



RICE UNIVERSITY  
Kinder Institute for Urban Research  
*Building Better Cities, Building Better Lives*

# THE FORTY-FIRST YEAR OF THE KINDER HOUSTON AREA SURVEY:

At the Forefront of a  
Changing America



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**ROBERT BOZICK | STEPHEN L. KLINEBERG**

MAY 17, 2022



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[doi.org/10.25611/9HYD-J930](https://doi.org/10.25611/9HYD-J930)

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## › Introduction.

Over the course of the past forty-one years, the “Kinder Houston Area Survey” has been measuring systematically the attitudes, beliefs, demographic characteristics, and life experiences of successive representative samples of Harris County residents. Through intensive interviews reaching a total of more than 50,000 Houstonians over the years, the surveys have documented significant changes in the way area residents perceive and understand Houston’s ongoing challenges and opportunities. No city in the nation has been tracked in this way over such a long period of time. Few more clearly exemplify the remarkable trends that are refashioning the social and political landscape across America.

The good blue-collar jobs of the early 1980s, as in the city’s oil-field manufacturing industries (Hughes Tool Company, Cameron Iron Works), have largely disappeared in the wake of globalization and automation. Today’s economy is generating growing inequalities predicated above all else on access to high-quality education and technical skills. The source of wealth from now on will have less to do with natural resources (such as cotton, timber, cattle, sugar, and oil), which were the bases for the wealth of Houston and Texas during most of the twentieth century, and more to do with human resources, with the development and distribution of theoretical knowledge and practical skills.

At the same time, America is undergoing an extraordinary demographic transformation. An earlier generation, predominantly composed of non-Hispanic whites (aka: Anglos), is being replaced by a new generation of Americans, who are a mix of all the world’s ethnicities and religions. Nowhere is that transition more clearly seen or more sharply articulated than here in Houston, Texas.

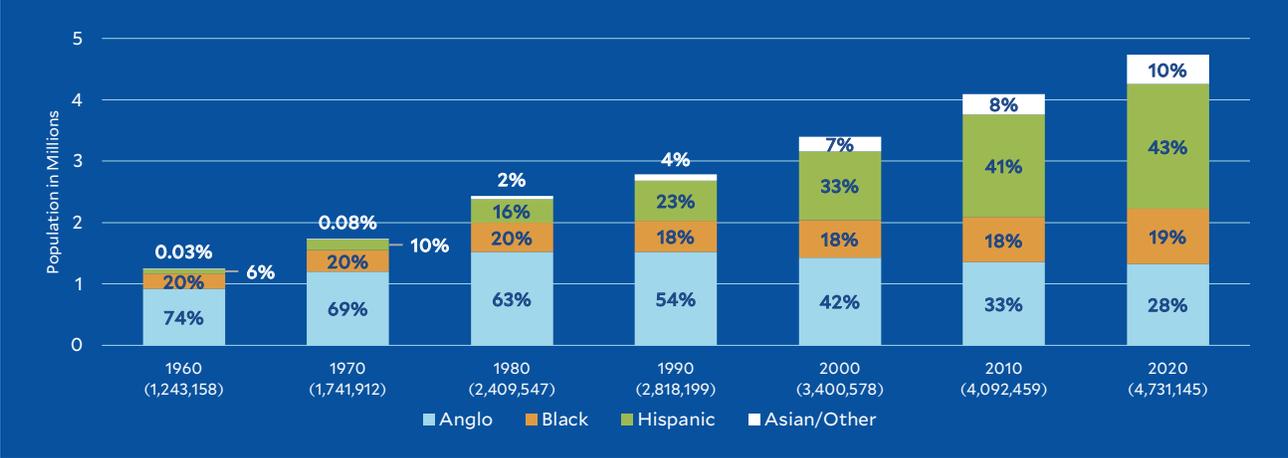
Figure 1 presents the census figures for Harris County through the past seven decades, from 1960 to 2020. In the census of 1960, Houston was still essentially a bi-racial Southern city, with 74 percent of its population consisting of non-Hispanic whites, and another 20 percent were African Americans. During the oil-boom years of the 1960s and ‘70s, Anglos were pouring into this fortunate city from everywhere else in the country. By 1980, Harris County had grown into the fourth largest metro area in America, with Anglos still comprising almost two-thirds of the population. After the oil bust of 1982, the Anglo population of Harris County stopped growing and then declined slightly. During the last four decades, virtually all the growth in this, one of the most rapidly growing cities in America, is attributable to the influx of Hispanics, Asians, and Blacks—including large numbers of immigrants from Mexico and El Salvador, from Vietnam and India, from Nigeria and Jamaica.

By the time of the 2020 census, Harris County was now 43 percent Hispanic, 28 percent non-Hispanic white, 19 percent African-American, and 10 percent Asian and others. Soon after 2040, according to census projections, non-Hispanic whites will constitute less than half the population of the United States as a whole, and the nation’s overall demographics will look very much like Harris County’s today. This is where, for better or worse, the American future is going to be worked out. Houston is called upon to be a model for the rest of the nation, to take the lead in building something that has never existed before in human history—a truly successful, inclusive, equitable, and united multiethnic society, comprising virtually all the peoples, all the ethnicities, all the religions of the world, gathered here, in this one remarkable place.

In the following pages, we present the findings from the forty-first annual survey, conducted in Harris County during January and February of 2022, using a new, web-based survey methodology (described in the next section). This year’s report begins with an assessment of the top-of-the-head concerns of area residents, as traffic congestion subsides and economic anxieties re-emerge as “the biggest problem facing people in the Houston area today,” with crime a close second, followed by concerns about the COVID pandemic. We document the broad-based impact of

FIGURE 1

THE DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSFORMATIONS OF HARRIS COUNTY (U.S. CENSUS, 1960-2020)



the pandemic more specifically on area residents' sense of well-being, on their levels of stress and anxiety, and on their feelings of loneliness and isolation.

We assess the deepening economic inequalities in this city, which have been exacerbated by the pandemic, highlighting the stark contrasts in the life experiences of Blacks and Hispanics on the one hand and of Anglos and Asians on the other. Although unemployment is at an almost all-time low and job opportunities are perceived to be plentiful, the vast majority of area residents report that they have seen either no change or an actual worsening in their financial circumstances during the past few years. And they are pessimistic about their prospects for the future.

Shifting to national issues, the 2022 survey finds that very few area residents believe the twenty-year war in Afghanistan has made the country any safer from terrorism. The data underscore the public's continuing support for abortion rights, almost regardless of the circumstances. We find strong public backing for specific measures to expand voter access, along with opposition to any tightening of voter restrictions. Area residents are opposed to enacting new laws to ban the teaching of race in the public schools. They are split in their willingness to cut the budget of the Houston Police Department to spend more on other crime prevention programs. They support the legalization of marijuana. And they give voice to a deep and pervasive distrust in the leadership of almost all of America's core institutions.

Meanwhile back at home, area residents are increasingly embracing Houston's growing diversity. They are more prepared today than ever before to acknowledge the realities of ongoing racial discrimination, and to recognize the barriers that make it very difficult for Black and Hispanic families to work their way out of poverty. The surveys document increasing support among area residents for government programs designed to foster greater equality of opportunity and to push back against the economic disparities that continue to seriously compromise the city's future.

Perhaps most significantly, area residents now affirm, with greater clarity than ever before, the critical need to increase the city's investments in its public schools. Their call for additional spending to improve public education across the board is further confirmed by the vast majorities of survey respondents in the years since 2018 who said they were in favor of raising taxes to provide preschool education for all children in Houston.

## Developing a Reliable Survey Methodology in a Web-Based World.

As survey research adjusts to modern modes of communication and to the public's growing reluctance to respond to landlines and cell phones, we have been developing a new research methodology at the Kinder Institute. The overall goal is to enhance the Institute's ability to conduct surveys with representative samples of Harris County residents throughout the year and to explore an array of topics that are of critical importance to the Houston community.

As part of this initiative, we are convening a series of panels comprised of area residents who have indicated a willingness to be interviewed several times throughout the year. The objective is to create an on-going, "real-time" survey platform that can quickly and efficiently collect important data to inform the needs of city leaders, policy makers, community groups, and other local stakeholders.

With this longer-term goal in mind, we recruited a randomly-selected panel of 3,205 Harris County residents who agreed to participate in the surveys with us. Interviewing the same area residents on multiple occasions will provide an opportunity not only to measure Houstonians' opinions, priorities, expectations, and aspirations, but also to document more precisely the way responses to the survey questions are evolving over the years.

