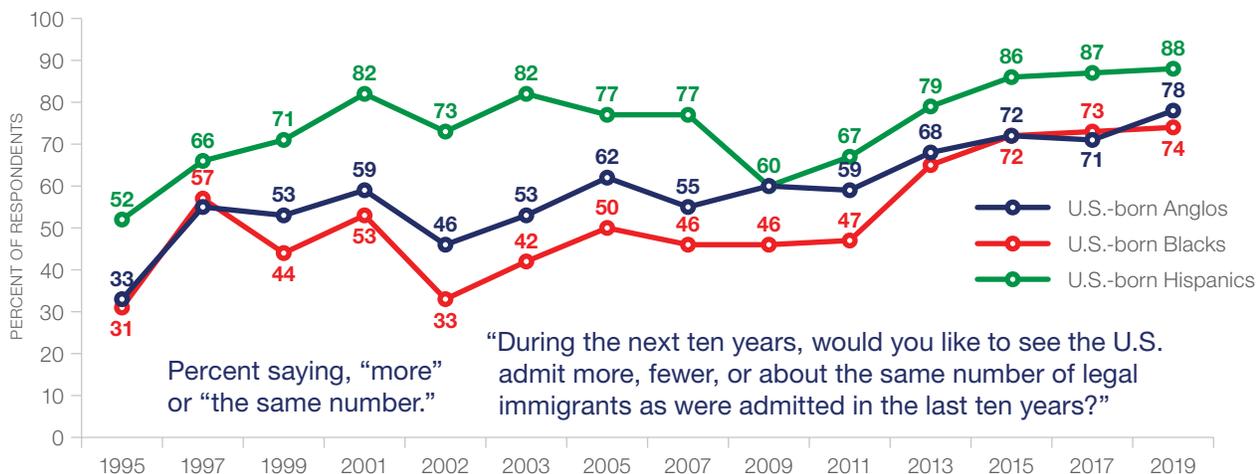


Figure 9

Source: Kinder Houston Area Surveys (1995–2019)

### Support for admitting more or the same number of legal immigrants in the next ten years, in three U.S.-born ethnic communities (1995–2019)



strengthens, rather than threatens, American culture grew from 33 percent in 1997 to 49 percent in this year’s survey. And the percentage of U.S.-born Anglos who thought that Houston’s diversity will eventually become a source of great strength for the city, rather than a growing problem, increased from 59 percent in 1998 to 70 percent in 2018.

Have comparable changes been occurring among U.S.-born blacks and Hispanics? Are the two minority

communities also growing more comfortable with diversity and immigration over the years? In alternating surveys since 1995, we have asked the respondents whether they think the United States should admit more, fewer, or about the same number of legal immigrants in the next ten years as were admitted in the past ten years. In all three of Houston’s major ethnic communities, as Figure 9 indicates, the trends are similar and compelling.

The percent of U.S.-born Anglos who were calling on the country to admit more or the same number of legal immigrants in the next ten years grew from 33 percent in 1995, to 59 percent in 2001, to 62 percent in 2005, to 68 percent in 2013, and to 78 percent in 2019. In very similar fashion, the percentage of U.S.-born blacks calling for the same number or more immigrants to be admitted increased from 31 percent in 1995 to 74 percent today. Among U.S.-born Hispanics, the numbers grew from 52 percent to 88 percent.

The respondents from all three U.S.-born communities are increasingly rejecting the call for further restrictions on the number of new immigrants coming to America. Undocumented immigration has slowed in recent years, so the fear of an invasion of dangerous foreigners has faded. The immigration concerns today have much more to do with addressing the desperate needs of the large numbers of refugees seeking asylum, rather than with undocumented immigrants thought to be pouring into this country, threatening American jobs and public safety.

The continuing growth in the numbers of Asians and Hispanics in America today is no longer due primarily to the influx of new immigrants; it is mainly attributable instead to the coming of age of the 100-percent American young people who are the U.S.-born children of the immigrants who came here 25 and 30 years ago. Will the new immigrants ever learn English? Will they ever become

truly American? Are they remaining in their co-ethnic enclaves, keeping with their foreign ways, and refusing to assimilate? All those early fears are rapidly fading in this new world of thriving interethnic friendships and increasing rates of intermarriage.

In alternating years since 2002, we have asked the survey respondents if they had close personal friends from each of the other three major ethnic groups in Houston. The numbers increased in every community with regard to every ethnicity. The proportion of Anglos who said they had a close friend who was African-American grew from 69 percent in 2002 to 80 percent in 2019. The numbers of blacks who had a close friend who was Asian expanded from 32 to 54 percent. The percentage of Hispanics with an Anglo friend grew from 49 to 65 percent. The numbers of Asians with a close personal friend who was Hispanic increased from 53 to 83 percent.

