

Kinder Houston Area Survey reveals more Houstonians support mass transit

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One of America's most automobile-dependent large cities may be heading into a new era, according to the 31st annual Kinder Houston Area Survey conducted by Rice University. Among the findings in this year's survey: Houstonians support mass transit, feel better about the economy and say relations between ethnic groups are better than ever.

The survey results were released today at a luncheon hosted by the Greater Houston Partnership and Rice's Kinder Institute for Urban Research.

Mass transit and a preference for urban living

A large and growing proportion of Harris County residents emphatically support improvements in [mass transit](#), and majorities are now calling for more opportunities to live within walking distance of shops and workplaces. Fifty-six percent of the respondents in Harris County and 61 percent in surrounding counties said that the development of a much-improved mass transit system is "very important" for the future success of the Houston area. A majority (51 percent) of Harris County residents want more [taxpayer money](#) to be spent on improving rail and buses rather than on expanding existing highways.

"The romance with the automobile, which has been the essence of Houston for most of its modern history, is clearly fading," Klineberg said. "The suburbs are more crowded, gas prices and [traffic congestion](#)

are soaring, fewer households have children at home, and the lure of urban amenities, both in downtown Houston and in suburban 'town centers,' is generating a sea-change in area residents' living preferences."

In 1999, 52 percent of Anglos living in the city of Houston said they would someday like to move to suburbs, compared with 26 percent of those in the suburbs who were interested in moving to the city. This year, the figures are reversed: Just 28 percent of city residents said they want to live in the suburbs, but 33 percent of suburbanites are now interested in someday moving to the city.

The economy

Perspectives on the local economy have improved somewhat over the past year: As the official unemployment rates for Harris County fell from 8.4 percent in February 2011 to 7.3 percent in 2012, the proportion of Harris County residents giving positive ratings ("excellent" or "good") to job opportunities in the Houston area jumped from 35 percent in 2011 to 48 percent this year. At the same time, however, the respondents feel no better about their personal financial situations. The proportion who said their economic circumstances have been getting better dropped from 42 percent in 2008 to 29 percent in 2011; it was unchanged in this year's survey (27 percent). Moreover, 32 percent of the respondents with children at home said they had difficulty buying groceries to feed their families during the past year, an all-time high.

"This is a powerful indication of how uneven the economic tides have become, even as the overall economy recovers," Klineberg said. "The most important political issue of our time will have to do with how to restore the public and private institutions that used to ensure that most Americans could share in the prosperity of the country."

Area residents are more concerned about the growing inequalities, and

they increasingly support government programs to restore a more broad-based prosperity. Fifty-nine percent in this year's survey agreed that "the government should take action to reduce income differences between rich and poor in America," up from 45 percent who felt that way in 2010.

Ethnic relations and immigration

More than ever, Houstonians are optimistic about the region's burgeoning diversity, and they are less antagonistic in their attitudes toward [undocumented immigrants](#). "Houston is now the most ethnically and culturally diverse metropolitan area in the nation," Klineberg said. "The surveys indicate a growing acceptance of this remarkable new reality. Moreover, the animosity toward undocumented immigrants seems to be fading, and the achievement of comprehensive immigration reform may be more politically feasible today than it has been in many years."

In every survey since 1992, area residents have been asked to evaluate the relations among ethnic groups in the Houston area. The proportion saying "excellent" or "good" increased from 21 and 23 percent in the early 1990s to 40 percent in 2000 and 2001 and 42 percent in 2010 and 2011. This year, respondents who gave positive evaluations grew to 49 percent, the highest level ever recorded in the surveys.

Attitudes toward undocumented immigrants have improved significantly. Just 36 percent thought that the influx of undocumented immigrants is a "very serious" problem for the [Houston area](#), down from 47 percent in 2010 and 56 percent in 2008. In addition, 74 percent of Harris County residents, more than ever before in the surveys, now support "granting illegal immigrants a path to legal citizenship if they speak English and have no criminal record." Fully 82 percent are in favor of "allowing the children of undocumented immigrants to become U.S. citizens, if they

have graduated from college or served in the military."

The Kinder Houston Area Survey

For the first time in its 31-year history, the 2012 survey included representative samples of adults from the entire 10-county Greater Houston metropolitan area, and that expansion will continue in future years as a reflection of the importance of measuring the full range and distribution of regional attitudes. The interviews were conducted by phone between Feb. 16 and March 27 and reached a scientifically representative sample of 1,610 area residents, including 344 (21 percent) from outside Harris County. Thirty-one percent of all respondents were contacted by cellphone. The Philadelphia-based firm Social Science Research Solutions administered the survey.

Through more than three decades of systematic surveys, this research program has measured the Houston region's economic and demographic transformations and recorded the way area residents respond to them. No other metropolitan region in the country has been the focus of a research program of this scope. None more clearly exemplifies the trends that are rapidly refashioning the social and political landscape of urban America, Klineberg said.

Provided by Rice University

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