

TRACKING HOUSTON PERCEPTIONS IN REMARKABLE TIMES

A Conversation with Stephen L. Klineberg and Debbie Z. Harwell

This year marks the thirty-ninth annual Houston Area Survey produced by the Kinder Institute for Urban Research at Rice University under the direction of Dr. Stephen Klineberg. The survey, which comes out each spring, has become something of a local legend, as its perspectives on the changing Houston demographics and the shifts in attitudes trace almost forty years of our history and growth as a community – both statistically and personally.

Stephen Klineberg is himself a local legend. If Houston Public Media's guest list had an equivalent for J. J. Watt or James Harden, it would be Stephen Klineberg, who monitors the city's pulse. A New York native, Klineberg received his Ph.D. in sociology at Harvard and taught at Princeton before coming to Rice University in the early 1970s for what he expected to be a short stint. Over forty years later he continues to be intrigued by the city, which he sees as a sociological laboratory, observing, "Houston may be the most fascinating and consequential city in America. This is where the American future is going to be worked out."

Klineberg's book, *Prophetic City: Houston on the Cusp of a Changing America*, due out this spring, examines Houston's demographic shifts, its economy increasingly built on technical skills and education, and the new importance of

the city's quality-of-life attributes. He describes *Prophetic City* as "a book about Houston, written by the people of Houston," including not only those in the random samples who participated in the annual surveys but also the additional sixty interviews researchers conducted.

The Kinder Houston Area Survey began as a fifteen-minute telephone interview that has grown to an average length of more than twenty-five minutes. It reaches a scientifically selected, randomly generated, representative sample of one thousand adults in Harris County, with (in different years) additional surveys conducted in Fort Bend and Montgomery counties and oversamples into Houston's Asian communities. Some questions are included every year, others are asked every few years, when a shift in opinion or lack of a shift would be significant to note; and additional questions appear periodically to explore emerging issues. No other city in the United States has been tracked in this way over such a long period of time.

It was my privilege to sit down with Stephen Klineberg – who is just as delightful as the legend you hear on the radio – to discuss some of the historic changes Houston has experienced and how Houstonians are responding to our biggest challenges.

Houston skyline at sunset, July 4, 2018.

Photo by Ramiro Reyna Jr.,
courtesy of Shutterstock.

Launching the Study of a City in Transition.

DH: How did the Houston Area Survey get started?

SK: It fell to my lot back in the spring of 1982 to teach a class in research methods to sociology students, with a focus on survey research. We were planning to interview a random sample of freshmen and seniors at Rice, to explore the similarities and differences in their assessments of the university and in their perspectives on the future. Then a new and more intriguing possibility opened up. In the fall semester of 1981, Dick Jaffe from Chicago's National Opinion Research Center and Rosie Zamora Cope from Houston launched a new professional research firm, called Telesurveys of Texas, and they were looking for additional projects to get better known in the community.

Houston in 1981 was in the midst of a spectacular economic boom, brought about by the tenfold increase in the value of oil. The price of a barrel of Texas crude grew from \$3.20 in 1970 to \$10, \$15, \$20, \$25, \$30, to \$37.50 in 1982. Houston's prime industrial products increased tenfold in value, with no lessening of world

demand. Some one million people moved into Harris County between 1970 and 1982. This booming metropolis was also world-famous for having imposed the least amount of controls on development of any city in the western world: Who cares if it's ugly? So what if it smells? It's the smell of money. Come on down!

With the help of Telesurveys of Texas, we could conduct a study of Houston itself; we could explore the way area residents were balancing the exhilaration of the city's spectacular growth with mounting concerns about traffic, pollution, crime, and other social costs the unfettered growth was generating. Rosie, Dick, and I agreed to work together to offer a class in that spring semester to teach the students how to conduct a systematic survey that would measure the views of area residents.

In May 1982, two months after we completed the survey, the oil boom collapsed. By the end of 1983, more than a hundred thousand jobs were lost in this once-booming city. We thought it might be a good idea to conduct the survey again with a new class the following spring to measure reactions to the sudden turn of events. Then, as the changes accelerated further into the 1980s, we kept offering the course and conducting the survey in all the years after that; year after year, now thirty-nine and counting.

Houston History magazine has helped to clarify for all of us the basic DNA of this city. God surely did not intend a major metropolis to be built on this mosquito-infested, hot, flat, and treeless swampland; yet Houstonians have always risen to the occasion and seized whatever sources of wealth were available at each historical moment. Today we face new challenges and opportunities, and Houston's future is once again in question.

Houston Survey-1982 Page 2.

First of all, a question about life in the Houston area: What would you say is the biggest problem facing Houstonians today? What would PROBE BRIEFLY AND RECORD VERBATIM:

TIME BEGAN: _____ AM _____ PM

How would you rate the following items in terms of living in the Houston area? Would you say that they are excellent, good, fair, poor, or DK?