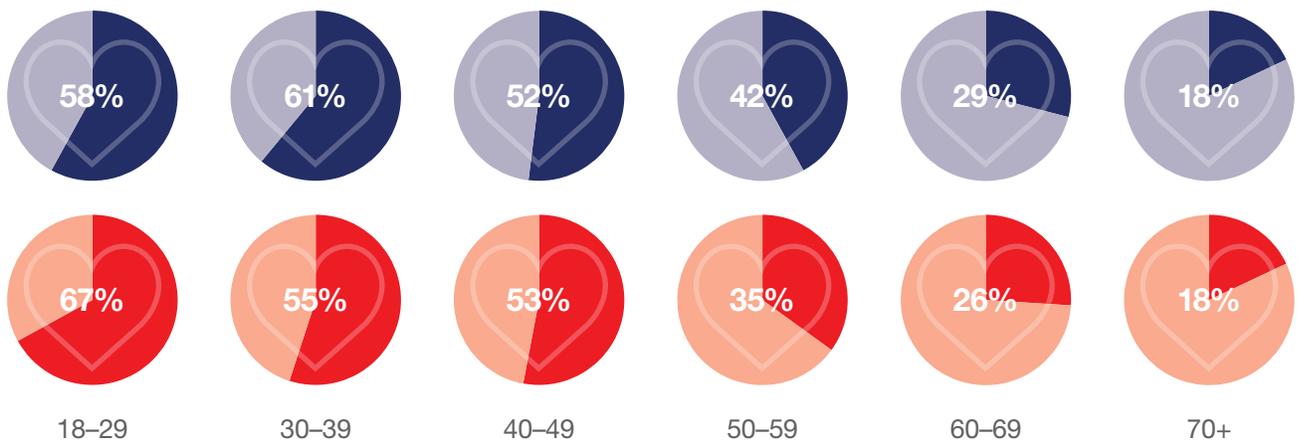
In an earlier report, we asked whether the increase among U.S.-born Anglos in their support for immigration and in their comfort with diversity was because they have been changing their minds about the impact of immigration (i.e., intracohort change). Or were the more positive attitudes due instead to the coming of age of younger Anglos who are entering adulthood with more positive attitudes toward immigration and diversity than those of their elders (cohort succession)? The second hypothesis was the one most clearly supported by the data: The major force responsible

Figure 10

Source: Kinder Houston Area Surveys (2007, 2011, 2014, 2016, 2018)

Interethnic romantic relationships by age among Anglos and Blacks (2007–2018, combined)

“Have you ever been in a romantic relationship with someone who was not **Anglo/Black**?”



for the more welcoming attitudes among Anglos was the ongoing replacement of one generation by the next.

Each successive cohort of Anglos and African Americans is bringing more positive interethnic attitudes into the public arena. Today's older respondents grew up in the America of the 1960s and 1970s; that was a profoundly different era from the 1990s and 2000s, when the younger generations were coming of age. Biography intersects with history to shape the way people experience the world: Among Anglos and African Americans, one of the most powerful predictors of comfort with diversity and of interethnic friendships is simply their age or year of birth. Older respondents are less likely than their younger counterparts to report having close personal friends from the other ethnic communities. Figure 10 depicts the differences by age among Anglos and blacks in the proportions who report having been in an interethnic romantic relationship.

The Anglo and African-American respondents were asked on five different occasions in the past twelve years if they had ever been in a romantic relationship with someone who was not of their ethnicity. As indicated in the Figure, some 60 percent of those in their 20s and 30s answered in the affirmative. The numbers declined to about 40 percent among the respondents aged 50 to 59, then dropped to 29 and 26 percent for those aged 60 to 69, and to just 18 percent for ages 70 and older. The successive generations have come of age under distinctly different circumstances.

Younger Americans of all ethnicities across most of the country have been growing up in a world where ethnic diversity is part of their lived experience and close intergroup relationships are increasingly common. The world of the 2000s and 2010s, when the younger generations were coming of age, is a place of thriving interethnic friendships and increasing rates of intermarriage. This is a decidedly different era compared to the more rigidly segregated world of the 1960s and 1970s, when today's older Americans were moving into adulthood.

There is a well-known law of human nature that states in essence: "What I am familiar with feels right and natural. What I'm unfamiliar with feels unnatural and somehow not quite right." The more recent generations of area residents are taking for granted what earlier generations still find difficult to accept. The ongoing replacement of the generations will surely help to smooth the evolution of

this city and nation as they undergo the transition into a multiethnic world.

Among Hispanics and Asians, meanwhile, the most important determinant of interethnic friendships, not surprisingly, is whether they are the U.S.-born children of earlier waves of immigrants, or whether they are first-generation immigrants themselves, more likely to be ensconced in their co-ethnic enclaves and less likely to be fluent in English. Figure 11 shows that relationship among Hispanics in Houston.

Fully 80 percent of the U.S.-born Hispanics, compared to 62 percent of the first-generation immigrants, report having a close personal friend who is Anglo. The generational differences in friendship networks are even greater with regard to relationships between Hispanics and blacks: 79 percent of the American-born Hispanics, but just 49 percent of the first-generation Hispanic immigrants, said they had a close personal friend who was African-American. When asked if they had ever been in a romantic relationship with someone who was not Hispanic, 57 percent of the U.S.-born respondents said they had, compared with 22 percent of the immigrants.

Figure 12 depicts a very similar pattern among the two groups of Asians. The Asian immigrants are far less likely than the U.S.-born to have close personal friends from the other ethnic communities; but note that they are more likely to have such friends than are the Latino immigrants, fewer of whom are middle-class professionals or fluent English speakers. Thus 71 percent of Asian immigrants, compared to 62 percent of their Hispanic counterparts, said they have a close personal friend who is Anglo; and 61 percent of the Asians, in contrast to 49 percent of the Hispanics, have a close personal friend who is African American. The figures were more comparable when asking about romantic relationships: 50 percent of U.S.-born Asians and 57 percent of U.S.-born Hispanics said they had indeed been in a relationship of that sort, compared to 32 and 22 percent of the first-generation immigrants.

