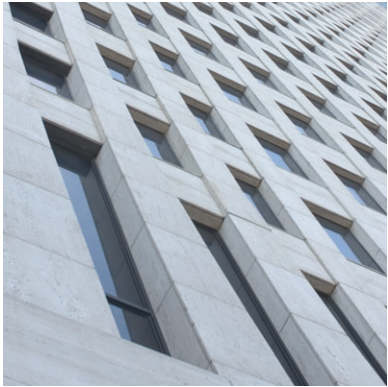


## The Houston Area Survey 1982 – 2005



# PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS IN REMARKABLE TIMES

Tracking Change Through 24 Years of Houston Surveys

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# Introduction

## Historical Overview

The first Houston Area Survey was conducted during the spring semester of 1982. It was developed in collaboration with Telesurveys Research Associates, then a new Houston research firm, as a one-time class project in research methods for sociology majors at Rice University. Its purpose was to engage undergraduate students in developing and analyzing a professional poll to measure public attitudes and perceptions in a city that was in the midst of a remarkable period of economic boom.

Ever since the Spindletop gusher blew in January 1901, Houston had been riding its location near the East Texas oil fields to continual prosperity. This became essentially a “one-horse” industrial city, focused on refining hydrocarbons into gasoline and petrochemicals and servicing the world’s oil and gas industries (Thomas and Murray 1991). In 1980, 82 percent of all the area’s primary-sector jobs were tied into the business of oil. The price of a barrel of Texas crude rose from \$3.39 in 1971 to \$12.64 in 1979 to \$31.77 in 1981 (Feagin 1988). The metro area’s population grew by almost a million people during the twelve years between 1970 and 1982. Houston was the undisputed resource and energy capital of the world, the “Golden Buckle of the Sun Belt,” the bastion of classical laissez-faire capitalism, the epitome of “free enterprise” America.

Proud of having the nation’s “best business climate,” Houstonians proclaimed themselves to be the triumphant realization of what Americans can achieve when left unfettered by zoning, excessive taxation, and government regulations (Kaplan 1983). The city was world-famous for having imposed the fewest restrictions on development of any urban area in the Western world (Louv 1983). This was a metropolis to be built almost entirely by developers’ decisions (Thomas and Murray 1991). As Robert Fisher (1990) observed, “the ideological thrust in Houston in the twentieth century has been anti-government, anti-regulation, anti-planning, anti-taxes, anti anything that seemed to represent, in fact or fantasy, an expansion of the public sector or a limitation on the economic prerogatives and activities of the city’s business community.”

In May 1982, just two months after the first Houston Area Survey was completed, the oil boom suddenly collapsed. A growing global recession had suppressed demand just as new supplies were coming onto world markets, and the Houston economy went into a tailspin. It was obvious that important changes were under way and that it would be valuable to conduct the survey again the following year, then again, and then in all the years after that.

Houston recovered from the 1980s recession to find itself in the midst of a fully restructured economy and an accelerating demographic revolution. By the 1990s, new economic, educational, and environmental challenges were redefining the “pro-growth” strategies required for urban prosperity. At the same time, major immigration streams were transforming this Anglo-dominated biracial city into one of the country’s most ethnically and culturally diverse metropolitan areas. Houston was at the center of the sweeping changes that have redefined the nature of American society itself in the twenty-first century.

### *The Houston Area Survey, 1982–2005*

Using identical questions across the years, with new items added periodically, this annual series of countywide, random-digit-dialed, computer-assisted surveys has tracked America’s fourth largest city in the midst of fundamental transformation. No other metropolitan area in the nation has been the focus of a long-term study of this scope. None more clearly exemplifies the remarkable trends that are radically reconstructing the social and political landscape of urban America.

Originally underwritten by the *Houston Post* and, after that paper’s demise, by the *Houston Chronicle*, the surveys are now made possible by a consortium of generous foundations, corporations, and individuals whose names are listed, with deep appreciation, at the end of this report. Thanks to their generosity, for almost a quarter-century the Houston Area Survey has been able to provide continually updated and reliable information on the changing demographic patterns, life experiences, attitudes, and beliefs of Harris County residents. In recent years, the surveys have been expanded to reach large representative samples from all four of Houston’s major ethnic communities. The overall purpose of this research is to measure systematically the way area residents are responding to the ongoing

societal transformations, and to make the survey findings readily available to Houston’s business and civic leaders, to the general public, and to scholars across the country.

## Conducting the Surveys

To ensure each year that every Harris County adult living in a household with a telephone will have an equal probability of being interviewed, the survey respondents are selected through a two-stage random-digit-dialing procedure. In each household reached by computer-generated telephone numbers, the designated respondent is selected randomly from all household members aged 18 or older. Using “back translation” and the reconciliation of discrepancies, the questionnaires are translated into Spanish, and bilingual supervisors and interviewers are assigned to the project at all times. For the first 22 years of this research program, Telesurveys Research Associates conducted the interviews and oversaw the professional quality of the sampling procedures and data collection. Beginning in 2004, those responsibilities were assumed by the Center for Public Policy at the University of Houston.

During February and March of each year, lengthy interviews are conducted with successive representative samples of area residents. Averaging more than 20 minutes apiece, they record a rich array of socioeconomic and demographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, education, income, occupation, homeownership, migration patterns), as well as measuring attitudes and beliefs in many different areas. The surveys ask about the respondents’ perspectives on the local and national economy, poverty programs, and interethnic relationships; their beliefs regarding discrimination, affirmative action, and immigration; their attitudes toward education, crime, health care, taxation, and community service; their concerns about downtown development, mobility, and the environment; their views on abortion, homosexuality, and other aspects of the “social agenda”; their religious and political orientations; and their family situations.

In the early years, the sample sizes ranged from 450 to 550; since 1990, they have been set at 650. Response rates — the ratio of completed interviews to all possible households in the telephone sample — averaged nearly 75 percent during the 1980s. In this new age of

“Caller-I.D.s,” recording machines, and constant telemarketing, it is more difficult to get people to answer their telephones or to talk to unknown others, and response rates have fallen to about 50 percent — still a high figure for professional survey research today, justifying continued confidence in the reliability of the data.

### *Margins of error*

For a representative sample of 650, there is a 95 percent probability that the survey findings will be true for the entire Harris County adult population within a margin of error of plus or minus 3.5 percent. In assessing changes from one year to the next or in measuring the central thrust of Houston attitudes, this means that a difference of six percent or less may be due to chance variations in the samples, and therefore should not be interpreted as reflecting true differences among area residents. Note, however, that when several years of successive surveys provide data that consistently point in the same direction (e.g., a change over three years from 25 to 28 to 30 percent), statistical tests may determine that a trend of this sort, despite amounting to a total of only five or six percentage points, is unlikely to have been the result of random fluctuations in the samples, and reflects instead a real change in the attitudes of area residents.

When responses diverge from one year to the next by seven or more percentage points, it can safely be concluded that such discrepancies could have been produced by chance fewer than five times out of a hundred. Differences of this magnitude are almost always “statistically significant,” and therefore justify the conclusion that the surveys are capturing real changes among area residents in their responses to identical questions asked in successive surveys. Similarly, if responses in any particular year diverge by seven or more points, it can be concluded that a majority found in the survey represents a true majority in the population as a whole.

### *The “oversample” surveys*

Because only one adult per household is interviewed and Houston’s minority communities are more likely than Anglos to live in households with several adults, the basic random surveys invariably overrepresent Houston’s Anglo population. In part for that reason, in 13 of the most recent 15 years (the excep-

tions were 1992 and 1996), the basic random surveys have been expanded with additional “oversamples.” Using identical random selection procedures, and terminating the interviews after the first few questions if the respondent is not of the ethnic background required, further interviews are conducted each year to enlarge and equalize the annual samples of Anglo, African-American, and Hispanic respondents at 450 to 500 each. In 1995 and 2002, major additional funding made it possible to include large representative samples from Houston’s varied Asian communities, with one-fourth of the interviews being conducted in Vietnamese, Cantonese, Mandarin, or Korean (see Klineberg 2002).

## Tracking the Changes Across Twenty-Four Years

In addition to journal articles, presentations at professional meetings, and book chapters (e.g., McKeever and Klineberg 1999; Klineberg and Kravitz 2003; Klineberg 2004; Lincoln 2005), this research has been the subject of four published reports intended for a general audience (Klineberg 1993, 1994, 1996, 2002). All of these previous reports focused on Houston’s ethnic communities. They drew on successive “oversample” surveys to measure the general quality of interethnic relationships and to explore the most important differences found among Anglos, African Americans, Latinos, and Asians in their attitudes, beliefs, and life experiences.

This report examines a wider range of issues, drawing on all 24 years of systematic surveys to provide a far more comprehensive assessment of the way the general public has been responding to the ongoing economic and demographic transformations. We track area residents’ changing views of economic opportunities in the Houston area and of the importance of quality-of-life issues, particularly with regard to air pollution, mobility, and the general aesthetic appeal of the region. We also explore the differences between city and suburb in this far-flung metropolis, and ask about the reasons for the new interest on the part of Anglo suburbanites in moving to the city, even as the region continues to grow ever farther out, into the open spaces on the periphery.

In addition, we build on two earlier reports (Klineberg 1996, 2002) to

assess the ongoing immigration that is transforming this region and the nation. Unlike previous immigrant flows to America, the current streams are non-European and strikingly diverse (as the surveys show) in their educational and income backgrounds. We explore the extent of upward mobility experienced by three generations of Latino immigrants, and we assess the changing quality of intergroup relationships in the Houston region. Finally, we make use of some innovative measures included in the most recent surveys to clarify the complex nature of racial attitudes in this time and place of unprecedented diversity, and we explore the persistent divisions among Houston’s ethnic communities in their beliefs about equality of opportunity in American society today. In the concluding section, we review the major findings that document the evolution of public attitudes in the midst of remarkable change, and we consider their implications for the challenges and opportunities facing the Houston area in the years ahead.

## A Restructured Economy

### The Roller Coaster of Job Opportunities

Figure 1 provides a vivid picture of the economic upheavals this city has undergone in the course of the 24 years. In each annual survey, respondents have been asked whether they thought job opportunities in the Houston area were excellent, good, fair, or poor. The chart shows the proportions giving positive evaluations (ratings of “excellent” or “good”) on this question.

During all of the 1970s and into the early 1980s, the Houston region was booming. As a result of the OPEC oil embargo in 1973-74 and then the Iranian Revolution in 1978-79, the price of a barrel of Texas crude rose dramatically and Houston’s prime industrial products were becoming many times more valuable, with no lessening of world demand. Between 1970 and 1982, while the rest of the country was languishing in the “stag-flating ‘70s,” almost one million people — mostly non-Hispanic whites — were streaming into the Houston metropoli-

tan region. The population was growing by more than 1,300 per week. Every day, on average, 250 additional cars and trucks were trying to navigate the streets and freeways of Harris County.

#### From boom to bust

In the first Houston survey, conducted in March 1982, fully 76 percent of all area residents rated job opportunities in the Houston area as “excellent” or “good.” 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 on the basis of \$50 oil. Within 18 months, a region that for more than a century had known only growing prosperity recorded a net loss of nearly 100,000 jobs.

By the time of the second survey, as indicated in Figure 1, the proportion of area residents giving positive evaluations to the local job situation dropped to just 41 percent. There was a slight improvement in 1984, prompting the oft-repeated words of encouragement, “Stay alive ‘til ‘85!” Then came the second major blow, when the falling price of oil hit bottom in late 1986 at less than \$10 per barrel and the recession spread from the energy sector to the entire economy. By February 1987, only 11 percent of area residents gave positive ratings to job opportunities, 72 percent cited the economy as the biggest problem facing the region (see Figure 6), and half of all respondents said that living conditions in the Houston area were getting worse.

#### The problematic recovery

By 1990, the region had emerged from the recession to find itself in a new kind of economic environment. No longer was the local economy “countercyclical” relative to the rest of the nation; with the decline of its energy industries, Houston was now much more closely tied to broader national and global economic trends. The city participated in the countrywide recession of 1991-92, and then in the longest peacetime economic expansion in American history brought about, we now know, by a “stock market bubble” and a “dot.com boom.” Positive ratings of job opportunities grew from 27 percent in 1993 to 41 percent in 1995 and 52 percent in 1997. They reached 72 percent in 1998 and 73 percent in 2000, statistically indistinguishable from where they had been at the height of the boom back in 1982.

As the new century began, the economic expansion gave way to an extended period of slowed growth and rising unemployment both locally and nationally. The positive numbers steadily declined, and the 2001-2003 recession was followed by a “recovery” that generated fewer jobs than in most previous economic upturns. The proportion giving positive evaluations to job opportunities fell from 73 percent in 2000 to 67 percent in 2001, 52 percent in 2002, and 39 percent in 2003. The numbers were unchanged in 2004, but then jumped to 50 percent in 2005.

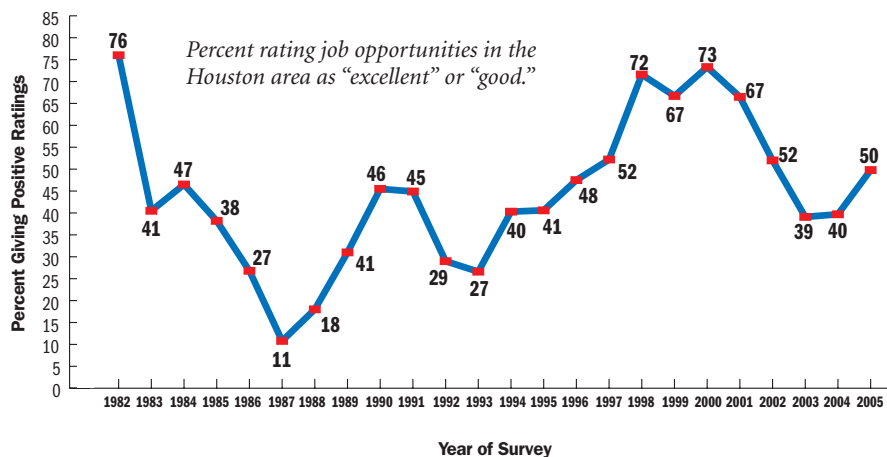
Other tentative signs of economic improvement have appeared in the most recent surveys. When respondents were

asked to name “the biggest problem facing people in the Houston area today,” the proportion of area residents who cited the economy as the biggest problem grew from 8 and 9 percent in 2000 and 2001 to 19 percent in 2002 and 25 percent in 2003. Then the numbers dropped back to 18 percent in 2004 and to 15 percent in 2005 (see Figure 6).

In every year, respondents have been asked directly about their own economic circumstances: “During the last few years, has your financial situation been getting better, getting worse, or has it stayed about the same?” The percentage of area residents saying that their personal economic conditions were improving dropped from 48 percent in 2001 to 41 percent in 2002, 37 percent in 2003, and 31 percent in 2004. In 2005, however, the number of survey respondents who said they were doing better grew significantly, to 42 percent.

On the other hand, the recent good news on the economic front has not generated much confidence that sustained improvements lie ahead. When asked how they thought they would be doing three or four years down the road, there was no evidence of increasing optimism. In 2001, 66 percent of area residents thought they would be better off; the numbers were 62 percent in 2002, 60 percent in 2003 and 2004, and 62 percent in the latest survey. In 2004, when asked if living conditions in the Houston area were getting better, getting worse, or stayed the same, 37 percent said conditions were getting better; that was the view of 33 percent in 2005. When asked about national prospects, 45 percent in 2004, and 42 percent in 2005, thought the country was headed for better, rather than more difficult, times. Feelings of vulnerability in a stressful labor market and at a time of intensifying global competition continue to dampen public outlooks.

**Figure 1**  
**Percent Rating Job Opportunities as “Excellent” or “Good” (1982-2005)**

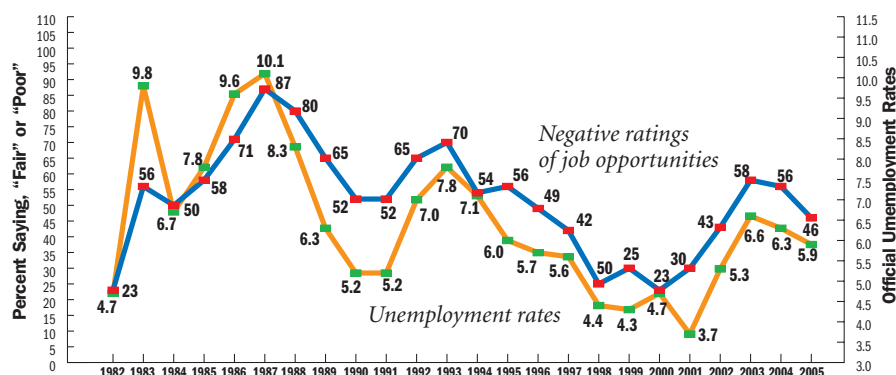


## Subjective Assessments and Objective Realities

Figure 2 provides an interesting “validity check” on these subjective perceptions of the Houston economy. It compares the proportions of survey respondents over the years who gave negative ratings (only “fair” or “poor”) to job opportunities with the official unemployment rates in Harris County as subsequently reported by the Texas Workforce Commission for



**Figure 2**  
**Negative Ratings of Job Opportunities in Relation**  
**to the Official Unemployment Rates**



Source for unemployment: The Texas Workforce Commission

February in each of the survey years. The chart depicts a remarkable consistency between the public's overall impressions of job opportunities and the actual unemployment figures.

There was one notable exception to the general agreement between the subjective and objective assessments. The proportion of area residents giving negative ratings of job opportunities grew from 23 percent in 2000 to 30 percent in 2001, while the official unemployment rates were dropping from 4.7 to 3.7 percent. In the early spring of 2001, area residents were aware that the 1990s expansion was ending, even as the actual unemployment rate was falling to its lowest point in 21 years. By the time of the 2002 survey, the measures of objective conditions validated the subjective perceptions, and the curves were once again in sync. The official unemployment rates rose sharply to 5.3 percent in 2002 and to 6.6 percent in 2003, before dropping slightly to 6.3 percent in 2004 and 5.9 percent in 2005. The negative ratings of job opportunities followed suit, rising from 30 percent in 2001 to 43 percent in 2002, 58 percent in 2003, and 56 percent in 2004 before dropping to 46 percent in 2005.

Figure 2 also reminds us that the most recent downturn represents the third recession that Houston has experienced in the past quarter-century. During the depths of the oil-boom collapse, unemployment rates reached 10.0 percent in 1987 and 8.3 percent in 1988. In the national recession of the early 1990s, Houston's unemployment rates were 7.0 percent (1992), 7.8 percent (1993), and 7.1 percent (1994). The latest downturn beginning in 2000 was approaching the

dimensions of the early 1990s, but it peaked in 2003 at an official unemployment rate of 6.6 percent, before dropping to 6.3 percent in 2004 and to 5.9 percent by 2005.

## Into the New "Hourglass" Economy

Houston recovered from the economic collapse of the mid-1980s to find itself in a more problematic economy. The vigorous blue-collar "resource economy," for which this region in particular was so favorably positioned, has now receded into history. In its place, an increasingly high technology, knowledge-based, fully global economic system has been taking shape. Advances in computers and robotics, intensifying worldwide competition, inexpensive transportation, and the decline in union strength have combined with changes in government policies to reduce the number of well-paid factory jobs. The "blue-collar path," which once brought economic security to millions of American workers with high school educations or less, was becoming much more difficult to find.

Gone are the days when a high school graduate in Houston could go to work in the oil fields or in manufacturing jobs at Hughes Tool Company or Cameron Iron Works and expect to be able to make a middle-class wage. "Human capital" has become the critical economic resource, and advanced education is now the most important determinant of a person's ability to earn enough to support a family. From now on, as the saying goes, "What you earn depends on what you've

learned." The restructured, two-tiered "hourglass" economy offers rich and expanding opportunities for those with high levels of technical skills and educational credentials. For workers without such qualifications, the economy is generating large numbers of poorly paid, dead-end service-sector jobs that offer few benefits, low job security, and little opportunity for advancement through on-the-job training.

## From "the rising tide" to "the great inversion"

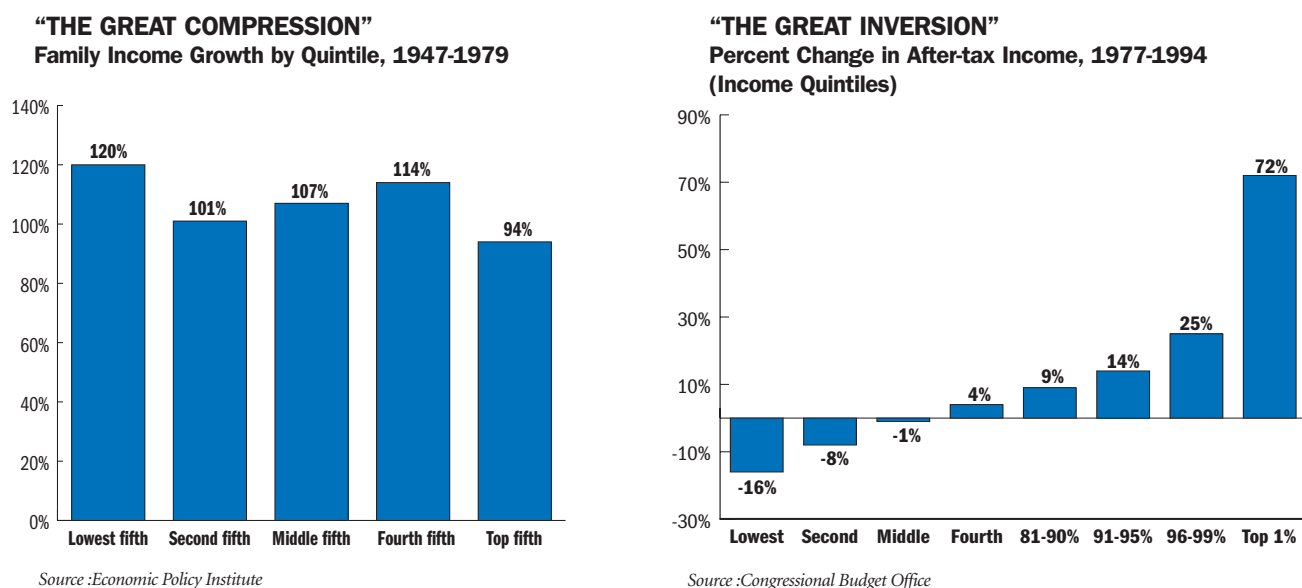
In the new economy, poverty is increasing even as the city and nation become richer. Opportunities narrow for many while they expand for others. And inequalities in income and wealth grow ever wider and deeper. Figure 3 illustrates how profoundly these forces have changed American society. The two charts, borrowed from Kevin Phillips' *Wealth and Democracy* (2002), depict the striking upward redistribution of income that occurred between the 30 years after World War II (1947-1979) and the "millennial quarter-century" that brought the twentieth century to a close.

During the years after the Second World War, the rich got steadily richer, but the poor got richer faster, the middle class expanded, and the "rising tide" did indeed "lift all boats." The postwar quarter-century represented the triumph of American industrialism, the crowning achievement of an economic system in which the dominant occupational category was the semiskilled factory worker, and wealth came primarily from the exploitation of natural resources. Through the application of ever more wondrous technological inventions combined with ever-cheaper energy, the national Gross Domestic Product per capita actually doubled in real terms, corrected for inflation, during the twenty years between 1950 and 1970.

Family incomes were growing by 2.5 to 3.5 percent per year, inflation was virtually nonexistent, and unemployment kept moving steadily downward. The average American worker, wherever he was on the up-escalator (it was almost always "he"), found his earnings steadily growing from one paycheck to the next. Those were the years when Americans celebrated the stay-at-home housewife-mother in suburbia, U.S. women gave birth to an average of 3.6 children, and the "Baby Boom" was launched upon the land.



**Figure 3**  
**Two Contrasting Quarter-Centuries**



From: Kevin Phillips. 2002. *Wealth and Democracy: A Political History of the American Rich*. New York: Broadway Books, p. 137.

The economic conditions of the last quarter-century are dramatically different. As indicated in Figure 3, between 1977 and 1994 the after-tax incomes of the best-paid 20 percent of Americans, controlling for inflation, grew vigorously; among the top one percent, household incomes rose by 72 percent. Meanwhile, the earnings of the bottom half of all American families actually declined. More recently, the financial bubble in the late 1990s generated enough demand for workers that almost everybody's wages grew, albeit in very unequal shares. In the 22 years between 1979 and 2001, according to the Congressional Budget Office, the after-tax incomes of the top one percent of American households had increased by 139 percent; the incomes of the middle 20 percent of households rose by 17 percent, and the incomes of the poorest fifth, by 9 percent (Scott and Leonhardt 2005).

On almost every measure, pausing only briefly during the late 1990s expansion, the income gap has grown dramatically over the past quarter-century. The disparities are greater today than at any time since the 1920s, and greater in America than in any other industrial nation. As Lester Thurow (1995), Dean of the School of Management at MIT, observed of this period: “No country in the world, without undergoing a military defeat or an internal revolution, has ever experienced such a sharp redistribution

of earnings as the United States has seen in the last generation.”

## Challenges to the American Dream

Most Americans continue to believe that this is a land of unbounded opportunity, where intelligence and ambition matter far more than parenthood and class. It is this belief that explains why Americans have tolerated the widening inequalities so much more than Europeans. The growing gap is acceptable, we reason, as long as our children have a good chance of succeeding. This is the promise that lies at heart of the American dream and that takes the sting out of the widening gulf between rich and poor. As long as there is something close to equality of opportunity, Americans generally believe, the differences in income and wealth do not add up to class barriers (Bartlett 2005; Scott and Leonhardt 2005).

Moreover, the typical American, even in this time of burgeoning inequality, is living with more than his or her parents did. When asked in the 1999 Houston survey about their own standard of living (“that you have had or expect to have”) in comparison with that of their parents, 66 percent of area residents said their standard of living was “higher,” and only 11 percent said “lower.” On four different

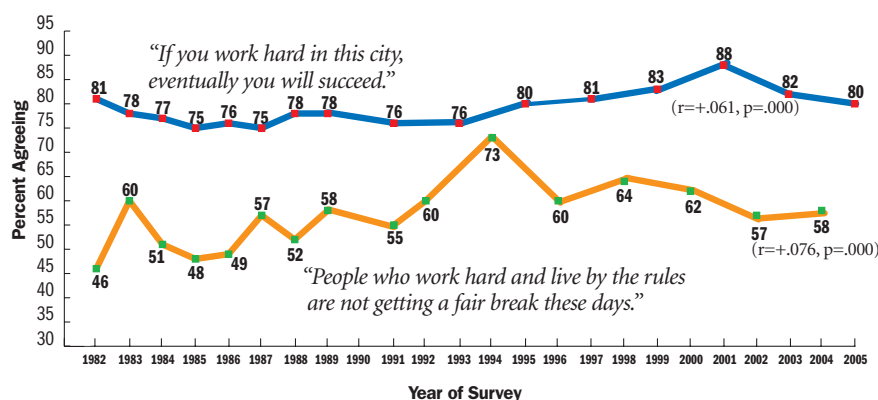
occasions, the survey respondents were asked if they thought that “young people in America today will eventually have a higher standard of living, about the same, or a lower standard of living than do adult Americans today.” The number saying “higher” grew from 23 percent in 1995 to 31 percent in 1998 and 45 percent in 2002. As a result of that optimism, the gaps in wages, education, and health have not (at least not yet) become major political issues. Even as the upward redistribution of wealth continues, Americans are increasingly convinced that they and their children have a good chance of succeeding in this economy.