To construct the panel of Harris County residents, we made use of the U.S. Postal Service's "computerized delivery sequence file," which lists all addresses associated with housing units in Harris County. We sent an invitation packet to a randomly-selected

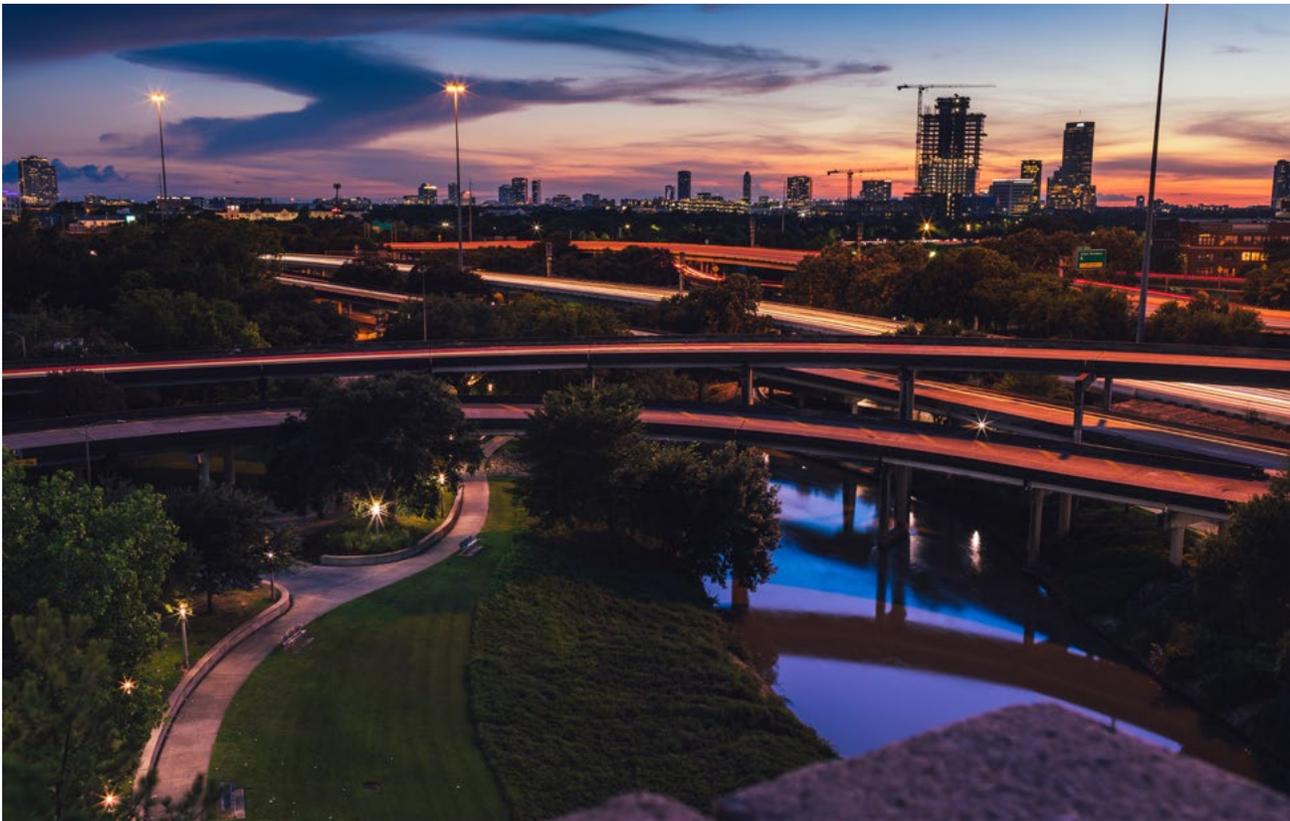


PHOTO BY KINGSLEY LI

sample of 101,000 addresses from all parts of the county and invited an adult in each household to join the panel. The invitation packet, printed in both English and Spanish, included a brochure explaining the goals of the initiative, the types of surveys the participants would be asked to complete, and the safeguarding procedures in place to protect the confidentiality of their responses. To underline the importance of the project, the invitation letter was endorsed by the Houston Independent School District, the Houston Health Department, the Harris Health System, Legacy Community Health, the Super Neighborhood Alliance, the Houston Astros, and the Houston Dynamo FC.

The invitees who agreed to join the panel completed an online form asking for their basic sociodemographic data as well as their contact information. Follow-up postcards were sent to households that did not respond to the initial invitation. We also used public telephone records to ascertain the phone numbers associated with the addresses of those who had not

yet responded. A team of trained interviewers called the numbers of the non-respondents in a final attempt to recruit them for the panel.

The opportunity to participate in the forty-first annual Kinder Houston Area Survey was offered to all 3,205 members of the panel. The questionnaire was administered between January 11 and February 25, 2022. It was filled out by 1,958 respondents, for a completion rate of 61 percent. Eight of the surveys were from panelists who had since moved out of Harris County; those eight were excluded from the analyses. Of the 1,950 respondents in the final sample, 61 percent were female, and 39 percent were male; 49 percent were non-Hispanic whites, 20 percent were Blacks, 18 percent were Hispanics, and 8 percent were Asians; the average age was 49.

All the analyses presented in this report have been “weighted” to correct for variations in the likelihood of selection and to align the sample more closely with the known population characteristics of Harris

County residents. This helps to ensure that the data we report here will reflect as accurately as possible the actual distributions in the county's population along such dimensions as race, ethnicity, age, gender, educational attainment, and homeownership. When asking about changes from one year to the next, we present the weighted responses given by successive representative samples of Harris County residents, responding to identically-worded questions that have been positioned similarly in the survey instrument.

### Forty-One Years of Shifting Concerns.

The Kinder Houston Area Survey began as a class project at Rice University in the spring semester of 1982. Houston at that time was in the midst of a booming economy. This was a one-horse industrial town, riding its location near the East Texas oil fields to continued prosperity during the first 82 years of the twentieth century. More than 80 percent of the city's primary-sector jobs in 1980 were associated directly or indirectly with the value of oil, and the price of a barrel increased ten-fold between 1970 and 1982, with no lessening of world demand. During that twelve-year period, while the rest of the country was languishing in the "stagflating seventies," nearly one million people poured into the Houston region.

This city was also world-famous for having imposed the least possible controls on development of any city in the Western World. Houstonians proudly proclaimed themselves to be the epitome of what Americans can achieve when left unfettered by zoning codes, government regulations, or excessive taxation. The 1982 survey, conducted in March of that year, sought to measure the way area residents were balancing the exhilaration of the city's spectacular expansion with rising concerns about the "social costs" of its unfettered growth, such as the mounting challenges of traffic congestion, the spread of toxic pollution, and soaring crime rates.

Two months after the first survey was completed, the boom collapsed. A global recession had suppressed the demand for petroleum products just as new supplies were coming onto world markets. The price of

a barrel of oil fell from \$35 to \$28 almost overnight, but Houston's business community had been building and borrowing in the confident expectation of \$50 barrels. By the end of 1983, this once-booming region recorded a net loss of more than 100,000 jobs.

It was clear that we needed to conduct the survey again the following spring to measure area residents' reactions to the sudden turn of events. Then, as the changes accelerated further and the city emerged from the recession in the late 1980s into a rapidly changing America, we kept conducting the survey in all the years after that.

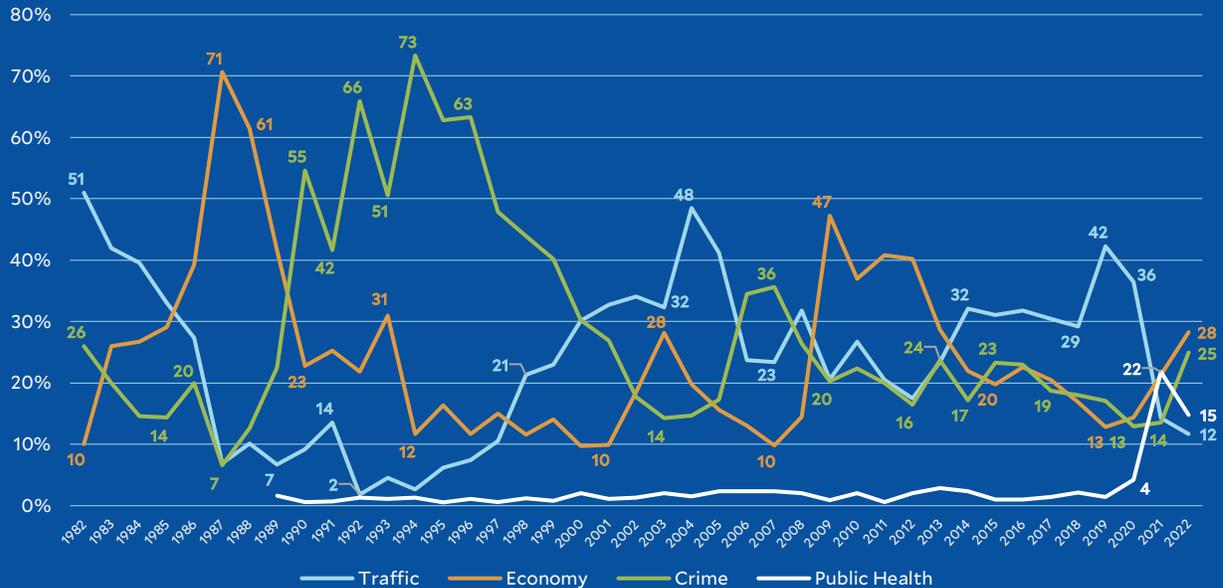
Houston's shifting fortunes are clearly reflected in answers to the open-ended question that begins each survey interview, asking the respondents what they would say is "the biggest problem" facing Houston-area residents today. Figure 2 depicts the proportions across the forty-one years who spontaneously named traffic congestion, the economy, crime, or public health as Houston's biggest problem.