Consistent with these findings, the surveys indicate that 28 percent of all married U.S.-born Hispanics in Harris County are married to non-Hispanics. The U.S. Census reports that Asian Americans are the most likely of all the major racial or ethnic communities in America to live in mixed neighborhoods and to marry across racial lines: Of all the Asian newlyweds between 2015 and 2017, for example,

Figure 11

Source: Kinder Houston Area Surveys (2007–2018)

## Interethnic friendships among U.S.-born and foreign-born Hispanics (2007–2018)

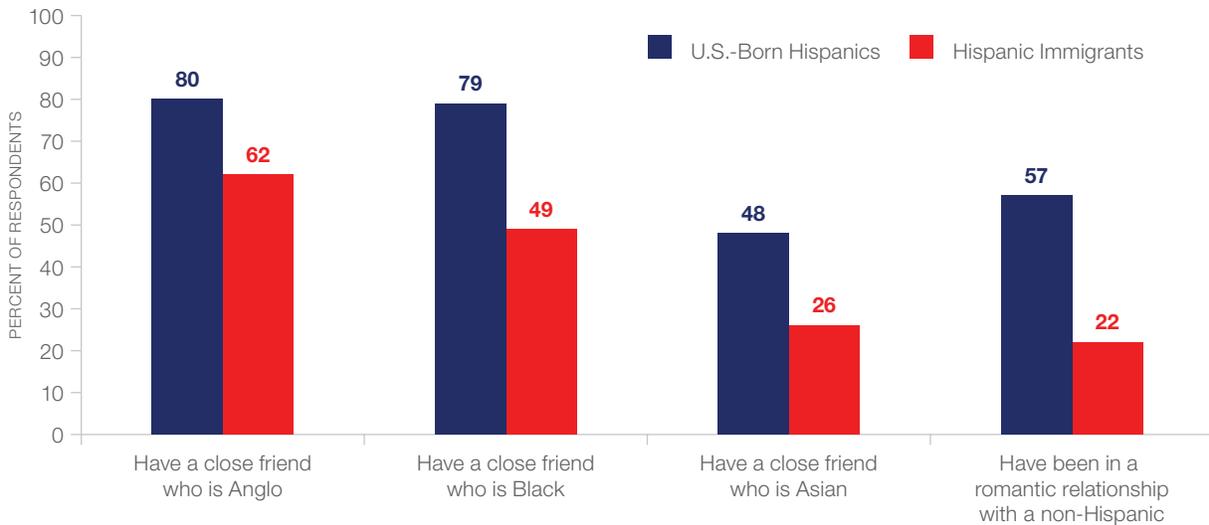
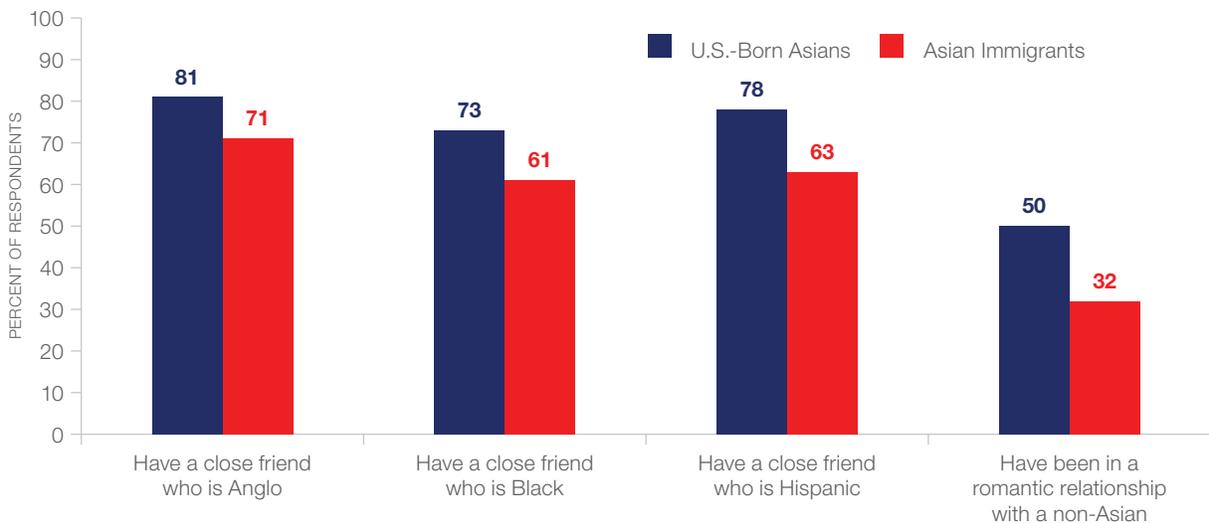


Figure 12

Source: Kinder Houston Area Surveys (2007–2018)

## Interethnic friendships among U.S.-born and foreign-born Asians (2007–2018)



almost three out of ten (29 percent) had married someone who was not Asian. Black intermarriage rates have more than tripled in the past forty years, growing from 5 percent in 1980 to 18 percent today.

This nation is moving inexorably into what sociologists have been calling a “trans-racial” world, where ethnicity is becoming more fluid and inherently less relevant. The real danger for the future of Houston and America, many have

suggested, is not so much an ethnic divide, as a class divide, although the two (of course) are closely interrelated. Today’s global, high-tech, knowledge-based economy is generating a growing middle class and a growing underclass in all four of America’s ethnic communities, predicated above all else on access to quality education.



# After Harvey

Are the effects of Hurricane Harvey fading from public consciousness or has a new and lasting determination to strengthen government controls taken hold in an effort to mitigate the effects of future flooding? The 2019 survey replicated several questions from 2018 to measure the stability of the concerns that area residents were expressing when asked about these issues so soon after the storm made landfall in August 2017. As shown in Figure 13 and as noted earlier, flooding issues were less salient in 2019 than the year before, when the respondents were asked to name the biggest problem in the Houston area today.