### Two aspects of the “work ethic”

Repeatedly over the years, survey respondents have been asked about two statements reflecting the vaunted American belief in the “work ethic.” On one question, the findings seem clearly to confirm the “can do” spirit of optimism and self-confidence that has animated much of this region's history. As indicated in Figure 4, when area residents were asked about the statement, “If you work hard in this city, eventually you will succeed,” the proportion in agreement has never fallen below 75 percent, even in the depths of the recession in 1987.

Moreover, that confidence has grown significantly over the 24 years, reaching 88 percent in the 2001 survey. As indicated in the figure, the overall linear

**Figure 4**  
**Changes in Two Measures of the Work Ethic (1982-2005)**



correlation ( $r$ ) between agreement with the statement and the year when the survey was conducted is  $+.061$ , and the probability ( $p$ ) of a correlation of that magnitude being produced by chance is less than one in a thousand. The growing conviction that hard work will be rewarded (eventually) will surely be a source of strength for this community as Houstonians seek to meet the challenges of the region's ongoing economic and ethnic transformations.

On the other hand, when respondents are asked about current realities ("these days"), a growing sense of alienation and insecurity is equally apparent. In response to the statement, "People who work hard and live by the rules are not getting a fair break these days," agreement has also increased significantly during the years of the surveys. Only 46 percent of area residents agreed with this proposition in the midst of the oil boom (1982), but 60 percent agreed during the bust the following year. The number in agreement subsided and then grew steadily again until it reached 73 percent in the recession of 1994, just before the economic expansion of the late 1990s. The proportions have remained stable between 60 and 57 percent in the years since then.

Underlying this oscillating pattern was significant overall growth ( $r=+.076$ ,  $p=.000$ ) across the 24 years in this important indicator of "alienation." The economy now rewards, almost exclusively, workers with high levels of educational credentials and technical skills, and it tends to concentrate wealth in fewer hands. In the absence of professional training, or special talents as an artist, performer, or athlete, simply being

prepared to "work hard and live by the rules" offers much less assurance of success than was the case during the halcyon days of industrial growth in the post-war quarter-century. By the mid-1990s, area residents were increasingly aware of these changed conditions. There can be little doubt that among the most compelling political challenges facing this city and nation today is the need to find effective ways to moderate the growing income and education gaps that belie the promise of equal opportunity in America.

## Quality of Place: The Basics

The new "knowledge economy" not only has resulted in an increasingly unequal society; it also has fundamentally redefined the "pro-growth" strategies that urban areas need to put into place if they are to succeed in the twenty-first century. Almost all observers agree that a city's prosperity will now increasingly depend upon its ability to nurture, attract, and retain the nation's skilled and creative knowledge workers and high-tech companies. Talented individuals and leading corporations are freer today than ever before to choose where to live. As a result, quality-of-life issues have become significant determinants of a city's success in the new economy.

Houston's prospects will be shaped, to an important degree, by its ability to develop into a much more environmentally and aesthetically appealing urban destination. This means significant and

sustained improvements in the vitality of its various "downtown" areas, the mobility of its commuters, the excellence of its public schools, the renown of its centers of art and culture, the abundance and beauty of its parks, trees, and bayous, the accessibility and richness of its hiking, boating, and birding areas, the quality of the air and water that it offers to its residents. Endowed with less physical beauty and fewer obvious natural amenities than many urban areas (such as Seattle, San Francisco, or Denver), Houston is too often losing out to other cities in its efforts to attract and retain the most innovative companies and the most talented individuals.

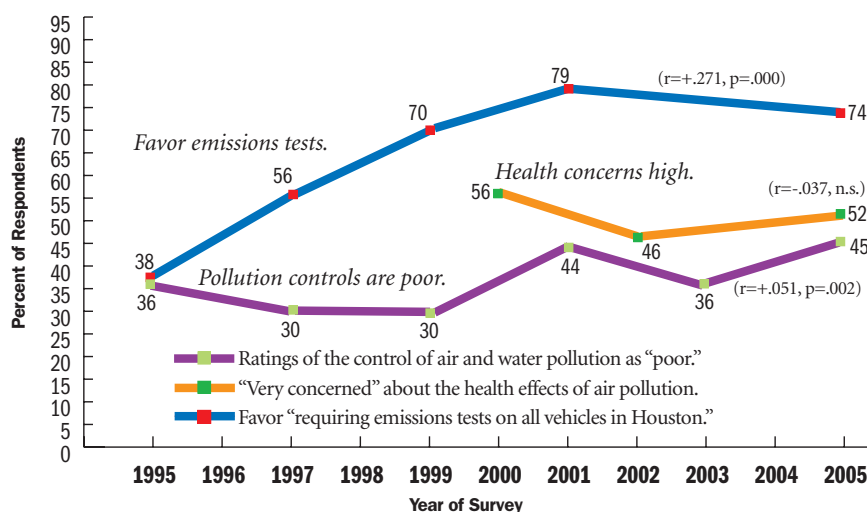
## Air Pollution

The city's image problems were fully evident on October 7, 1999, when the headline in *U.S.A. Today* was, "Houston, cough, cough . . . We've got a problem, cough, cough!" As the *Los Angeles Times* proclaimed on that particularly hot and balmy day, "New Smog Capital of America Declared!" For the first time in history, Houston had surpassed Los Angeles in the number of dangerously polluted days recorded during a single year.

Through most of the 1990s, Houston's business community generally took a dim view of calls for stronger regulations. Air quality had been improving slowly but steadily since the early 1970s. The new federal standards were widely believed to be based on questionable science, and any vigorous efforts to come into compliance with those regulations were "certain" to cause serious harm to the city's entire economy. Today, in a quite remarkable reversal, Houston's business leadership has made it clear, in all of its official pronouncements, that stringent environmental regulations, far from being anti-growth or anti-business, have become *essential* for the city's prosperity in the twenty-first century.

The annual surveys have documented growing public support for new initiatives with regard to these and other quality-of-life issues. Figure 5 presents area residents' responses to three questions about air pollution. In alternating years between 1995 and 2001, respondents were asked if they favored or opposed "requiring emissions tests on all vehicles in Houston." The proportion who said they supported such mandatory testing increased from 38 percent in 1995 to 56

**Figure 5**  
**Measures of Environmental Concern (1995-2005)**



percent in 1997, 70 percent in 1999, and to 79 percent in 2001. In the 2005 survey, 74 percent of Harris County residents said they were in favor of requiring emissions tests on all Houston vehicles, with just 21 percent opposed.

#### The renewed concerns

The surveys in 2003 and 2004 seemed to suggest that area residents were growing somewhat more confident about the city's ongoing efforts to address its air pollution problems. In 14 surveys spanning the 24 years, respondents were asked to evaluate "the control of air and water pollution in the Houston area." In the 1999 survey, 30 percent rated the city's pollution control efforts as "poor." That number increased to 44 percent by 2001, but in 2003 the proportion saying "poor" dropped back to 36 percent. In 2005, the percentage jumped again, this time to 45 percent — the strongest negative rating ever given on this question in all the years of this research. Just 20 percent of area residents in the 2005 survey gave positive evaluations (ratings of "excellent" or "good") to Houston's pollution efforts.

The data also seemed to indicate that decreasing numbers of area residents were worried about the effects of air pollution on their family's health. Figure 5 indicates that those saying they were very concerned about the health effects dropped from 56 percent in 2000 to 46 percent in 2002. But in the 2005 survey, perhaps as a result of a series of earlier newspaper articles on toxic releases in the area (Cappiello and Olsen 2005), the proportion of area residents who

said they were very concerned about the health effects of dirty air increased to 52 percent. When asked directly in the 2005 survey if they thought air pollution in the Houston area was generally getting better, worse, or had stayed about the same, 48 percent said the pollution was getting worse. Only 10 percent believed the region's air quality was improving.

In sum, the surveys show clearly that area residents are yet to be convinced that real progress is being made in the effort to reduce the levels of air pollution in the region, and they are steadfast in their support for initiatives to improve the overall quality and health of the envi-

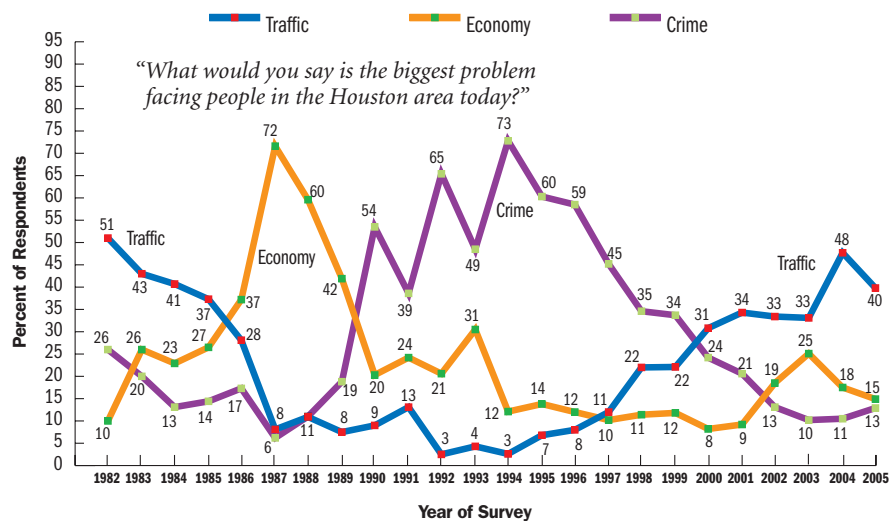
ronment. If it turns out that Houston is unable to comply with the federal air quality standards by 2007 (or even 2010), and to fashion a more livable urban environment overall, that inability will not be due to any presumed resistance on the part of the residents of this city, but to a failure of leadership.

## Traffic Before and Traffic After

Figure 6 records the issues that have been most salient among the public's unprompted expressions of concern across the 24 years of surveys. The data reinforce the conclusion that area residents are becoming increasingly sensitive to quality-of-life issues. The open-ended question that begins each survey asks: "What would you say is the biggest problem facing people in the Houston area today?" The figure depicts the percentages among successive samples of Harris County residents who spontaneously named traffic congestion, the economy, or crime.

Not surprisingly, traffic was the predominant concern during the population boom of the early 1980s, whereas the preoccupation in the midst of the 1980s recession was the economy. The percentages naming unemployment, poverty, or economic insecurity as the most serious problem facing people in the Houston area peaked at 72 percent in early 1987 — the bottom of the recession. With recovery, the numbers

**Figure 6**  
**The Biggest Problem in the Houston Area Today (1982-2005)**



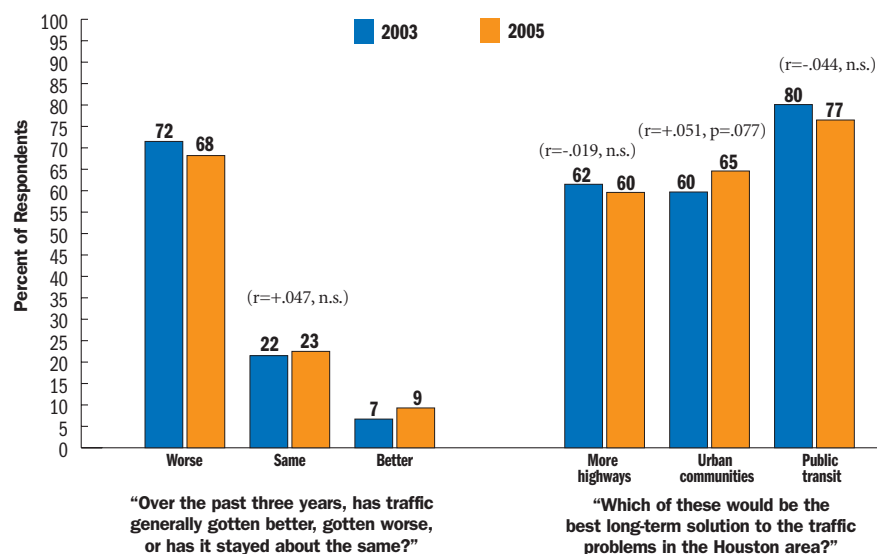
expressing concern about financial issues declined rapidly, and the economy was rarely mentioned during the boom of the late 1990s. Economic concerns began to pick up again in the mild recession that followed, rising to 19 percent in 2002 and 25 percent in 2003 before dropping back once again to just 15 percent in 2005. These findings offer further evidence of the public's belief, in just the year or so preceding the most recent survey, that the economy is finally showing signs of improvement.

During the 1990s, the fear of crime was the predominant preoccupation, mentioned spontaneously by an astonishing 73 percent of area residents in 1994. Since that year, the numbers citing crime or personal safety as the biggest problem decreased steadily to 50 percent in 1996, 34 percent in 1999, 21 percent in 2001, and just 13 percent since 2002. The decline in the preoccupation with crime and personal safety is consistent with official local and national statistics documenting a drop in the actual rates of crime since the mid 1990s. That area residents no longer feel afraid of one another is surely good news for this city.

Meanwhile, those expressing concerns about traffic, transportation, or mobility grew from just 12 percent in 1997 to 22 percent in 1999, 31 percent in 2000, and 33 or 34 percent in 2001 through 2003. In the 2004 survey, the numbers citing traffic congestion as the biggest problem facing people in the Houston area jumped dramatically to 48 percent, a level no different statistically from the 51 percent who cited traffic congestion at the height of the population boom in 1982. In the most recent survey, the portion of respondents naming traffic as the biggest problem in Houston dropped to 40 percent. As shown in Figure 6, mobility has continued to rank as the greatest concern of area residents during all of the past six years.

The decline from 2004 to 2005 in the numbers citing traffic as the biggest problem in Houston was due, at least in part, to growing concerns about other quality-of-life issues. Thus, for example, the proportion mentioning environmental pollution on this open-ended question rose from 3 percent in 2003 and 2004 to 8 percent in 2005. In the recent surveys, growing numbers of respondents also have been pointing spontaneously to problems of education, city services, or access to health care. With area residents no longer preoccupied with

**Figure 7**  
**Assessments of Traffic in the Houston Area and of Three Potential Solutions (2003, 2005)**



either economic insecurity or personal safety, today's circumstances may offer a better chance than at any time in the past quarter-century for Houston's citizens to come together in a cooperative and determined effort to address the broader issues that will shape their city's future.

## Mobility Solutions

In 2003 and 2005, survey respondents who had lived in the region for three or more years were asked, "Over the past three years, has traffic in the Houston area generally gotten better, gotten worse, or has it stayed about the same?" Figure 7 indicates that an overwhelming majority (72 percent in 2003 and 68 percent in 2005) said traffic conditions were getting worse; just 7 and 9 percent, respectively, thought that traffic was getting better.

When asked in 2005 which of three proposed solutions they thought would be most effective in addressing the area's traffic problems, only 31 percent chose the traditional strategy of "building bigger and better roads and highways"; 27 percent called for "developing communities where people can live closer to where they work and shop"; and a clear plurality of 42 percent opted for "making improvements in public transportation, such as trains, buses, and light rail." Not only do area residents name transportation as their top concern; a plurality also believes that improved public transit is

the best way to address the city's mobility problems.

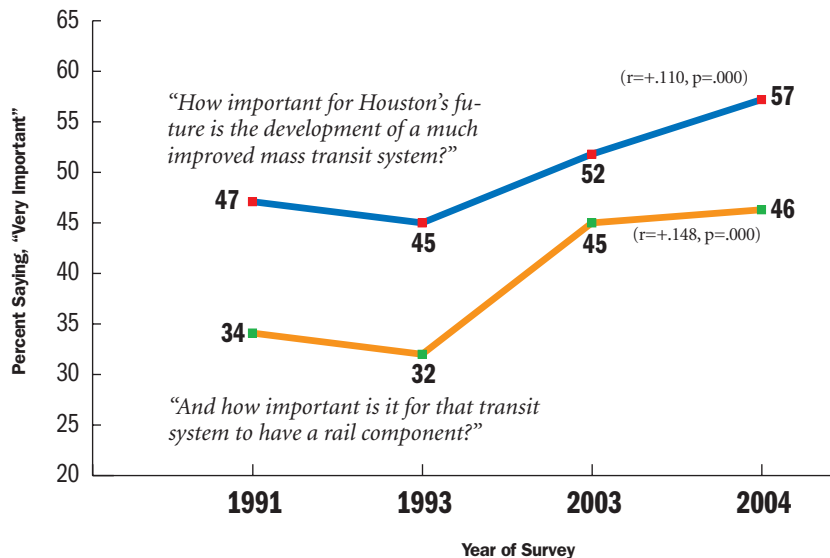
When asked which of the remaining two solutions they preferred, Figure 7 indicates that 77 percent of the survey respondents in 2005 named transit improvements as their first or second choice, 65 percent called for new mixed-use communities, and 60 percent opted for bigger and better roads and highways. None of these percentages differed significantly from the choices respondents made in 2003, although the numbers calling for "new urbanist" communities increased from 60 to 65 percent during the two years. It will be interesting to track the continuing evolution of these attitudes in future surveys.

### The call for mass transit

The 2003 and 2004 surveys replicated two questions that were last asked together in 1991 and 1993. The first question was: "How important for the future success of Houston is the development of a much improved mass transit system?" As indicated in Figure 8, the proportions saying that better transit is "very important" for the city's future grew significantly, from 47 percent in 1991 and 45 percent in 1993 to 52 percent in 2003 and 57 percent in 2004. The numbers saying "not very important" dropped from 19 and 16 percent in the early 1990s to just 11 and 10 percent a decade later.



**Figure 8**  
**The Importance of a Much Improved Mass Transit System and of Including a Rail Component (1991-2004)**



Respondents who said that a much-improved mass transit system was at least “somewhat important” for Houston’s future were asked a follow-up question: “And how important is it for that transit system to have a rail component?” In 1991 and 1993, 34 and 32 percent said that rail was a “very important” component of an improved system; the numbers jumped to 45 and 46 percent in 2003 and 2004. Only 15 percent in the two most recent surveys thought that a rail component was “not important,” down from 25 and 23 percent in 1991 and 1993, respectively.

Area residents who said they lived in the city of Houston were only slightly more supportive of improved mass transit (56 percent said such improvements were very important) than those in the suburbs (48 percent). The differences in support for rail by place of residence were even smaller: 47 percent of city residents and 43 percent of suburbanites said it was very important for the transit system to have a rail component.

The 2001 survey asked two questions about the light rail line, which was then being proposed by the Metropolitan Transit Authority as an urban amenity to stimulate downtown development: “As you may know, Metro is planning to build a light rail system to encourage community development along Main Street from downtown to the Astrodome. Do you think Metro should or should not conduct a referendum to determine

voter support before proceeding with a light rail system?” Then the second question: “If a referendum were held on the light rail proposal for Main Street, would you vote for it or against it?” Fully 60 percent of the survey respondents said they would vote for the light rail proposal; only 31 percent would have voted against it. Here again, there were no meaningful differences between city dwellers (62 percent said they would vote for the light rail project, with 31 percent against) and those who indicated that they lived in the suburbs (59 to 32 percent).

#### **Would you give up your car?**

When asked in 2004 about the statement, “Even if public transportation were much more efficient than it is today, I would still drive my car to work,” 58 percent of all Harris County residents agreed and 38 percent disagreed. This reflected no change at all from 1985, the last time the question was included, when 60 percent agreed and 37 percent disagreed. Nevertheless, that more than a third of all area residents continue to assert that they are prepared to give up their cars in commuting to work if mass transit improves is an impressive figure in one of the most automobile-dependent cities in the country.

Interestingly, an important predictor of answers on this question was where the respondents lived when they were 16 years old. Those who grew up in Houston (of whom 68 percent agreed)

or elsewhere in Texas (59 percent) were more likely to agree that they would still drive their cars to work even if public transportation were much more efficient, compared with those who grew up somewhere else in America (of whom 54 percent agreed) or in another country (51 percent), where they might well have had more experience with transit systems.

An even more powerful predictor was age. Among the older respondents in the 2004 survey (those aged 60 to 92), 55 percent *disagreed* with the suggestion that they would still drive to work if transit were more efficient, compared to 40 percent of those aged 45 to 59, and just 32 percent of the youngest adults, aged 18 to 29. In addition, only 46 percent of those with household incomes of less than \$25,000 said they would still drive to work, compared to 60 percent of those with higher incomes. These are useful reminders that there are many in this city, as in all others, who are too old, too poor, or too young to drive an automobile, and they (quite obviously) are the ones most in need of alternative modes of transportation.

## **Urban Beautification**

In 2001, the business leaders of Houston, working through the Greater Houston Partnership, established a new organization that would have seemed totally out of character just a few years earlier. Joining with “Trees for Houston,” “The Park People,” “Scenic Houston,” and other civic and environmental organizations, they formed the “Quality of Life Coalition.” As described on its Web site ([www.qol-houston.org](http://www.qol-houston.org)), the goal of the coalition is to mobilize Houston’s public and private sectors to dramatically accelerate tree planting and landscaping along the city’s major thoroughfares and bayous, to expand parks and recreational areas, to remove billboards wherever possible, and to clean up litter and graffiti. Explicitly recognizing that “Houston must develop the recreational and environmental amenities to be competitive in the new economy,” the coalition is committed to ensuring that the city will grow into a place that is considerably more “environmentally and aesthetically appealing” than it is today.

Progress along these lines is clearly being made, as any visitor who has returned to Houston after a few years’

absence will attest. Not surprisingly, moreover, the surveys document strong and growing public support for such initiatives. Inspired by the goals of the Quality of Life Coalition, the surveys asked area residents on two different occasions if they would favor or oppose “spending additional public funds in order to make Houston more attractive by removing billboards and planting trees.” Figure 9 indicates that 59 percent were in favor and 40 percent opposed in 1989. By 2004, that majority had grown significantly to 67 percent, with just 29 percent opposed ( $r=+.105, p=.000$ ).

In sum, a strong and broad-based consensus seems to be developing among area residents throughout this sprawling metropolis regarding the importance for Houston’s future of addressing the region’s mounting air pollution and mobility problems. Area residents increasingly support the development of a much-improved mass transit system, one that includes a rail component along with a mix of other traffic initiatives. They wholeheartedly endorse the ongoing efforts to make Houston more beautiful, greener, and healthier for its citizens. Furthermore, the business case for these quality-of-life initiatives is widely acknowledged and growing stronger.

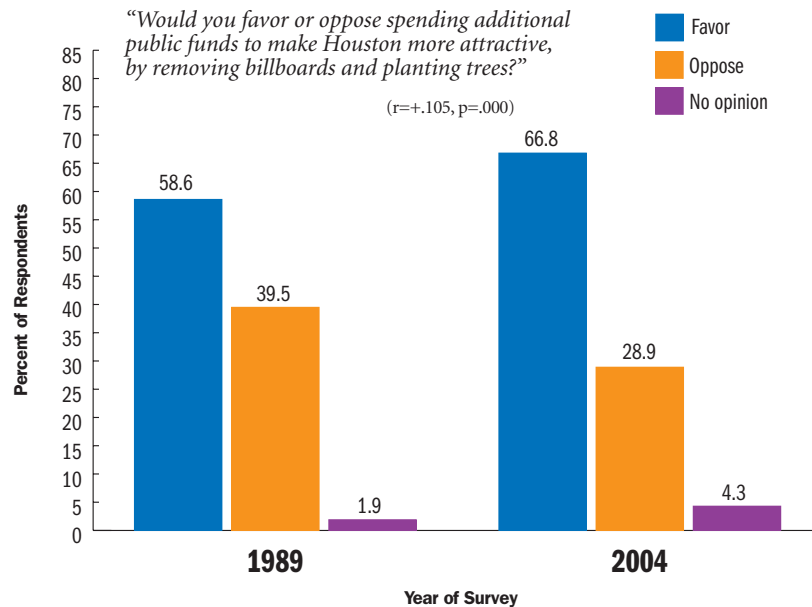
## City and Suburb in a Spreading Metropolis

### Suburbanization Forever?

The 2005 Houston survey included a question similar to one asked in a Chicago poll in 2003: “During the next 20 years,” area residents were informed, “Harris County will need to build new housing, shops, and workplaces for more than a million additional residents. Where do you think the new buildings should primarily be located?” The respondents were evenly divided: 47 percent said they “should be put on the outskirts of the region,” and 44 percent said they “should be added in the already developed areas.”

Unlike Houstonians, the Chicago respondents — more accustomed to urban density, more sensitive perhaps to the loss of open land as a consequence of sprawl — were much clearer (by 77 to 23

**Figure 9**  
**Support for Additional Spending to Make Houston More Physically Attractive (1989, 2004)**

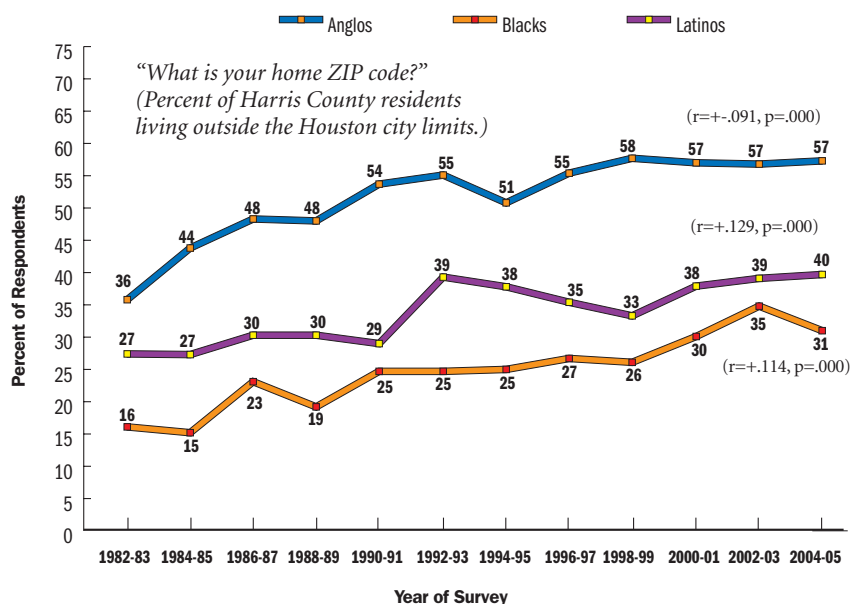


percent) that new homes and workplaces should be added in the already developed areas of the region. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that Houston continues to grow ever farther out — into the farmlands, prairies, forests, and marshes of the outlying counties.