During the height of the boom in the early 1980s, when an average of 260 vehicles were being added every day onto the streets and freeways of Harris County, traffic congestion was the dominating concern. In the first survey, conducted in February and March 1982, more than three-fourths of area residents (76 percent) rated job opportunities in the Houston area as excellent or good; 47 percent said their personal financial situations were getting better, and 63 percent thought they would be even better off three or four years down the road.

Not until 1985, when the full force of the downturn had registered in the psyches of this once-booming metropolis did most of the survey respondents spontaneously name the economy as the region's dominating problem. By 1987, one of every seven jobs that had been in Houston in 1982 had disappeared. The unemployment rate had grown into double digits; only 12 percent of area residents were still giving positive ratings to local job opportunities; and a whopping 71 percent now cited the economy (poverty, unemployment, homelessness) as the biggest problem in the Houston area.

FIGURE 2

### TRENDS IN IDENTIFYING THE “BIGGEST PROBLEM FACING PEOPLE IN THE HOUSTON AREA TODAY” (1982–2022)



By the early 1990s, the economic recovery was underway at last and worries about crime, fueled by the crack cocaine epidemic, were now predominating. In the 1995 survey, crime was named by 73 percent of area residents as the biggest problem in the Houston area. In the years since then, as indicated in Figure 2, the numbers citing crime decreased steadily, at least until very recently.

Meanwhile, as concerns about the economy and crime were fading, rapid population growth continued, fueled primarily (as we have seen) by the dramatic influx of Hispanics and Asians, and traffic congestion once again became the predominating preoccupation. The percentage of area residents who named traffic as Houston's biggest problem grew from single digits in the early 1990s to 48 percent in 2004; then faded following the Great Recession of 2008. Starting in 2014, traffic congestion was once again named as the most serious problem, jumping to 42 percent in the 2019 survey.

The COVID pandemic and the economic shutdown it generated enveloped the Houston community in

the summer of 2020. In the 2021 survey, spontaneous mentions of the pandemic as the biggest problem in Houston were now at the top of the list. Concerns about public health were cited by 22 percent; traffic was named by just 14 percent, with crime also at 14 percent and the economy at 21 percent.

This year's survey found that the proportion of area residents who were still preoccupied by the COVID pandemic had dropped to 15 percent. Today's most prevalent anxieties are focused once again on the local economy, with 28 percent citing the cost of living, especially in reference to gasoline and housing prices. Another 25 percent were worried about the soaring rates of violent crime, which are now among the highest in the nation. Only 12 percent in this year's survey cited traffic congestion as the biggest problem. These shifting preoccupations clearly reflect the changing fortunes of the city. It will be interesting and important to continue tracking the evolution of these concerns in the years ahead.



## › The Pandemic Aftermath.

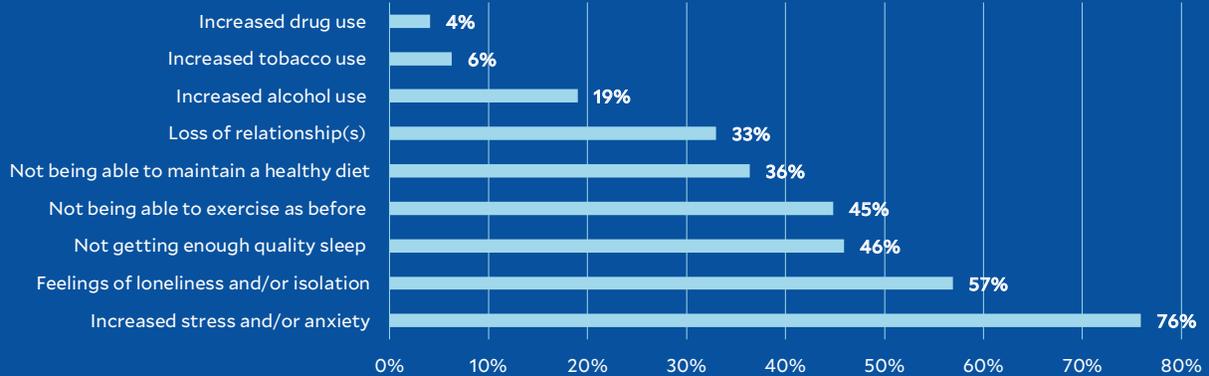
**T**he 15 percent of respondents in the 2022 survey who spontaneously named the pandemic as the biggest problem in Houston, along with the 28 percent who cited the economy, are evidence that the effects of the first two years of the pandemic continue to be felt. In early 2022, the country was still reeling from its impact. By January 11, when this year's survey was launched, Harris County had experienced a total of 262,525 COVID cases, resulting in 3,010 deaths. Moreover, while the economy was steadily recovering from the pandemic-induced recession, the early months of 2022 witnessed a decline in labor-force participation and an increase in the unemployment rate.

The 2022 survey included a series of questions about how the respondents' lives and finances had been affected since the start of the pandemic. We provided a list of potential negative consequences and asked the survey participants to indicate which ones, if any, they had personally experienced. Figure 3 shows the responses, with the least prevalent outcomes listed at the top and the most prevalent ones at the bottom.

Three-fourths of all Harris County residents (76 percent) reported experiencing increased stress and anxiety, and 57 percent acknowledged greater feelings of loneliness and isolation since the start of pandemic. Nearly half (46 percent) reported not getting enough quality sleep, and another 45 percent said they had

FIGURE 3

## REPORTS OF NEGATIVE OUTCOMES RESULTING FROM THE PANDEMIC (2022)



not been able to exercise as much as they had before the pandemic. These numbers are a reminder that, in addition to the direct medical impacts of the virus itself, there were profound and pervasive effects on the overall health and wellbeing of the broader Houston population.

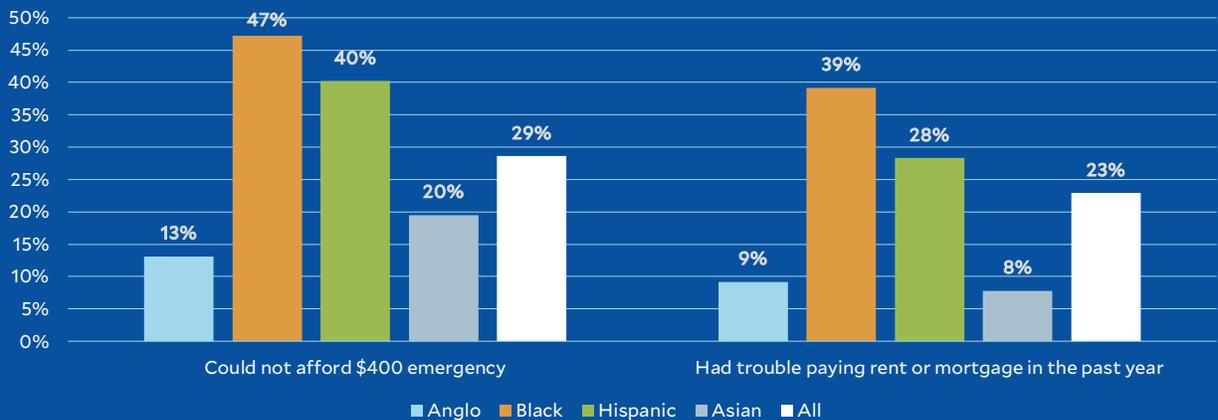
As noted earlier, when asked to name the biggest problem facing people in the Houston area today, the economy now ranks as the dominating concern. The pandemic has clearly upended area residents' financial well-being in ways that have exacerbated the growing inequalities. Figure 4 explores the distribution of



PHOTO BY KATIE WHEELER ON FLICKR

FIGURE 4

## THE PREVALENCE OF ECONOMIC HARDSHIP, BY RACE/ETHNICITY (2022)



responses on two measures of economic hardship, with the survey respondents divided by their race/ethnicity.