Figure 13

Source: Kinder Houston Area Survey (2017–19)

The biggest problem in Houston: The rise and fall of spontaneous concerns about flooding

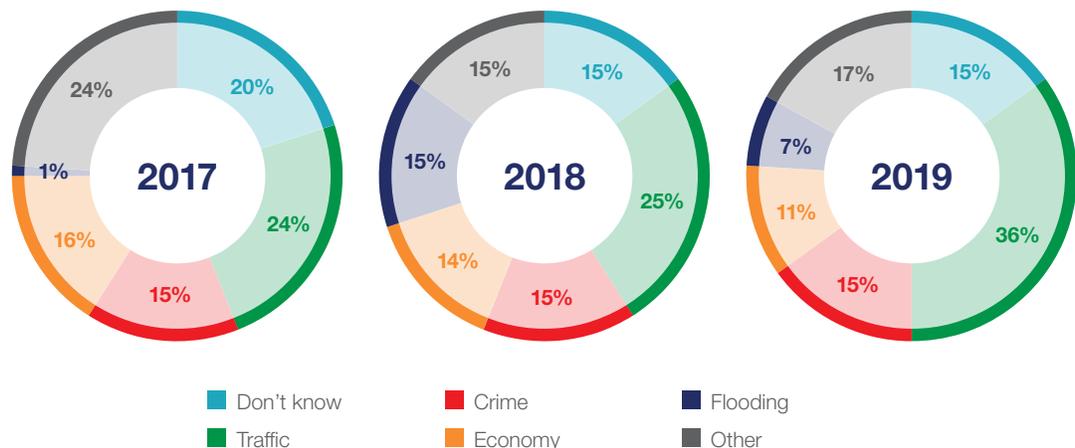
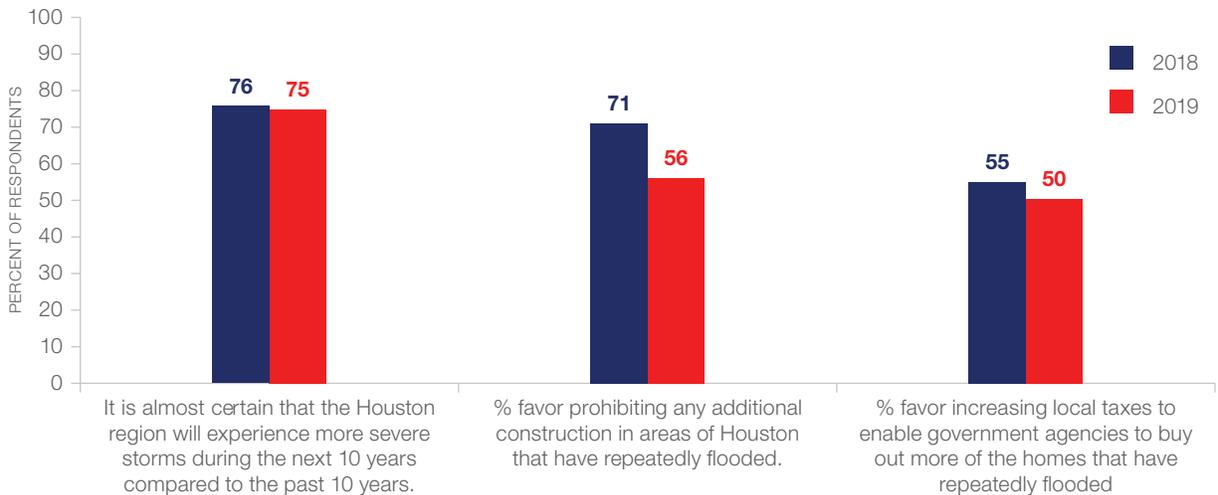


Figure 14

Source: Kinder Houston Area Surveys (2018–2019)

## The likelihood of future storms and support for flood-mitigation controls (2018–2019)



Only one percent of the respondents in February 2017, before Harvey, thought of flooding and storms when asked to name the most salient issue in the Houston region. Shortly after that great rainfall event, 15 percent spontaneously named the floods as the biggest problem. Attention to storms and resiliency faded to just 7 percent in 2017, and mentions of traffic jumped from 25 to 36 percent. Has the declining salience of flooding issues affected area residents' continued willingness to support major interventions intended to reduce the region's vulnerability to future storms? Figure 14 suggests that it has in some respects but not in others.

There has been no change at all from last year to this in the clear majorities, at 76 and 75 percent who agree, "It is almost certain that the Houston region will experience more severe storms during the next ten years compared to the past ten years." However, support for more stringent government regulations has declined. In 2018, 71 percent were in favor of prohibiting any additional construction in areas of Houston that have repeatedly flooded; that was the case for just 56 percent

of the respondents in this year's survey. Similarly though less dramatically, 50 percent today, compared to 55 percent in 2018, said they were in favor of increasing local taxes to enable government agencies to buy out more of the homes that have repeatedly flooded. The instinctive resistance to an increase in government controls over the initiatives of the private sector is still firmly embedded, it would seem, in Houston's basic DNA.