Figure 10 depicts the movement to the suburbs on the part of Harris County’s Anglos, African Americans, and Latinos

across the 24 successive surveys, charting the percentages in each group whose home ZIP codes placed them outside the city limits of Houston. In the first two years (1982-83), only 36 percent of the Anglo respondents were living in the outlying areas of Harris County. That figure grew gradually and continually to reach 57 percent by the time of the most recent interviews. Similarly, the percent-

**Figure 10**  
**The Proportions of Harris County Residents Living Outside the City Limits of Houston (1982-2005)**



age of Latinos who were living outside the city limits of Houston increased from 27 percent in the early years to 40 percent more recently. For African Americans, the figures were 16 percent in 1982-83 and 31 percent in 2004-05.

The seemingly irresistible movement out to the empty spaces on the periphery holds true for the Houston region as a whole. Figure 11 depicts data from the 2000 census with regard to the populations and ethnic compositions of the city of Houston and all eight of its surrounding counties. Two striking realities stand out in this chart. First, Harris County, with more than 3.4 million inhabitants in 2000, contains almost 73 percent of the 4.7 million people who live anywhere in the entire area. The eight-county Consolidated Metropolitan Statistical Area (CMSA) covers a total of 8,778 square miles. This represents a geographical expanse larger than the state of Massachusetts and slightly smaller than Maryland! No wonder Houston has been called “the blob that ate southeast Texas” (Gilmer 2005). Houston may be America’s fourth largest city, but it sits at the center of what is only the nation’s eighth most populous metropolitan area.

Second, with the exceptions of Fort Bend County (which is only 46 percent Anglo) and Waller County (at 50 percent), all of the surrounding coun-

ties are disproportionately composed of non-Hispanic whites. The numbers range from a high of 81 percent in Montgomery County to 63 percent in Galveston County. In 2003, the Office of Management and Budget developed new rules for designating metropolitan areas. The redesigned “core-based statistical area” now identifies the “Houston-Baytown-Sugar Land Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA).” Two additional low-density, Anglo-dominated counties have been added to the metro area — namely, Austin County (pop. 23,590; 72 percent Anglo) and San Jacinto County (pop. 22,246; 81 percent Anglo). Clearly, with the exceptions of Fort Bend and Waller, the counties that surround Harris County and that comprise the greater Houston MSA, expanding across 10,062 square miles, are still today remarkably Anglo, and all nine have remarkably small and widely dispersed populations, compared to Harris County itself.

Given the allure of empty spaces, it is not surprising that the rates of growth in Harris County have diverged from those in its surrounding areas during recent decades. Between 1970 and 2000, Harris County doubled its population, and the suburban areas of the county grew by 207 percent. At the same time, the population of Fort Bend County grew by 579 percent, and Montgomery County, by 495 percent. The census depicts a popu-

lation that is slowly spreading outward, primarily toward the South and West, with the most rapid growth occurring along the periphery of the region in the outlying areas of Harris County and beyond (Gilmer 2005).

## Downtown Revitalization

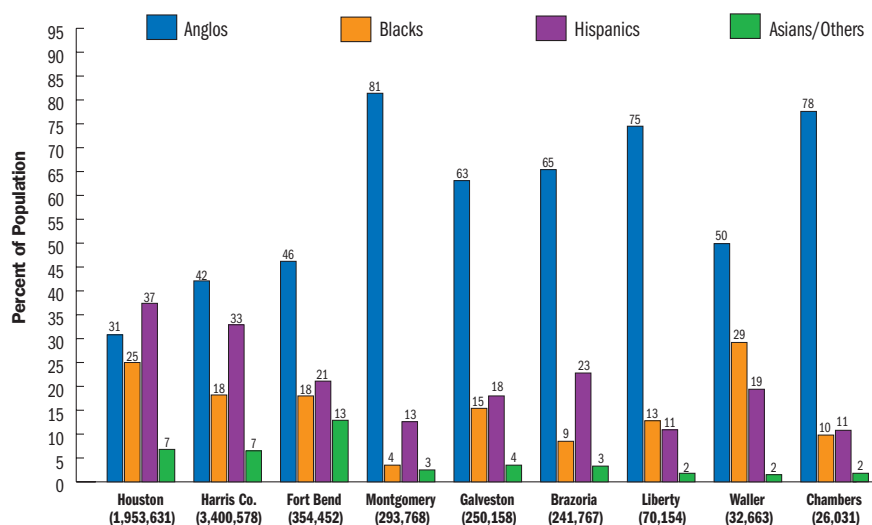
Without doubt, the center of the city of Houston has been reborn since 1995, transformed from a “business-only” activity hub into a vibrant blend of business, entertainment, and residential venues (Greater Houston Partnership 2005). The 7.5-mile light rail system along the Main Street corridor opened in January 2004, linking Reliant Park (completed in 2002) and the Texas Medical Center (comprising more than 42 member institutions and more than 65,000 employees) with Minute Maid Park (2000), the Hilton Americas Hotel (2003), the greatly expanded Convention Center (2003), and the new Toyota Center (2003) for basketball and hockey (Sheridan 2001, 2003).

The Bayou Place Entertainment Complex (1998) and the Hobby Center for the Performing Arts (2002) have added to the attractions of Houston’s 17-block Downtown Theater District. The new Beck Building (2000) has almost doubled the exhibition space of the Houston Museum of Fine Arts, the anchor of the city’s Museum District, whose 16 member institutions comprise one of the country’s significant cultural destinations.

With more than \$4.5 billion in new construction completed or under way since 1999, the city’s impressive skyline is being redrawn in ways not seen since the 1970s, when some of the world’s most famous architects (e.g., Philip Johnson, Renzo Piano, Cesar Pelli) used this city to showcase their talents. Furthermore, major improvements have been made to the city’s streets, sidewalks, and public spaces. Pedestrian plazas, improved lighting, the accelerated planting of trees, and a variety of landscaping projects have all enhanced the attractiveness of the many new residential properties that have been developed throughout the urban core.

In alternating years since 1995, the surveys have asked about the importance “for the future of Houston” of making major improvements in the downtown areas of the city. The proportions of all area residents saying that downtown development was “very important” for

**Figure 11**  
**The Demographics of Houston and Its Eight Surrounding Counties (2000)**



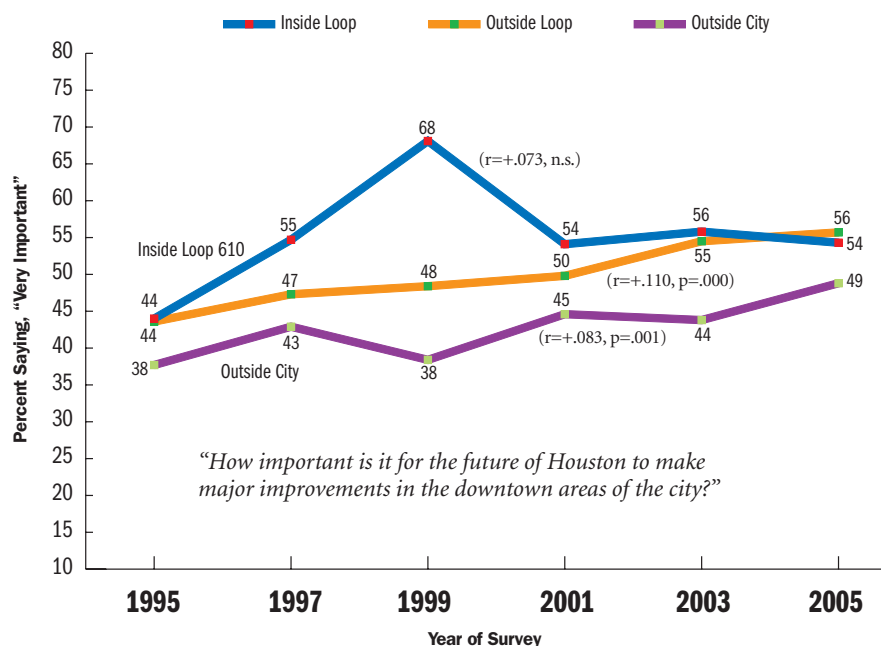
Source: U.S. Census ([www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)); classifications based on Texas State Data Center conventions; total populations are given in parentheses.

Houston's future grew steadily from 41 percent in 1995 to 46 or 47 percent in 1997, 1999, and 2001, to 50 percent in 2003 and 52 percent in 2005. There were differences on this question by place of residence, but here again, they were surprisingly small. Figure 12 shows that in 1995, among those living within the city limits, 44 percent said that downtown development was very important, compared to 38 percent of those in the far suburbs of Harris County. In 2005, the comparable figures were 56 percent for those inside Loop 610, 54 percent for those outside the Loop but within the city limits, and 49 percent for those living outside the city limits of Houston.

The city of Houston sprawls across 634 square miles, an area into which could be placed simultaneously the cities of New York, Washington, Boston, San Francisco, Seattle, Minneapolis, and Miami (Greater Houston Partnership 2005). Furthermore, the greater Houston CMSA, as we have seen, covers a geographical space larger than the state of Massachusetts. Downtown Houston is the one part of this far-flung metropolis to which virtually everyone in the region feels some sense of connection. The widely shared enthusiasm for the ongoing revitalization of Houston's downtown may help to encourage the residents of this sprawling metropolitan area to work more effectively together in new cooperative efforts to enhance the public spaces of the city and to address the shared concerns of the region as a whole.

The surveys also make it evident that area residents generally reject their city's time-honored stress on individual freedoms and unfettered property rights, calling instead for greater attention to the physical and aesthetic features of the public sphere. In the most recent survey, for example, respondents were asked about two statements regarding property rights. Almost three-fourths (72 percent) endorsed the assertion that "we need better land-use planning to guide development in the Houston area." Only 23 percent agreed instead that "people and businesses should be free to build wherever they want." Area residents seem clearly to recognize the need for more effective mechanisms to guide development and to plan, in a more comprehensive and thoughtful way, the uses to be made of the remaining open spaces in the area.

**Figure 12**  
**The Importance of Downtown Development, by Home ZIP Code (1995-2005)**



## The New Urban Allure

Even as suburban sprawl continues to dominate the settlement patterns of the region, Houston's success in revitalizing its urban core seems to have created a small but unmistakable countervailing movement. One of the surprises in the 2004 Houston Area Survey was the unexpected surge of interest the surveys revealed, particularly among Anglo suburbanites, in the idea of someday moving to the city (Klineberg and Fitzmorris 2004).

From 1999 through 2003, whenever the surveys have asked the question, twice as many people in the city thought they would be interested in someday moving to the suburbs as the reverse. Always before, almost twice as many African Americans as Anglos who live in the suburbs have said they'd be interested in someday moving to the city. As indicated in Figure 13, the attitudes of suburban Anglos changed significantly between 2003 and 2004. The numbers expressing at least some interest in joining the urban scene grew from 20 percent in 2003 to 35 percent in 2004. Among those saying they were "very interested" in such a move, the jump was from 4 percent to 14 percent. (There were real but smaller increases in the city's allure for suburban African Americans and Latinos.)

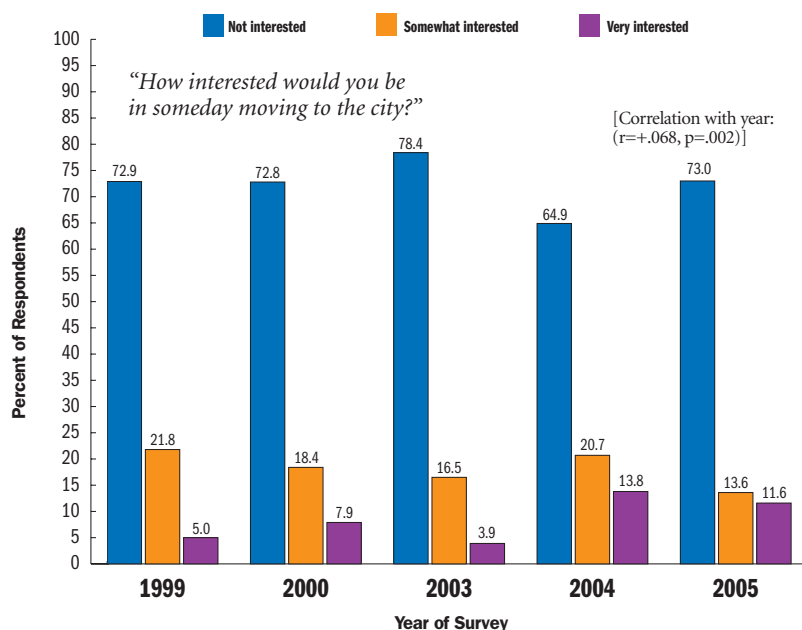
As many noted at the time, the 2004 survey was conducted just one month after the excitement surrounding the opening of the light rail line along Main Street and the festivities associated with Super Bowl XXXVIII, which was held in the brand-new Reliant Stadium just a few weeks prior to the 2004 survey. All that attention to downtown activities might well have stimulated a temporary surge of interest in city living. We knew it would be important to return to this question in 2005, when the influence of these one-time events would have dissipated and a more reliable measure of sustained suburban interest in city living might be obtained.

As Figure 13 indicates, when Anglos in the suburbs were asked in 2004 how interested they would be in someday moving to the city, the percentage saying that they had no interest in such a move dropped significantly from 78 percent in 2003 to 65 percent in that year's survey. In 2005 the numbers expressing no interest in city living increased again, to 73 percent. The downtown celebrations during January 2004 do indeed seem to have generated a fleeting up-tick in the city's allure for Anglos living in the suburbs of Harris County.

On the other hand, and perhaps even more important, Figure 13 also indicates that the percentage of suburban



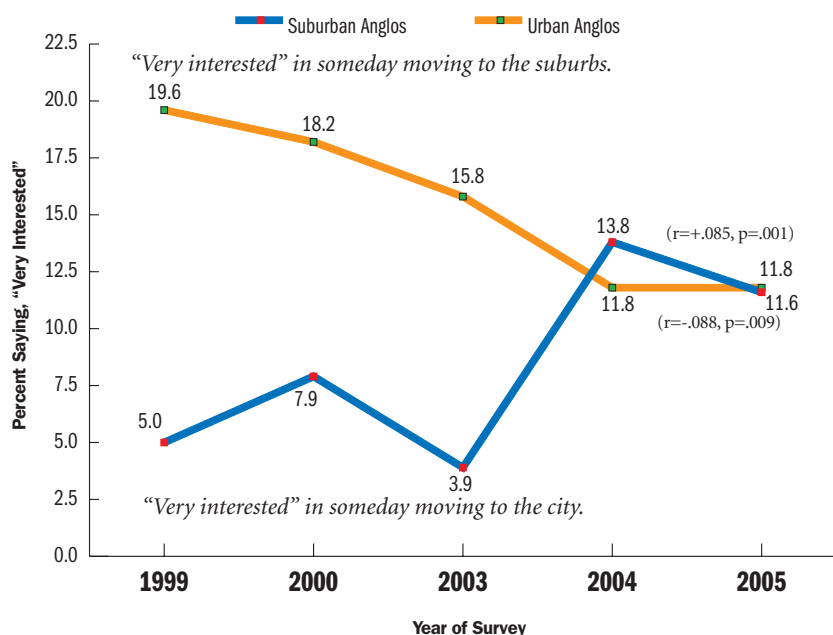
**Figure 13**  
**Three Levels of Interest Among Suburban Anglos in Someday Moving to the City (1999-2005)**



Anglos in 2005 who said they were very interested in someday moving to the city — a number that had grown from 4 percent in 2003 to 14 percent in 2004 — remained basically unchanged at 12 percent in the 2005 survey. Moreover, as indicated in Figure 14, there were now just as many Anglos in the suburbs who

said they would very much like to move to the city as there were Anglos in the city who were very interested in someday moving to the suburbs. The tripling in the number of suburban Anglos expressing a strong interest in city living (the jump from 4 percent in 2003 to 12 percent in 2005) does indeed seem to constitute a

**Figure 14**  
**Percent of Anglos “Very Interested” in Moving from Suburbs to City and from City to Suburbs (1999-2005)**



real and lasting change, with important implications for the future of downtown development.

### City vs. suburb

In collaboration with the Texas Transportation Institute, the 2005 Houston Area Survey sought a more comprehensive understanding of the reasons for the new interest among suburbanites in city living. Respondents were asked first what they believed to be the differences between “life in the central city of Houston — meaning inside Loop 610 or the Galleria area,” and “life in the suburbs — meaning outside Loop 610 and the Galleria area.” They were offered five statements and asked in each case, “Is that more true of the city of Houston or more true of the surrounding suburbs?” Area residents were generally in agreement about the differences between life in the city and a home in the suburbs.

The Houston suburbs are perceived to be less congested than the city, a place where cars can be used with relative ease. By 75 to just 13 percent, respondents said it was in the suburbs rather than the city that “you can generally find convenient parking wherever you need to go.” By 61 to 17 percent, they believed that the suburbs are where “the local streets and highways are not congested.” Indeed, in an open-ended question asking “why” of the Anglos in the city who were interested in someday moving to the suburbs, the predominant reason (given spontaneously by 35 percent of these respondents) was that the suburbs offered a less congested and frenetic lifestyle.

The city, on the other hand, is generally perceived to be a place where shops and other amenities are more accessible and as a place of greater diversity. By 65 to 25 percent, the respondents agreed that the statement, “You can get to most places you need to go by walking or on a bicycle,” was truer of the central city. By 54 to 30 percent, they saw the city as the location where “the typical commute to work is less than 20 minutes.” By 49 to 33 percent, they claimed that the city was more likely than the suburbs to be a place where “people of different ethnic and economic backgrounds live in the same neighborhoods and interact in a social context.”

These perceptions were also reflected in the reasons people in the suburbs spontaneously offered for their interest in someday moving to the city. When asked why they were attracted to urban

living, more than 71 percent gave as their most important reason the shorter commutes and the closeness to Houston's cultural amenities, sports events, and shops. When these suburbanites were asked what sort of city neighborhood they would prefer, 75 percent chose "an area with a mix of developments, including homes, shops, and restaurants." Only one-quarter said they would prefer to move into "a single-family residential neighborhood" in the city.

#### Who wants to move to the city?

Even in Houston, one of the most sprawling, least dense metropolitan regions in the country, the surveys indicate that a small but growing number of suburbanites are seeking a more urban experience, with "good" density and mixed uses, and with easier access to

shops and other urban amenities. Table 1 compares the Anglos in the suburbs who said they were very interested in someday moving to the city with those who were only somewhat or not interested in such a move. The data indicate, not surprisingly, a tendency for those whose jobs are in the city to be more interested in moving there than if they work in the suburbs or beyond. In general, however, work-related issues and traffic woes played only a minor and inconsistent role in differentiating the movers from the non-movers. There were also few differences by income, age, or family circumstances. Far more important than the "push" of long commutes is the "pull" of the city's revitalized recreational amenities and comfort with its diversity.

In the 2005 survey, respondents were asked how often they visited Houston's

museums, nightlife, or sporting events. Nine of every ten Anglos who indicated that they lived in the suburbs and were very interested in moving to the city said they made use of such amenities at least several times a year, compared to just 50 percent of those who were uninterested in such a move. Conversely, 90 percent of Anglo suburbanites who said they rarely or never make use of Houston's amenities said they were not interested in moving to the city. In addition, suburban dwellers with an interest in moving to the city were significantly more likely to have taken a ride at least once on the light rail and to *disagree* with the suggestion that they would continue to drive their cars to work even if public transit were much more efficient than it is today.

A second, equally important factor in the urban allure has to do with attitudes toward Houston's burgeoning ethnic and cultural diversity. The suburbs are growing increasingly diverse, of course, but we have seen that they remain far more Anglo-dominated than the city. In the 2005 survey, Anglos comprised 62 percent of all Harris County residents whose home ZIP codes placed them outside the city limits, but they were just 42 percent of those living inside Loop 610. In addition, suburban Anglos generally live in dispersed, segregated subdivisions, made up of what the *Wall Street Journal* (Suskind 1992) once called "PLUs" (people like us). As a result, interethnic encounters are likely to be considerably less frequent in the suburbs than in the city.

It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that almost all the survey questions measuring attitudes toward ethnic diversity differentiate the suburban Anglos who are interested in someday moving to the city from those who would prefer to stay where they are. Thus, as seen in Table 1, 80 percent of the suburbanites who are attracted to city living assert that Houston's increasing ethnic diversity is a "good thing," compared to just 62 percent of those who have no interest in moving to the city. By 76 to 64 percent, the suburban Anglos interested in moving are more likely to believe that Houston's ethnic diversity will become "a source of great strength for the city" rather than "a growing problem," and by 68 to 48 percent, they are more apt to believe that the new immigration "mostly strengthens," rather than "threatens," American culture. Conversely, 44 percent of those with no interest in city living are convinced that immigrants take more

**Table 1**  
**Significant Differences Among Suburban Anglos by Their**  
**Interest in Someday Moving to the City (2004-2005)**

(Total number of respondents:)		Not interested (N=1081)	Somewhat (N=266)	Very interested (N=124)
Where do you work most of the time? (2005)	In the center city	22%	24%	<b>38%</b>
	Elsewhere in Harris Co.	40	55	39
	Outside Harris County	<b>32</b>	16	18
How important is it to make major improvements in the downtown areas of the city? (2004)	Not important	<b>13%</b>	4%	5%
	Somewhat important	42	<b>51</b>	23
	Very important	45	45	<b>73</b>
How often do you visit Houston's museums, nightlife, or sporting events? (2005)	Never	<b>11%</b>	0%	3%
	Rarely	<b>39</b>	21	8
	Several times a year	50	79	<b>90</b>
In the past year, how often did you ride on the light rail train? (2005)	Not at all	<b>85%</b>	83%	73%
	At least once	15	17	<b>28</b>
Even with better transit, I would still drive my car to work. (2004)	Agree	<b>64%</b>	49%	47%
	Disagree	36	51	<b>53</b>
The increasing ethnic diversity in Houston is: (2005)	A bad thing	<b>24%</b>	19%	18%
	A good thing	62	66	<b>80</b>
The increasing ethnic diversity in H. will eventually become: (2004)	A growing problem	<b>27%</b>	11%	11%
	A source of strength	64	<b>79</b>	<b>76</b>
The increasing immigration into this country mostly: (2005)	Threatens the culture	<b>41%</b>	34%	20%
	Strengthens the culture	48	47	<b>68</b>
Immigrants to the U.S. generally: (2004)	Take more	<b>44%</b>	30%	29%
	Contribute more	34	<b>53</b>	<b>50</b>
Undocumented immigs. are major cause of unemployment. (2004)	Agree	<b>37%</b>	28%	21%
	Disagree	56	61	<b>76</b>
We should take action to reduce the number of new immigrants. (2004)	Agree	<b>64%</b>	49%	40%
	Disagree	30	46	<b>55</b>
Immigrants admitted in the next 10 years vs. the past 10 years: (2005)	Fewer	<b>41%</b>	36%	28%
	Same number, More	54	60	<b>68</b>

from the American economy than they contribute, compared to 29 percent of those who would like to move to the city. The non-movers are also more likely to believe that undocumented immigrants are a major cause of unemployment in Houston, and to call for greater restrictions on immigration in general.

Each of these “pulls” has a separate and cumulative impact. Anglo suburbanites who are uncomfortable with the growing diversity and look askance at the new immigration are nevertheless eager to move to the city if they are frequent users of Houston’s urban amenities. Those who rarely make use of the city’s recreational and cultural venues are more interested in moving to the city if they feel a sense of solidarity and comfort with the ethnic diversity of the urban scene. On the other hand, neither traffic woes nor long commutes are demonstrably responsible for “pushing” them out of their suburban homes.

## “Houston. It’s Worth It!”

Area residents, as we have seen, express widespread dissatisfaction with what they perceive to be inadequate progress on mobility, air pollution, and other quality-of-life issues. They also voice concerns about access to health care, affordable housing, city services, and the state of public education. Thus, for example, when asked directly in 2004 whether

they thought the public schools in the Houston area over the past few years had gotten better, worse, or stayed the same, 31 percent said the schools were getting worse. Only 24 percent thought they were improving, down from 30 percent who felt that way in 2002. When asked about the overall quality of living conditions in the Houston area during the past three or four years, only 33 percent in the 2005 survey thought that conditions were improving; 25 percent said things were getting worse.

It is all the more interesting and important, therefore, to note that area residents are remarkably upbeat about the actual experience of living in the Houston area. On eight different occasions between 1983 and 2004, survey respondents were asked to rate the Houston area in general as a place to live. The responses have not changed over all the years, and the proportions saying “excellent” or “good” have averaged above 69 percent. As indicated in Figure 15, the number of area residents giving positive ratings in 2004 was higher than 71 percent.

The 2005 survey posed the question in a slightly different way: “Compared to most other metropolitan areas in the country,” respondents were asked, “would you say that the Houston area is a much better place, a slightly better place, a slightly worse place, or a much worse place in which to live?” More than 78 percent of area residents affirmed that

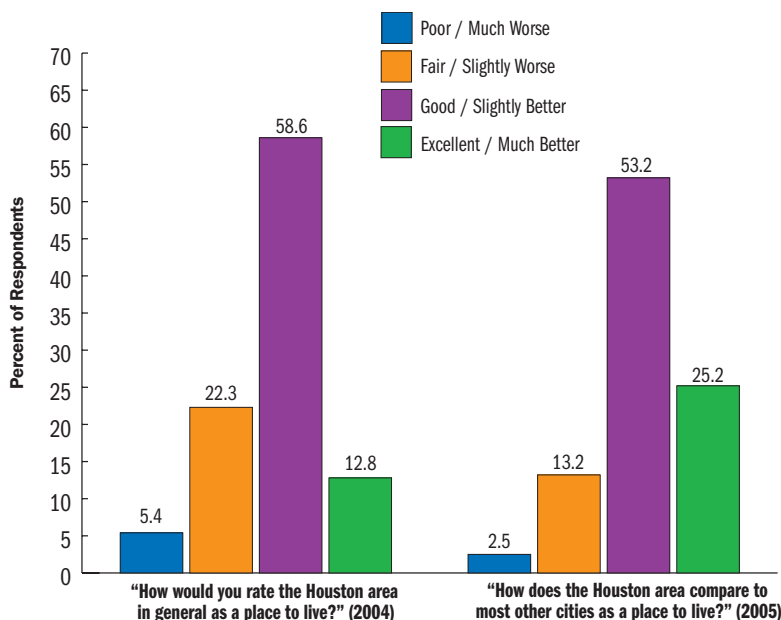
Houston was a better place to live than most other metropolitan areas.

