

Houstonians more positive about city despite economic woes, annual survey finds

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In spite of a dramatic rise in concerns about the local economy, Houstonians are more positive about living in the region, according to the latest annual Houston Area Survey results from Rice University.

The number of respondents who named the economy as "the biggest problem facing people in the [Houston](#) area today" shot up to 44 percent this year from 15 percent in 2008, as the official unemployment rate in Harris County grew from 4.1 to 6.3 percent. Nevertheless, when asked to compare Houston with other metropolitan areas, 44 percent said it was a "much better" place to live -- up from 25 percent in 2005 and 31 percent in 2007. Another 41 percent said the Houston area was "slightly better."

The results demonstrate "a typically Houston combination of concern and optimism," said Rice University sociology Professor Stephen Klineberg, who has overseen the survey since its inception 28 years ago. The 2009 survey was conducted between Feb. 3 and Feb. 25 and reached a scientifically representative sample of 706 Harris County residents.

Houstonians' attention to the economy has pushed aside -- or at least diminished -- other concerns, like crime and traffic. Only 22 percent said they were "very worried" about being the victim of a crime, down from 31 percent last year; 60 percent said traffic was getting worse, compared to 66 percent in 2007.

Concerns about the economy are also generating support for government initiatives. With 67 percent of respondents describing the growth of the

rich-poor gap as a "very serious problem" for the country, the number who say the government "should do more to solve our country's problems" has grown from 36 percent in 1996 to 47 percent today. "You can only justify less government involvement in the economy when you think the economic outcomes are fundamentally fair," Klineberg explained.

Houstonians' views on immigration have also been affected by the economic anxieties, sometimes in curious ways, Klineberg said. The number of area residents who believe that the new immigration "mostly strengthens (rather than 'threatens') American culture" increased to 49 percent this year from 44 percent in 2007. The new number is still lower than the 57 percent in 2005, but higher than the 39 percent in 1997. The percentage of area residents who favor "granting illegal immigrants a path to legal citizenship if they speak English and have no criminal record" rose from 56 percent in 2008 to 61 percent this year, but it too is lower than the 68 percent in 2007.

Klineberg characterized the attitudes toward immigration as complex and volatile, but said he has detected among respondents "less of a sense today than in recent years that we are being overwhelmed by immigrants coming here and threatening our culture." Still, only 64 percent in the 2009 survey agreed that "the children of illegal immigrants should have the right to attend the public schools," down from 71 percent in 2007.

The findings on important social issues reveal two quite different trends. Attitudes toward abortion rights have been virtually unchanged for all of the last two decades in Houston, but views on homosexuality have shifted. On virtually every relevant question, support for gay rights has grown, in what Klineberg described as an "unmistakable, consistent increase over time."

The belief that homosexuality is "morally wrong," for example, dropped

steadily from 59 percent in 1997 to 46 percent in 2009. The number who said they had a "close personal friend who is gay or lesbian" grew from 44 percent in 2004 to 56 percent today. Support for gay marriage rose to 43 percent in 2009 from 32 percent two years ago. Tolerant attitudes toward homosexuality closely follow age, Klineberg noted, with younger Houstonians more accepting of gays and lesbians. On the other hand, age is not a good predictor of opinions about abortion, he added, suggesting that this may help to explain their different trajectories over the years.

Finally, Klineberg pointed to a "paradigm shift" on attitudes toward mass transit. The percentage of area residents who chose "improvements in public transportation" as the best solution to the region's traffic problems rose to 50 percent from 40 percent during the last four years. Support for including a rail component in mass transit increased steadily from 32 percent in 1993 to 45 percent in 2003, and to 58 percent in 2008. These findings represent an important change from a population that was deeply skeptical of mass transit to one that is now approaching a consensus on its importance, Klineberg said.

The ability to track attitudes on a variety of subjects over time is what makes the Houston Area Survey so valuable, he said. The survey each year is designed and directed by Klineberg and his undergraduate sociology class at Rice University. The telephone interviews are conducted by the Center for Public Policy at the University of Houston.

More information: To see a compilation of the central findings from this year's survey, go to media.rice.edu/images/media/News/HAS09_report.doc .

Source: Rice University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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