

Survey shows growing support of immigrants in Houston area

Majority in area appreciate diversity, economic impact, annual Rice survey finds

By [Lomi Kriel](#) **April 24, 2014** | Updated: April 25, 2014 12:09am

When Carlos Duarte moved to Houston two and a half years ago from Phoenix, he was startled to see four police officers - an Anglo, an Asian, an African-American and a Latino - walk into a restaurant to share a meal.

"It was like the perfect balance," said Duarte, a 42-year-old father of four and regional director at Mi Familia Vota, a national nonprofit group focused on Latinos. "I've been in many parts of the country, and I've never, ever seen that before."

Because of such Houston moments, Duarte was not surprised by the findings about immigration attitudes in a new study by the Rice University Kinder Institute for Urban Research. The survey found that a clear majority of Harris County residents hold positive attitudes about legal and illegal immigration.

In the survey, released Thursday, three-fifths of respondents said immigrants contribute more to the American economy than they take. That was 10 percentage points more than in 2012, the last time researchers asked the same question, and the highest since the survey began in 1982.

When polled specifically about illegal immigration, 75 percent of respondents said the large number of people in the area without legal permission is not a "very serious" problem, up 12 percentage points from 2012 when the question was last posed.

That upswing is partly a reflection of Houston's status as the most diverse metropolitan area in the nation, cementing its transformation from a biracial Southern port city into a place where only one-quarter of its residents are Anglo, said Stephen Klineberg, a Rice sociology professor and codirector of the institute directing the study.

"We're all different people today," he said. "A lot of the shock and surprise has dissipated when it comes to immigration. People are realizing how much immigrants have contributed and that it's not an invasion."

The survey included responses from 1,048 Harris County respondents contacted by cellular or land-line phones. The results were weighted to represent the demographic makeup of the county. The margin of error is plus or minus 3 percentage points.

Demographic shifts

Today, non-Hispanic whites represent a majority of the population only among Harris County residents over the age of 65. More than half of all residents under the age of 20 are Latinos, and another fifth are African-American, according to 2012 census data.

Such demographic shifts mean people are more likely to know someone who is not here legally, said Duarte, who's polled in conservative Houston congressional districts and found similar support for immigration.

"Once you know someone you realize they're not criminals but productive members of society, students, construction workers, janitors," he said.

Another crucial factor is Houston's booming economy, Klineberg said. The number of residents who told researchers their personal financial situation has improved in the past few years increased for the first time since

2011, to 34 percent, reaching pre-financial crisis levels. Experts say people perceive less competition for scarce jobs and resources when the economy improves.

In the survey, three-quarters of respondents said they favor granting immigrants in this country illegally a path to citizenship if they speak English and have no criminal record. That was down 8 percentage points from 2013, but still the second-highest level in the poll's history, Klineberg said.

Forty-five percent of Harris County residents gave high ratings - 6 or higher on a scale with 10 representing the most positive - about their attitudes toward immigrants here illegally.

Publicity around the plight of so-called dreamers, immigrants who came here as children and who President Barack Obama has allowed to stay temporarily if they meet certain requirements, also has helped change perceptions, said University of Houston Downtown President Bill Flores.

One such student at his campus, Wendy Ramirez, 22, came here from Mexico when she was 9 after her father was rendered quadriplegic in a hit-and-run accident. That inspired Ramirez to become a doctor, but the biology student worries medical schools won't accept her because of her status.

Political rhetoric hurts

The survey's findings, representing the most in positive sentiments toward immigration in two decades, seem at odds with recent political rhetoric on the issue. Nationally, immigration reform has stalled in Congress and activists have derided Obama as the "Deporter-In-Chief" for having removed more than 2 million immigrants during five years.

In Texas, Republican state Sen. Dan Patrick's campaign for lieutenant governor has featured harsh language on immigration. Patrick has advocated closing the border and repealing in-state tuition and paths to citizenship for young immigrants. He has spoken of an "illegal invasion from Mexico" and has accused immigrants of bringing "third-world diseases."

These factors may account for one of the study's most surprising findings, Klineberg said. Despite increased prosperity, lower unemployment and fewer worries about crime, Harris County residents' assessment of inter-ethnic relations declined sharply.

Participants' evaluation of relations among ethnic groups in the Houston area had increased every year since 1992, peaking in 2013 at 50 percent positive.

This year, the proportion saying such relations were good dropped overall and within each racial group. The biggest decline was among Latinos, who reported a fall from 43 percent in 2013 to 35 percent this year. This seems inconsistent with the growing acceptance of immigrants and may represent a statistical fluke, but it could also sound a warning to city, county and state leaders.

"Latinos feel under attack with the increased deportations, all the rhetoric in the media," said Maria Jimenez, a longtime Houston immigrant activist now with Houston United. "There is tremendous pressure."