Recently a new Web site ([www.houstonitsworthit.com](http://www.houstonitsworthit.com)) has caught the imagination of the public. The site opens with rapid-fire reminders of Houston’s less endearing features — the heat; the humidity; the flying cockroaches; the hurricanes; the flooding; the traffic; the construction; the potholes; the billboards; the sprawl; the refineries; the pollen; the air; the no mountains — before arriving at the confident claim: “Houston. It’s Worth It.” Area residents are invited to post their comments. Almost two thousand have responded, often with infectious tongue-in-cheek humor and protestations of unexpected silver linings to be found amidst the supposed disadvantages. Many also write about Houston’s numerous restaurants, with their panoply of cuisines in a city of burgeoning diversity. Others point to the friendliness of the people, the low cost of living, the richness of Houston’s theater and museum districts, the impressive skyline, the nearby beaches for sailing and fishing, and much else.

Whatever the particular allure, and however much Houstonians are given to complaints about the city’s problems and concerns about the challenges that lie ahead, it is useful to be reminded of how many of those who live in this city would not want to be anywhere else. The public’s strong and persistent commitment to the city’s improvement will play a critical role in Houston’s efforts to position itself for prosperity in the new economy. It will not be easy to transcend the narrow businessman’s culture and excessive individualism that worked so well for this city during most of the twentieth century. Whether out of short-term self-interest or ideological habit, many of the region’s dominant industries and institutions will continue to fight against vigorous efforts to strengthen environmental regulations, to build a comprehensive and efficient mass transit system, or to develop effective mechanisms for urban planning.

Nevertheless, the new economic imperatives, reinforced by citizen demand, offer an unprecedented opportunity to develop policies that can integrate quality-of-life initiatives with enlightened economic self-interest. Building on widely shared public support and with sustained determination, this city may yet be able to refashion itself into a place of uncommon beauty, environmental

**Figure 15**  
**Ratings of the Houston Area in General as a Place to Live (2004, 2005)**



health, and widespread well-being — so that Houston will become not only a well-liked place for those who already live here, but also an urban destination of choice that will attract the country's most talented individuals and innovative companies, those whose skills and creativity will be the basis for the production of wealth in the new economy of the twenty-first century.

## A Demographic Revolution

The reform of the nation's restrictive immigration laws in 1965 opened the gates to new immigrant flows that have transformed the composition of the American population. Between 1492 and 1965, 82 percent of all the peoples in the world who came to these shores came from Europe. Another 12 percent were African Americans, originally brought here as slaves to serve the Europeans. A small number of Chinese and Japanese were working as farmers or laborers in California and Hawaii, and the surviving Native Americans were confined to scattered reservations. The American nation was to be composed almost exclusively of European nationalities.

Between 1924 and 1965, under the notorious National Origins Quota Act, immigration slowed to a trickle, Asians were effectively banned from coming to America, and preference was given to the "Nordics" over the less desirable "Alpines" and "Mediterraneans." With this legislation in effect, 82 percent of all immigrant visas went to northwestern Europeans and another 16 percent were allocated to other Europeans, leaving 2 percent for everyone else. No limits were imposed on Western Hemisphere countries, in order to ensure that Mexican labor could be recruited when needed and then deported en masse when no longer required. The law had its intended effect. The ethnic composition of the country in 1965 remained as it had been in 1920.

## The Inadvertent Act That Changed America

The Immigration and Nationality Act Amendments of 1965 (a.k.a. the Hart-Celler Act) undid the previous immigration policy, with its explicitly racist

underpinnings. More generous limits were established, and visas were no longer allocated on the basis of ethnicity or national origin. Preferences were now to be based primarily on family reunification, with additional priority given to professional skills and proven vulnerability to persecution. The act's proponents did not expect it to bring much change either in the quantity of immigrants or in their composition (Glazer 1985). Soon after its passage, however, the number of newcomers grew rapidly, ending the fifty-year hiatus on large-scale immigration, and the European proportion fell precipitously.

In the 1960s, 3.2 million immigrants came to America, of whom only 34 percent were Europeans. There were 5 million immigrants during the 1970s, with only 18 percent from Europe. In the 1980s, almost 10 million newcomers immigrated to America, and fewer than 11 percent were Europeans. Not since the peak years of immigration before World War I had so many sought to make their way to America. The census of 1990 recorded a foreign-born population of 19.8 million — the largest number of immigrants in American history. In the 2000 census, the count stood at 31.1 million, an increase by another 57 percent over the 1990 figure.

During the decade of the 1990s, the Latino population in the nation as a whole grew by 58 percent and the Asian population, starting from a much smaller base, expanded by 72 percent. The number of European-ancestry Americans, in contrast, increased by just 3.4 percent. The nation's three largest minority populations combined were growing at almost 12 times the rate of Anglos. By 2000, fewer than 70 percent of all Americans were white and non-Hispanic, down from more than 75 percent just a decade earlier. If current trends continue, the census projects, soon after 2050, Americans of European descent will comprise less than half the nation's population.

In several of America's largest cities, that "majority-minority" future is already here. Newly arriving immigrants tend to cluster in a small number of metropolitan areas, attracted by family and linguistic connections and benefiting greatly from the social and economic support that co-ethnic communities provide. The metropolitan regions of Los Angeles and New York together contain more than one-third of the entire foreign-born population of America (Waldinger 2001).

Then come four smaller but important gateway cities — Miami, San Francisco, Chicago, and Houston. The new immigration has spread next to Washington DC, San Diego, Dallas, Boston, and Atlanta, and is now reaching into virtually every city and town across America. Perhaps nowhere has the demographic revolution been more sudden or dramatic than in the Houston area.

## The Houston Numbers

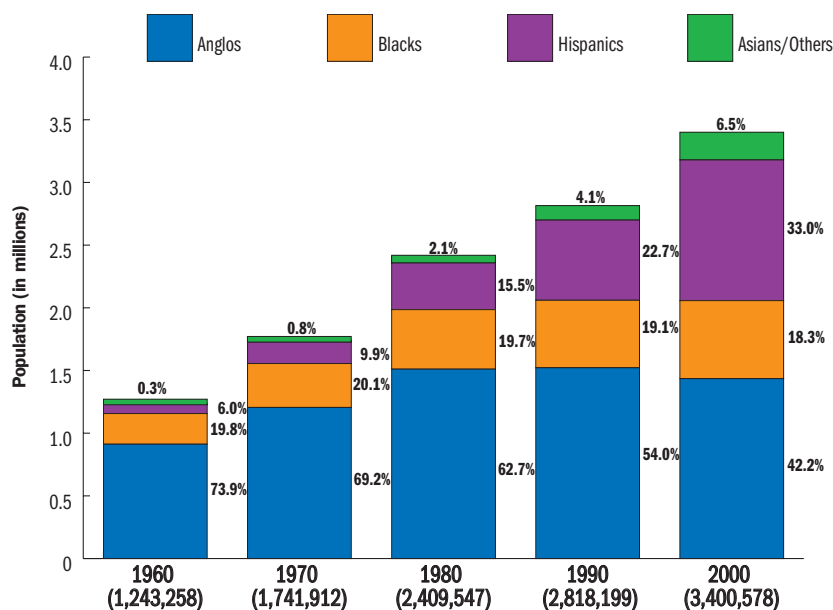
Figure 16 depicts the U.S. census figures for Harris County during each of the past five decades. The surging growth in the 1960s and 1970s was brought about primarily by the influx of white non-Hispanic Americans who were streaming into this booming region from other parts of the country. The Anglo population of Harris County grew by 31 percent in the 1960s and by another 25 percent in the 1970s. By 1981, Houston had overtaken Philadelphia to become the fourth largest city in America, with a population that was still almost two-thirds Anglo. Only 15.5 percent of Harris County residents in 1980 were Hispanic and only 2.1 percent were Asian.

After the collapse of the oil boom in 1982, the Anglo population basically stopped growing. It grew by 1 percent in the 1980s and then declined by 6.3 percent in the 1990s. Yet the county's total population increased by 17 percent during the 1980s and 21 percent in the 1990s. The African-American population grew by about 18 percent in each of these decades, fueled both by African immigration and by the return to the South of many middle-class blacks from northern cities. Meanwhile, the number of Hispanics in Harris County, which had doubled in the 1960s and doubled again in the 1970s, expanded by approximately 75 percent in both the 1980s and the 1990s. The Asian population grew by 129 percent in the 1980s and by another 76 percent in the 1990s.

Virtually all the net growth of Harris County's population during the past quarter-century is thus attributable to immigration directly from abroad, as well as to the birth of new babies, often the children of earlier immigrants. The 2000 census counted 3.4 million people in the county, of whom just 42 percent were non-Hispanic whites. The area's population was now 33 percent Hispanic, 18 percent African-American, and 7 percent Asian or other. By the end



**Figure 16**  
The Demographic Transformations of Harris County (1960-2000)



Source: U.S. Census ([www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)); classifications based on Texas State Data Center conventions; total populations are given in parentheses.

of 2004, according to census estimates, Harris County's population had grown to almost 3.8 million, and Hispanics (at 39 percent) now outnumbered Anglos (37 percent) in the county as a whole.

Meanwhile, in the city of Houston, Hispanics were already the largest ethnic group by 2000. Figure 17 depicts

the census data. The number of Anglos living within the city limits of Houston declined by 21 percent in the 1980s and by another 9 percent in the 1990s. At the same time, the populations of Hispanics and Asians were surging. By the 2000 census, the city had almost 2 million inhabitants, of whom 37 percent were Hispanic

and only 31 percent Anglo; another 25 percent were African-American and 7 percent were Asian or other.

The city's population as a whole, which had grown by barely more than 2 percent during the 1980s, expanded by 20 percent in the 1990s. If the "new urban allure" explored earlier in this report continues unabated through the decade, we would expect the 2010 census to document a further surge in the city's population as well as a significant turnaround in the steady net exodus of Anglos from the urban scene that began after 1980.

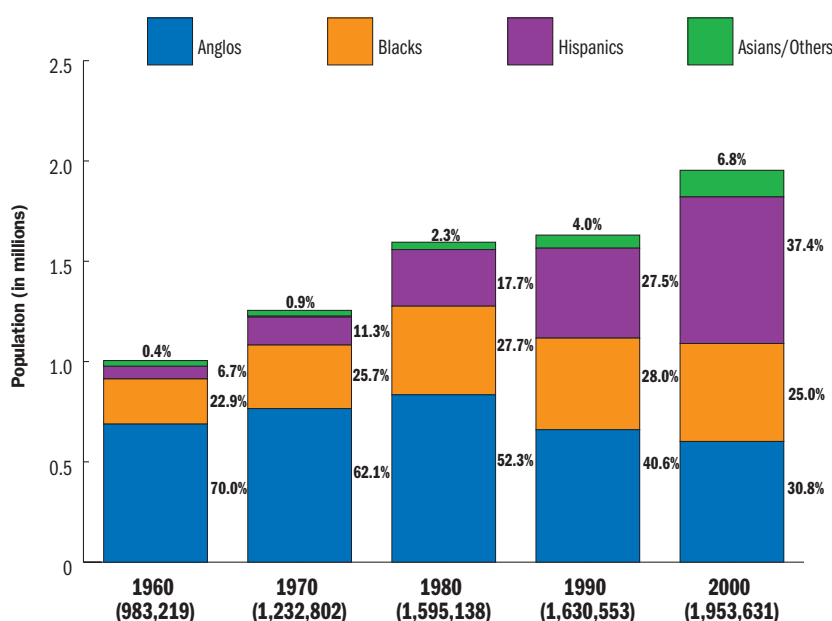
## Characteristics of a Multiethnic Melting Pot

Throughout virtually all of its history, Houston was essentially a biracial Southern city dominated and controlled, in a taken-for-granted, seemingly automatic way, by Anglo males. In just the past quarter-century, it has been transformed into one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse cities in America. Had Houston not been one of the nation's great immigration magnets, this city would have met the same fate as Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Baltimore, Detroit, and St. Louis — major American cities that have seen their populations decline over the past twenty years. Instead, Houston is one of the most rapidly growing and vibrant cities in America, purely because of its attraction to the new immigrants from abroad.

It is also interesting to note that the Houston area has a more balanced distribution among America's four great ethnic communities than most of the other major "multiethnic melting pot" cities. Harris County is home to more Hispanics than San Francisco, more Asians than Miami, more African Americans than Los Angeles. This is where America's four largest ethnic populations meet in a more equal distribution than almost anywhere else in the country. All of Houston's communities are now "minorities." All will need to work together to build the new multiethnic future that will be Houston and America in the twenty-first century.

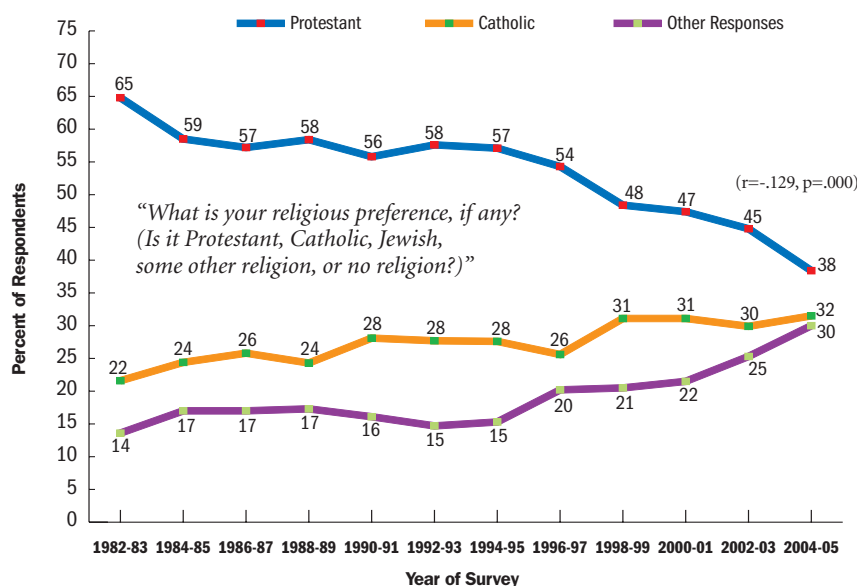
By 2000, Harris County had no racial or ethnic majority. Four years later, that was true for the state of Texas as a whole. In August 2004, about eight months earlier than expected, the census announced that the nation's second most populous state has now joined California, along

**Figure 17**  
The Demographic Transformations of the City of Houston (1960-2000)



Source: U.S. Census ([www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)); classifications based on Texas State Data Center conventions; total populations are given in parentheses.

**Figure 18**  
**The Changing Distributions of Protestants, Catholics, and Others in Harris County (1982-2005)**



with New Mexico, Hawaii, and the District of Columbia, in majority-minority status. Moreover, as we have seen, Houston today looks very much like census projections for the country as whole by the middle of the century. This city's ability to navigate the difficult transition into becoming a successful and inclusive multiethnic society will be significant not only for the Houston future, but for the American future as well.

#### Religious transformations

A further manifestation of the demographic transition can be seen in the changes the surveys reveal in respondents' stated religious affiliations over the years. Figure 18 shows the percentages among successive representative samples of Harris County residents who, when asked for their religious preference, indicated they were Protestants, Catholics, or something else. Since its beginnings, Houston has been a predominantly Protestant city. The surveys make it clear that this is the case no longer.

The proportion of Protestants in the Houston area dropped steadily and significantly from one year to the next, falling from 65 percent in 1982-83 to just 38 percent in 2004-05. Meanwhile, the numbers of Catholics, fueled by Latino and Vietnamese immigration, grew from 22 percent in the earliest years to 32 percent most recently. The Jewish proportion of the survey population remained unchanged at approximately 1.4 percent,

and the numbers claiming no religion grew only slightly, from 6 to 8 percent in the early years to 9 or 10 percent more recently. During that same period, the share of the Harris County population claiming other religious affiliations (such as Islam, Buddhism, or Hinduism) tripled, from 6 percent in 1982-83 to 18 percent by 2004-05.

It is interesting to note in this connection that religious beliefs in general appear, if anything, to have grown stronger during the 24 years of the Houston surveys. Respondents each year were asked how important they felt religion was in their lives. The proportion saying that religion was "very important" grew from 52 percent in 1982-83 to 62 percent in 1994-95 and 65 percent in 2004-05. In addition, more respondents in 2004-05 (62 percent) than in earlier years (58 percent in 1997, 55 percent in 1986) said that they had attended religious services during the previous month. The changing mix of religious preferences among area residents during the past quarter-century has not meant any discernible weakening whatsoever in the strength and importance of religious convictions within the population as a whole.

## The Interactions of Ethnicity and Age

The ongoing ethnic transformations of America are especially dramatic when

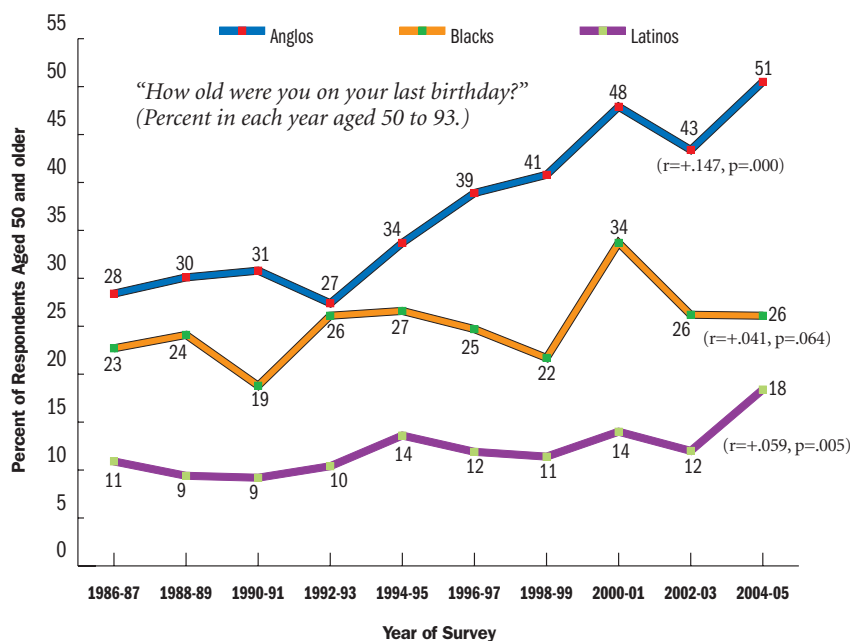
age is taken into account. The nation's current population of senior citizens is disproportionately Anglo, and they will soon be joined by the predominantly Anglo baby-boom generation. The 73 million Americans who were born during the halcyon days after World War II (1946-1964) are now aged 41 to 59. During the next thirty years, the number of Americans over the age of 65 will double. The younger populations who will replace the baby boomers are disproportionately non-Anglo and considerably less privileged. The "aging of America" is as much a division along ethnic lines as it is along generational lines.

In the Houston area, the intergroup differences by age are particularly striking because they also result from the timing of the two great population streams into this region. The earlier stream was largely composed, as we have seen, of "domestic migrants" — overwhelmingly non-Hispanic whites who were pouring into this region from elsewhere in the country, especially during the oil boom years of the 1960s through the early 1980s. The second stream is composed almost exclusively of immigrants from Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Caribbean. Almost always, of course, it is younger adults who are the most likely to brave the difficult journey in pursuit of better opportunities for themselves and their children. The ranks of Houston's Asians, Latinos, and blacks are being replenished by the continuing influx of younger immigrants. This is much less the case for Anglos.

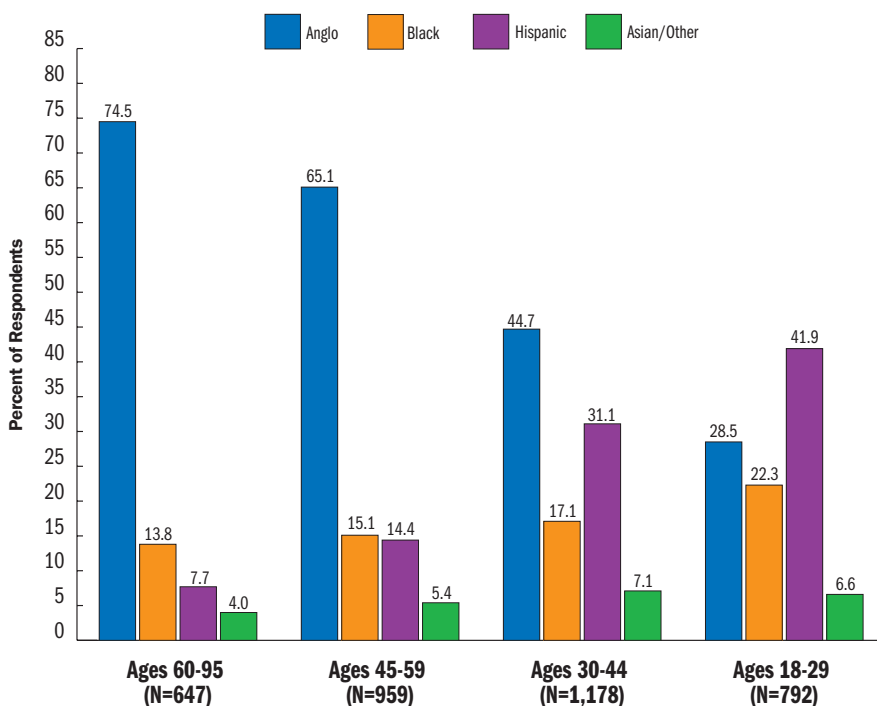
Figure 19 depicts the percentages of the area's Anglo, black, and Latino residents who were 50 years old and older at the time of the surveys. In 1992-93, just 27 percent of all the Anglo respondents were 50 or older. That proportion grew to 34 percent in 1994-95, 39 percent in 1996-97, 41 percent in 1998-99, 48 percent in 2000-01, and 51 percent in 2004-05. In each successive representative sample of Harris County residents, the Anglo population has been getting progressively older ( $r=+.147, p=.000$ ). In contrast, the data show very little increase in age among the African-American respondents across the years ( $r=+.041$ ), and none at all for the Latinos, with the exception of the sudden up-tick from 12 percent who were aged 50 and older in 2002-03 (no change from the 11 percent who were that age back in 1986-87) to 18 percent in 2004-05.

African Americans are the most

**Figure 19**  
Residents Aged 50 and Older in Three Communities (1986-2005)



**Figure 20**  
The Proportions in Four Age Groups Who Are Anglo, Black, Hispanic, and Asian or Other (2000-2005)



likely of all ethnic groups to be native Houstonians: 57 percent of the black respondents interviewed in the past five years (2001-2005) said they grew up in the Houston area. This was the case for less than 35 percent of the Anglo respondents. According to the surveys, the Anglo residents came to Houston at the median date of 1977, at the median age of twenty-eight. In contrast, the median date of arrival for Houston's Hispanic immigrants was 1993, at the median age of twenty-four. More than 40 percent of all Latino and Asian immigrants have come to this region within the past ten years (since 1995).

The timing of these migration patterns goes a long way toward explaining the predominance of non-Anglos among the younger adults in the Houston area. Figure 20 combines the last six representative samples of Harris County residents (2000-2005) to show the ethnic composition of four age groups. The data paint a striking demographic portrait of Houston's present and future.

Of all the respondents reached in the past six years who were sixty years old or older at the time of the interviews, almost 75 percent were Anglos, and just 14 percent were African Americans, 8 percent Hispanics, and 4 percent Asians. At each younger age group, particularly after age 45 (where the "baby boomers" predominate), the proportion of Anglos plummets, while the percentage of the other ethnicities (especially Latinos) grows rapidly. Among all young adults (age 18 to 29) living in Harris County today, 42 percent are Hispanics, 22 percent are African Americans, 7 percent are Asians, and fewer than 29 percent are Anglos.

Non-Anglos are even more dominant among the region's future adults. Anglo children are more likely than others, of course, to be attending private or suburban schools, but the latest figures from the Houston Independent School District ([www.houstonisd.org](http://www.houstonisd.org)) are nonetheless indicative. In the 2004-2005 school year, of all the 208,945 students in all H.I.S.D. classes from kindergarten through senior year in high school, 59 percent were now Latino children and another 29 percent were African Americans.

Thus we find ourselves at a remarkable hinge in history, a time when 75 percent of everyone in the region who is 60 years old or older is Anglo, and close to 75 percent of everyone under the age of 30 is either black or Hispanic. These are the two populations that are by far the most

likely to be living in poverty and that have been the least well served historically by the region's educational and social service institutions. Clearly, if the socioeconomic disparities are not substantially reduced, if too many of Houston's "minority" youth remain unprepared to succeed in the knowledge economy of the twenty-first century, it is difficult to envision a prosperous future for the region. This is also true, of course, for the state of Texas as a whole (see Murdock and Klineberg, forthcoming).

There is no doubt that Houston's extraordinary diversity can be a major asset for this port city in its efforts to position itself as a center for trade and commerce in the global economy. The new diversity could also become a serious liability, undermining rather than enhancing the region's competitive advantages. Without sustained and determined intervention to improve the quality of the public schools and family support systems, Houston will be unable to develop the educated work force that the new economy requires.

On the other hand, it is equally clear that if the education and income gaps can be substantially reduced, Houston will be in a position to capitalize fully on the advantages of having a young, multicultural and multi-lingual workforce, and will be well positioned for competitive success in the new economy. Much will depend upon how this generation of leadership responds to the challenges and opportunities inherent in these remarkable transformations.

## A Bifurcated Immigration Stream into a Bifurcated Economy

### The Extraordinary Socioeconomic Diversity

A critical aspect of the challenge facing this city and nation can be seen in Figure 21, which depicts the striking intergroup differences in educational attainment among Houston's varied immigrant and American-born communities. The con-

trasts reflect the two most important ways in which the current immigration differs from all previous immigrant streams in American history. First, of course, the new immigration is predominantly non-European; but second, and also unprecedented, are the socioeconomic disparities among the new immigrants. One group (mostly from Asia and Africa) is coming to Houston and America with higher levels of educational credentials and professional skills than ever before in the history of American immigration. Another, larger group (mostly Hispanic) is arriving with stunning educational deficits relative to the rest of the American population.