WHAT ABOUT . . .	EXCELLENT	GOOD	FAIR	POOR	DK	NA	
A. police protection?	1 (2.4%)	2 (34.2%)	3 (66.4%)	4 (20.1%)	5 (2.6%)		10/ (POLICE)
B. public education?	1 (10.4%)	2 (36.7%)	3 (31.8%)	4 (10.9%)	5 (10.2%)		11/ (SCHOOLS)
C. the control of air and water pollution?	1 (2.2%)	2 (26.5%)	3 (40.8%)	4 (26.0%)	5 (4.5%)		12/ (POLLUT)
D. job opportunities?	1 (39.3%)	2 (36.7%)	3 (11.9%)	4 (10.7%)	5 (1.6%)		13/ (JOBSOPPS)
E. the cost of food and other necessities?	1 (3.6%)	2 (32.8%)	3 (41.0%)	4 (21.8%)	5 (0.7%)		14/ (COSTS)
F. your neighborhood as a place to live?	1 (28.6%)	2 (42.5%)	3 (21.4%)	4 (6.8%)	5 (0.7%)		15/ (OWNPLACE)

For each of the following public issues, please tell me whether you are generally for it or against it, okay? What about . . .

THE MOVEMENT FOR . . .	FOR IT	AGAINST IT	DK	NA	
A. the control of handguns?	1 (51.0%)	2 (45.6%)	3 (3.4%)	4 (9.9%)	16/ (NOGUNS)
B. the ratification of the equal rights amendment?	1 (68.4%)	2 (24.9%)	3 (6.8%)	4 (9.9%)	17/ (ERA)
C. The reinstatement of the death penalty?	1 (71.1%)	2 (23.8%)	3 (5.1%)	4 (9.9%)	18/ (DEATH)
D. the reinstatement of the draft?	1 (64.1%)	2 (31.6%)	3 (4.3%)	4 (9.9%)	19/ (DRAFT)

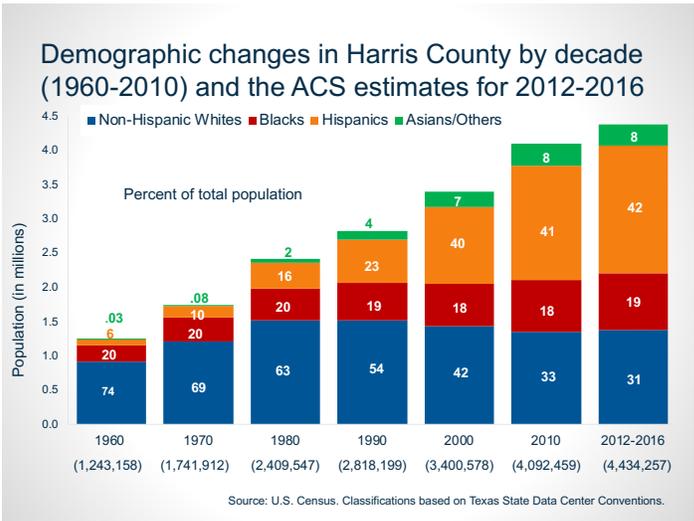
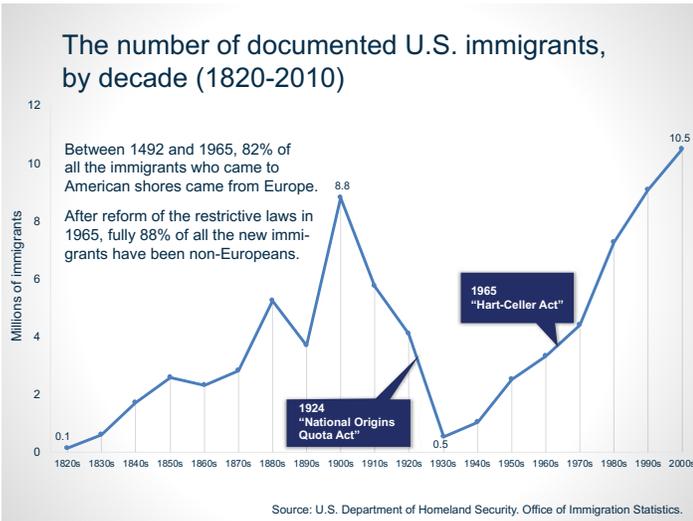
The report on the first Houston Area Survey, conducted in 1982, is protected by a light blue and gray cardboard cover bound by staples. While some of the results were expected, such as the positive ratings of job opportunities and the concerns about pollution, others were surprising, including the strong support for handgun control and for the ratification of the equal rights amendment. These were early signs of how often the views of ordinary citizens are at odds with public policies.

The Demographic Transformation.

DH: What stands out to you personally as a Houston resident witnessing those transitions, and does that coincide with your viewpoint as a researcher?

SK: Personal experience and sociological studies converge in the recognition that America is in the midst of an epic demographic transition, with Houston at the epicenter. Throughout its history, the United States was composed primarily of European nationalities — deliberately so. Between 1924 and 1965, we were operating under one of the most racist and restrictive laws the U.S. Congress has ever passed: the National Origins Quota Act, which sought to allow entry only to the “genetically superior” northern Europeans.

That law could not survive the shifts of consciousness brought about by the civil rights movements in the 1950s and 1960s. When immigration reform was finally enacted in 1965, its purpose was simply to get an embarrassing law off the books. No one thought anything much would change—but everything changed.