One of the questions asks: “Suppose you suddenly had to come up with \$400 to deal with an unexpected emergency, how would you handle a situation like that?” Almost three out of ten (29 percent) said they would either have to borrow the funds or would not be able to come up with that kind of money. Not surprisingly, the proportions of area residents who indicated that they lacked the resources to cover a \$400 emergency were much higher for Blacks and Hispanics (at 47 and 40 percent, respectively) than was the case for Anglos and Asians (at 13 and 20 percent).

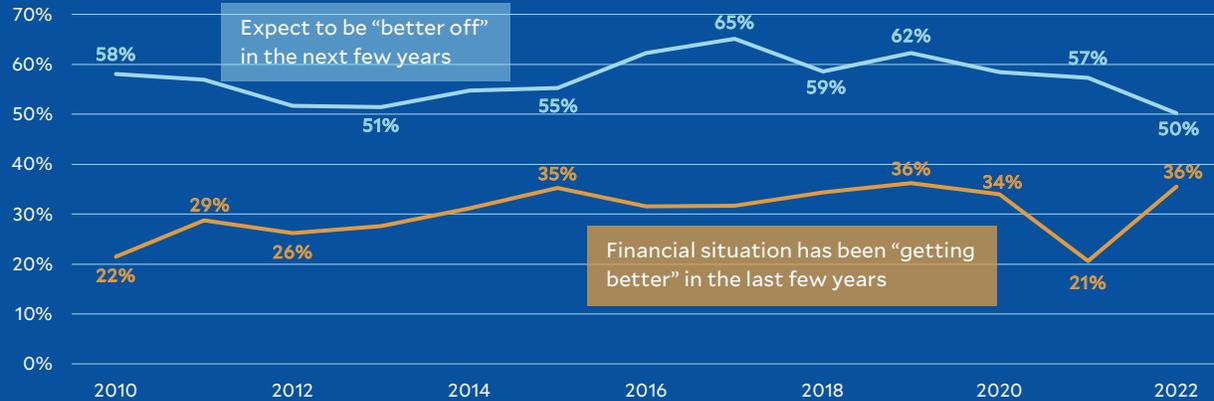
One important factor that exacerbated the financial pressures facing area residents in the past year was the lifting of the eviction moratorium. That initiative had been put into place at the start of the pandemic to protect renters and mortgage holders—many of whom were unable to work due to the lockdown measures and other restrictions. The moratorium ended on July 31, 2021, and eviction filings in Harris County increased to an average of 3,909 a month. The 2022 survey included this question: “Was there a time in the past 12 months when you were unable to pay your rent or mortgage on time?”

As indicated in Figure 4, fully 23 percent of the respondents said that there was indeed a time when they were unable to make their rent or mortgage payments. It is no surprise to find that housing insecurity is once again much more pronounced among Blacks and Hispanics, of whom 39 and 28 percent, respectively, indicated that they were unable to make at least one of their rent or mortgage payments in the past year. While the effects of the pandemic are no doubt widespread, these figures further highlight the extent to which the burdens associated with the pandemic have weighed most heavily on communities that are already the most disadvantaged on other socioeconomic dimensions.

How have the events of the pandemic and the accompanying recession affected area residents’ assessments of their personal economic circumstances, and how do their outlooks today compare with previous years? The 2022 survey included two related questions, which have been asked repeatedly over the years of this research. First, we asked: “During the last few years, has your financial situation been getting better, getting worse, or has it stayed about the same?” We followed up by asking: “What about three or four years down the road? Do you think you’ll be better off, worse off, or about

FIGURE 5

## TRENDS IN RESPONDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR PAST AND FUTURE FINANCIAL SITUATIONS (2010–2022)



the same as today?” Figure 5 gives the percentage of Harris County residents in the years dating back to 2010 (about two years after the onset of the Great Recession) who reported that their financial circumstances have gotten better during the past few years and the percent expecting to be better off three or four years down the road.

Consistently, across the years from 2010 to 2020, about one-third of the respondents have said their circumstances were improving. Last year’s survey recorded a sharp drop—from 34 percent in 2020 to just 21 percent in 2021 in the proportion of area residents who reported that they had been doing better financially. That dramatic drop-off was not unexpected given the multi-faceted ways that the pandemic disrupted the economy and compromised the employment opportunities available to those who were willing and able to work. What *is* surprising is the remarkable rebound from last year to this in the percent who indicated that their circumstances were getting better. In the 2022 survey, 36 percent (up from 21 percent in 2021) reported that their financial situation had improved, returning to levels comparable to those observed before the onset of the pandemic.

The uptick is in keeping with the impressions of many area residents that the Houston economy is finally

recovering, and that the worst of the pandemic is now behind us. It should also be noted, however, despite the positive picture from this year, that the vast majority of Houstonians have consistently reported that their financial circumstances have stayed the same or gotten worse. This is another reminder of the pervasive economic insecurities in Houston that continue to compromise area residents’ perspectives on the future.

Meanwhile, as Houstonians look forward to life after the pandemic, have they become more optimistic about their economic prospects? The upper line in Figure 5 shows the trends in the percentage of area residents who said they thought they would be “better off” three or four years down the road. Optimism about the personal future peaked in 2017 at 65 percent, just as President Trump was taking office. Since then, the percentage foreseeing a more prosperous future for themselves and their families has declined, reaching a new low of just 50 percent in this year’s survey. In sum, while the worst of the pandemic appears to be over, the uncertainty, pessimism, and economic insecurity it has generated have by no means abated, and the experience of the past two years has clearly diminished area residents’ traditional optimism about their personal futures.

## › National Issues.

PHOTO BY KINGSLEY LI

### The war on terror.

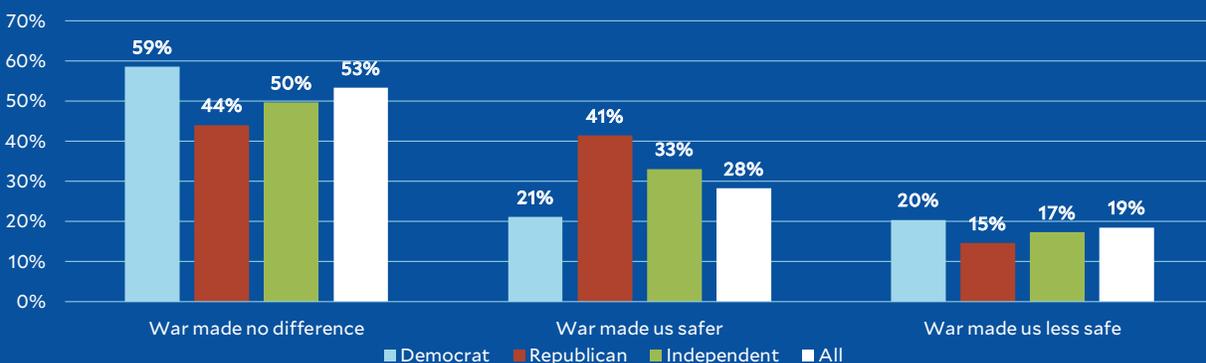
Back in October 2001, as a response to the 9-11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the United States and its allies invaded Afghanistan with the intent of ousting the Taliban regime. Known as “the War on Terror,” the conflict lasted for almost two decades. In August 2021, the United States completed the withdrawal of all American troops

from Afghanistan, with the Taliban clearly poised to consolidate its power. Over 7,000 American soldiers, including 624 Texans, had died in that war.

We thought it might be interesting to include a question in the 2022 survey to measure public assessments of the 20-year military initiative: “Do you think the U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan has made the United States safer from terrorism, less

FIGURE 6

#### ASSESSMENTS OF THE RESULTS OF THE TWENTY-YEAR WAR IN AFGHANISTAN, BY POLITICAL PARTY AFFILIATION (2022)





safe, or has it made no difference?” Figure 6 shows the responses to this question, with the respondents differentiated by their political party affiliation.

A little more than half (at 53 percent) felt that the 20-year military involvement made no difference at all in protecting Americans from terrorism, and only about one in four (28 percent) believed that America was safer as a result of the war. Like so many other issues in this polarized age, there are distinct differences on this question by political party. The percentage of Republicans who believed that our military involvement has made us safer (at 41 percent) was almost double the proportion of Democrats (21 percent) who took that position.