Said Reginald Lillie, president of NAACP Houston: "It speaks to an overall frustration with what's coming from our politicians, the rhetoric, the divisiveness ... that trickles down."

Income segregation

It also reflects uglier truths: Houston is the nation's fourth-most economically segregated large metro and sixth-most ethnically segregated, Klineberg said. Harris County's relatively low unemployment rate - 5.7 percent in January - masks large numbers of "poverty-level" jobs.

That may explain why 62 percent of respondents this year agreed government should take action to reduce income differences, up from 45 percent in 2010. Seventy-one percent of respondents favored increasing the minimum wage, even if doing so might lead to fewer jobs.

Though Houston is so diverse, its sprawling form and cheap housing mean people can choose to live in more homogenous communities. In more dense cities such as New York, "people are stuck living where they can afford it," Klineberg said.

"In the midst of all this transformation in Houston, diversity can either be our greatest asset or what could tear us apart," he said.

Other findings from the report

* Traffic: 29 percent (up from 21 percent in 2013) now say that traffic - more than the economy or crime - is the biggest problem facing the Houston area.

* Transportation: Harris County residents are evenly divided about improving public transit or expanding highways and in preference for living in single-family residential areas or in mixed-use urban environments.

* Capital punishment: Houstonians have gradually dropped their support for the death penalty, with 69 percent supporting alternatives - such as life in prison without parole - for people convicted of first-degree murder.

* Drug penalties: Support for lesser penalties for drug offenses has increased with 72 percent of residents agreeing those caught with small amounts of drugs should be fined rather than sent to jail.

Dynamic shift

The Houston Annual Survey reveals a city of immigrants that reflects our nation's future.

Copyright 2014: Houston Chronicle | April 24, 2014 | Updated: April 25, 9:25am

Photo By Marie D. De Jesu's/Staff

Immigrants become U.S. citizens during a ceremony in Houston on Feb. 20.

Immigrants have built and shaped the cities of our nation, but no city has changed so quickly and overwhelmingly as Houston. Our muddy port town, dominated for all of its history by white men, is now the most ethnically and culturally diverse city in the United States. As Houston grapples with these changes, [Rice University](#) professor [Stephen Klineberg](#) put forth one overarching question to the crowd at Thursday's luncheon for the 33rd [Kinder Institute](#) Houston Area Survey: How will Houston succeed?

It isn't just a question for Houston but the entire country. Houston is dealing with the demographic shifts right now, but by 2050 the rest of the nation will be where we are in 2014. It falls upon us to find the solutions today for America's tomorrow.



2014

For decades, Houston could rely upon blue-collar jobs and a suburban lifestyle to keep the city running. Those trends have run out. Now our public leaders have to tackle big issues. We have to ensure that the rising tide of non-Anglo students gets the education necessary to compete in a new economy.

Politicians must connect with the needs of communities that are often ignored, or even disparaged, in the usual conversation. And Houston has to start investing in quality-of-life issues to guarantee that we can be a place where people live, not because they have to, but because they want to.

As Klineberg said on stage at the [Hilton Americas](#): "It is hard to create a prosperous future unless you create the opportunities for people to succeed."

Some politicians are starting to listen. While the gubernatorial race is prone to the usual distractions, both Attorney General [Greg Abbott](#) and state Sen. [Wendy Davis](#) are on the right path when they talk about the need for pre-K education in Texas. The education gap between rich and poor kids is apparent as early as kindergarten, and most students never catch up. It is a good sign for Houston when both policymakers and demographic pollsters are on the same page.

Yet when it comes to immigration, the statistics and the rhetoric couldn't be further apart. Judging from the candidates in the [Republican Party](#) primary, you would think that Houstonians are ready to round up every illegal immigrant and turn the Rio Grande into Checkpoint Charlie.

Klineberg's numbers show something different. In his 2014 survey, Klineberg found that 75 percent of Houstonians believe that a large number of undocumented immigrants is not a very serious issue, up from 63 percent in 2012 and 51 percent in 2010. Not only do folks in our sprawling metropolis have a positive view of immigrants, legal or otherwise, but that opinion grows more favorable every year. In fact, 75 percent of people in the Houston area support granting undocumented immigrants a path to citizenship, if they speak English and have no criminal record. And overall, 59 percent believe that immigrants contribute more to the American economy than they take.

So when politicians demonize immigrants, they're not pandering - they're in denial.

America has always integrated every new wave of huddled masses. This time should be no different. Houstonians are ready. When will Austin and Washington catch up?

By the numbers

Texas is going urban in a big way. Planning for a more crowded future must begin now.