The 2002 Houston Area Asian Survey found that 88 percent of all Asian adults in Harris County are first-generation immigrants. More than two-thirds of all the Asian respondents indicated that they grew up in their countries of origin and came to Houston and America as adults. Figure 21 indicates further that 61 percent of all the Asian immigrants currently residing in the Houston area have college or postgraduate degrees, compared to just 46 percent of the U.S.-born Anglos.

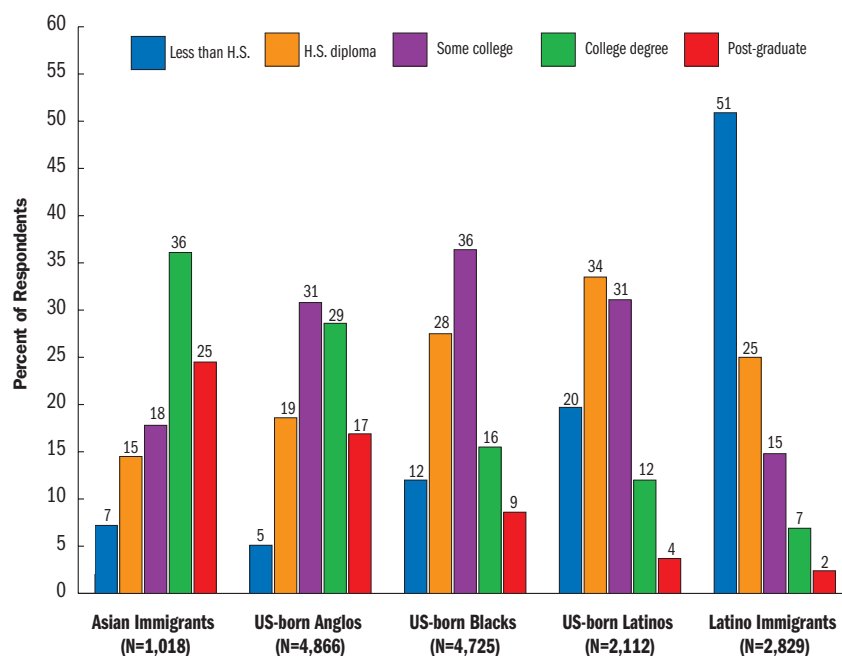
In sharp contrast, more than 51 percent of the Hispanic immigrants in Harris County, who constitute almost 60 percent of all Hispanic adults in the region, do not have high school diplo-

mas. Only 9 percent have college degrees. The comparable figures for Houston's American-born Latinos are 20 percent without high school diplomas and 16 percent with college degrees or more. The U.S.-born African Americans have higher levels of education than their Latino counterparts, but much lower levels than the Anglos or Asians: 12 percent of the African-American adults in the Houston area do not have high school diplomas, and 25 percent are college-educated.

### The Distinction Between Refugees and Immigrant Professionals

The success that so many Asian immigrants have achieved in America has given rise to the "model minority" myth. This widely held image is built on the assumption that today's Asians are much like the European peasants who came to America during the great "third wave" of immigration between 1890 and 1914. As was the case with these earlier immigrants, Asians are thought to have arrived in America with little money and few skills. If they have succeeded, it must therefore be solely by virtue of their hard work, high intelligence, and strong family values. This set of assumptions is often taken as additional confirma-

**Figure 21**  
**Educational Attainment in Five Houston Communities (1994-2005)**





tion that America remains a land of equal and unlimited opportunity for all. Hence, at least by implication, Houston's blacks and Latinos have only themselves to blame if they have not achieved equal success.

The data depicted in Figure 21 make it clear, however, that Asians have been relatively successful in Houston and America mainly because they come from families in their countries of origin whose educational and occupational attainments far exceed the average for native-born Anglos. When asked what occupation their fathers had when they themselves were 16 years old, almost half (48 percent) of all the Asian respondents in the 2002 survey said their fathers were doctors, lawyers, professors, engineers, corporate executives, or other professionals. This was true for just 39 percent of the Anglos and 17 percent of the African Americans and Latinos. Only 20 percent of all the Asians in Houston said their fathers were in low-paying production jobs or worked as agricultural or day laborers; but this was the case for 37 percent of Anglos, 62 percent of blacks, and 70 percent of Latinos.

The stereotype of the "model minority" thus overlooks the class advantages enjoyed by the high proportion of Asian immigrants who come from upper-middle-class families in their countries of origin, and it diverts attention from

continuing discrimination against people of color. It also lumps together into a single image individuals from 27 different nationalities who speak different languages, follow different religious and cultural traditions, and came to America under contrasting circumstances, for divergent reasons, and with vastly different levels of resources. Above all, the "model minority" myth glosses over the fact many Asian Americans are far from prosperous, and makes it less likely that Asians in need will be given the help that others receive.

#### *Four distinctive Asian communities*

Figure 22 depicts the educational differences among Houston's four largest Asian populations. The high overall levels of educational achievement among Asians in general mask important differences by country of origin. The differences have much to do with American immigration policies after reform in 1965. The new legislation identified three different avenues for preferential entry into this country. The primary welcome was to be based on family reunification; secondary preference would be given either to applicants with high levels of professional skills or to refugees with proven vulnerability to political persecution.

The Vietnamese fled to this country after the fall of Saigon in 1975 as part of the largest refugee resettlement program in American history. Like most

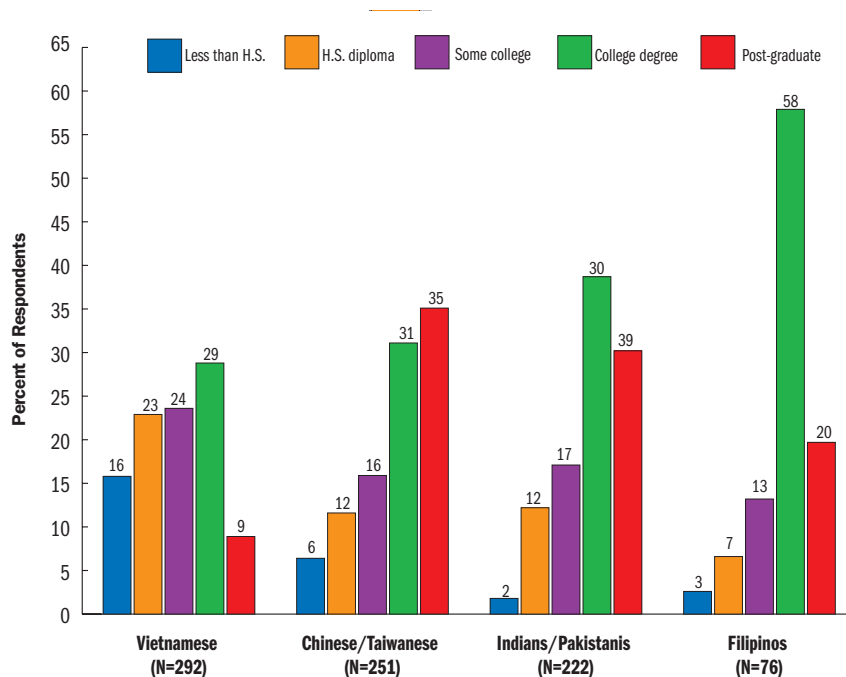
refugee communities in the United States (Cubans in Miami are a prime example), they came in at least two waves. Most of the early arrivals were highly educated professionals, politicians, or military officers who had served in the former American-backed governments in Vietnam. Thus of all the survey respondents from Vietnam who indicated that they came to America between 1975 and 1979, 58 percent had college degrees and 62 percent completed the interviews in English.

Many more Vietnamese came to Houston in the 1980s and 1990s with little formal education and few resources, having survived horrible conditions in refugee camps and terrifying voyages across the seas. Most speak little English: 68 percent of the Vietnamese respondents in the Houston surveys who had come to America since 1990 completed the interviews in their native languages. Only 22 percent of these immigrants have college degrees. When asked about their religious preferences, most said they were Buddhists, whereas the majority of the first-wave Vietnamese were Catholics or Protestants.

Hence, it is not surprising to see in Figure 22 a far greater variability in educational attainment among the Vietnamese than in the other Asian communities. More than 16 percent of the Vietnamese do not have high school diplomas, compared to just 7 percent of all Asians in the Houston area. Fewer than 38 percent have college or professional degrees, in contrast to 61 percent of the entire Asian population and to a striking 78 percent of the Filipinos (although Figure 22 also indicates that the Indians and Chinese are more likely than Filipinos to have post-graduate degrees).

The Filipinos in Houston, 67 percent of whom (according to the surveys) are women, came primarily under the occupational provisions of the 1965 Immigration Reform Act — conspicuously, the data suggest, for jobs as health technicians and nurses at the Texas Medical Center and other area hospitals. When asked what it was that brought them or their parents to America, 64 percent of the Filipino respondents said they came primarily for work opportunities. Almost three-fourths (72 percent) of the Vietnamese said they immigrated because of political persecution, as a result of war, or in search of freedom. The Chinese and Indians were more likely than the other Asian communities

**Figure 22**  
**Educational Attainment in Four Asian Communities (1995, 2002)**



to say that they came mainly for educational reasons.

Houston's Vietnamese, as we have seen, are generally facing far more challenging socioeconomic circumstances than other Asians. The surveys indicate that only 13 percent of all the Asian respondents were in low-paid production or day-labor jobs; but this was the case for 28 percent of the Vietnamese. These respondents were also less likely than other Asians to have health insurance and more likely to report that they have problems buying groceries to feed their families. Clearly, many Vietnamese are having a difficult time in the Houston area, and they may be less likely to receive the help they need, in a language they can understand, from a wider community that continues to believe that all the Asians are doing fine.

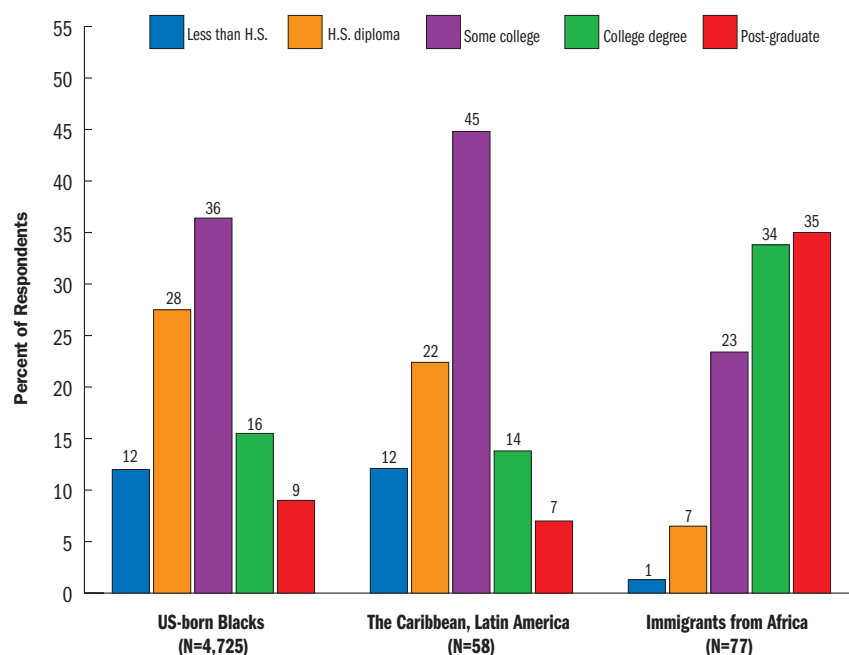
## Nigerians and Jamaicans

Figure 23 shows that distinctions by place of origin matter greatly for the black immigrants as well. Remarkably, the newcomers from Africa (primarily Nigeria) have higher levels of education than *any* other immigrant population reached in this research, including any of the Asian communities. Only 8 percent of the African immigrant respondents have high school diplomas or less; 69 percent have college degrees and 35 percent have post-graduate credentials. In contrast, the black immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean (primarily Jamaica) are arriving with levels of educational attainment that are no higher than those of Houston's native-born African Americans.

Why are the immigrants from Africa and from most of Asia coming to America with levels of education and professional credentials that are so much higher than those from Mexico, Central America, or Southeast Asia? The primary explanation lies in the restrictive immigration laws before reform in 1965. Throughout most of the twentieth century, Asians were declared to be "inassimilable aliens" and were effectively banned from coming to America, and Africans were never allowed before 1965 to immigrate freely. As a result, after the restrictive laws were changed, entry into America through family reunification was unavailable to these potential immigrants (although it would be the primary avenue of legal immigration for Mexican nationals).

As we have seen, the only other ways to be eligible for preferential access after

**Figure 23**  
**Educational Attainment in Three Black Communities (1994-2005)**



1965 were by virtue of refugee status (the Vietnamese), by qualifying as "professionals of exceptional ability" (Asian Indians, Chinese, Africans), or by having occupational skills that were sorely needed and in demonstrably short supply in the United States (Filipino nurses). The unprecedented socioeconomic disparities among today's immigrant communities reflect the history of American immigration policy. The new immigrants are being relegated either to the upper or the lower sections of the "hourglass" by virtue of the skills they bring with them from their countries of origin.

## Mexicans and Central Americans vs. Cubans and South Americans

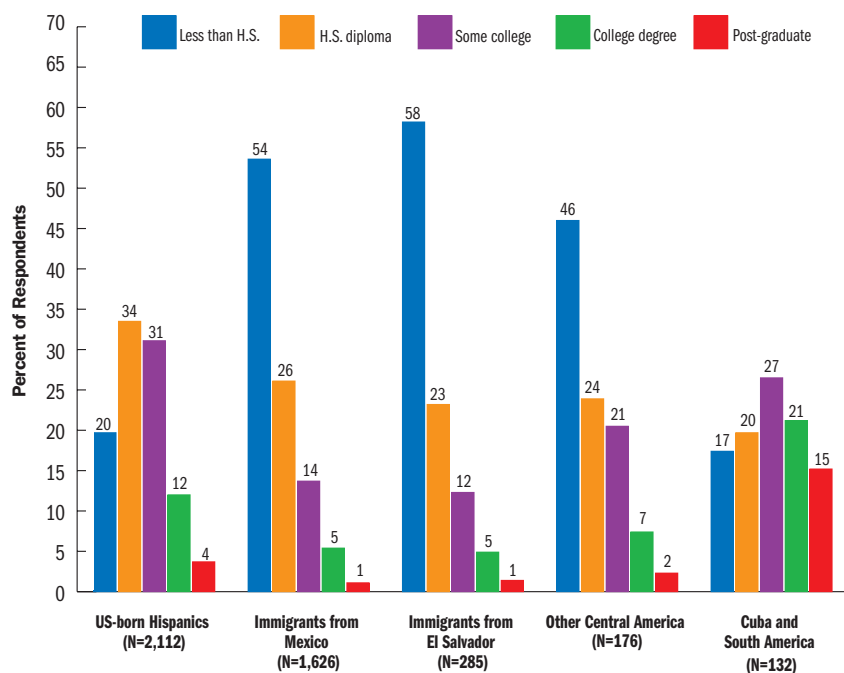
Figure 24 indicates that the immigrants from Cuba and South America, unlike those from Mexico and Central America, are coming to Houston with considerably higher levels of education and professional credentials than the U.S.-born Hispanics. Only 17 percent of the immigrants from these countries do not have high school diplomas; fully 36 percent have college degrees. These more highly skilled immigrants, however, represent just 6 percent of Houston's Hispanic immigrant population. According to the surveys and consistent with the cen-

sus, fully 72 percent of all the Latino immigrants in Harris County come from Mexico. Another 13 percent are from El Salvador, and 8 percent come from elsewhere in Central America. As indicated in Figure 24, the majority of immigrants from these countries do not have high school diplomas.

The immigrants from Mexico and Central America are coming to Houston with extraordinary energy and ambition, a proven willingness to work hard, and strong family values. They also come in great numbers with little formal education and few economic resources. They are generally working long hours in jobs that offer very low wages and no benefits. They are responsible for much of this region's inexpensive and high-quality construction and yard work, and they fill the expanding low-skilled niches in the service sector — cooking and washing dishes in restaurants, cleaning private homes, and caring for children and the elderly.

Thus of all the new immigrants into Houston and America, the very least skilled and the most vulnerable are those arriving from Mexico and Central America (Waldinger 2001). In the surveys conducted during the past five years (2001-2005), fully 65 percent of Houston's Latino immigrants who are in the Houston work force reported earning less than \$25,000 in the previous year.

**Figure 24**  
**Educational Attainment in Five Latino Communities (1994-2005)**



This was the case for 39 percent of the U.S.-born Hispanics, 36 percent of the African Americans, and just 19 percent of the Anglo respondents. Only 49 percent of the Hispanic immigrants have health insurance, compared to 86 percent of all other area residents.

The children of the Latino immigrants are generally attending overcrowded, underfunded inner-city schools. The parents are working from dawn to dusk locked in poverty, with few of the resources needed to help their children succeed in the public schools. Unless the wider Houston community is prepared to offer the kind of assistance and support that will provide these young people access to high-quality pre-school and after-school programs and encourage them to continue through high school and into some level of advanced education, they run the risk of being relegated to the same menial jobs now held by their parents (Portes and Rumbaut 1996). There can be little doubt that the way the lives of Houston's Latino immigrants and their children unfold will profoundly shape the region's future.

### Three Generations of Latinos

The long history and large numbers of Hispanics in the Houston area make it

possible to assess the experiences and perspectives of three generations of Latino immigrants. The three groups consist of those who are themselves foreign-born (the first-generation immigrants); those who were born in the United States but both of whose parents were born abroad (the second generation); and those who were not only born in the United States themselves, but report that both of their parents were also born in this country (the third-plus generation). The few Latino respondents who did not fit into one of these three categories were removed from this analysis.

#### *Measures of acculturation and assimilation*

To what degree is the traditional model of successful immigration being followed today? Are later generations of Latino immigrants doing better than those who came to America more recently? We make use of eleven expanded surveys to compare the three generations in the degree of their "acculturation" into the American mainstream and in the levels of educational and occupational success they have achieved. Figure 25 presents some of the differences among the three generations on measures of the extent to which they have assimilated into the mainstream American culture.

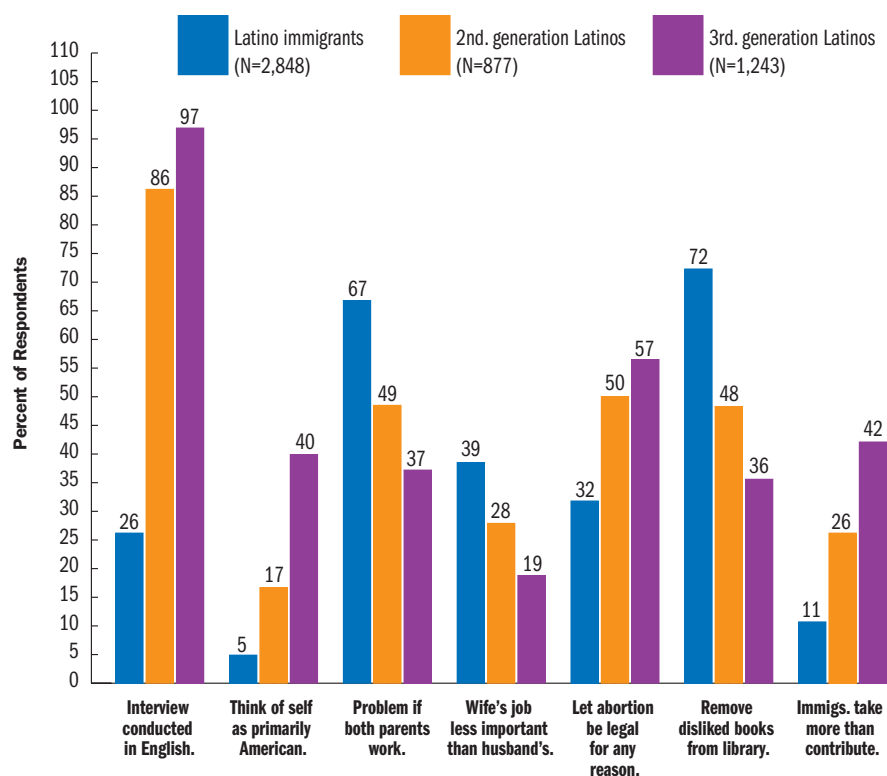
With each successive generation, and across a wide variety of areas, the data clearly indicate a progressive increase in

"Americanization." Thus, for example, third-generation Hispanics are more likely than the second generation, who in turn are far more likely than first-generation immigrants, to have conducted the interviews in English rather than Spanish. Only 26 percent of the Latino immigrants completed the surveys in English. Of the 74 percent who were interviewed in Spanish, 65 percent indicated that they spoke at least some English, but only 23 percent said they spoke it "fairly well." Among third-generation respondents, 97 percent answered the questions in English and 62 percent said they were at least somewhat fluent in Spanish.

The proportions who think of themselves as "primarily American" grew from 5 percent in the first generation to 17 percent in the second and 40 percent in the third. Conversely, the numbers who saw themselves as "primarily Hispanic" dropped from 76 to 31 to 19 percent. The attitude questions reflect an increasing endorsement from one generation to the next of the more secular and "modern" mainstream positions. Each generation is progressively less inclined to agree with the claim that "preschool children are likely to have problems later in life if both of their parents work," or that "it is more important for a wife to help her husband's career than to have one herself." Each is also more prepared to agree that "it should be legal for a woman to obtain an abortion if she wants to have one for any reason," and to disagree with the suggestion that "a book that most people disapprove of should be kept out of the public libraries."

In addition, each generation of Hispanic Americans is progressively more likely to have reservations about the new immigration. As indicated in Figure 25, the proportions believing that "immigrants to the U.S. generally take more from the American economy than they contribute" grew from 11 percent among the immigrants themselves to 26 percent in the second generation and 42 percent in the third. Similarly, the numbers calling for fewer immigrants to be admitted into the country grew from 31 percent among the Latino immigrants to 51 percent among the grandchildren of immigrants. The belief that "undocumented immigrants are a major cause of unemployment in the Houston area today" was endorsed by 29 percent of the first-generation immigrants, 31 percent of the second generation, and 47 percent of the third.

**Figure 25**  
**Some Indicators of Assimilation Among Three Generations of Latino Immigrants (1994, 1995, 1997-2005)**



These are compelling indications of a progressive movement from one immigrant generation to the next into the American cultural mainstream. The generational pattern that reveals an increasing internalization of the language and culture of America seems as clear today among Hispanics as it was a century ago among the Germans in Texas or the Swedes in Minnesota. Third-generation Latinos are more fully assimilated into American life than are members of the second generation, who in turn are clearly more “Americanized” than the first-generation immigrants.

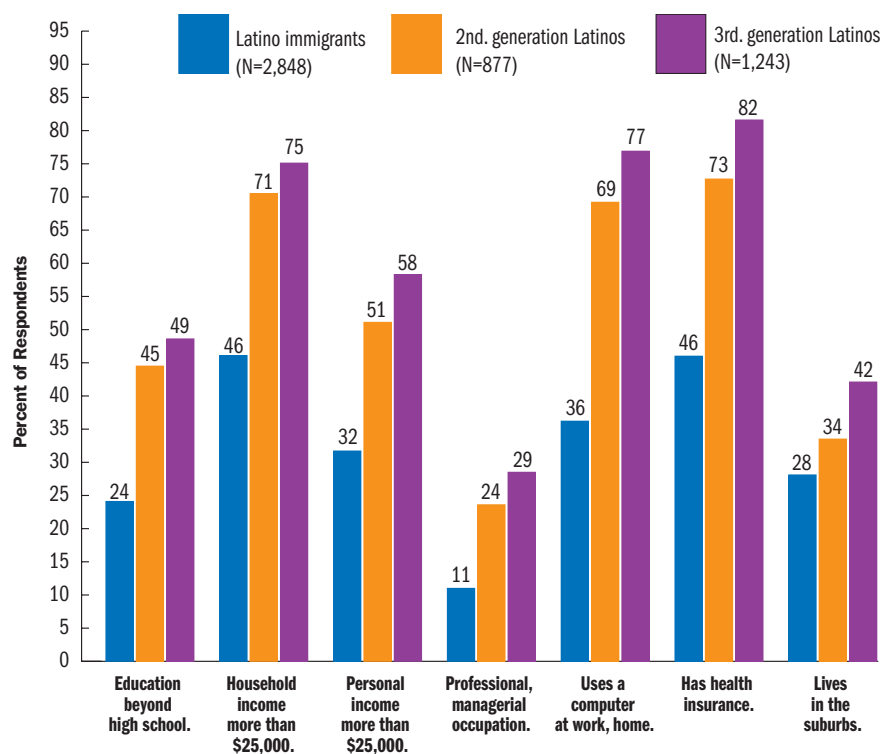
For the immigrants who arrived early in the last century, however, this was much more unmistakably a land of opportunity and upward mobility. Until the last quarter-century, American history has been a continuing story of the success achieved by third-generation immigrants as they climbed higher on the educational and economic ladder than their parents, just as the second generation climbed higher than the first. In a disconcerting break with that history, the data presented in Figure 26 show that this is much less clearly the case for today’s Hispanic population.

The surveys indicate that second- and third-generation Latinos have indeed risen above the positions that the first generation of new immigrants now occupies. In comparison with the foreign-born Hispanics, both of the U.S.-born generations report considerably higher levels of educational attainment, household and personal incomes, and occupational prestige. The two native-born populations are also far more likely to report using a personal computer in their home or place of work, to have health insurance, and to live in the suburbs of Harris County.

The data also make it clear, however, that the American-born Hispanics whose parents were also born in the United States (the third generation) have not advanced very much in either educational achievement or occupational status over those whose parents were foreign-born (the second generation). Third-generation Hispanics, the most “Americanized” of all Latinos, are only slightly more likely than those whose parents were first-generation immigrants to have had some education beyond high school or to report household or personal incomes above \$25,000.

The third-generation respondents are barely more likely to be in higher-status

**Figure 26**  
**Measures of Socioeconomic Status Among Three Generations of Latino Immigrants (1994, 1995, 1997-2005)**





positions as professionals or managers or to have health insurance. They are just slightly more likely than the second generation to use a personal computer at their home or place of work and to live in the suburbs. Systematic analyses indicate that almost all of the differences between second- and third-generation Latinos, although small, are nevertheless statistically significant, *i.e.*, they are large enough to permit the conclusion that the third generation has in fact experienced an advance in socioeconomic status over the second.

#### ***Roadblocks to mobility in the new economy***

It is nevertheless surprising that the advance has not been greater. Despite the evidence (in Figure 25) of their fuller integration into mainstream American culture, most in the third generation are not staying in school much longer than the current representatives of their parents' generation; nor are they earning appreciably higher wages in more desirable jobs. Why is the old model of immigrant success not being replicated among Hispanics today? Several factors appear to be implicated.