Immigrants were suddenly pouring into America once again, and 88 percent were coming from Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Caribbean. The United States is transforming into a microcosm of the world. This is the first “universal nation”—the first nation in the history of the world that can say: We are a free people and we come from everywhere.

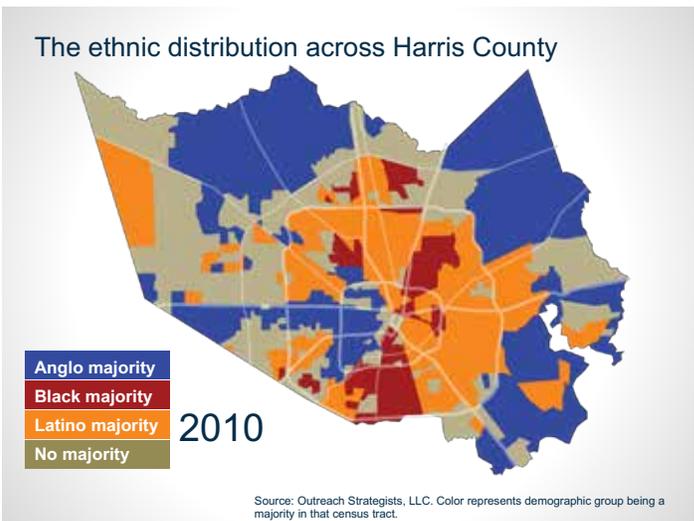
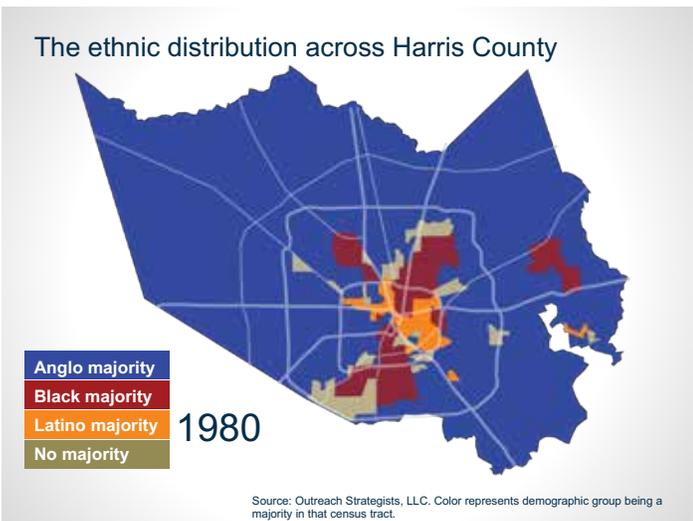
No city in America has experienced the transition as suddenly, as completely, and as irreversibly, as Houston, Texas. Throughout its history, this black/white southern city was dominated and controlled in an automatic, taken-for-granted way by white men. In 1980 there were 2.4 million people living in Harris County; 63 percent were Anglos, 20 percent were African Americans, 16 percent were Hispanics, and 2 percent were Asians. After the oil bust of 1982, the Anglo population of Harris County stabilized and then decreased.

During the past three and a half decades, all the net growth of this, the most rapidly growing city in America, has been due to the influx of Hispanics, Asians, and African Americans. Today, Houston is by some measures the single most ethnically diverse major metropolitan area in the entire country. As of

2016, Harris County, with a population of 4.5 million, was 42 percent Hispanic, 19 percent African American, 8 percent Asian, and 31 percent Anglo. Fort Bend County may be the most ethnically diverse county on the planet: According to the latest census estimates, the county is now 24 percent Hispanic, 21 percent Asian, 20 percent African American, and 34 percent Anglo.

No city has benefited more from immigration. Just imagine how different the story of Houston would have been if it had not become a magnet for the new immigration of the past thirty-five years: Houston would have lost population. It would have had the same fate as other American metros that are losing their status as major cities because for three and a half decades they have stopped growing—cities such as Philadelphia, Baltimore, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, Detroit, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Buffalo. Instead, Houston is one of the most vibrant, rapidly-growing metropolitan areas in America, with a vigorous entrepreneurial economy, fueled primarily by the energy and commitment to hard work of immigrants who have been pouring into this city from Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Caribbean.

The U.S. Census projects the demographic distribution of America as a whole in 2050, as the baby-boom

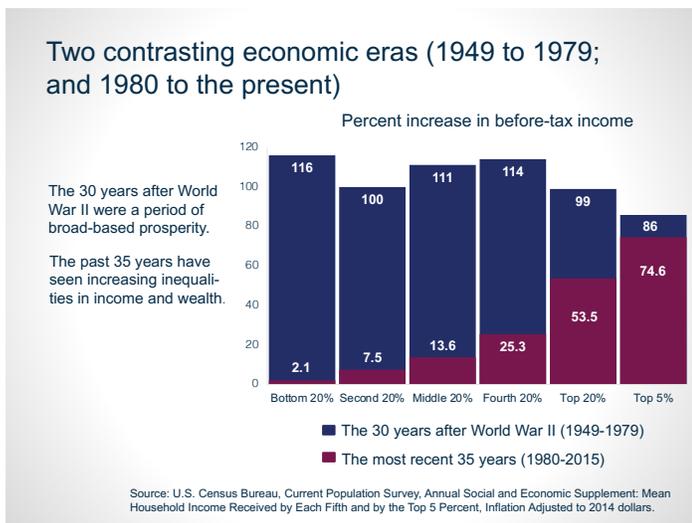


generation—the seventy-six million overwhelmingly Anglo babies born between 1946 and 1964—continues to age, and younger cohorts are disproportionately non-Anglo. By mid-century, all of America will look like the census depiction of Houston today.