Copyright 2014: Houston Chronicle | January 10, 2014

Houston skyline 2013

Let's paint Texas' and Houston's future by the numbers, with flourish of the editorial paintbrush to three expert sources - the [U.S. Census Bureau](#), Texas State Demographer Lloyd Potter and [Stephen Klineberg](#), co-director of [Rice University's Kinder Center for Urban Research](#). Keep that word "urban" in mind as we recite those numbers:

1. **26.5 million:** Texas' estimated current population.



a

1. 387,397: the number of new residents added during the 12 months ending July 1, 2013.
1. **1 million:** the number of new residents expected to land in Harris County in the next 20 years.
1. **3 million:** the number of newcomers expected in the Greater Houston area in the next two decades.
1. **55.2 million:** Our state's population in 2050 if Texas experiences the same population growth it had between 2000 and 2010.
1. **41.3 million:** The population projection for Texas if the population growth rate is half that of 2000-2010.

The lone prairie long ago ceased to be lonesome in the Lone Star state.

Texas is growing - and going - more urban with every passing day. Awhile back, [Texas Monthly](#) had an unforgettable image of that on its cover: A Manhattan-like collection of skyscrapers crowded into the familiar outline of our state.

Getting from 26.5 million Texans to 55.2 million or even just 41.3 million in just 36 years will be a heavy lift, even for a state and a people - Texans - who thrive on challenge.

We think each of the following areas need Texans' best individual and collective thinking:

Water: According to census data released last year, the Lone Star State has eight of the country's top 15 fastest-growing cities. By 2030, an extra 1.9 million people will call Houston home, Dallas-Fort Worth will experience a 2.5 million increase, Austin an increase of 900,000. Presumably, all those new Texans will expect to drink, bathe, clean, nourish lawns and gardens and enjoy recreation on our rivers and lakes. We'll need water, in other words, and we'll need more than we have now.

The decision by Texas voters last year to allow money from the [Rainy Day Fund](#) to be used to meet future water needs is a start, but we must do more. We'll need innovative conservation strategies, new reservoirs, pipeline transfers and other farsighted efforts to meet our water needs.

Education: Hispanic students will comprise nearly two-thirds of Texas' public school enrollment by the year 2050, yet we're failing to properly educate the Hispanic students we have now. Texas has to tackle both structural problems that make it hard to get a good education, and also the cultural predilections that say it isn't necessary.

Additional funding isn't everything, but more money lets districts afford smaller classes and give personal attention to kids who need it the most. Schools also need programs that show students and their families that education is worthwhile - whether to learn vocational skills or reach higher education.

Public-private partnerships can provide career paths for high school students. Projects like HISD's [Emerge college](#) placement and early childhood education programs ensure proper bookends for students' K-12 schooling.

Transportation: Good roads and efficient freight rail lines are the arteries that pump the state's economy. Roads and mass transit do the same job in our growing major cities. Three areas need long-term vision: 1) Accommodation of the needs of a booming energy industry that is the very heart beat of the state's economy; 2) minimizing at-grade crossings for freight lines in urban areas; and 3) a long-term vision of how best to integrate freeways, toll roads and rail to keep our cities moving.

Immigration: Compared to other border states, Texas traditionally has enjoyed a good working relationship with its neighbor to the south. We share cultural, economic and social ties. Lawmakers need to look for ways to strengthen those ties.

[Thomas Donohue](#), president and chief executive officer of the [United States Chamber of Commerce](#), knows what Houston, the nation's most diverse city, has discovered. "Throughout history," he noted recently, "immigrants have brought innovation, ideas and investments to American enterprise, and in terms of demographics, we need immigration."

Disaster planning: More than five years after Hurricane Ike, our storm-prone area remains shockingly vulnerable. The most important thing isn't whether we choose the Centennial Gate or the Ike Dike. The most important thing is that we settle on a plan and begin to execute it.

Criminal justice: Incarceration rates are dropping, we're expanding drug courts and reforming juvenile justice. Despite these changes, we still have the nation's fourth highest adult incarceration rate. Greater focus on probation over jail time will save the state money while allowing nonviolent criminals to stay at their jobs and help support their families. And decriminalizing marijuana will allow our police to concentrate on the people we're actually afraid of, instead of people who make questionable life choices.

Governance: Change must be considered at several levels. Many of Houston's biggest challenges are regional in nature. The impact of Hurricane Ike in 2008 was felt across every county in Southeast Texas. Clean air and transportation also present regional challenges. The talk about a more formalized regional entity to deal with problem areas and lessen both costly overlap and local disagreements must get more specific. At the state level, the questions are the self-evident ones: Can an increasingly crowded, urbanizing state function with part-time, laughably underpaid elected representation in the Texas Legislature that only meets every other year? Can the traditional rural-urban rivalries in Austin be quieted in the interest of greater cooperation? Beyond the details, the largest question of all: As population swells and empty spaces fill up, will Texas preserve its unique identity?