For one, Hispanics (particularly those with Indian features and darker skins) are more likely to experience discrimination than were the European immigrants of a century ago. In addition, several studies point to the influence on young Hispanics of an "adversarial culture" in urban America that tends to denigrate school achievement and discourage high aspirations (Portes and Rumbaut 1996). In addition, any persuasive explanation for the relative underachievement of third-generation Hispanics must take into account the broader changes explored earlier that have constricted the opportunities for upward mobility in today's economy.

The classic formula for successful immigration envisioned three or four generations to climb the proverbial ladder, from low-wage entry-level jobs through blue-collar mobility, and finally into college and mainstream America. "Peddler, plumber, professional" was the expected generational progression (Suro 1998). The vigorous industrial-era society that greeted the earlier immigrants contained many upward steps on the ladder of mobility through an abundance of well-paid blue-collar jobs, buttressed by favorable government policies. This was particularly the case, as we have seen, in the America of the 1950s and 1960s,

when the third-generation descendants of the Europeans who came early in the last century entered the labor force.

In today's increasingly polarized, two-tiered economy, however, many of the intermediate rungs on that occupational ladder have disappeared. Increasingly, the economy now provides either low-wage, low-skill service or production jobs on the one hand, or well-paid professional positions requiring college degrees on the other. The opportunities for upward mobility today require levels of schooling that the third generation of Latino Americans and their parents may simply be unable to afford.

High school dropout rates reflect in part the pressure so many young Latinos feel to help their parents by getting a job as soon as possible. Why stay in school, they may ask themselves, when there are few good opportunities even for high school graduates and when a college degree seems hopelessly out of reach? Whatever the combination of forces responsible for the slowing of generational progress, these are not obstacles that impoverished young people can easily overcome on their own. Sustained determination on the part of the wider society, fueled by new public and private investments, will be required in order to surmount the barriers to achievement that now consign far too many children of unskilled workers, whatever their ethnicity, to lives that offer little hope for a better future.

## **Assessments of Intergroup Relationships**

As the demographic revolution unfolds within a polarized economy, there will inevitably be conflict and controversy. The ongoing changes are generating fears, suspicions, insecurities, and frustrations. They are also bringing enriched interpersonal relationships and unexpected opportunities for people of varied backgrounds to work together in building the new multiethnic future. How these contradictory consequences will develop is unclear. It is important, therefore, to track with reliable empirical data the nature and evolution of ethnic relations in the Houston area, and to measure the public's acceptance of intergroup differences in general.

## **The Growth of Pro-Immigrant Attitudes**

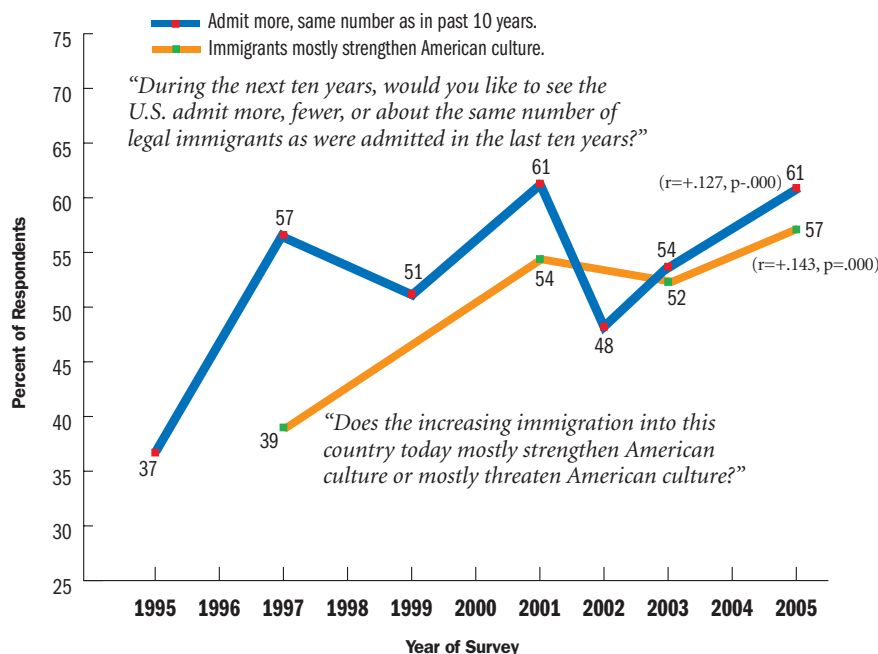
Overall, the surveys clearly suggest that the state of ethnic relations in Houston is good. Area residents have been asked a variety of questions over the years to measure their attitudes toward the demographic trends that are transforming the Houston region. Consistently, strikingly, and unmistakably, no matter how the questions are worded, the survey respondents across the years have expressed progressively more positive attitudes toward Houston's burgeoning ethnic diversity. Figure 27 presents the responses to two questions that directly measure attitudes toward the new immigration.

When successive representative samples of Harris County residents were asked if they would like to see the U.S. admit more, fewer, or the same number of legal immigrants in the next ten years as were admitted in the past ten years, the proportions calling for more or the same number grew from 37 percent in 1995 to 57 percent in 1997 and 61 percent in 2001. In February 2002, shortly after 9/11, support for more immigration fell back to 48 percent. It grew again to 54 percent in 2003. When the question was repeated in the 2005 survey, 61 percent of the respondents were once again calling for more or the same number of immigrants to be admitted — returning precisely to where the number had been just before the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.

Figure 27 also documents progressively more positive beliefs about the impact of the new immigrants on American culture. When asked if they thought the increasing immigration into this country today mostly strengthens or mostly threatens American culture, the proportion of area residents saying the new immigrants mostly strengthen the culture grew from 39 percent in 1997 to 54 and 52 percent in 2001 and 2003, and to 57 percent in 2005.

In addition, respondents were asked if they thought "immigrants to the U.S. generally take more from the American economy than they contribute, or do they contribute more than they take?" The percentages among the successive samples of area residents who said the immigrants generally contribute more than they take grew from 35 percent in 1996, to 48 percent in 1998, to 52 and 49 percent in 2002 and 2004. The propor-

**Figure 27**  
**Attitudes Toward the New Immigration (1995-2005)**

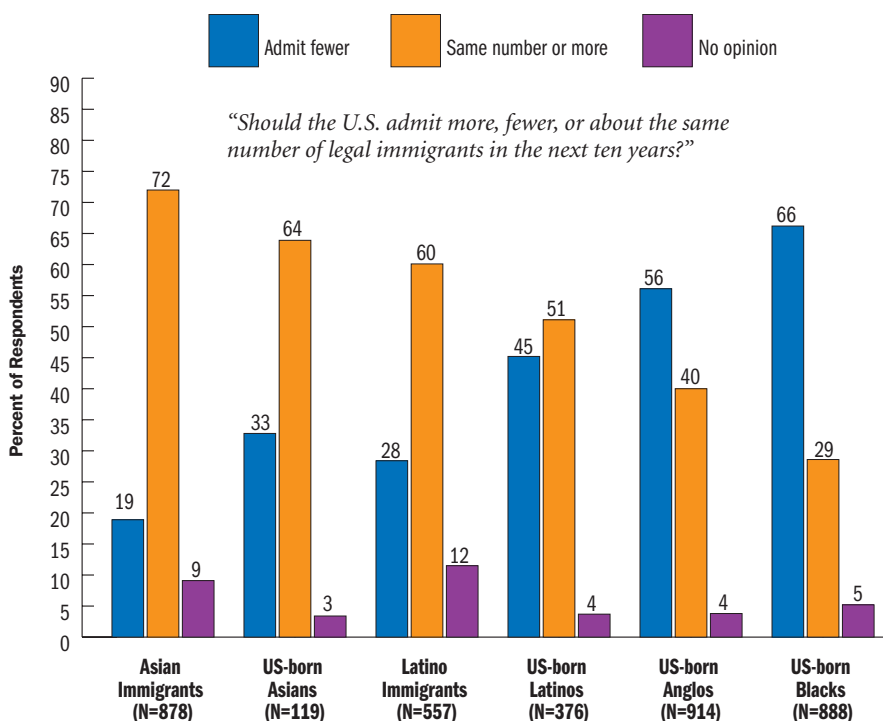


tions agreeing with the suggestion that “undocumented immigrants are a major cause of unemployment in the Houston area today” declined steadily, from 54 percent in 1989, to 44 percent in 1996 and 1999, to just 34 percent in 2004.

When asked about the statement, “We should take action to reduce the number of new immigrants coming to America,” agreement dropped from 54 percent in 2000 to 48 percent in 2004.

Not everyone, of course, is equally

**Figure 28**  
**Support for Immigration in Six Ethnic Communities (1995, 2002)**



enthusiastic about the arrival of so many newcomers. There are important and consistent intergroup differences in anti-immigrant attitudes. Not surprisingly, Latinos and Asians, as recent immigrants themselves, are far more likely to be positively predisposed to the new immigration, and (as noted above in discussing differences among the three Latino generations) the closer the U.S.-born respondents are to their own immigrant experience, the more favorable their views. Figure 28, drawing on the two expanded surveys (in 1995 and 2002) that reached large representative samples from all four of Houston’s major ethnic communities, illustrates the basic pattern of intergroup differences on immigration issues.

Fully 72 percent of the Asian immigrant respondents were calling for more or at least the same number of legal immigrants to be admitted in the next ten years. This was also the case for 64 percent of the U.S.-born Asians, 60 percent of the Latino immigrants, and 51 percent of the U.S.-born Latinos. Only 40 percent of the U.S.-born Anglos, however, said they would be happy to see more or the same number of new immigrants admitted in the decade ahead, and the number dropped to just 29 percent among the U.S.-born African Americans. Conversely, 66 percent of the African-American respondents were calling for fewer new immigrants to be admitted. This was the case for 56 percent of U.S.-born Anglos, 45 percent of U.S.-born Latinos, 28 percent of Latino immigrants, and just 19 percent of Asian immigrants.

Virtually the same pattern holds for other beliefs about the new immigrants (e.g., Do they take more from the American economy than they contribute? — Should we take action to reduce the number of new immigrants coming to America?). Across the board, respondents who are immigrants themselves have the most positive views; their children are somewhat less enthusiastic about the new immigration, and the U.S.-born Anglos are still less so. The African-American respondents consistently express the strongest reservations. Such views undoubtedly reflect African Americans’ far stronger feelings of vulnerability in competing for semi-skilled jobs with Latino immigrants, who are prepared to work for less than most Americans would expect, putting downward pressure on the salaries paid for all low-level service jobs in today’s economy.

### The new diversity

Figure 29 tracks the responses to two questions that sought to measure more directly the respondents' attitudes toward Houston's ethnic diversity itself. When asked if they thought the region's burgeoning diversity will eventually become a source of great strength or a growing problem for the city, the proportions in the successive representative samples of Harris County residents who believed that the diversity would turn out to be a source of strength for this city rose steadily from 57 percent when the question was first asked in 1996, to 59 percent in 1998, 64 percent in 2000, and 69 percent in the 2004 survey.

In alternating years, respondents were also asked whether they believed that "the increasing ethnic diversity in Houston brought about by immigration is a good thing or a bad thing." Figure 29 indicates that the proportions saying that the growing diversity is a good thing for the city increased significantly from 54 percent in 1994 to 63 percent in 1999 and 69 percent in 2001, fell back to 64 percent in 2003, then rose again to 67 percent in 2005.

What accounts for these increasingly positive assessments of the new immigration? The good feelings may derive in part from the region's residential patterns. In this low-density, sprawling metropolis, largely composed of isolated subdivi-

sions, people are rarely made uneasy by the intrusion of non-English-speaking strangers. Area residents are less likely to feel encroached upon as they look out from their relatively homogeneous neighborhoods onto an increasingly vibrant, colorful, and interesting world, enriched by the expanding cultural variety of Houston's restaurants, theaters, and festivals.

The growing ethnic diversity, as noted earlier, is also widely recognized in the business community as an important potential asset for this major port city in its efforts to build enduring cultural and economic interconnections in the global marketplace. Houston's public and private leadership has been virtually unanimous in calling for the city to capitalize on its diversity in the new economy. Whatever the combination of causes, the widespread belief among area residents that Houston's diversity is a positive development for the region will surely facilitate the interethnic cooperation that will be needed to build a truly successful multiethnic society.

### Assessments of Ethnic Relations

Further confirmation of positive feelings in this connection can be seen in the way survey respondents have evaluated the relations among the various ethnic

groups in the Houston area. In every year since 1992, the proportions in the successive samples who gave ratings of "excellent" or "good" to Houston's ethnic relations grew consistently from 20 percent in 1992 to 30 percent in 1997, 43 percent in 2002, and 48 percent in 2005. Figure 30 graphs the responses separately for each of Houston's three largest ethnic communities.

The continually improving assessments are particularly evident and consistent among Anglo respondents, at least through 2001, when the positive ratings stabilized at approximately 50 percent saying that ethnic relationships in Houston were excellent or good. These were considerably higher proportions in that year than was the case either for the Latino respondents (only 32 percent gave positive ratings in 2001) or the African Americans (35 percent). In the years since then, while the Anglo views remained unchanged, the evaluations given by Latinos and blacks continued to improve.

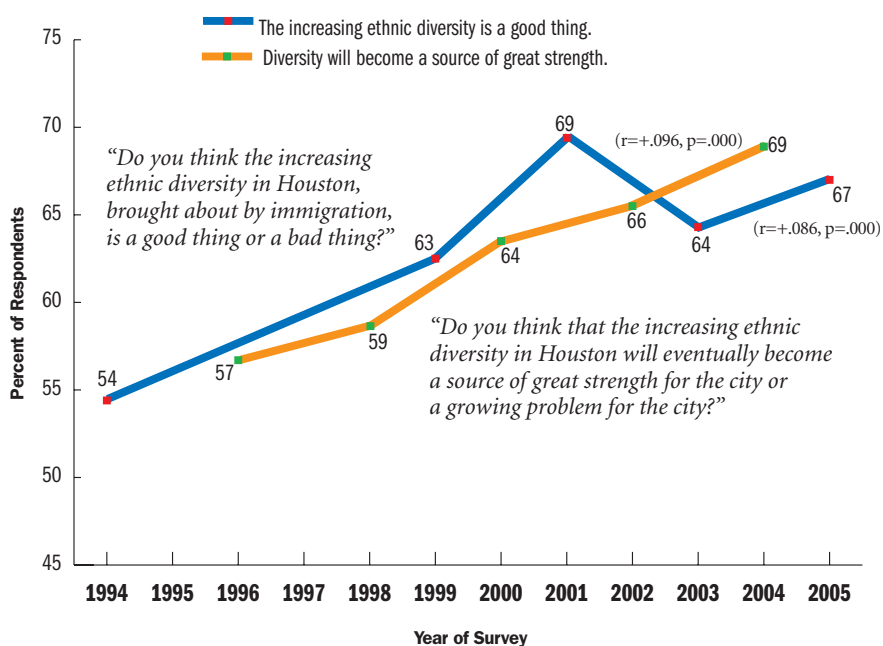
As a result, the consistently less favorable assessments among the two minority communities converged by 2005 with the more positive Anglo views. In the 2005 survey, 49 percent of the Anglo respondents said that relations among ethnic groups in the Houston area were excellent or good. This was also the case for 48 percent of the Latinos and 46 percent of the African Americans.

### The ten-point scales

In an effort to clarify further the way the different communities evaluate ethnic relationships in Houston, survey participants were asked on six different occasions between 1995 and 2004 to evaluate on a 10-point scale (where "10" means "excellent" and "1" means "very poor") the relations that generally exist in the Houston area between their group and each of the other three major ethnic communities. Confirming the positive changes depicted in Figure 30, the ratings without exception grew increasingly positive over the years among all four ethnic communities (Anglos, African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians) in their evaluations of the relationships between their group and all three of Houston's other populations.

There were also interesting intergroup differences in evaluations of the same relationships. Anglos consistently give higher ratings to Anglo-black relations in Houston than do African Americans

**Figure 29**  
**Beliefs About Houston's Ethnic Diversity (1994-2005)**



themselves. Combining the scores across the six years, an average of 39 percent of all Anglo respondents gave scores of 7 to 10 in their evaluations of Anglo-black relationships, but this was true for just 28 percent of the African Americans. There were no differences between Anglos and Latinos in their ratings of Anglo-Hispanic relationships. Latino immigrants, however, give substantially lower scores to black-Hispanic relations than do either the U.S.-born Latinos or the black respondents. In addition, blacks evaluate their relationships with Latinos more favorably than they do their relations with Anglos, whereas Hispanics (especially the Latino immigrants) give higher ratings to their relations with Anglos than to their relations with blacks.

The Asian respondents consistently give more positive ratings to all three relationships (Asian-Anglo, Asian-black, and Asian-Hispanic) than do any of their non-Asian counterparts. Of all the intergroup relationships being evaluated on these scales, Anglos and Asians give the most positive ratings to the relations between their two communities. The next most favorable are the ratings given to Anglo-Hispanic relationships. The most tension-free relationships in Houston, by these measures, are those between Anglos on the one hand and Asians and Hispanics on the other.

African Americans experience the most problematic relationships overall, now no longer just in relation to Anglos. The lowest ratings given by any group to any relationship are the ones given by blacks to Asian-black relationships. Asians also give the lowest ratings to their relationships with blacks, but still rate them far higher than do the African Americans themselves.

The findings point to important areas of tension and potential conflict within an overall generally positive and improving picture of interethnic relationships in the Houston area. It will be important to encourage the development of closer and more trusting interactions between African Americans and the Latino immigrants and between blacks and Asians in Houston. Black-Anglo relations are also deeply problematic, burdened (as will be seen below) by continuing prejudices and by fundamental disagreements about the extent of equality of opportunity in American society. None of these cautionary findings, however, should detract from the overall conclusion that area residents are increasingly comfortable with their city's burgeoning diversity. That assessment is further reinforced by evidence of growing acceptance and comfort among area residents with regard to a variety of other dimensions of diversity as well.

## The Declining Fear of Crime

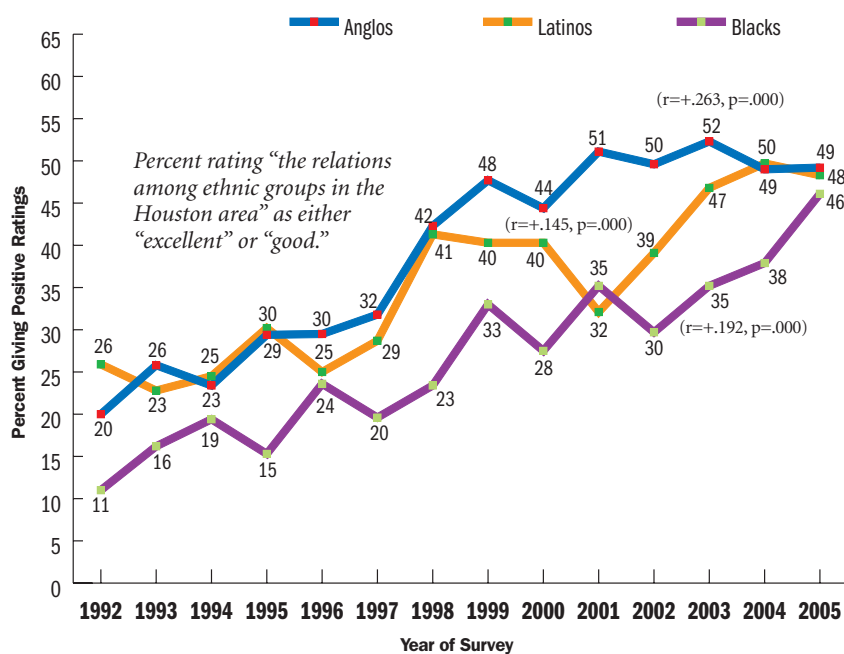
An important positive development for the city, as we have seen, is the decreasing percentage of survey respondents since 1994 who spontaneously name crime as the biggest problem facing people in the Houston area today. The lessening concern about crime was confirmed in the more direct measures the surveys have included in recent years. Thus, when respondents in 1994 were asked how safe they would feel walking in their neighborhood after dark, just 26 percent said they felt "very safe." That number grew to 29 percent in 1998 and to 40 percent in 2002 and 2004. When asked in 1994 how they personally felt about crime compared to a year earlier, 55 percent said they felt "more uneasy." The proportions dropped to 38 percent in 1996 and 28 percent in 1998, then rose to 35 percent in 2000.

In alternating years since 1995, respondents were asked, "How worried are you personally that you or a member of your family will become the victim of a crime?" As indicated in Figure 31, the overall proportions of area residents who said they were "very worried" declined sharply and consistently, from 41 percent in 1995 to 31 percent in 1997, 27 percent in 1999, 23 percent in 2001, and 21 percent in 2003. In the 2005 survey, the numbers were up slightly to 26 percent. Conversely, the proportions who said they were "not very worried" or "not worried at all" grew from 20 percent in 1995 to 28 percent in 1999, and to 37 percent in both 2003 and 2005.

Figure 31 also presents the data separately for four communities. Over the years, Latino immigrants have felt considerably more vulnerable than other area residents. In the 2005 survey, fully 63 percent of the foreign-born Latinos said they were very worried about being the victim of a crime, compared to just 26 percent for the population as a whole. Only 17 percent of the Latino immigrants said they were not very or not at all worried, compared to 37 percent of all other respondents.

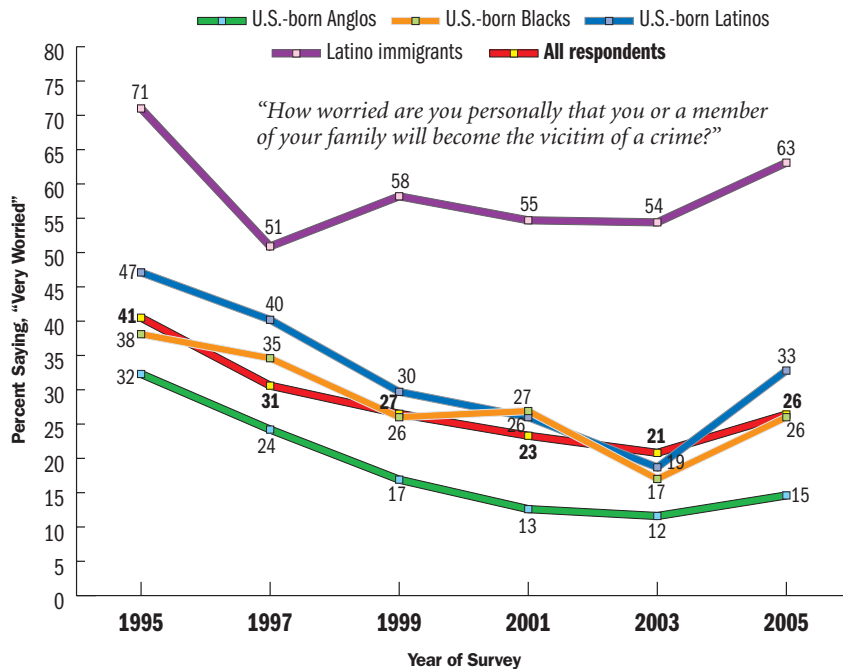
One of the most powerful predictors of Latino immigrants' crime fears is their command of English. In the 2005 survey, three-fourths of all foreign-born Latinos answered the surveys in Spanish, and 73 percent of these respondents said they were very worried that they or a family member will be the victim of a crime.

**Figure 30**  
**Positive Ratings of the Relations Among Ethnic Groups in the Houston Area (1992-2005)**





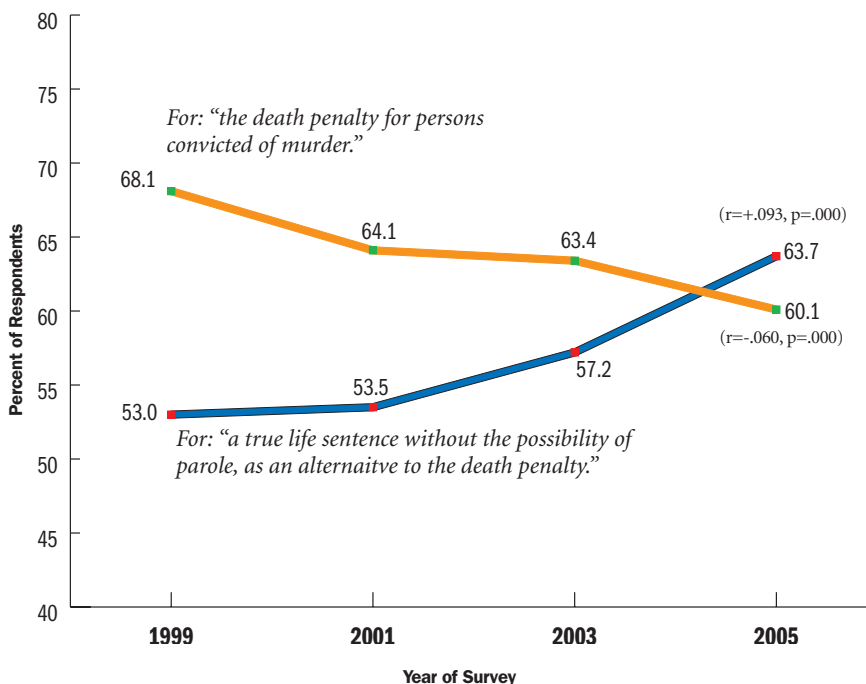
**Figure 31**  
**The Fear of Crime Overall, and in Four Communities**  
**(1995-2005)**



In sharp contrast, only 33 percent of the immigrants who conducted the interviews in English expressed such fears. We know that most Latino immigrants have come to Houston with few skills, speaking little English, and facing daunting economic and cultural challenges. The surveys also indicate that they are considerably less likely to say that they have personal friends who are Anglo, Asian, or black than any of the U.S.-born respondents. It is not surprising, therefore, that Latino immigrants — especially among those who speak little or no English — might feel particularly vulnerable and insecure in Houston today.

It is worth noting that the lessening fear of crime in recent years has been accompanied by growing support for less punitive measures in response to both crime and drugs. In 1995, for example, only 36 percent of the respondents agreed that “the possession of small amounts of marijuana should not be treated as a criminal offense.” The numbers grew to 41 percent when the question was asked again in 2003. Similarly, when presented in 2005 with the statement, “People in possession of small amounts of marijuana should be fined rather than sent to jail,” fully 69 percent agreed, and only 26 percent disagreed. In another indication of more tolerant views, 53 percent in 1997 were in favor of “making marijuana legally available for medical purposes.” The proportion jumped to 62 percent in the 2003 survey.