Into the Knowledge Economy.

DH: How do you think this idea of diversity meshes with the economic underclass that the survey also indicates is developing here?

SK: These are the two fundamental transformations of our time: Number one, the transition from a bi-racial European-American nation into a multiethnic community made up of virtually all the ethnicities and all the religions of the world. And number two, the fundamental shift in the nature of the American economy itself. In the 1960s and 1970s, among the big employers in Houston were Hughes Tool Company and Cameron Iron Works. You could drop out of school, work in manufacturing or become a roustabout in the oil fields, and expect to make a middle-class wage.

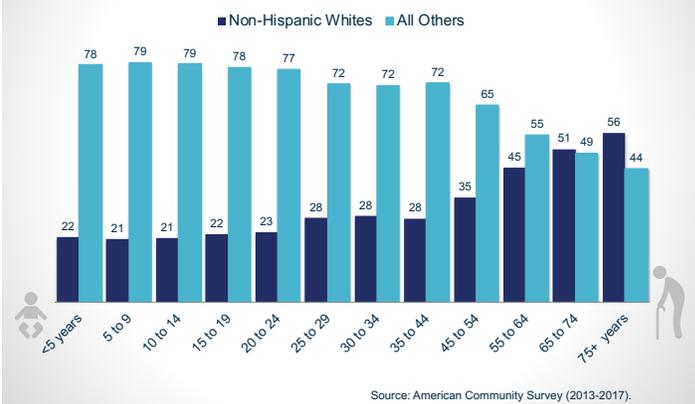


That was the era when a rising tide did indeed lift all boats. The average American man, whatever his education, literally doubled his income in real terms during the post-war quarter century. Those were the years when we celebrated the stay-at-home housewife-mother in suburbia and the average American woman gave birth to 3.6 children. Like a pig being swallowed by a python, the seventy-six million babies born in that extraordinary period after World War II have been moving through the American system. The leading edge of the baby boom generation will turn seventy-four in the year 2020.

The broad-base prosperity had ended by the late 1970s. Since 1980 virtually all the benefits of economic growth have gone to the richest 20 percent of Americans. Sixty percent of American families, in contrast, have found their incomes growing very

slowly, or not at all, during the past forty years, with prosperity predicated now more than ever on access to quality education and the mastery of technical skills. In today's global economy, companies can produce goods anywhere and sell them everywhere: If you are doing a job that I can train a Third World worker to do, and I pay that Third World worker fifteen dollars a day to do the job, I'm not going to pay you fifteen dollars an hour. And if you are doing the kind of work that I can program a computer to do, I will soon be replacing your job with an intelligent machine.

The current population of Harris County by age group and ethnicity (ACS, 2013-2017)



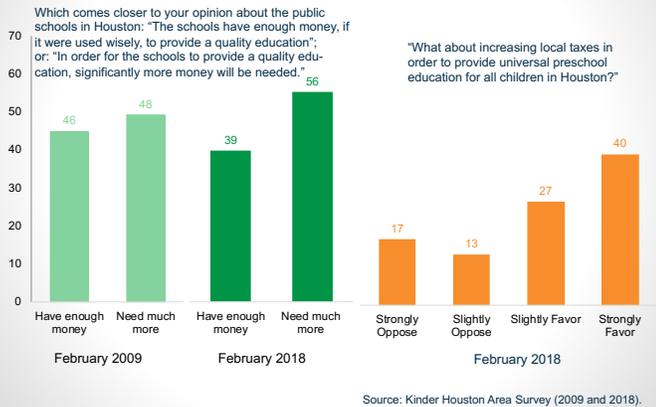
Fully 70 percent of all Harris County residents today who are under the age of twenty are African American and Hispanic—the two groups that are by far the most likely to be living in poverty, and we know what poverty does to your ability to advance in the public-school system. If too many of Houston's African American and Hispanic young people are unprepared to succeed in today's global, knowledge-based economy, it is difficult to envision a prosperous future. Houston's ethnic diversity can be the greatest asset this city could have as it builds the bridges to the global marketplace—or it could end up tearing us apart and becoming a major liability, reducing rather than enhancing the city's competitiveness in the new economy.

The Educational Divides.

DH: What do you see for Houston's prospects if we don't address better educational opportunities, especially for our African American and Latino communities?

SK: If we don't manage to turn the educational trajectories around effectively and soon, it is hard to see how Houston can prosper in the years ahead. During most of Texas history, you didn't need much schooling to succeed. Financial advance was based on exploiting the resources of the land: The big Texas fortunes were made from cotton, timber, cattle, sugar, and oil. The

The support for more public school funding and for universal preschool education (2018)



source of wealth in the twenty-first century will have less to do with natural resources and more to do with human resources, with knowledge and skills. The future of Houston and Texas will now depend more than ever before on making sustained and effective investments in public education—from birth to college, from cradle to career.