On the one hand, this finding may seem surprising given that the Republican Party has generally become more isolationist in its orientation toward foreign affairs. On the other hand, Republicans have historically been staunch supporters of the military and steadfast proponents of a vigorous national defense. Regardless of party, however, it is worth emphasizing that despite two decades of substantial U.S. investments of lives and treasure in an effort to eradicate a key source of international terrorism,

three-fourths of all Houstonians simply do not believe that the country has become any safer as a result.

### Abortion rights.

Back home, in 2021 the 87th Texas Legislature enacted 666 new laws, which included significant changes in public safety, health care, and K-12 education. The laws attracted national attention in part because they reflected distinctly conservative priorities in a state that many had thought was becoming more liberal in its political orientation. The laws highlighted the broader tensions of the “culture wars,” which have become a mainstay of American politics. Looking at these issues through the vantage point of Houston—the most ethnically diverse city in Texas and one the most diverse in the United States—may provide a glimpse into how these political struggles will play out in other parts of the country in the years ahead.

Raising considerable attention were the new state laws regarding the continued access to abortion. Texas has made it illegal to obtain an abortion as soon as the embryo’s heartbeat is detected, with no exceptions, and the legislation allows residents to sue abortion providers if they believe the law has been broken. It

seemed important to assess area residents' feelings about abortion rights, so the 2022 survey asked about support for a woman's access to abortion under four different conditions.

Figure 7 documents the public's broad and steadfast support for abortion rights. On the most unrestrictive question, almost two-thirds of the respondents (64 percent) said they supported a woman's right to an abortion if she wants one for any reason. The acceptance of abortion is strongest if the woman's health is seriously endangered by the pregnancy, with 92 percent in agreement. In sum, Houstonians'

across-the-board support for abortion rights, almost regardless of the circumstances, means that we are likely to see a fierce local backlash in opposition to Texas' new highly restrictive laws, if the Supreme Court declares them to be constitutional and allows them to stand.

In alternating years since 1988, the Houston surveys have been asking about support for a woman's right to an abortion "if she wants to have one for any reason." Figure 8 presents the trends on this question, with responses going back to 2012 and broken out by the respondents' political party affiliation. In accord

FIGURE 7

SUPPORT FOR ACCESS TO ABORTION UNDER VARYING CONDITIONS (2022)

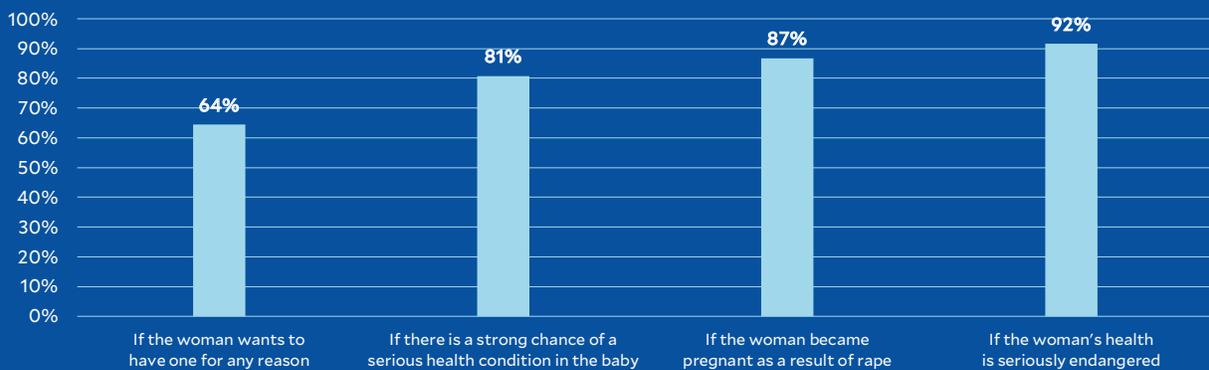
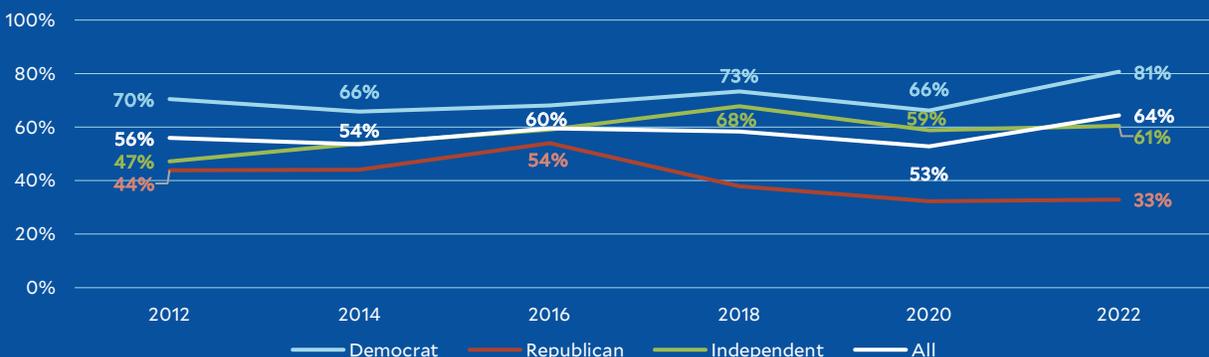


FIGURE 8

TRENDS IN SUPPORT FOR A WOMAN'S RIGHT TO AN ABORTION "IF SHE WANTS ONE FOR ANY REASON," BY POLITICAL PARTY AFFILIATION (2012-2022)



with national polls, Republicans in Houston have been consistently less prepared to support abortion rights than their Democratic neighbors, but the divide between the two parties appears to be changing in important ways.

Between 2012 and 2016, the parties seemed to be slowly converging, with Republican support for abortion rights growing and Democratic support remaining steady. After 2016, the parties diverged: Republican support dropped precipitously, while Democratic support increased. In this year’s survey, 81 percent of Democrats supported a woman’s right to an abortion for any reason. That level of support is almost 50 points higher than it is among Republicans (at 33 percent). The increasing divergence along party lines reflects the growing political polarization across the nation and portends intensifying rifts on policies affecting family planning and women’s reproductive health.

**Voter suppression.**

On the heels of the contentious 2020 presidential election, Texas enacted a series of new laws that sought to tighten restrictions on voting procedures. The laws include the elimination of drive-thru and 24-hour voting, and they require those filling out mail-in ballots to provide their driver’s license or social security number. Additionally, the laws give partisan poll

watchers more ability to oversee election activities, and they increase the penalties for election-law violations.

The new legislation is receiving critical scrutiny since the state’s changing political landscape and its policy directives often reverberate across the nation. To explore the way Houston-area residents view the different voting regulations, this year’s survey provided descriptions of five different electoral policies and asked the respondents if they supported or opposed them. Figure 9 gives the percent of support for various measures affecting voter access, with the respondents divided by their political party affiliation.

Across the board, most Houstonians firmly support these various measures to expand voter access, even as the new Texas laws seek to tighten the restrictions: 81 percent were in favor of drive-thru polling locations, 83 percent supported 24-hour polling places, 85 percent were in favor of opening more temporary voting locations, and 71 percent supported the promotion of vote-by-mail through advertisements or public service announcements. The lowest level of support was for the mailing of unsolicited absentee ballots, but this too was endorsed by a majority of the respondents (at 55 percent).