**Figure 32**  
**Support for the Death Penalty vs. Life Imprisonment**  
**(1999-2005)**



#### *Attitudes toward the death penalty*

In 1993, 79 percent of area residents were in favor of “the death penalty for persons convicted of murder.” By 1999, as indicated in Figure 32, that number had dropped to 68 percent, then dropped again to 64 and 63 percent in 2001 and 2003, and to 60 percent in 2005. Meanwhile, the proportions in support of an alternative to the death penalty (“a true life sentence without the possibility of parole”) grew gradually and consistently from 53 percent in 1999 and 54 percent in 2001, to 57 percent in 2003 and 64 percent in 2005. The proportions who expressed support for the death penalty over the alternative of a real life sentence dropped from 43 percent in 1999 to 31 percent in 2005.

Similarly, when respondents in the 2000 survey were given the choice among three different punishments for persons convicted of first-degree murder, a clear plurality (42 percent) chose the death

penalty over life imprisonment with no chance for parole (33 percent) or life imprisonment with a chance for parole after 25 years (21 percent). When that same question was asked in 2004, the proportion of area residents favoring the death penalty dropped from 42 to 36 percent, while those choosing life without parole grew from 33 to 41 percent.

## The Triumph of the “Tolerant Traditionalists”

### Abortion rights

Another intriguing indication of the growing acceptance of differences can be seen in area residents’ perspectives on the complex and controversial questions of abortion and homosexuality. When asked about the morality of abortion and about support for new laws that would restrict a woman’s access to abortion, there were no changes on either question between 1997 and 2005. As shown in Figure 33, 54 percent in 2005 said that abortion was morally wrong, but so did 55 percent in 1997. The data also make it clear that there are many area residents who espouse “traditional” values for themselves, yet respect the rights of others to make different decisions in their own lives.

In 2005, Figure 33 indicates that 54 percent of the respondents said they personally believed that abortion was mor-

ally wrong, yet only 37 percent were in favor of “a law that would make it more difficult for a woman to obtain an abortion.” Similarly, respondents were asked on seven different occasions between 1988 and 2004 about the statement, “It should be legal for a woman to obtain an abortion if she wants to have one for any reason.” By an average of 56 percent in agreement to 40 percent opposed, and despite their reservations regarding the morality of abortion, area residents have decisively endorsed that strong assertion of the right to choose. It is because of these “tolerant traditionalists” (representing approximately 20 percent of all area residents) that Houston can lay claim to being a modern, generally progressive city rather than a traditionalistic one.

While attitudes on this issue have not changed over the years, it is important to note that the intensity with which such views are held is a significant factor in turning “public opinion” into “politically effective opinion.” In 2004, area residents were evenly divided (by 47 to 48 percent) on whether they considered themselves to be “pro-life” or “pro-choice” in the abortion debate. All were asked about the extent to which their views on that issue would influence their voting behavior: “Suppose that there was a candidate running for the Legislature whose views you mostly agreed with but who took a position on abortion rights that you disagreed with completely. Would you

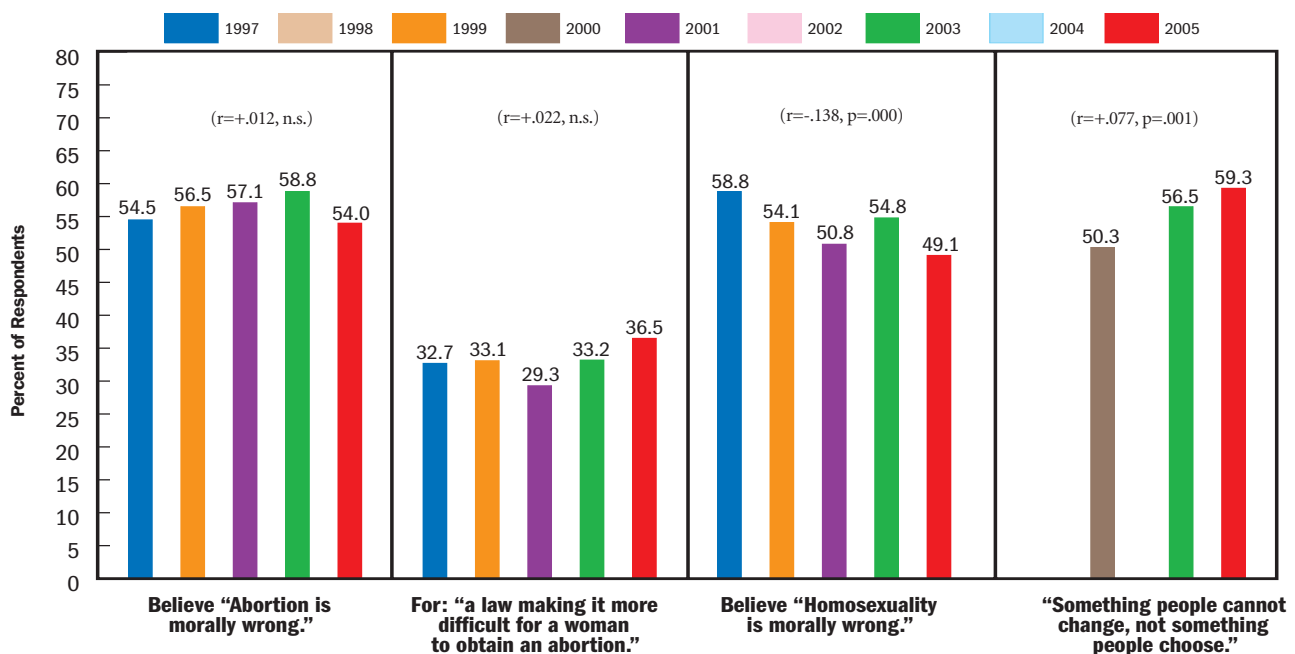
certainly not vote for that candidate, probably not, or could you still vote for that candidate?” Less than a third (32.9 percent) of the “pro-life” respondents said they could vote for a pro-choice candidate, but more than half (50.2 percent) of those who described themselves as “pro-choice” said they could nevertheless vote for an anti-choice politician.

### Gay rights

Meanwhile, on issues of homosexuality, in contrast to abortion, meaningful change has occurred — gradually, inconsistently, but unmistakably — during the nine years in which these questions have been asked in the surveys. Figure 33 indicates that the percentage of respondents who believed that homosexuality was “morally wrong” decreased from 59 percent in 1997 to 54 percent in 1999 and 51 percent in 2001, rose to 55 percent in 2003, and then fell to 49 percent in the 2005 survey.

Figure 33 also shows that 50 percent of area residents in the 2000 survey believed that homosexuality is “something people cannot change” rather than “something people choose.” The numbers holding that view increased significantly to 57 percent in 2003 and 59 percent in 2005. In a similar question, included in three other surveys, respondents were asked if they thought homosexuality was primarily “a matter of personal choice, an inborn trait, or something caused by

**Figure 33**  
**Beliefs about Abortion and Homosexuality (1997-2005)**



the social environment.” The percentage of respondents saying they believed homosexuality to be a matter of personal choice dropped from 50 percent in 1993 and 49 percent in 1999 to just 38 percent in 2004.

The position people take on whether homosexuality is a personal choice or an unchanging condition is the single most powerful predictor of their attitudes toward gay rights in general. If homosexuality is understood to be part of the natural variation among human beings, then it is no longer a moral issue and becomes instead a question of a person’s comfort with human diversity in general, a comfort and acceptance that the surveys indicate have been growing among area residents along a variety of dimensions. (The second most important predictor of support for gay rights, by the way, is having a personal friend who is gay or lesbian. In the 2005 survey, 54 percent of area residents said they did indeed have a gay friend.)

The surveys also asked about the two most contentious issues with regard to gay rights. On both questions, support for equal treatment grew steadily until 2001 or 2002 and remained unchanged in the years since then. In 1991, only 19 percent were in favor of “homosexuals being legally permitted to adopt children.” That number grew to 26 percent in 2000, then to 38 and 36 percent in 2002 and 2004. In 1997, 30 percent agreed with

the statement that “marriages between homosexuals should be given the same legal status as heterosexual marriages.” The proportion in agreement grew to 37 percent in 2001, and was unchanged in 2003 and 2004.

Gradually, if haltingly and inconsistently, area residents appear to be coming to the view that homosexuality is part of the natural variation in the human condition. Their support for equal rights for gays and lesbians, while still far from overwhelming, increased significantly during the 1990s, and appears likely to continue to expand slowly but surely in the years ahead.

#### *Perspectives on mental illness*

A progressively unfolding process of growing tolerance may also help to account for area residents’ generally “enlightened” views with regard to those who are suffering from mental illness. In collaboration with the Mental Health Association of Greater Houston, the 2004 Houston Area Survey included several new questions that sought to measure public beliefs about mental illness. The pattern of findings makes it clear that area residents have generally come to believe that mental illness is essentially a physiological disorder that ought to be treated like any other physical illness. Fully two-thirds of the survey respondents said that mental illness is primarily due to a brain or other physiological

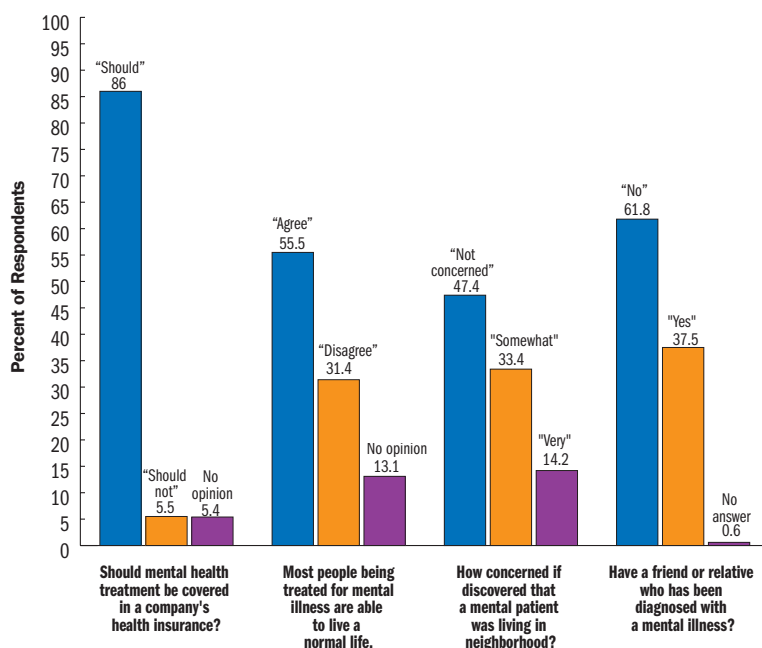
disorder; only 5 percent attributed the infirmity to “a character flaw.”

Four additional questions are presented in Figure 34. By 86 percent, an overwhelming majority of area residents believe that corporate health insurance programs should be required to cover mental health treatment in the same way as other illnesses. By 56 to 31 percent, they agreed that “most people being treated for mental illness are able to live a normal life.” By 47 percent, a clear plurality would *not* be concerned if they discovered that a person being treated for mental illness was living in their neighborhood. In addition, not shown in the figure, a majority (by 51 to 42 percent) said they would be willing to pay higher taxes to improve access to mental health services in the Houston area.

Not surprisingly, there are disagreements about the effectiveness of therapy and differences among the respondents in their comfort levels when encountering someone being treated for a mental illness. Democrats and liberals are more inclined than Republicans and conservatives to approve of requiring corporations to provide mental health insurance and raising taxes to improve access to mental health services. African Americans are more apt to be concerned if a person living in their neighborhood is being treated for a mental illness. Women are more likely than men to agree that most people undergoing treatment can live a normal life.

All these predictors pale, however, when compared to the single question shown in Figure 34, asking about the respondents’ personal experience with mental illness. The 38 percent of area residents who said they had a friend or relative who had been diagnosed with a mental illness were far more likely to express “enlightened” views across the board, compared to the 62 percent without such knowledge. They were significantly more inclined to favor improved access to mental health services through equal insurance coverage and higher taxes, to say that learning of a neighbor under treatment is not a reason for concern, and to believe that most people being treated for mental illness can live a normal life. Mental illness is no respecter of the standard sociological differentiations by ethnicity, gender, age, education, income, politics, or religion, and it is personal knowledge wherever it occurs that has the greatest impact on public perceptions.

**Figure 34**  
**Area Residents’ Perspectives on Mental Illness (2004)**



### In sum

The surveys converge in suggesting that area residents are growing more comfortable with the new diversity that defines the Houston region. We have seen this in their increasingly positive evaluations of Houston's ethnic diversity and of ethnic relations in general, their decreasing fear of crime, their willingness to support the right of others to make personal choices of which they themselves might disapprove, their growing acceptance of homosexuality as the reflection of natural human variation, and the diminishing stigma they attach to mental illness. Houston will need to build on area residents' growing acceptance of such differences if it is to forge a strengthened sense of mutual respect and common purpose among its varied populations and to overcome the misunderstandings that derive from sharp intergroup disparities in perspectives and beliefs.

## The Ethnic Divides in Attitudes and Experiences

### The Growing Acceptance of Integration — in Principle

Increasing tolerance is also reflected in responses to questions that have sought to measure racial prejudice directly. On five different occasions, the Anglo and African-American respondents were asked about their personal preferences with regard to the racial composition of their neighborhoods. As indicated in Figure 35, the proportions of Anglos who said they would personally prefer to live in a fully integrated neighborhood (with white and black residents "mixed half and half") grew dramatically from 27 percent in 1986, to 40 percent in 1991 and 43 percent in 1998, to 60 percent in 2001 and 57 percent in 2005. The numbers who said they preferred an "all white" neighborhood dropped from 31 percent in 1986 to just 5 percent in 2005.

There were no comparable shifts in the attitudes of the African-American

respondents toward neighborhood segregation. In proportions ranging from 69 to 75 percent over the years, the African Americans in the Houston area have consistently indicated a strong desire to live in fully integrated ("mixed half and half") neighborhoods.

What are we to make of the striking changes in the expressed preference for racial integration among Anglos in Houston? Data from the 2000 census indicate that residential segregation in Harris County has actually increased during the past decade, despite the dramatic expansion in the region's overall ethnic diversity (Rodriguez 2001). Anglos were slightly *less* likely in 2000 than in 1990 to live in census tracts with black or Hispanic neighbors, even as the proportion of Anglo respondents in the surveys who said they would personally prefer to live in integrated neighborhoods grew from 40 percent in 1991 to 60 percent in 2001.

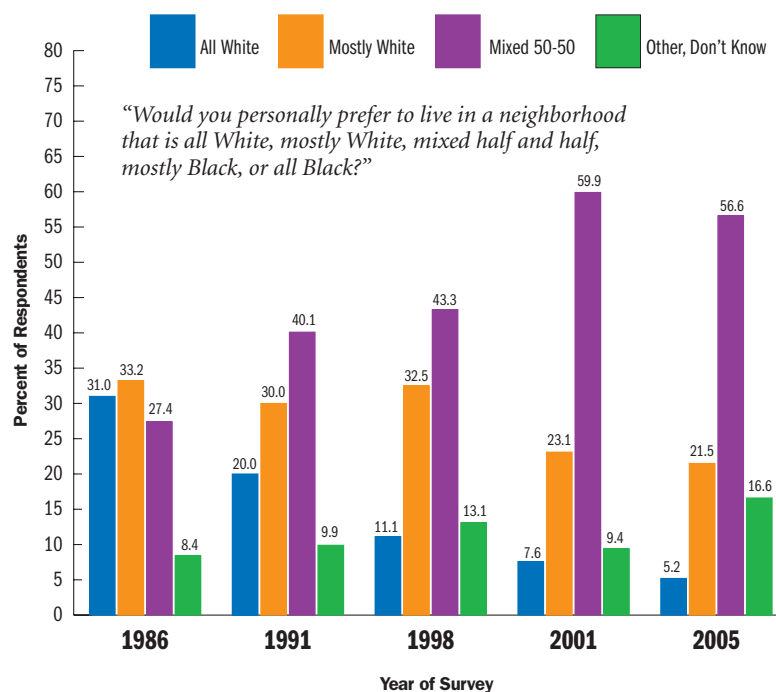
The evolution of Anglo attitudes in this connection suggests that conscious feelings of racial prejudice are indeed diminishing. The vast majority of European-Americans no longer accept the basic assumptions of "old-fashioned racism" (generally understood to mean the belief that blacks are inferior and segregation is good). Additional confirmation of improving attitudes comes from

responses to a question about intermarriage: "If a close relative of yours wanted to marry someone of a different ethnicity, would you approve or disapprove?" In 1995, 71 percent of the Anglo respondents said they would approve of the marriage or that ethnicity would make no difference. The proportion expressing such acceptance grew to 82 percent in the 2002 survey.

Moreover, on three different occasions, survey respondents were asked which was more important: "For children to attend the schools that are closest to their homes, even if everyone is of the same ethnic background," or: "For children to attend schools that are ethnically diverse, even if they have to travel outside the neighborhood." The proportion of Anglos calling for ethnically diverse schools, even if it would mean having to travel some distance from home, grew from 14 percent in 1991 to 20 percent in both 1996 and 2005 ( $r=+.066$ ,  $p=.018$ ).

Why, then, in light of such changing attitudes, has residential racial segregation remained so prevalent in the Houston area? This sprawling, low-density metropolitan area is largely composed, as we have seen, of "decentralized villages" where people of similar socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds live in relative isolation. Thus Anglo students continue to attend mostly Anglo schools, while

**Figure 35**  
**Anglos' Preferences Regarding the Racial Composition of Their Neighborhoods (1986-2005)**





minority students are in schools with mostly minorities, even as the broader school districts themselves grow more ethnically diverse (Cobb 1999). Why is it still so rare for Anglo Houstonians to interact with African Americans or Hispanics in their neighborhoods or classrooms? Is it purely due to differences in economic circumstances, or is something else involved as well?

## The Continuing Resistance to Integration — in Reality

In recent years, the surveys have developed additional attitudinal measures that identify some clear limits to the expressed preference on the part of Anglos for greater ethnic diversity in their neighborhoods. In 2003, 2004, and 2005, the interviews made use of the computer capabilities of modern survey research to test the effects of varying the proportions of residents from other ethnic communities in a given neighborhood on the willingness among Anglos, African Americans, and Latinos to purchase a home in that neighborhood. Figure 36 depicts the way the 2004 survey investigated this question.

Survey respondents were asked to imagine that they were looking for a house and found one they liked much more than any other house: “It has everything that you’ve been looking for, it’s close to work, and within your price range.” Because high crime rates and poor schools are often cited as reasons for not wanting to live in an area with many racial minorities, the question went on to say, “Checking on the neighborhood, you find that the schools are of high quality and the crime rate is low.” This was followed by one of six statements, specifying further that the neighborhood in which the house is located was composed alternatively of 10, 30, or 60 percent of one of the other ethnic groups and that the inverse proportion of the neighborhood was made up of the respondent’s own ethnicity (e.g., Anglos were asked about a black-Anglo neighborhood or a Latino-Anglo neighborhood). After being presented with one of the six vignettes, respondents were asked, “How likely or unlikely do you think it is that you would buy this house?”

Figure 36 shows the results for the Anglo, black, and Hispanic respondents. The data make it clear that Anglos,

**Figure 36**  
**The Impact of a Neighborhood’s Racial Composition on the Likelihood of Buying a House (2004)**



despite their belief that they themselves are free from any remnants of “old-fashioned racism,” are significantly less likely to want to buy a house in a neighborhood that is 60 percent black or Latino, even when informed that the schools in the neighborhood are of high quality and the crime rate is low. The 73 percent of Anglos who say they would be “very likely” to buy in a neighborhood that is 30 percent black drops to 49 percent when the proportion of blacks reaches 60 percent. A similar fall-off, from 81 to 58 percent, occurs when the neighborhood goes from 30 to 60 percent Latino. No such effects of neighborhood composition are evident for either the African-American or the Hispanic respondents.

### A more elaborate factorial design

In 2003 and 2005, a more complex question was developed, building on work by Emerson, Yancey, and Chai (2001). Three neighborhood characteristics (crime rates, school quality, and property values) were varied in the vignettes. Each respondent was given the description of a neighborhood that had a randomly generated combination of attributes (shown here in brackets): “Imagine that you are looking for a new

house, and you find one that you like much more than any other house. It has everything you’ve been looking for; it’s close to work, and within your price range. Checking on the neighborhood, you find that the public schools are of [low/high] quality, property values are [declining/increasing], the crime rate is [low/high], and the neighborhood is [11 variations, ranging from 100 percent composed of the respondents’ own ethnic group to 100 percent composed of the specified other group, in increments of 10 percentage points].” After hearing their version of the vignette, respondents were asked, “How likely or unlikely do you think it is that you would buy this house?”

The beauty of this complex factorial design is that it can measure the impact of the ethnic composition of the neighborhood in rigorous independence from the effects of all three of the commonly cited reasons people give for not wanting to live in an area with many residents of a different ethnicity from their own (i.e., high crime rates, poor-quality schools, and declining property values). Sophisticated computer analyses of the responses, isolating the effects of racial composition itself (Lewis and Emerson

2005), show unmistakably that Anglos are less likely to buy an otherwise desirable house as the proportion of either blacks or Latinos in the neighborhood increases, whereas the proportion of Asians in the neighborhood has no effect at all on Anglo preferences.

The ethnic composition of the neighborhood — whether consisting of Anglos, blacks, Latinos, or Asians — also (once again) had no measurable impact on the housing preferences of either the Latino or African-American respondents. The findings from these carefully designed measures in three successive surveys converge in suggesting strongly that the continued residential segregation in the Houston area is at least to some extent a direct reflection of neighborhood preferences on the part of Anglo Houstonians themselves.

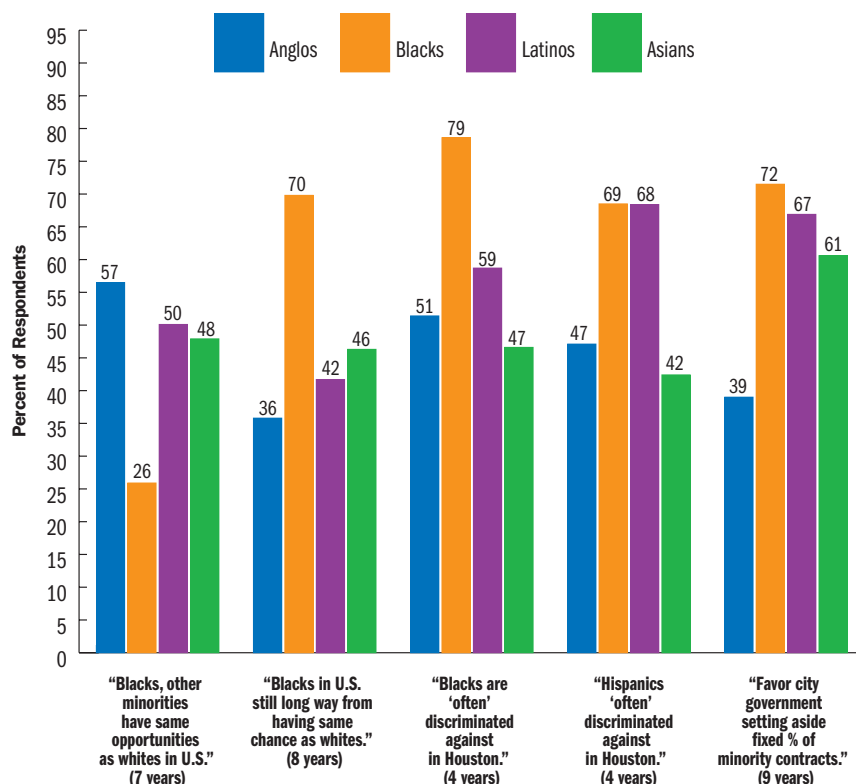
## Ways of Seeing and Ways of Not Seeing

Perhaps because they sincerely do not believe that they themselves are prejudiced, nor do they know many others who are, Anglos in Harris County (and across America) generally believe that racism has now largely disappeared from this “colorblind” society. They are convinced that discrimination is a thing of the past and affirmative action remedies are therefore both unnecessary and unfair. Minorities, especially African Americans, live in and experience a quite different reality. At the same time, the continued residential segregation in the area creates few opportunities for the communities to confront their contrasting beliefs and to work toward reconciliation.

Figure 37 illustrates the divisions that accompany the growing ethnic tolerance in this city. The findings evoke that famous statement attributed to the British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead: “Every way of seeing,” he reminded us, “is always a way of *not* seeing.” On these issues in particular, with regard to beliefs about discrimination and the extent of equality of opportunity in America, African Americans generally live in and “see” a world that most Anglos simply do not see, and vice versa.

In seven alternating years since 1991, respondents have been asked about this statement: “Blacks and other minorities have the same opportunities as whites in the U.S. today.” On average over the years, 57 percent of all Anglos have agreed

**Figure 37**  
**Interethnic Differences in Beliefs About Equality of Opportunity in America (1991-2005)**



with this assertion, as have 50 percent of Latinos and 48 percent of Asians, whereas 72 percent of African Americans have disagreed. When presented in eight other surveys with the alternative statement, “Black people in the U.S. are still a long way from having the same chance in life that white people have,” an average of 70 percent of the black respondents have agreed, but 61 percent of Anglos, 53 percent of Latinos, and 46 percent of Asians have disagreed that blacks continue to be harmed by unequal opportunities.

Only 51 percent of the Anglo respondents, along with 59 percent of Latinos and 47 percent of Asians, believe that blacks are often discriminated against in Houston, compared to 79 percent of African Americans. Only 47 percent of Anglos and 42 percent of Asians believe that Latinos are often discriminated against, but this is the view of 68 percent of the Latinos themselves and of 69 percent of the African-American respondents. Support for municipal set-asides is strong among blacks, Hispanics, and Asians (at 72, 67, and 61 percent, respectively), but the program is opposed

by 54 percent of Anglos. It is interesting to note that the Asians in Houston, who have higher levels of education (but significantly lower household incomes) than Anglos are generally more aware than Anglos of unequal opportunities in America, and more in favor of affirmative action remedies.

## Differences Among Ethnic Groups in the Impact of Rising Incomes

To what extent are these intergroup differences in beliefs about inequality primarily a function of socioeconomic status rather than ethnicity? Is it mainly because blacks are more likely to be struggling economically that they are more sensitive to discrimination? Will their views about equality of opportunity in America become more like those of Anglos as they achieve greater economic success? Table 2 compares the responses to questions about inequality given by three groups of Anglos, blacks, and Latinos, all of whom were working at

least part time in the Houston labor market — respondents who reported earning less than \$25,000 during the previous year, those making \$25,000 to \$50,000, and those earning more than \$50,000.