Area residents are increasingly aware of the need for more investments in education. When asked in 2018 if significantly more money is needed to provide a quality education or whether the schools have enough money, if it were used wisely, a clear majority (by 56 to 39 percent) said that more money will be needed. In 2009, the survey participants were evenly divided (at 48 and 46 percent). When the question was first asked in 1995, only 38 percent thought more money was needed for the public schools.

In the 2018 survey, we also asked the respondents if they were in favor or opposed to increasing local taxes in order to provide universal preschool education for every child in Houston. "Increasing local taxes"—when you start a question with those words, you expect firm opposition. To our surprise, a whopping 67 percent called for more taxes for pre-K education, with 40 percent strongly in favor, and only 30 percent slightly or strongly opposed.

One of the moments of truth in American education is third-grade reading: If you're not reading at the third-grade level in third grade, you are four times more likely to drop out of high school. The most powerful predictor of whether you can read at a third-grade level is: Did you start kindergarten ready to learn to read? Rich kids generally enter kindergarten one and a half to two years ahead of poor kids. That gap didn't matter so much when there were plenty of low-skilled, well-paid, blue-collar jobs. Today, the educational inequalities matter enormously, and the public is increasingly aware of the need to address those new realities.

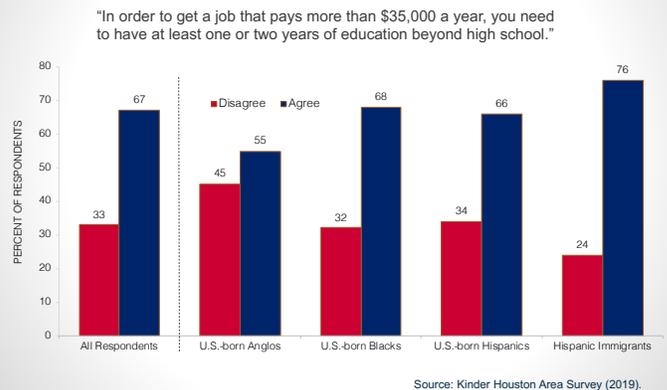
The Impact of Concentrated Poverty.

DH: What did you see when you focused on the demographics in relationship to attitudes about the importance of education beyond high school?

SK: In the 2018 survey, we 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." A clear majority of the survey respondents, by 67 to 33 percent, agreed.

I fight a losing battle with many of the wealthy and powerful in Houston who say: If only blacks and Hispanics valued education and understood its importance the way Anglos and Asians do, everyone would get the education they need. But when we break down the answers to that question by ethnicity, we find that it is Anglos—with 45 percent disagreeing with that statement and just 55 percent agreeing—who are the most likely to believe that there are plenty of jobs in Houston for anybody willing to work hard, and having a post-secondary education is not that important. It is African Americans (at 32 to 68 percent), and U.S.-born Hispanics (34 to 66 percent), and especially Hispanic immigrants (24 to 76 percent) who are the most likely to agree that you need to have one or two years of education beyond high school if you hope to get a decent job in today's economy.

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

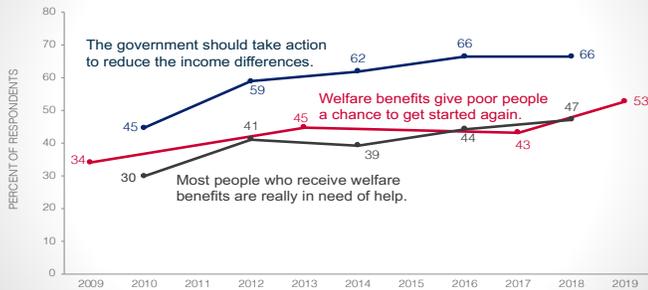


If blacks and Hispanics are not getting the education they need to succeed, it is demonstrably not because they and their parents do not value that education or recognize its importance. It is because these minority communities are far more likely than Anglos and Asians to be living in areas of concentrated poverty, attending underfunded inner-city schools, and facing all the additional out-of-classroom barriers that poverty imposes on a young person's ability to succeed in the public school system—the decaying neighborhoods, the constant threat of hunger and homelessness,

the unmet medical and dental needs, the continuing disruptions as impoverished families keep moving in search of more affordable places to live.

A City Reinventing Itself.

Support for government programs to reduce the inequalities in American society (2009-2019)



Source: Kinder Houston Area Survey (2009-2019).

DH: One result that surprised me had to do with support for government programs to narrow the gaps in economic wellbeing. The numbers who agreed that government should take action to reduce the income differences between rich and poor in America grew from 45 to 66 percent over the past decade.