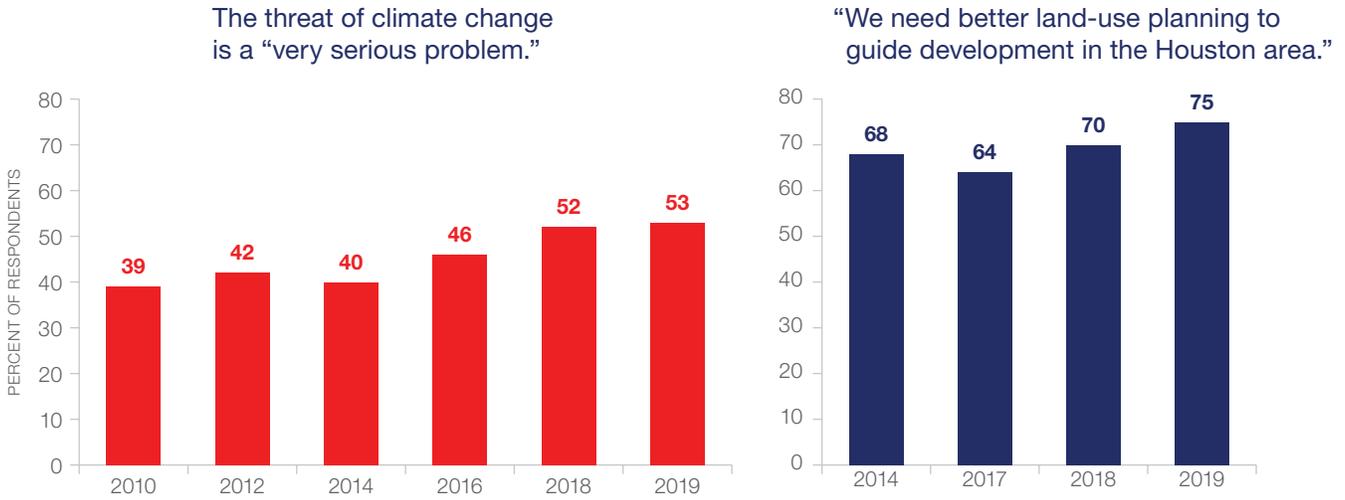


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Figure 15

Source: Kinder Houston Area Surveys (2010–2019)

## Concerns about climate change and calls for better land-use planning (2010–2019)



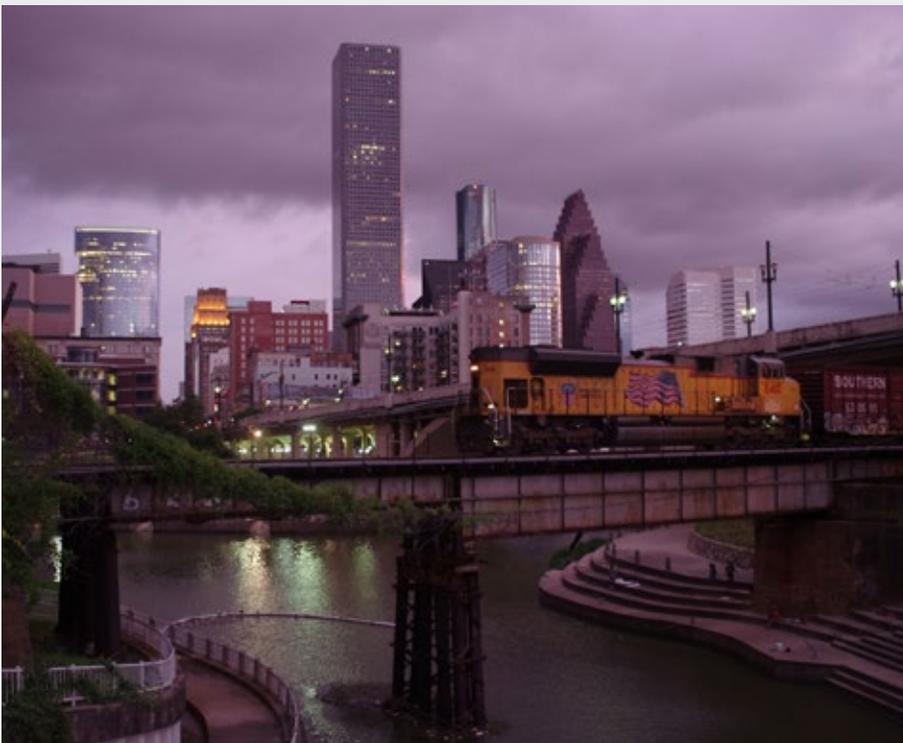
Two other questions, depicted in Figure 15, make it clear that continuing changes are taking place in the survey participants’ broader perspectives. In 2010, only 39 percent thought that the threat of climate change was a very serious problem. That concern grew to 46 percent in 2016, and then jumped to 52 percent in 2018, soon after Harvey. Instead of any lessening of concern today

as the memory of the storm has receded, the perceived seriousness of climate change is unchanged, at 53 percent, in the 2019 survey.

The respondents in 2019 were also asked if they believed that “we need better land-use planning to guide development in the Houston area,” or if they agreed

instead that “people and businesses should be free to build wherever they want.” The proportion calling for more effective land-use planning grew from 64 percent in 2017 to 70 percent in 2018, and then increased further to 75 percent in 2019.

The surveys underline the profound ambivalence that so many feel about how to respond to the growing dangers of flooding: Area residents continue to resist any additional government interference in developer decisions, even as they also clearly recognize the region’s deepening vulnerability to severe storms and the need for new forms of public action.





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# Continuity and Change in Political Orientations

**H**arris County residents are gradually becoming both more secular (see the rise of the “Nones” in last year’s report) and more aligned with the Democratic Party. Beginning in 1984, the survey participants were asked if they would call themselves a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or something else. Those who did not indicate an affiliation were asked if they thought of themselves as closer to the Republican or Democratic Party. Figure 16 shows the percentages of area residents over the years who chose Republican or Democrat in answer to either of these two questions.

Through most of the early years of the survey, at least until 2005, area residents were evenly divided between the two political parties. In that year, 37 percent of the survey participants said they were affiliated with or leaning toward the Republican Party and 35 percent said they leaned toward the Democrats. In the surveys since then, however, the proportion of Democrats has increased decisively, reaching 52 percent in 2016, 44 percent in 2018, and 48 percent in this year’s survey. Meanwhile, the numbers of Republicans have hardly changed at all, at around 29 to 33 percent across all the years. The partisan gap looked as if it might be closing in 2018, but it expanded again to reach a differential of almost 20 points in 2019.

Figure 17 shows the partisan divides on the question of whether the country is headed for better times or more difficult times. In February 2017, soon after Donald Trump’s election, the survey revealed a striking, if unsurprising, reversal in perspectives on the American future as expressed by Republicans and Democrats.