Democrats were dramatically and consistently more likely than Republicans to endorse each of the five measures, with the largest differences found in

FIGURE 9

**SUPPORT FOR FIVE DIFFERENT PROPOSALS TO INCREASE VOTER ACCESS, BY POLITICAL PARTY AFFILIATION (2022)**

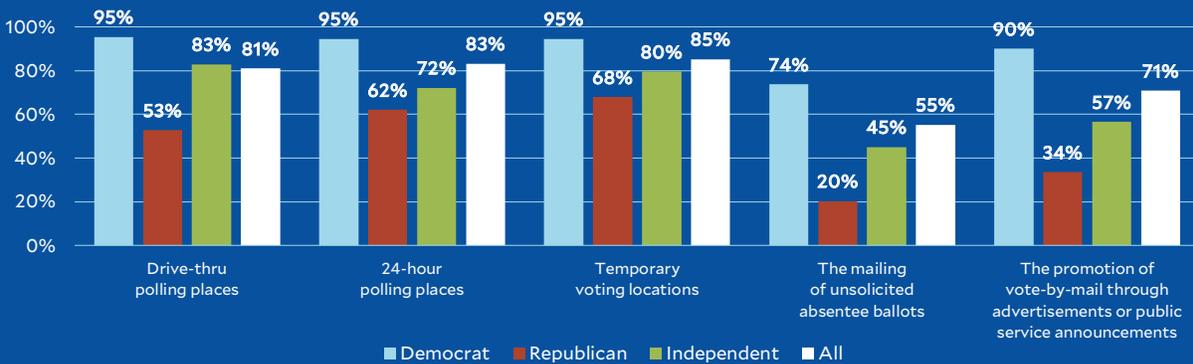
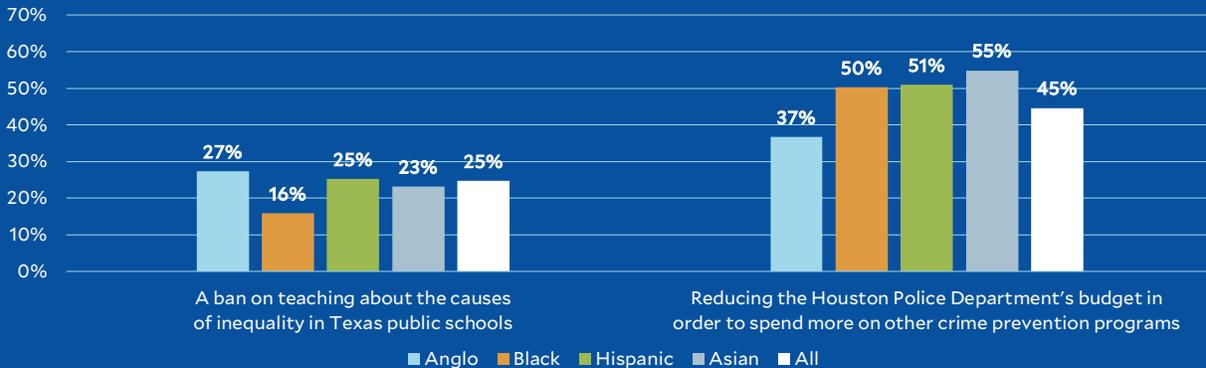


FIGURE 10

**SUPPORT FOR INITIATIVES TO RESTRICT THE TEACHING OF RACE AND TO REDUCE POLICE BUDGETS, BY RACE/ETHNICITY (2022)**

their support for vote-by-mail and for the mailing of unsolicited absentee ballots. Ninety percent of Houston-area Democrats were in favor of promoting vote-by-mail through public service announcements, compared with only 34 percent of Republicans—a remarkable 56-percentage point difference. And 74 percent of Democrats supported the mailing of unsolicited absentee ballots, but this was the case for just 20 percent of Republicans.

### Racial matters.

Some of the new policy measures enacted by the Texas Legislature sought to address the way racial issues are discussed in schools and manifested in broader policing efforts in the community at large. These included laws that forbid the discussion of “critical race theory” in schools and that penalize cities that reduce their police-force budgets. In this year’s survey, we asked about these two proposals.

As indicated in Figure 10, only one in four Houstonians supported the ban on teaching about inequality and race in Texas schools; but support among Anglos was higher than in other racial/ethnic communities: 27 percent of Houston-area Anglos supported the ban compared with just 16 percent of Blacks. In addition, fully 45 percent of all area residents supported reducing the Houston Police Department’s budget

in order to spend more on other crime prevention programs. Support for this initiative was highest among Asians (at 55 percent) and lowest among Whites (37 percent).

### Legalizing marijuana.

Texas also expanded its laws regulating access to medical marijuana to include a broader array of qualifying conditions. The bill this year represented an important step in a more liberal direction, in a state that is still one of the most restrictive in the country regarding access to marijuana. The 2022 Houston survey asked respondents whether they favored or opposed the legalization of marijuana (a) for recreational purposes and (b) for medical purposes. The percentages expressing support are shown in Figure 11, with the respondents divided by political party affiliation. Sixty-five percent of all survey participants were in favor of the legalization of marijuana for recreational purposes and fully 90 percent supported legalization for medical purposes. As indicated in Figure 11, Democrats were consistently more likely to support legalization than either Republicans or Independents.

In several previous iterations of the Houston survey, we replicated the question asking about support for the legalization of marijuana for medical purposes. Figure 12

FIGURE 11

**SUPPORT FOR THE LEGALIZATION OF MARIJUANA, BY POLITICAL PARTY AFFILIATION (2022)**

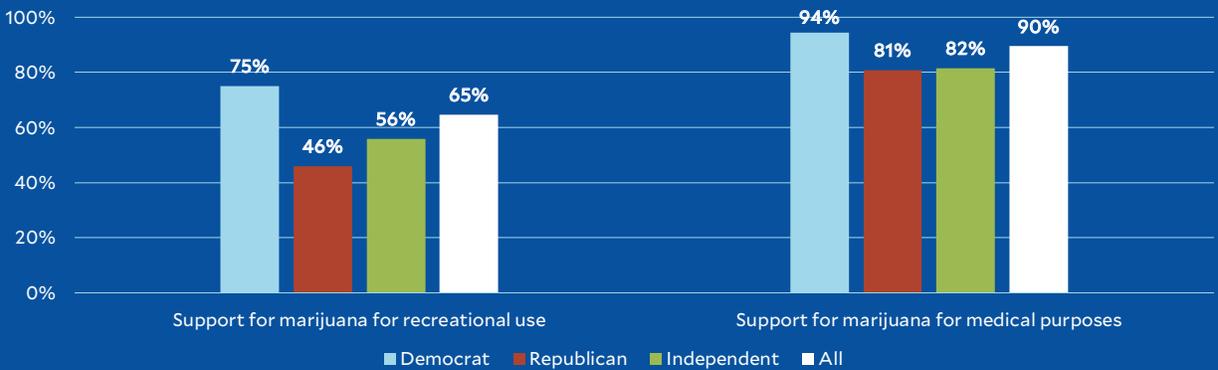
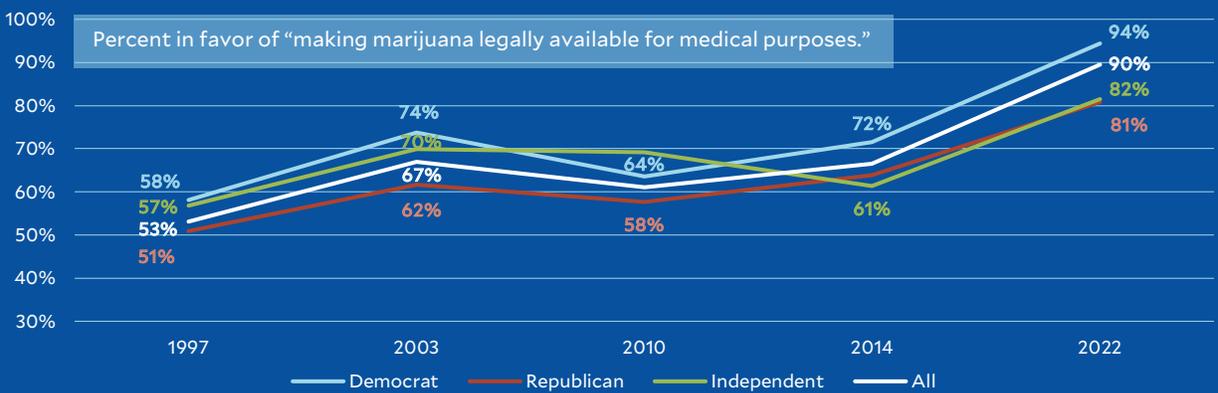


FIGURE 12

**TRENDS IN SUPPORT FOR LEGALIZING MEDICAL MARIJUANA, BY POLITICAL PARTY AFFILIATION (1997-2022)**

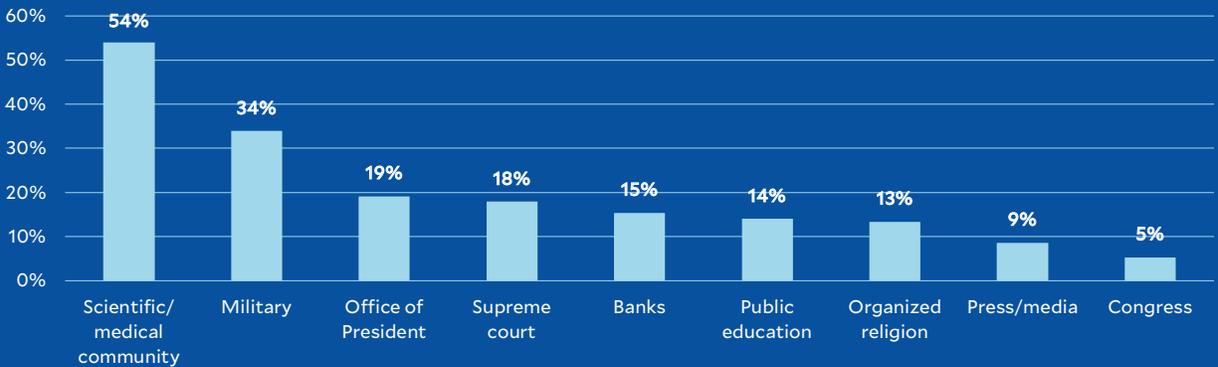


shows the time trends for this question, with responses broken down by political party affiliation. Support for legalizing access to medical marijuana grew steadily in the late 1990s, and then stalled in the early 2000s. Since 2010, however, support for the legalization of medical marijuana increased further among respondents across all political parties. In this year’s survey, 81 percent of Republicans and 94 percent of Democrats were in favor of legalizing medical marijuana. The data clearly suggest, perhaps surprisingly, that these new, more liberal marijuana laws will be welcomed by a clear majority of area residents.