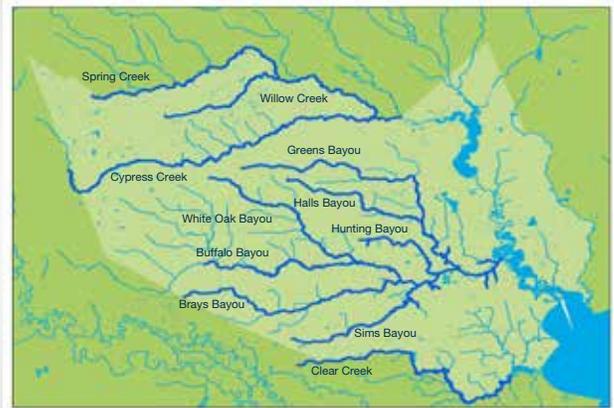
SK: That's right. You've touched on another of the central themes coming out of the surveys. Area residents over the past several years have been calling in growing numbers for efforts to reduce the economic inequalities, and they are more prepared to acknowledge that people today are often poor through no fault of their own. We've been asking over the years, for example, whether most of those receiving welfare payments are taking advantage of the system or are really in need of help. The percent saying welfare recipients really need the help they receive grew from 30 percent in 2010 to 47 percent in 2018.

More generally, Houstonians are clearly in the process of rethinking some of their basic assumptions. The survey respondents are much more inclined than in earlier years to support government initiatives and collective solutions. Houston-area residents, who once believed in building a city almost exclusively on the basis of short-term private-sector developer decisions, are increasingly recognizing the need for initiatives not only to reduce the growing inequalities and to advance education across the board, but also to make major improvements in Houston's quality-of-life attributes, partly in order to attract the talent that will grow the local economy in the years ahead.

One of the transformative events in Houston's history occurred on November 6, 2012, when the city's voters overwhelmingly approved a bond referendum proposed by the Houston Parks Board that would

provide one hundred million dollars in public money, to be matched by \$130 million in private donations, to transform three thousand acres along Houston's bayous into more miles of linear parks than can be found in any other city in America. The Bayou Greenways 2020 Initiative is in the process of building 150 miles of hike and bike trails along the city's nine major bayous, creating additional green space and recreational venues in almost every neighborhood. When the project is completed, 60 percent of all city residents will live within a mile and a half of a bayou trail, and Houston will be one of the greenest cities in America. A project of this sort, raising major public funds in order to beautify the city's communal spaces, would never have been seriously proposed in the Houston of fifteen or twenty years ago.

The major bayous of Harris County



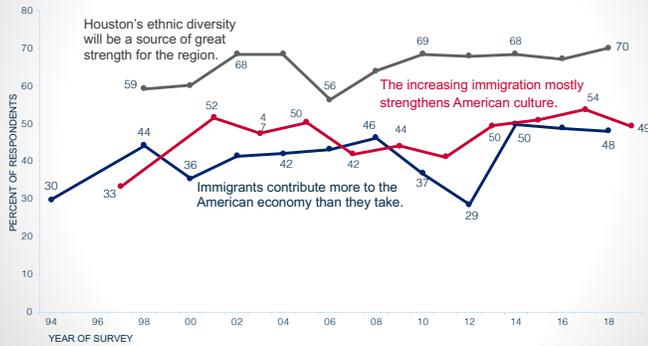
Change across the Generations.

DH: The support for investing in greenspace is encouraging.

SK: The surveys offer another promising sign in underlining the importance of age in shaping the attitudes and beliefs of area residents. We have asked a variety of questions measuring respondents' comfort with Houston's burgeoning diversity (e.g., "Will the increasing ethnic diversity in Houston eventually become a source of great strength for the city, or a growing problem?"); and their support for immigration (e.g., "Do immigrants generally contribute more to the American economy than they take, or do they take more than they contribute?").

Over the years, the Anglo respondents have been expressing increasingly positive views about the new immigrants, and the most powerful predictor of their attitudes is not gender or levels of education; it's their year of birth. Just 50 percent, for example, of the Anglo respondents who were born in the 1960s thought the U.S. should admit more or the same number of legal immigrants in the next ten years compared to the last

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



Source: Kinder Houston Area Survey (1994-2019).

ten years; this was the case for 57 percent of those born in the 1970s, and for 70 percent of the Anglos born in the 1980s.

Younger Houstonians are taking for granted and even celebrating what older area residents are still struggling to accept. Here's another indication of the ongoing change: Anglos were asked if they had ever been in a romantic relationship with someone who was not Anglo; 58 and 61 percent of the respondents who were under the age of 40 said, "Yes." The numbers dropped to 42 percent among Anglos in their 50s, to 29 percent for those in their 60s, and to just 18 percent of the respondents aged 70 and older.

The earlier generations grew up in the America of the 1960s and 1970s; that was a different world from the 1990s and 2000s, when today's younger cohorts were coming of age. There's a basic law of human nature that says in essence, "What I am familiar with feels right and natural; what I'm unfamiliar with feels unnatural and somehow not quite right." The growing comfort with diversity among U.S.-born Anglos is a reflection in large part of the processes of cohort succession in a time of significant change, as each generation, having grown up in a distinct era, is

Interethnic romantic relationships by age among Anglos (2007, 2011, 2014, 2016, 2018 combined)

"Have you ever been in a romantic relationship with someone who was not Anglo?"
(Percent saying, "Yes, I have".)