The 2018 survey found an even stronger separation, with 71 percent of Republicans asserting that the country was headed for better times and 76 percent of Democrats convinced instead that more difficult times now lay ahead. That was the largest gap ever seen on this question, so it was not surprising to find the divide moderating in this year’s survey, as the Democrats became somewhat

Figure 16

Source: Kinder Houston Area Survey (1984–2019)

Political party affiliation over the years among Harris County residents (1984–2019)

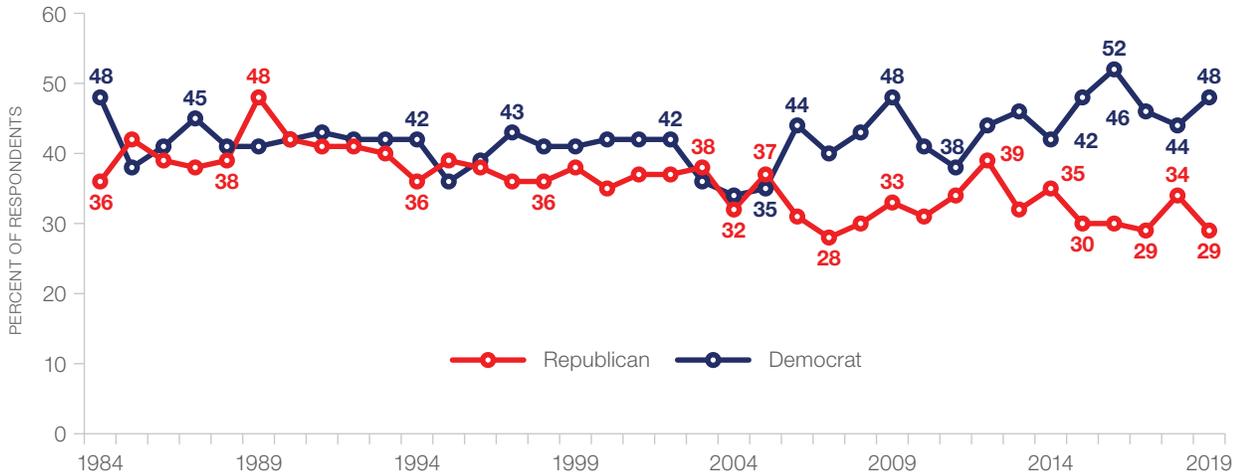
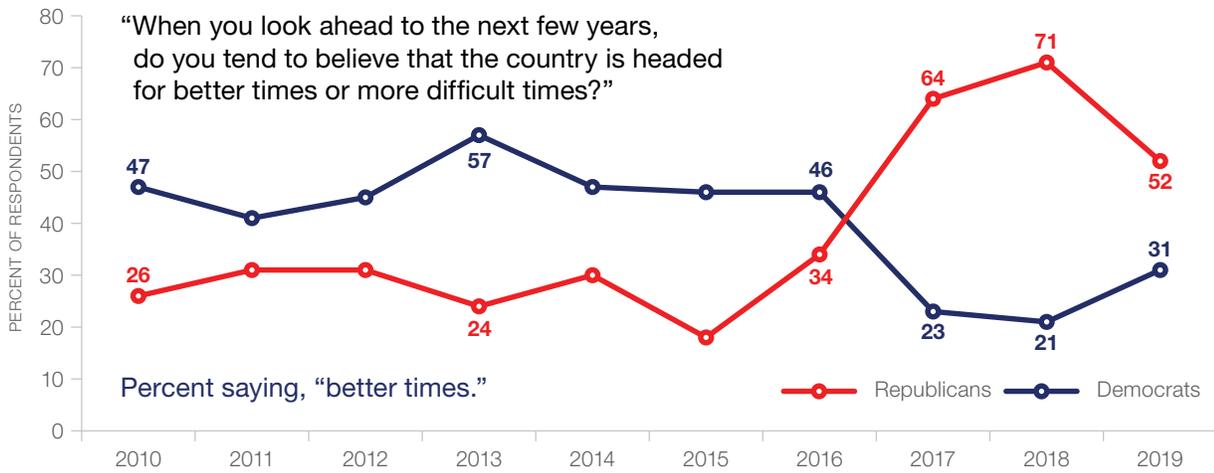


Figure 17

Source: Kinder Houston Area Survey (2010–19)

Differences by political party in beliefs about the American future (2010–2019)



more optimistic, the Republicans more pessimistic. The percentage of Democrats foreseeing better times ahead increased from 21 to 31 percent, whereas the proportion of Republicans expressing optimism about the country’s future declined from 71 to 52 percent.