**Distrusting institutions.**

The growing political polarization in the country has contributed to the declining trust in core American institutions. The national polls have been documenting increasingly discordant views on policy issues, individual rights, the accuracy of the news, even the validity of our elections. To what extent do Houston-area residents also (dis)trust America’s core institutions? In identifying which institutions are the most and the least trusted by area residents, we may be in a better position to focus our efforts

FIGURE 13

**PERCENT EXPRESSING “A GREAT DEAL OF CONFIDENCE” IN THE LEADERSHIP OF CORE AMERICAN INSTITUTIONS (2022)**


on strengthening trust where it is most needed. And certain policy initiatives may be less controversial if they're associated with organizations that have broad support.

In this year's survey, we asked about trust in nine core American institutions: "We are going to name some institutions in this country. As far as the people running these institutions are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?" Figure 13 shows the percentage of area residents expressing a great deal of confidence in each of the institutions.

Across the board, confidence in institutions is minimal and problematic: Only one institution was evaluated positively by most of the respondents—a disconcerting statement about our current political and social situation. The institutions garnering the greatest amount of trust include the scientific/-medical community (at 54 percent) and the military (34 percent). Confidence falls dramatically after that; the institutions garnering the least amount of trust include the press/media (at 9 percent) and the U.S. Congress (5 percent). We plan to ask these questions again in coming years to track the way patterns of institutional confidence are changing over time.



PHOTO BY JOSE LOSADA ON UNSPLOASH



## › Houston's Prospects.

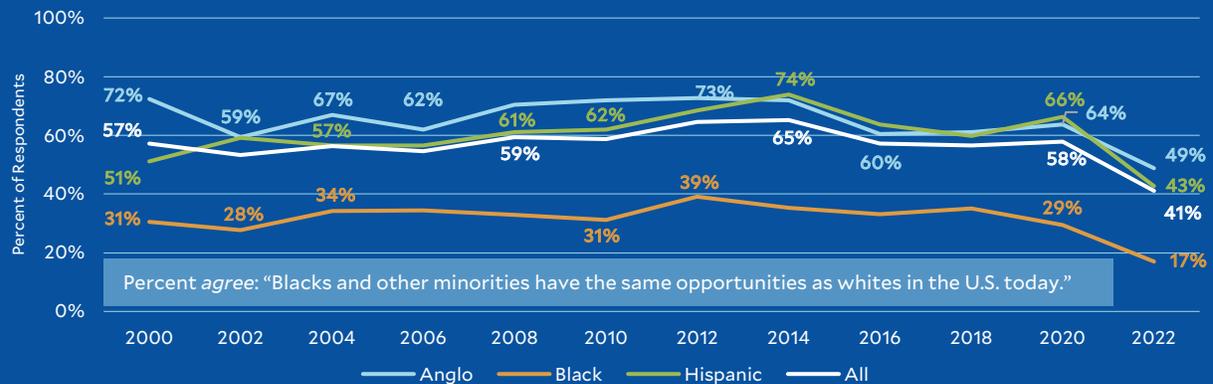
### Unequal opportunities.

We noted earlier that this traditionally bi-racial blue-collar city has become one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse metropolitan areas in the country. The surveys over the years have documented a growing embrace of Houston's remarkable diversity. Area residents of all ethnicities have been giving increasingly positive evaluations to relations among the ethnic communities, and they are more likely than ever before to say that they have close personal friends across the ethnic divides.

At the same time, the surveys have documented stark divisions, especially between African Americans and non-Hispanic whites, in their beliefs about the continuing realities of discrimination and the extent of equality of opportunity in America today. Figure 14 shows the percentages in Houston's three major ethnic communities who agreed over the years with the statement that "Blacks and other minorities have the same opportunities as whites in the U.S. today." Just two years ago, in the 2020 survey, 64 percent of the Anglo respondents agreed with that statement. Then came the renewed focus on racial discrimination

FIGURE 14

### TRENDS IN BELIEFS ABOUT THE RACIAL DISPARITIES IN LIFE CHANCES, BY RACE/ETHNICITY (2000-2022)



in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd in the summer of 2020.

This year's survey recorded a dramatic turnaround, as all three ethnic communities recorded a significant fall-off in the percent agreeing that Blacks and other minorities have the same opportunities as whites: The numbers of Anglos who agreed with that claim fell from 64 percent in 2020 to 49 percent in 2022,

and among Hispanics the decline was from 66 to 43 percent. Agreement among African Americans dropped from 29 percent in 2020 to 17 percent in this year's survey. For the first time over the years of the surveys, majorities in all three of Houston's largest ethnic communities now agree in acknowledging the racial inequities in access to economic opportunity in American society today.

The widespread and growing prevalence of poverty and homelessness in this affluent county was becoming increasingly difficult to ignore even before the pandemic underscored the life-and-death significance of the region's deepening inequalities. Area residents, who have traditionally been opposed to government intervention of almost any sort, appear to be rethinking their basic assumptions about the nature and causes of poverty in America.

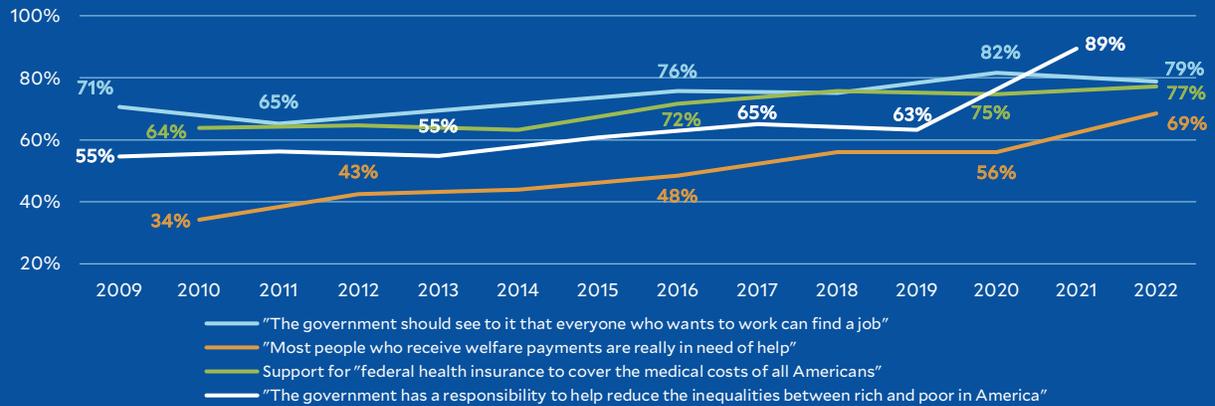
The survey participants are increasingly coming to recognize that in today's global, high-tech economy, people can lose their jobs and fall into poverty through no fault of their own, and government needs to play a more active role in strengthening the safety net and in fostering greater access to economic opportunity. As indicated in Figure 15, support among area residents for government initiatives to push back against the disparities has grown significantly in recent years.



PHOTO BY TRACVU

FIGURE 15

### TRENDS IN SUPPORT FOR GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS TO REDUCE THE INEQUALITIES IN AMERICA (2009–2022)



The proportion of survey respondents who agreed that “the government has a responsibility to help reduce the inequalities between rich and poor in America” increased from 55 percent in 2009, to 63 percent in 2019, and then jumped to a remarkable 89 percent in the survey last year. The numbers calling on government to “see to it that everyone who wants to work can find a job” increased from 65 percent in 2011 to 79 percent in 2022.