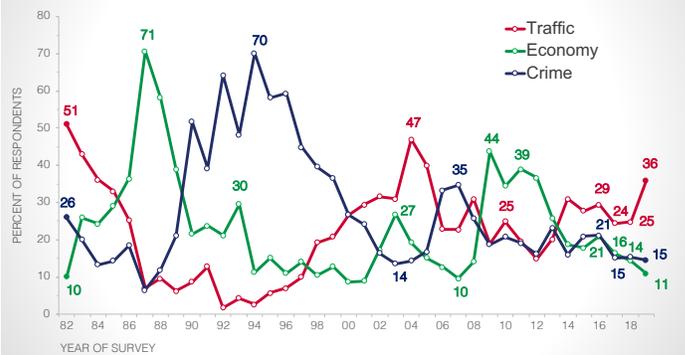
Source: Kinder Houston Area Survey (2007-2018).

bringing different experiences and expectations into the public arena.

Meanwhile, the growth in the numbers of Asians and Hispanics in America today is no longer due primarily to the arrival of new immigrants. It is the result instead of the coming of age of the U.S.-born children of the immigrants who came here twenty-five or thirty years ago. That new reality has inevitably diminished the earlier anxieties: Will the new immigrants ever learn English? Will they ever come out of their co-ethnic enclaves? Will they ever become truly American? Those fears have faded in this new world of thriving interethnic friendships and mounting rates of intermarriage. The real challenge facing Houston and America today is not so much an ethnic divide, important as that is; it is increasingly a class divide: There are deepening inequalities in access to opportunity in all communities.

A 50-50 Preference for Walkable Urbanism.

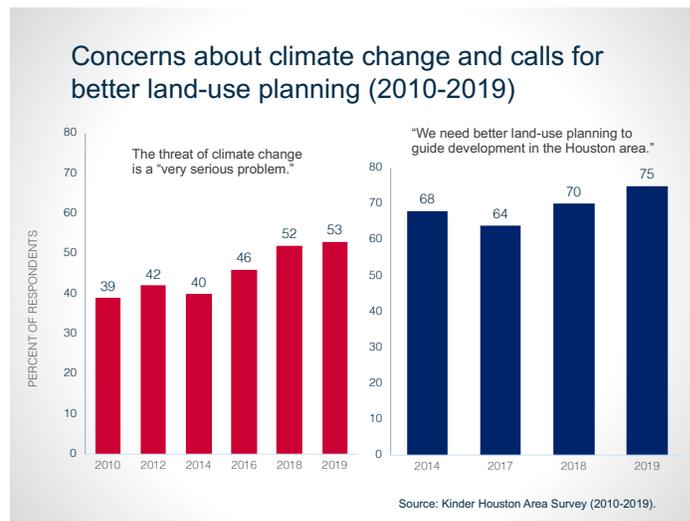
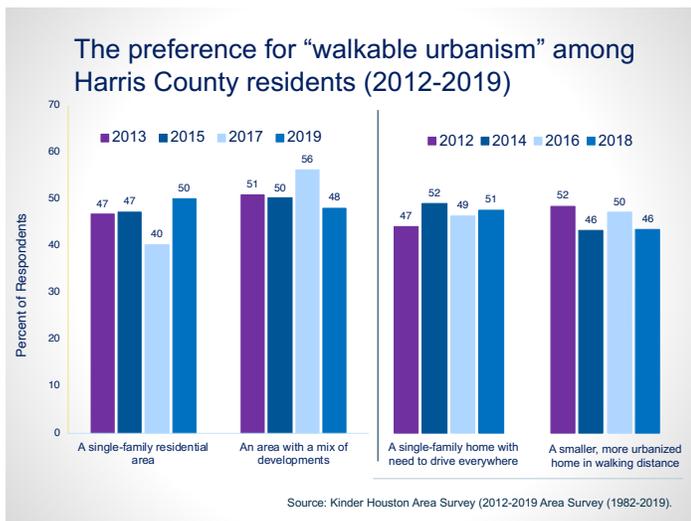
"What would you say is the biggest problem facing people in the Houston area today?" (1982-2019)



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

- DH:** Every year you ask about "the biggest problem facing people in the Houston area today."
- SK:** Right. The first question in each year's survey asks the respondents to name what they consider to be the biggest problem in Houston. In 1987, at the depths of the oil-boom collapse, 71 percent cited the economic crisis (poverty, unemployment, homelessness). In the mid-1990s, crime was the great preoccupation, mentioned spontaneously by 70 percent of area residents in 1995 during the crack-cocaine epidemic. In the more recent surveys, as economic concerns have lessened and crime has receded, traffic congestion has become the dominant preoccupation.

The growing traffic woes may also help to explain area residents' somewhat surprising preferences for how they would actually like to live in this sprawling, automobile-dependent metropolitan region. By 50 and 48 percent, the respondents in 2019 were evenly divided in their preference for living in a single-family residential area, or in an area with a mix of developments,



including homes, shops, and restaurants. In 2018, 51 percent said they preferred a single-family home with a big yard, “where you would need to drive almost everywhere you want to go”; but 46 percent would opt instead for a smaller home, in a more urbanized area, within walking distance of shops and workplaces.