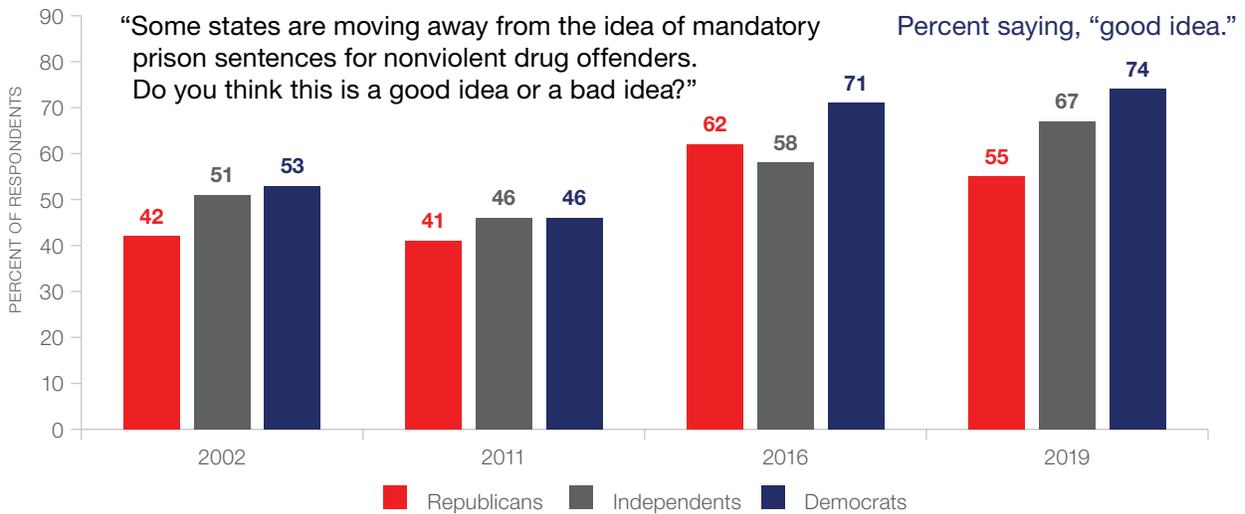
In keeping with the ongoing overall shift toward Democratic positions, the surveys have documented a growing consensus among area residents on the need to

reconsider national policies calling for mass incarceration and mandatory prison sentences, policies that have filled American prisons with 25 percent of all the inmates in all the world’s prisons, and has helped to raise the costs of incarceration in America to an estimated \$80 billion a year. Politicians from almost all political persuasions are coming to believe that reform of the mandatory minimum sentencing laws can save taxpayers money while also improving public safety.

Figure 18

Source: Kinder Houston Area Surveys (2019)

## Support for criminal justice reform by party affiliation (2002–2019)



The attitudes and beliefs of area residents as a whole have moved in precisely that direction. On four different occasions, from 2002 to 2019, the surveys have asked: “Some states are moving away from the idea of mandatory prison sentences for nonviolent drug offenders. Do you think this is a good idea or a bad idea?” The proportions overall who thought it was a good idea grew from 43 percent in 2011 to 64 percent in 2016 and to 68 percent in this year’s survey. The partisan divides have also grown. Figure 18 indicates that the percent of Republicans who approve of the idea of moving away from mandatory prison sentences dropped from 62 percent in 2016 to 55 percent in 2019. Meanwhile, the numbers of Democrats in support of reform has continued to grow, from 71 percent in the 2016 survey to 74 percent today.

Finally, we have been asking area residents since the early 1990s about their views on abortion and homosexuality. As indicated in Figure 19, the proportion who believe that abortion is morally acceptable has grown very gradually and not significantly, from 25 percent in

1997 to 36 percent in 2019, whereas the acceptance of homosexuality has undergone an extraordinary transformation, expanding from 21 percent in 1997 who believed that same-sex relations were morally acceptable to 58 percent in 2019.

The shifts in attitudes toward specific policies have been even more spectacular. Support for homosexuals being legally permitted to adopt children, for example, grew from

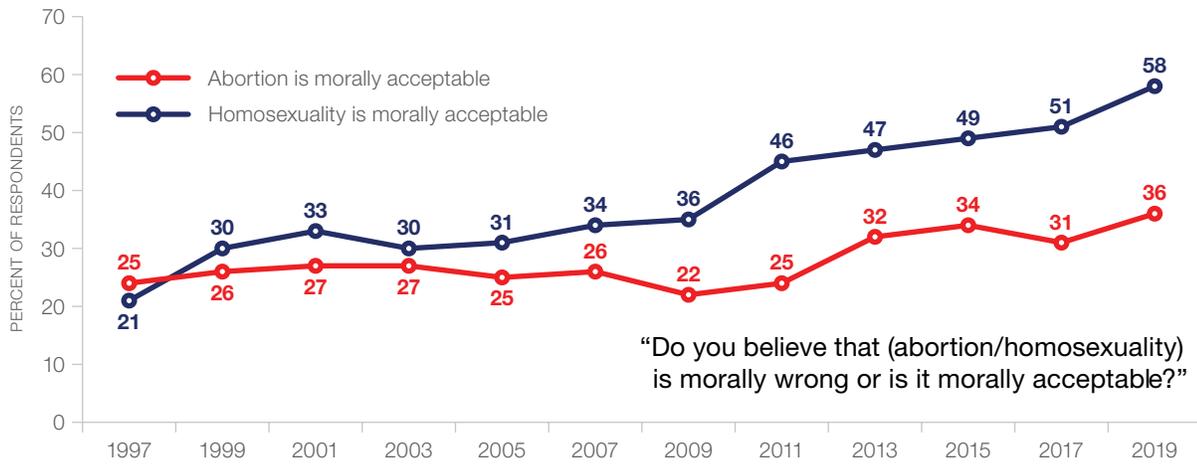


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Figure 19

Source: Kinder Houston Area Survey (1997–2019).

## The moral acceptability of abortion and homosexuality across the years (1997–2019)



just 19 percent when the question was first asked in 1991, to 35 percent in 2002, to 45 percent in 2008, and to 50 percent in 2018. The numbers who agreed that marriages between homosexuals should be given the same legal status as heterosexual marriages grew from 31 percent in 1993, to 41 percent in 2003, to 45 percent in 2013, to 64 percent in the 2019 survey. And the proportions who said they had a close personal friend who is gay or lesbian grew from 41 percent in 2004 to 59 percent in this year’s survey.

