

Attitudes on the economy, immigration and illegal drugs are highlighted in Houston Area Survey

April 22 2010

Concerns about the economy are changing Houstonians' attitudes toward jobs, immigration and the role of government, according to the 2010 Houston Area Survey, conducted by the Institute for Urban Research at Rice University.

As the official [unemployment rate](#) in Harris County hit 8.5 percent in March, the number of respondents who said their personal situations were getting worse in the past few years grew from 27 percent in 2009 to 32 percent in 2010.

"When asked how things were going for them, only 20 percent in this year's survey said their financial situation was getting better," said Rice University sociology Professor Stephen Klineberg, who has overseen the survey since its inception. "That is the lowest number ever recorded on this question in all 29 years of Houston surveys."

In spite of these financial concerns, there has been no decline among area residents in "their enthusiasm for Houston as a place to live nor for its efforts to provide more urban lifestyles," Klineberg said.

The 2010 survey was conducted between Feb. 3 and March 17 and reached a scientifically representative sample of 750 Harris County residents.

Houstonians are worried about jobs, the survey showed. The proportion of respondents giving positive evaluations to job opportunities in the Houston area (ratings of "excellent" or "good") declined from 49 percent in 2009 to 38 percent in 2010.

Regarding outlooks on their personal futures, the proportion of Houstonians who thought they would be better off three or four years down the road dropped from 52 percent in 2009 to 48 percent in 2010. And the number who believed their own standard of living would eventually be higher than that of their parents declined from 72 percent in 2008 to 57 percent this year.

Economic anxieties may also be influencing Houstonians' support for government initiatives. Fewer respondents (54 percent) thought it would be a "very serious problem" for the country "if the gap between rich and poor gets significantly bigger than it is today." That view was expressed by 67 percent of the survey participants in 2008. Agreement that "the government should take action to reduce income differences between rich and poor in America" declined from 44 percent in 1999 to 39 percent today.

The decreasing support for government action extended to health reform. The proportion of Houstonians who were in favor of "federal health insurance to cover the medical costs of all Americans" declined from 67 percent in 2008 to 52 percent in 2010. Respondents to this year's survey gave this answer several weeks before the health reform bill was actually passed.

The economic picture is not wholly bleak. Fully 38 percent said they thought that living conditions in the Houston area during the next three to four years will be better than they are today; just 16 percent thought conditions will get worse. The proportion of area residents who spontaneously mentioned the local economy (unemployment, poverty or

the cost of living) when asked to name "the biggest problem facing people in the Houston area today" declined to 38 percent in this year's survey -- after rising from 15 percent in the 2008 survey to 44 percent in 2009.

More broadly, respondents have been asked periodically how they would rate "the Houston area in general as a place to live." The percent that said "excellent" or "good" has grown consistently over the years, from 75 percent in 2008 to 82 percent in 2010.

Support for more urban lifestyles is reflected in the 41 percent of area residents who indicated that they would prefer to live in "a smaller home, in a more urbanized area, within walking distance of shops and workplaces" rather than in "a single-family home with a big yard, where you would need to drive almost everywhere you want to go." The percent of respondents in the suburbs who said they would someday like to move to the city is now equal to the numbers in the city who said they would someday like to live in the suburbs.

Attitudes toward immigration and ethnic diversity were mixed in this year's survey. Just slightly more people (47 percent) believe that immigrants to the U.S. generally take more from the American economy than they contribute; 44 percent think they contribute more than they take. A growing number (62 percent in 2010) support "building a 2,000-mile security fence along the U.S.-Mexico border to stop all undocumented immigration," up from 55 percent in 2008.

On the other hand, the proportion of area residents who believed that the influx of undocumented immigrants constitutes a "very serious" problem for Houston grew from 43 percent in 2006 to 61 percent in 2008 and declined to 52 percent in this year's survey. Similarly, the percent of survey respondents who support "granting illegal immigrants a path to legal citizenship if they speak English and have no criminal record"

decreased from 68 percent in 2007 to 56 percent in 2008 and then increased slightly -- to 59 percent -- in 2010.

According to the U.S. census, the population of Harris County in 1980 was 63 percent Anglo. Today non-Hispanic whites make up less than 35 percent of the county's population. Area residents appear to be increasingly comfortable with what Klineberg called "this remarkable transformation." The proportion of survey participants who thought Houston's increasing ethnic diversity will eventually become "a source of great strength for the city," rather than "a growing problem," increased from 65 percent in 2008 to 69 percent in this year's survey.

At the same time, Houstonians are becoming more lenient toward drug use and more tolerant of homosexuality.

Fully 69 percent agreed with the statement that "individuals in possession of small amounts of illegal drugs should be fined rather than sent to jail." Just 26 percent disagreed with this suggestion.

The numbers in favor of "homosexuals being legally permitted to adopt children" increased from 43 percent in 2008 to 52 percent in the 2010 survey. Support for "allowing gays and lesbians to serve openly in the military" grew from 64 percent in 2008 to 73 percent in 2010.

Significantly, during these same years there has been no change, and if anything a slight decrease, in support for abortion rights. The proportion of respondents who agreed "it should be legal for a woman to obtain an abortion if she wants to have one for any reason" declined from 54 percent in 2008 to 50 percent today.

More information: The full report will be released today at a luncheon sponsored by the Greater Houston Partnership and available online at [has.rice.edu/default.aspx?id=3 ... ntifier=id&itemid=30](http://has.rice.edu/default.aspx?id=3...ntifier=id&itemid=30)

Provided by Rice University

Citation: Attitudes on the economy, immigration and illegal drugs are highlighted in Houston Area Survey (2010, April 22) retrieved 23 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2010-04-attitudes-economy-immigration-illegal-drugs.html>

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