The 50-50 preference reflects not only concerns about traffic congestion and long commutes, but also the changing 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 U.S. households (according to the 1970 census) had children living at home. In 2010 that was true for less than a third, and by 2020 the census projects that only about one-fourth of American households will have children at home; another one-fourth will consist of persons living alone; and the fastest growing segment of the overall population today consists of men and women over the age of eighty.

Families with three or more children are being replaced by empty nesters wanting shorter commutes, by young creatives postponing marriage and having fewer children, and by increasing numbers of single-person and elderly households. No wonder residents across the Houston region are calling for more walkable alternatives and for “complete streets,” reconfigured to accommodate not only motorized vehicles, but also bikers and pedestrians. Real-estate developers are slowly responding to the new demands by building more transit-oriented communities, not only in Houston’s downtown areas, but also in the urbanizing “town centers” throughout this far-flung multi-centered metropolitan region.

naming flooding as the biggest problem: It went from just 1 percent in early 2017 to 15 percent in 2018 (six months after Harvey), and then in 2019 it dropped back down to 7 percent.

SK: It’s not so surprising that the top-of-the-mind preoccupation with floods and storms was more apparent six months after Harvey than it was a year and a half later, but the continuing concerns about flooding and resilience are clearly evident when people are queried directly about these issues. When asked, for example, about the statement: “It is almost certain that the Houston region will experience more severe storms during the next ten years compared to the past ten years,” 76 percent in 2018 agreed with that assertion; 75 percent agreed in 2019.

Back in 2010, only 39 percent thought that climate change was a very serious problem. That level of concern was expressed by 46 percent in 2016, 52 percent in 2018, and 53 percent in 2019. The respondents 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 to 75 percent in 2019. Area residents have recognized the region’s deepening vulnerability to severe storms, and they increasingly acknowledge the need for new forms of public intervention, not only to improve the region’s resiliency, but also to address the many other challenges facing this city in the years ahead.

Addressing the New Realities.

DH: So, is that basically how you would sum up the next thirty-eight years looking forward to future surveys?

SK: I think it’s clear that Houston is changing in fundamental ways and facing major issues in its efforts to succeed in the twenty-first century.

After Harvey.

DH: I drive in traffic every day; nevertheless, I was surprised that after the floods in 2015 and 2016 and Harvey in 2017—I was still surprised at the percentage

The Kinder Houston Area Survey (1982-Present)

Thirty-eight years of systematic interviews with successive representative samples of Harris County residents have explored the way the general public is responding to three fundamental new realities:

 The Epic Demographic Transition

 The Rise of the Knowledge Economy

 The New Salience of Quality of Place

It will be interesting and important to be able to keep measuring, through quantitative survey research, the way the region and the views of its residents continue to evolve in the years ahead. The past thirty-eight years of systematic interviews with successive representative samples of Harris County residents have clarified the way the general public is responding to today's major urban challenges. To wit:

- ***The epic demographic transition.*** If this region is to flourish in the years ahead, it will need to evolve into a much more unified, equitable, and inclusive multiethnic society, one with real equality of opportunity for all area residents in all communities, and positioned to capitalize fully on its remarkable ethnic and cultural diversity.
- ***The rise of the knowledge economy.*** To prosper in the high-tech, global economy, Houston will need to make significant investments in new centers of industry and innovation; it will need to drastically improve its public schools and nurture a far more educated workforce; and it will need to find effective ways to reduce the inequalities that have resulted from the combined effects of world-wide competition, declining unionization, advances in computers and robotics, and concentrated political power.
- ***The new salience of quality of place.*** To attract the talent that will grow its economy, the city will need to develop into a more aesthetically and environmentally appealing urban destination, and continue making major improvements in its parks and bayous, its mobility and transit systems, its air and water quality, its venues for sports and the arts, and its resilience in the face of increasingly severe storms and rising sea-levels.

The surveys have documented significant change over the years in the attitudes and beliefs of the general public. Houston area residents are expressing much more support today than in earlier years for policies that can reduce the inequalities and address the needs of families living in poverty. They are calling for more

spending on public education and for more stringent controls on development to enhance the region's quality of life and reduce its vulnerability to flooding. They are embracing Houston's diversity and feeling more comfortable in a world of thriving friendships across ethnic communities, religious beliefs, and sexual orientations. It remains to be seen whether the business and civic leaders of Houston can build on these attitude changes and make the sustained investments that will be needed to position the region for prosperity in this new era of economic, demographic, and technological transformation.

What happens in Houston will matter tremendously in the years ahead. This is where you can see the American future emerging. This is Houston's destiny, whether we would have chosen it or not, to be a "prophetic city," to be today where all the rest of the nation will be in the next twenty-five to thirty years. How Houston's residents and leaders address the critical issues and navigate the transitions will be of transcendent importance, not just for Houston's future, but for the American future as well.

Stephen L. Klineberg, Ph.D., is Professor Emeritus of Sociology at Rice University, director of the annual Kinder Houston Area Survey (1982-2020), and author of *Prophetic City: Houston on the Cusp of a Changing America* (Simon & Schuster, June 2020).

Debbie Z. Harwell, Ph.D., is the editor of *Houston History* and instructional assistant professor of history at the University of Houston.



Debbie Harwell and Stephen Klineberg at the Kinder Institute for Urban Research at Rice University.