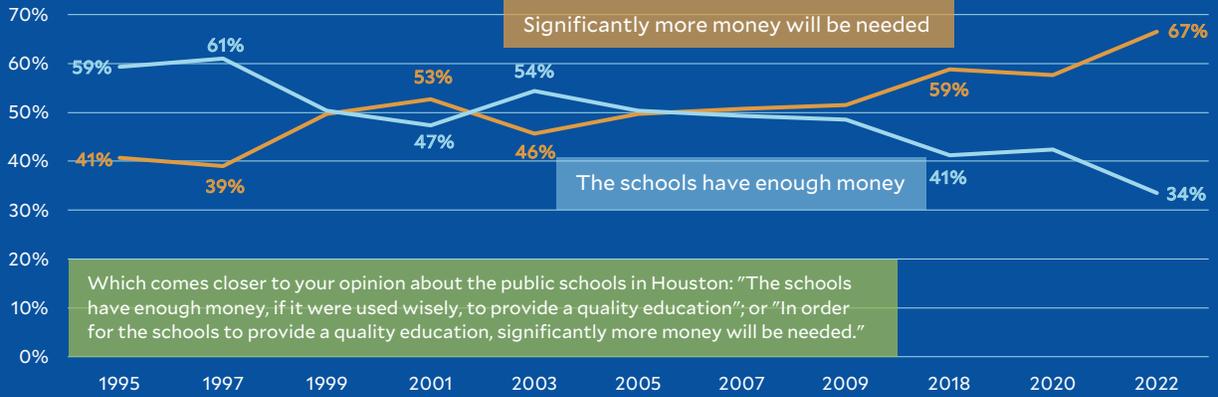
Area residents were also asked if they thought that “most people who receive welfare payments are really in need of help or are they taking advantage of the system.” The proportions who believe that welfare recipients are legitimately in need grew from 34 percent in 2010 to 56 percent in 2020, and then to 69 percent in 2022. And support for “federal health insurance to cover the medical costs of all Americans” grew from 64 percent in 2010 to 77 percent in this year’s survey.



PHOTO BY EMMANUEL APPIAH ON UNSPLASH

FIGURE 16

TRENDS IN BELIEFS ABOUT THE ADEQUACY OF FUNDING FOR THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS (1995-2022)



**Funding education.**

The surveys are also clear and consistent in documenting not only a growing sensitivity to the increasingly disparate opportunities in Houston, but also a recognition that the inequalities are predicated above all else on unequal access to quality education. The survey respondents have been asked over the years if they thought the Houston public schools have

enough money, if it were used wisely, to provide a quality education, or whether they believed instead that significantly more money will be needed. As indicated in Figure 16, when the question was first asked in the 1990s, decisive majorities of 59 and 61 percent said the schools have all the money they need as long as it isn't being wasted. During the first decade of the twenty-first century, the respondents were evenly divided in their assessments of the adequacy of school funding.

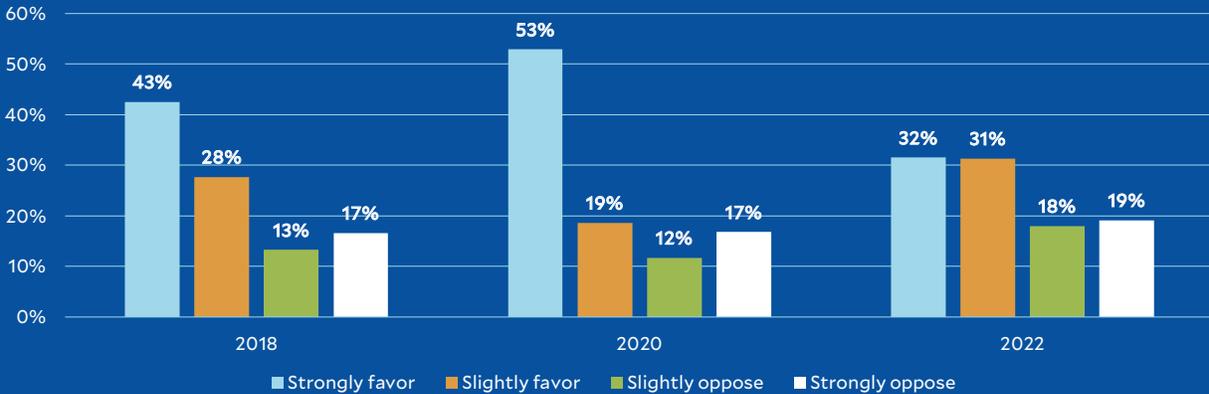
We asked the identical question again in 2018, 2020, and 2022. The data indicate that a sea change has occurred in the public's support for more spending on education. In 2018 and 2020, only 41 and 42 percent thought the schools had enough money, if used wisely, to provide a quality education. By early in 2022, support for more spending had grown even further: In this year's survey, only 34 percent still believed the spending was sufficient, and 67 percent were now calling for more investment in the public schools.

This year's figures were unexpected and consequential. The general public



PHOTO BY JESSICA TAN ON UNSPLASH

FIGURE 17

**SUPPORT FOR “INCREASING LOCAL TAXES IN ORDER TO PROVIDE UNIVERSAL PRESCHOOL EDUCATION FOR ALL CHILDREN IN HOUSTON” (2018, 2020, 2022)**


seems to have gotten the message: If Houston is to thrive in the new global, knowledge-based economy, it will need to become a “learning society,” drawing on its considerable resources to ensure that the young people in this city, who are disproportionately African American and Hispanic—the two groups, as we have seen, who are the most likely to be living in poverty—will be prepared to succeed in the high-tech knowledge-based economy of the twenty-first century. Area residents seem to be more prepared today than ever before to support the investments that will be needed to make the substantial improvements in the city’s public schools that these times require.

Figure 17 presents the responses to an important question about early childhood education, a survey item that was first included in 2018 and then replicated in 2020 and in 2022. Area residents were asked if they were in favor or opposed to “increasing local taxes in order to provide universal preschool education for all children in Houston.” Asking survey respondents about their willingness to raise taxes for just about any purpose usually generates a resounding “No.”

Surprisingly, in Houston in 2020, more than half (53 percent) of the survey respondents said they were “strongly in favor,” and another 19 percent “slightly in favor” of raising taxes for this purpose. In the 2022

survey, the resistance to higher taxes in a time of deepening economic anxiety is reflected in the fall-off to just 32 percent who said they were “strongly” in support of spending more money for preschool, but this year also saw an increase in those saying they were “slightly in favor” of this proposition. Thus, even given their preoccupation with economic insecurity, which was so clearly evident in this year’s survey, almost two-thirds (63 percent) of Houstonians today still say they’re in favor of increasing taxes to provide universal access to early childhood education.

The findings are clear in underlining area residents’ widespread agreement on the need to make substantial improvements in public education, beginning with first-rate preschool. And yet Houston is behind both San Antonio and Dallas in the percentage of children from impoverished families who have access to quality preschool. Houston-area residents are more insistent today than in previous years in calling for significant additional investments in the public schools across the board. Clearly the time has come for truly meaningful interventions along these lines.

## › Concluding Note.

**T**ranscending the sharp divides by political party affiliation and by race/ethnicity, these forty-one years of systematic surveys have revealed significant shifts in the way

Houston-area residents are responding to critical issues. Among the most compelling conclusions to be drawn from these continuing surveys and the ones with the clearest implications for Houston's prospects in the twenty-first century, are the following:

- The survey participants increasingly assert the urgent need for major new investments to achieve significant continued improvements in the Houston public schools—from cradle to career, from birth through college.
- They recognize more clearly than ever before that most poor people in America today are poor through no fault of their own, and they are calling for stronger government programs to reduce the rising inequalities.

- They are increasingly celebrating Houston's burgeoning diversity and feeling more at home in a world of thriving friendships across ethnic communities, religious beliefs, and sexual orientations.

The surveys make it clear that area residents have changed significantly over the years in their understanding of the most important challenges facing this city. It remains to be seen whether Houston's business and civic leaders will be able to build on the attitude shifts the data reveal to undertake the continued interventions that we know will be required to position Houston for broad-based prosperity in this time of remarkable economic, demographic, and technological transformation.

It will be valuable to keep tracking the evolution of area residents' attitudes and beliefs into the next forty years of the Houston story. And it will be especially important to find ways to translate that evolving understanding into sustained and effective action.

The Kinder Institute thanks the following supporters for their transformational support of our mission to *build better cities and improve people's lives*.

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Additional support comes from the **Friends of Kinder Institute**.

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And a special thanks to the University of Texas Health Science Center at the Houston (UTHealth) School of Public Health and ReconMR for their help in developing and implementing the 2022 survey.

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<sup>\*</sup> Denotes multi-year commitments to the Kinder Institute.

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Current as of April 15, 2022



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