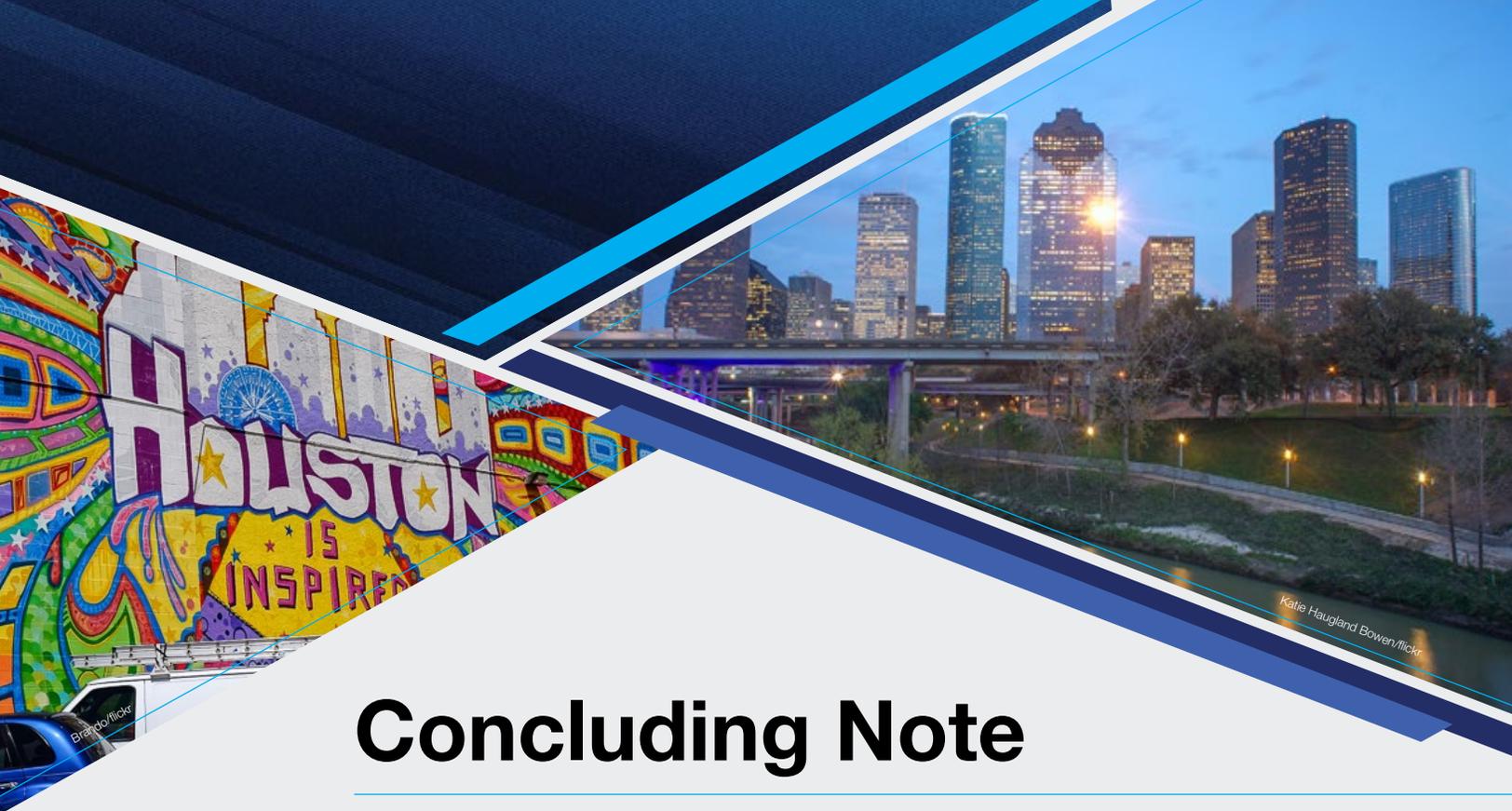
The data clearly suggest that homosexuality is coming to be understood as part of the natural human variation, making it harder to justify continued discrimination. Houston area residents are feeling more comfortable in

general in a world where mutual acceptance and friendship can thrive among people of different ethnic backgrounds, religious beliefs, and sexual proclivities.

Meanwhile, we have seen virtually no change across the years in the survey respondents’ attitudes toward abortion. Most area residents continue to indicate that they personally are opposed to abortion, yet they are also decidedly pro-choice. In the 2019 survey, 59 percent said they believed that abortion was morally wrong, but 62 percent were *opposed* to a law that would make it more difficult for a woman to obtain an abortion. In 2018 almost six out of ten (58 percent) agreed with the strong pro-choice position that, “It should be legal for a woman to obtain an abortion if she wants to have one for any reason.”

A majority of area residents thus espouse traditional values for themselves, yet most are also unwilling to impose a rule of that sort 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 generally progressive and tolerant city.





# Concluding Note

Part of the value of this research is that it allows us to get beneath the overheated rhetoric of the moment to assess the way area residents, when asked about their attitudes and beliefs in the privacy of their homes, are actually coming to understand today's challenges and taking stock of the new realities. The surveys have shown us, a local public official recently observed, that "we are better than we thought we were."

Houston-area residents are demonstrably more willing today than in earlier years to support government programs that address the basic needs of the poor and disadvantaged, and to insist on the importance of investing more in the public schools. They are increasingly embracing the region's burgeoning diversity and growing more comfortable in a world of thriving interethnic friendships and mounting rates of intermarriage. They recognize the need to reduce the region's long-term vulnerability to flooding; they increasingly favor criminal justice reform; they have changed their minds about the moral acceptability of homosexuality; and they continue to espouse a position that is both anti-abortion and prochoice.

These findings should remind Houston's civic leaders, so many of whom are working hard to develop effective responses to the region's economic and demographic challenges, that area residents are increasingly open to supporting new initiatives along these lines. It remains to be seen whether the community as a whole can summon the political will to undertake the critical long-term investments that will be needed in order to position the Houston region for sustained prosperity as the twenty-first century unfolds.

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