Not surprisingly, on most issues (not shown in the table) and within all three ethnic communities, the respondents who are more economically successful are generally more optimistic about the direction in which the country is headed and about the prospects for the next generation. The correlates of income appear to be quite different, however, for African Americans compared especially to Anglos on questions asking about the causes of poverty and about the experience of discrimination in the Houston workforce.

Anglo respondents consistently show the expected pattern. Those who have succeeded generally believe that the rules of the game are fair and every player has an equal chance to make it to the top. They are more likely to profess a firm allegiance to the American creed of economic individualism — the belief that it is up to each individual to succeed or fail on his or her own merits and, because there is equal opportunity for all, government has no business trying to shape the outcomes of social and economic com-

petition. Less successful Anglos are likely to temper their belief in individualism and self-reliance with a clearer recognition of structural barriers and personal vulnerabilities. African Americans, on the other hand, generally do not become more convinced that the game is fair, even as they succeed in playing it.

Thus, Table 2 indicates that among the wealthier Anglos (those making more than \$50,000), only 56 percent believe that “most poor people in the U.S. today are poor because of circumstances they can’t control,” rather than “because they don’t work hard enough.” The belief that structural barriers are the primary cause of poverty was held by 67 percent of the Anglos who were earning less than \$25,000. Among the black respondents, the relationship is reversed: 76 percent of the wealthier African Americans assert that poverty is due to circumstances people can’t control, compared to 71 percent of those who report earning less than \$25,000.

Similarly, the percent of Anglos saying that too little is being spent on poverty programs declined significantly with increasing income from 66 to 52 percent. Among blacks and Latinos, there was no relationship with income in the respondents’ support for poverty programs. The

surveys indicate further that wealthier Anglos are less likely than those earning lower salaries to believe that local government should do more to meet the needs of the hungry and homeless in Houston. More fortunate Anglos are more likely to be against spending public funds to make child care available to working parents or to ensure jobs for all who want to work. They are more firmly opposed to raising the minimum wage and to federal health insurance.

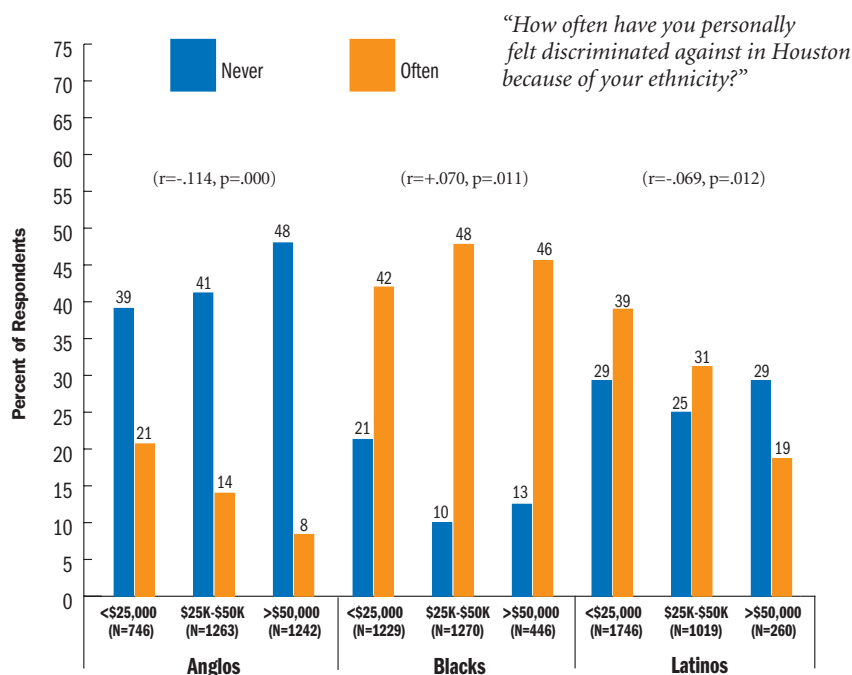
Among African Americans, in contrast, there is generally no relationship between personal income and support for most of these poverty programs. Wealthier African Americans appear to be just as committed as are poorer blacks to government efforts to help the poor and the homeless and to raise the minimum wage. It is also significant that, on virtually every one of these questions, the most affluent blacks are more firmly in support of poverty programs than the least affluent group of Anglos. Even as they succeed in their own lives, African Americans remain firmly committed to strengthening the efforts to ensure that equality of opportunity extends to the less privileged segments of American society.

What explains the differences in the

**Table 2**  
**Personal Income and Perspectives on Inequality in Three Ethnic Communities (1991-2005)**

		Anglos			Blacks			Latinos		
		<\$25K	\$25-\$50K	>\$50K	<\$25K	\$25-\$50K	>\$50K	<\$25K	\$25-\$50K	>\$50K
(Total number of respondents:)		(746)	(1263)	(1242)	(1229)	(1270)	(446)	(1746)	(1019)	(260)
Most poor people in the U.S. today are poor because:	Don't work hard enough	25%	27%	<b>30%</b>	<b>21%</b>	18%	14%	38%	35%	32%
	Circumstances can't control	<b>67</b>	60	56	71	72	<b>76</b>	53	58	56
National spending on improving the conditions of the poor:	Too little	<b>66%</b>	60%	52%	86%	84%	82%	60%	66%	67%
	Too much, Right amount	30	35	<b>43</b>	12	13	14	33	28	30
Local govt. efforts to meet the needs of hungry and homeless in Houston:	Not enough	<b>63%</b>	<b>65%</b>	50%	81%	82%	84%	60%	61%	70%
	Too much, Right amount	35	35	<b>47</b>	17	16	14	39	37	28
More govt. spending to make child care available to working parents?	For it	<b>75%</b>	66%	55%	<b>94%</b>	92%	84%	<b>88%</b>	<b>87%</b>	58%
	Against it	22	32	<b>42</b>	6	7	<b>14</b>	11	11	<b>38</b>
Govt. should see to it that everyone who wants to work can find a job.	Agree	<b>68%</b>	54%	43%	<b>84%</b>	80%	69%	<b>88%</b>	78%	63%
	Disagree	31	46	<b>56</b>	16	18	<b>28</b>	11	21	<b>36</b>
What about raising the minimum wage?	For it	<b>84%</b>	64%	61%	92%	94%	83%	<b>92%</b>	89%	62%
	Against it	14	31	<b>35</b>	6	5	13	7	8	<b>39</b>
Federal health insurance to cover the medical expenses of all Americans?	For it	<b>67%</b>	58%	53%	<b>91%</b>	85%	87%	<b>78%</b>	<b>79%</b>	69%
	Against it	31	39	<b>45</b>	7	<b>12</b>	<b>12</b>	17	18	<b>29</b>

**Figure 38**  
**Ethnic Differences in the Relationship Between Perceived Discrimination and Personal Income (1991-2005)**



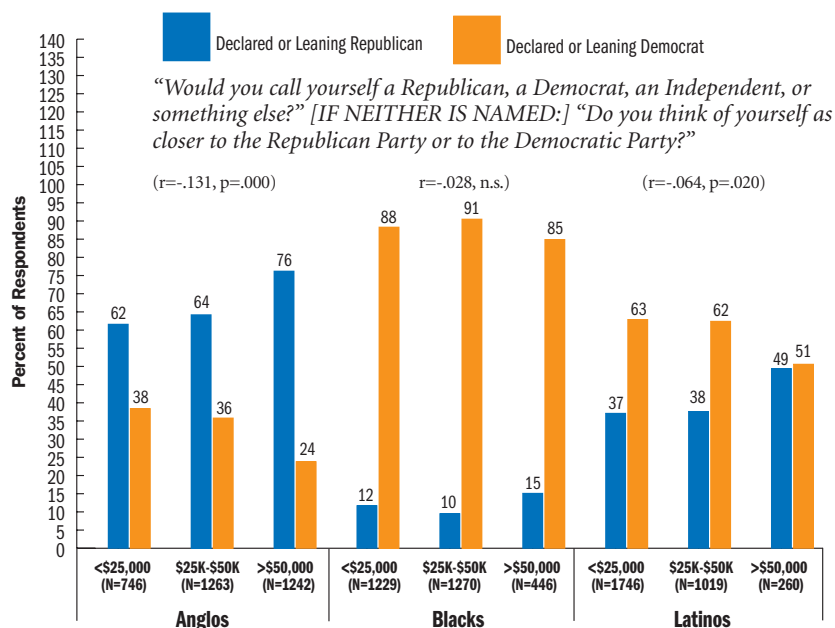
correlates of income among African Americans compared with Anglos? Why don't blacks, as they become wealthier, also come to accept the predominant view that America is a land of equal opportunity, where discrimination no longer exists, and everyone has the same chance to succeed, with no need for government intervention? Figure 38 provides a part of the answer. The surveys reveal that the economically successful blacks are actually more likely than less wealthy African Americans to report that they have often felt discriminated against in the Houston workplace. The opposite is the case for Anglos and Latinos.

When asked how often they personally have experienced discrimination, less successful Anglos and Latinos were significantly more likely than their wealthier counterparts to report that they have "very often" or "fairly often" felt that way. The pattern in both ethnic communities was consistent. Among the Anglo respondents, the number saying they have often felt discriminated against dropped from a high of 21 percent for those earning less than \$25,000, to 14 percent, to just 8 percent for Anglos earning more than \$50,000. For the three income groups among the Latino respondents, the comparable numbers fell from 39, to 31, to 19 percent.

For African Americans, a quite different pattern prevails. It is the middle-class blacks, those who are working in a predominantly Anglo occupational world, who are the most likely to report personal experiences with discrimination. Almost half (48 and 46 percent) of the African-American respondents who were making more than \$25,000 said they have experienced discrimination in Houston either very often or fairly often. This was the case for only 42 percent of the less successful black respondents. The percent saying they have never felt discriminated against dropped from 21 percent among those making less than \$25,000 to just 10 and 13 percent among those having better jobs and earning higher incomes.

Not surprisingly, these contrasting patterns are reflected as well in political party preferences, since the parties differ importantly in their views on the role of government in addressing issues of economic justice. Approximately two-thirds of all Anglos in Harris County are Republicans, and two-thirds of all Hispanics are Democrats, but income has the same relationship with politi-

**Figure 39**  
**Ethnic Differences in the Relationship Between Party Affiliation and Personal Income (1991-2005)**





cal party in both communities. Anglos and Latinos are more likely to become Republicans as their personal incomes rise. Figure 39 indicates that 76 percent of Anglos earning more than \$50,000 think of themselves as Republicans, compared to 62 percent of those making less than \$25,000. The comparable figures for Latinos were 49 percent among those earning more than \$50,000 and 37 percent for those with personal incomes of less than \$25,000. African Americans, in contrast, retain their allegiance to the Democratic Party regardless of their economic situations. At all income levels, 85 to 91 percent of the black respondents think of themselves as Democrats.

These divergent internal patterns offer important insights into the different realities that are generally experienced by Houston's varied ethnic communities in their encounters with economic opportunities and structural barriers in today's economy. In addition, of course, the findings raise intriguing questions about the political future. For how much longer will the predominantly Anglo belief in economic individualism and a minimal conception of government responsibility continue to dominate election outcomes in Houston and America? That position is sure to be challenged by the need to address the increasingly undeniable realities of blocked opportunities, growing income inequalities, and widespread economic insecurities. It will also have to respond to an electorate that is inevitably becoming less dominated by Anglo voters.

## Summary and Conclusions

For almost a quarter-century, the Houston Area Survey (1982-2005) has monitored systematically the continuities and changes in demographic patterns, life experiences, attitudes, and beliefs among successive representative samples of Harris County residents. Using identical items across the years, with new questions added periodically, these county-wide, random-digit-dialed, computer-assisted telephone surveys have tracked America's fourth largest city in the midst of fundamental transformation.

Throughout the first eight decades of the twentieth century, Houston was essentially an Anglo-dominated, one-industry town involved in the explora-

tion, production, and refining of petroleum products, riding its location near the East Texas oil fields to continued prosperity. Its economic success seemed to justify its political embrace of an extreme version of the nineteenth-century laissez-faire ideology of unfettered free-enterprise individualism, with a low-tax/low-spend philosophy of government that was world famous for having imposed the least amount of controls on development of any major city in the Western world. In May 1982, just two months after the first survey in this series, Houston's world collapsed.

The city recovered from the deep and prolonged recession of the 1980s to find itself at the center of the two most far-reaching social changes of our time — the fundamental and irreversible trends that have reshaped the foundations of the American economy and the ethnic composition of its population. New economic, educational, and environmental challenges have redefined the “pro-growth” strategies that will contribute to urban prosperity in the twenty-first century. At the same time, major immigration flows have transformed this city into one of the nation's most culturally diverse metropolitan areas, at the forefront of the new ethnic diversity that is refashioning the social and political landscape of urban America.

### *The burgeoning inequalities*

The resource-based industrial-era economy, for which this region was so favorably positioned, has now receded into history, taking with it the traditional “blue collar path” to financial security. In its place, an increasingly high technology, knowledge-based, fully global economic system has been taking shape. The new two-tiered “hourglass” economy offers rich and expanding opportunities for those with high levels of technical skills and educational credentials. For workers without such qualifications, the economy is generating large numbers of poorly paid, dead-end service-sector jobs that offer few benefits, low job security, and little opportunity for advancement through on-the-job training.

Despite the striking upward redistribution of income that has taken place during the past quarter-century, most area residents continue to believe that America is a land of equal opportunity for all, where hard work and intelligence matter far more than parenthood and class. The survey respondents agree in

increasing proportions that, “if you work hard in this city, eventually you will succeed.” On the other hand, they also believe in growing numbers that “people who work hard and live by the rules are not getting a fair break these days.” The American dream endures, but area residents are very much aware that in today's economy, hard work and “strong family values” in the absence of educational credentials offer much less assurance of success than was the case during the halcyon days of industrialism in the quarter-century after World War II.

### *Quality of place*

Urban prosperity today has less to do with control over natural resources and more to do with human resources — with nurturing, attracting, and retaining the “knowledge workers” whose creativity and skills are the primary generators of wealth in the new economy. Talented individuals and leading corporations are freer today than ever before to choose where they would like to live. As a result, quality-of-life issues and urban amenities, which were once dismissed as frivolous distractions in a narrowly focused businessman's calculus, have become significant determinants of a city's success.

The business case for strengthening environmental regulations, improving the urban amenities, and making Houston greener and more beautiful is now widely acknowledged. The surveys have documented growing public support for requiring emissions tests on all vehicles in Houston, making major improvements in Houston's downtown areas and in its mass transit systems, and spending public funds to make the area more attractive, by removing billboards and planting trees. If it turns out that this city is unable to comply in a timely manner with the federal air quality standards, and to fashion a more livable urban environment overall, that inability will not be due to any presumed resistance on the part of area residents, but to a failure of leadership.

### *City vs. suburbs*

Even as suburban sprawl and the allure of empty spaces continue to dominate the settlement patterns of the region, Houston's success in revitalizing its urban core has created a small but unmistakable countervailing movement. The most recent surveys have documented an unexpected surge of interest among suburbanites in someday moving to the

city. The tripling (from 4 to 12 percent) between 2003 and 2005 in the number of suburban Anglos expressing a strong interest in city living appears to be a real and lasting change, one with important implications for the future of downtown development.

When Anglos in the suburbs who said they were very interested in someday living in the city were directly compared with those who were not interested in such a move, the data make it clear that the most powerful factors are the “pull” of the city’s revitalized recreational amenities and the respondents’ feelings of solidarity and comfort with the ethnic diversity of the urban scene. Traffic woes and long commutes appear to be relatively unimportant in acting to “push” people out of their suburban homes.

### ***The new immigration***

The region’s surging growth during the 1960s and 1970s was brought about largely by the in-migration of Anglos, who were streaming into this booming region from other parts of the country. By 1981, Houston had become the fourth largest city in America, with a population that was still almost two-thirds non-Hispanic whites. After the collapse of the oil boom in 1982, however, Harris County’s Anglo population stopped growing and then declined. Yet the region’s population expanded by another 17 percent during the 1980s and by 21 percent in the 1990s.

The 2000 census counted 3.4 million people living in Harris County, of whom just 42 percent were non-Hispanic whites. The area’s population was now 33 percent Hispanic, 18 percent African-American, and 7 percent Asian or other. Houston in 2000 had no ethnic majority. Four years later this was true for the state of Texas. Houston today looks like census projections for the nation as a whole by the middle of the century. This city’s ability to navigate the transition into becoming a truly successful and inclusive multiethnic society will be significant not only for the Houston future, but for the American future as well.

The ethnic transformations are particularly dramatic when age is taken into account. Of all the survey respondents reached in the past six years who were 60 or older, 75 percent were Anglos. In sharp contrast, 72 percent of those 18 to 29 were black, Hispanic, and Asian. Almost two-thirds (64 percent) of these young adults were African-American

and Hispanic. These are the populations that are by far the most likely to be living in poverty and that have been the least well served historically by Houston’s educational and social service institutions. Clearly, if this community’s “minority” youth are unprepared to succeed in the knowledge economy of the twenty-first century, a prosperous future for the city as a whole seems unlikely.

### ***A bifurcated stream into a bifurcated economy***

The new immigration streams are unprecedented in American history: They are predominantly non-European and characterized by an extraordinary degree of socioeconomic diversity. One group of immigrants (mainly from India, China, and Africa) is coming to Houston and America with higher levels of professional skills than ever before in the history of American immigration. Another, larger group (mostly Hispanic) is arriving with striking educational deficits.

The “model minority” myth that purports to explain the success that Asians have achieved in America overlooks the many Asian immigrants who come from educational and occupational backgrounds that far exceed the average for native-born Anglo Americans. It also diverts attention from continuing discrimination against people of color. And it lumps together in a single stereotype professionals from India, Taiwan, and the Philippines who came to America under the occupational provisions of the Immigration Reform Act of 1965 and poverty-stricken refugees fleeing persecution in Southeast Asia or rural China.

Houstonians of any ethnicity who do not have college degrees or high levels of technical training have little chance to succeed in today’s economy, no matter how admirable their values or strong their determination. In a disconcerting break with the traditional twentieth-century story of immigrant success, marked by the climb from one generation to the next through the many blue-collar steps on the ladder of mobility, most third-generation Latinos in Houston today, despite their fuller integration into mainstream American culture, are not staying in school much longer than second-generation Hispanics, nor earning appreciably higher wages in more desirable jobs. In today’s economy, the opportunities for upward mobility require levels of education that too many third-generation Latino Americans and their parents are

simply unable to afford on their own.

### ***Assessments of ethnic relationships***

The surveys document progressively more positive attitudes toward the new immigration. Respondents from all four ethnic communities increasingly affirm their belief that Houston’s ethnic diversity will be a distinctly positive asset and a source of strength for the city as a whole. Latinos and Asians, as recent immigrants themselves, are the most likely to approve of the new immigration, and the closer they are to their own immigrant experience, the more favorable their views. African Americans, reflecting their greater vulnerability in competing with the new immigrants for semi-skilled jobs, consistently express the strongest reservations.

Survey respondents’ evaluations of interethnic relationships in the Houston area also have improved steadily in recent years. In the 2005 survey, almost half of all Anglo, African-American, and Latino respondents affirmed that the relations among ethnic groups in the Houston area are excellent or good. At the same time, the surveys point to important areas of tension and potential conflict within an overall generally positive and improving picture of interethnic relationships. Relations between African Americans and Latino immigrants and between blacks and Asians are particularly difficult. Black-Anglo relations are also deeply problematic, burdened by the evidence of continuing prejudices and by fundamental disagreements about the extent of equality of opportunity in American society.

Despite such cautionary findings, the surveys indicate clearly that area residents are growing more comfortable with the new diversity that defines the Houston region. The data document their increasingly positive evaluations of ethnic relations, their decreasing fear of crime, their willingness to support the right of others to make personal choices of which they themselves might disapprove, their growing acceptance of homosexuality as a reflection of the natural variation in the human condition, and the diminishing stigma they attach to mental illness. The city will need to build on residents’ growing comfort with such differences if it is to forge a strengthened sense of common purpose among Houston’s varied populations and to overcome the misunderstandings that derive from sharp intergroup disparities in attitudes and beliefs.

### *The ethnic divides*

Analyses of census data indicate that Anglos in Harris County were actually less likely in 2000 than in 1990 to be living in census tracts with black or Hispanic neighbors, even as diversity expanded and as the proportion of Anglo respondents in the surveys who said they would personally prefer to live in fully integrated neighborhoods grew from 40 to 60 percent. Prejudice has not yet disappeared in this low-density, still segregated city, but it is now less conscious and thus more difficult to address.

A series of carefully crafted questions in the three most recent surveys show that Anglos are less likely to buy an otherwise desirable house as the proportion of either blacks or Latinos in the neighborhood increases, whereas the proportion of Asians in the neighborhood has no effect on Anglo preferences. Neighborhood composition was found to have no impact on the housing preferences of either Latinos or African Americans. It seems undeniable that Houston's continued residential segregation is at least in part a direct reflection of neighborhood preferences on the part of Anglo Houstonians themselves.

Perhaps because they sincerely do not believe that they themselves are prejudiced, nor do they know many others who are, Anglos in Harris County (and America) generally suppose that racism has now largely disappeared from this "colorblind" society. They are convinced that discrimination is a thing of the past and affirmative action remedies are therefore both unnecessary and unfair. Minorities, especially African Americans, live in and experience a quite different reality. Meanwhile, the continued residential segregation in the region creates few opportunities for the communities to confront their contrasting beliefs and to work toward reconciliation.

As Anglos become more affluent, they are more likely than less successful respondents to believe that the rules of the game are fair and that every player has an equal chance to make it to the top, and they are less likely to empathize with those who have not succeeded. Among African Americans, in contrast, personal incomes are generally unrelated to support for poverty programs, and successful blacks are more likely than less affluent African Americans to report that they have personally felt discriminated against in Houston. Wealthier blacks, even as they succeed in their own lives, remain

committed to strengthening equality of opportunity in American society, and (unlike Anglos and Latinos) they retain their allegiance to the Democratic Party.

### *Transitional conclusions*

The experience of the past 24 years has convinced most Houstonians that the region's economic prosperity in the new century will require a quite different set of policies from the strategies that worked so well for this city during the first eight decades of the twentieth century, when its wealth came primarily from the East Texas oil fields. It is now widely recognized that, if Houston is to prosper in the new economy, it will need to nurture a far more educated work force than ever before. This will require significant improvements at all levels of public education, along with universal access to preschool and after-school programs, and the development of effective health and welfare policies to moderate the growing inequalities.

More generally, both local and national policies will need to be developed that can restore the nation's traditional "equalizing institutions" (Levy 1998) or design functional equivalents that can replace such programs as a truly progressive income tax, a minimum wage that once was intended to keep pace with inflation, an "earned income tax credit" sufficient to ensure that work is rewarded with a living wage, universal access to high quality schools and colleges, worker training programs that enable people to move ahead in their jobs, and strong labor unions. These were the policies and structures that once moderated the growth of inequality and ensured relatively equal shares across the class divide. Without such programs, Houston runs the risk of creating a larger and more permanent urban underclass in an increasingly rigidified social structure — one in which most of those at the top are Anglo, and most brown and black Houstonians remain stuck at the bottom (Murray, Stein, and Weiher 1998).

Houston's prospects in the new economy will also depend importantly on the city's ability to develop into a much more environmentally and aesthetically appealing urban destination. Endowed with less physical beauty and fewer obvious natural amenities than many urban areas (e.g., Seattle, San Francisco, or Denver), Houston is too often losing out to other cities in its efforts to attract and retain the most innovative companies and the most talented individuals.

Whenever Harris County residents are asked to rate the Houston area in general as a place to live, they overwhelmingly give favorable evaluations. The public's firm and consistent commitment to the city's improvement will play a critical role in Houston's efforts to position itself for prosperity in the new economy. It will not be easy to transcend the narrow businessman's culture and excessive individualism that worked so well for this city during most of the twentieth century. Whether out of short-term self-interest or ideological habit, many of the region's dominant industries and institutions will continue to fight against vigorous efforts to strengthen environmental regulations, to build a comprehensive and efficient mass transit system, or to develop effective mechanisms for urban planning.

The new economic imperatives, reinforced by citizen demand, offer an unprecedented opportunity for this city to develop the kinds of policies that can integrate quality-of-life initiatives with enlightened economic self-interest. To succeed, Houston must develop into an urban destination of choice, offering the kind of quality of place that will attract and retain the nation's most talented individuals and innovative companies, whose skills and creativity will be the basis for the generation of wealth in today's knowledge economy.

Houston's burgeoning ethnic diversity will be one of the city's hallmarks in the twenty-first century, and it will surely be a considerable asset for this major American port in the global economy. But if most area residents continue to live and work in largely segregated ethnic enclaves, and if they remain divided by misperceptions and stereotypes reinforced by a widening gap in economic opportunities, Houston's expanding diversity may also give rise to serious social conflict. If this region is to flourish in the new century, it will need to develop into a much more unified, inclusive, and vibrant multiethnic society, one in which equality of opportunity is truly made available to all of its citizens and all are encouraged to participate as full partners in the decisions that will shape the city's future. Only a determined and committed effort to reverse economic polarization can ensure that the majority of Houston's Hispanic and African-American citizens will be able to share equitably in the city's economic progress.

Encouraging developments are under way in all of these critical areas, but



much more will be required if Houston is to grow into the stature of a world-class multiethnic metropolis, positioned for sustainable prosperity in the new economy. Being able to follow systematically through the annual Houston Area Survey the evolution of area residents' attitudes and experiences will continue to inform our understanding of what may yet be possible for this remarkable city in the years ahead.

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A graduate of Haverford College near Philadelphia, Dr. Stephen L. Klineberg received an M.A. in Psychopathology from the University of Paris and a Ph.D. in Social Psychology from Harvard. After teaching at Princeton, he joined Rice University's Sociology Department in 1972.

In March 1982, he and his students initiated the annual Houston Area Survey, a systematic series of telephone interviews with representative samples of Harris County residents. Supported by a consortium of local foundations, corporations and individuals, the surveys have been expanded in recent years to include much larger numbers of Anglos, African-Americans, Hispanics, and Asians.

The recipient of nine major teaching awards at Rice, Professor Klineberg has written numerous journal articles, appears frequently on radio and television, and publishes a continually updated series of reports on the survey findings. He is at work on a book that will cover the first quarter-century of the Houston studies, exploring through systematic survey research the way the general public is responding to the economic, demographic, and environmental challenges of our time.



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