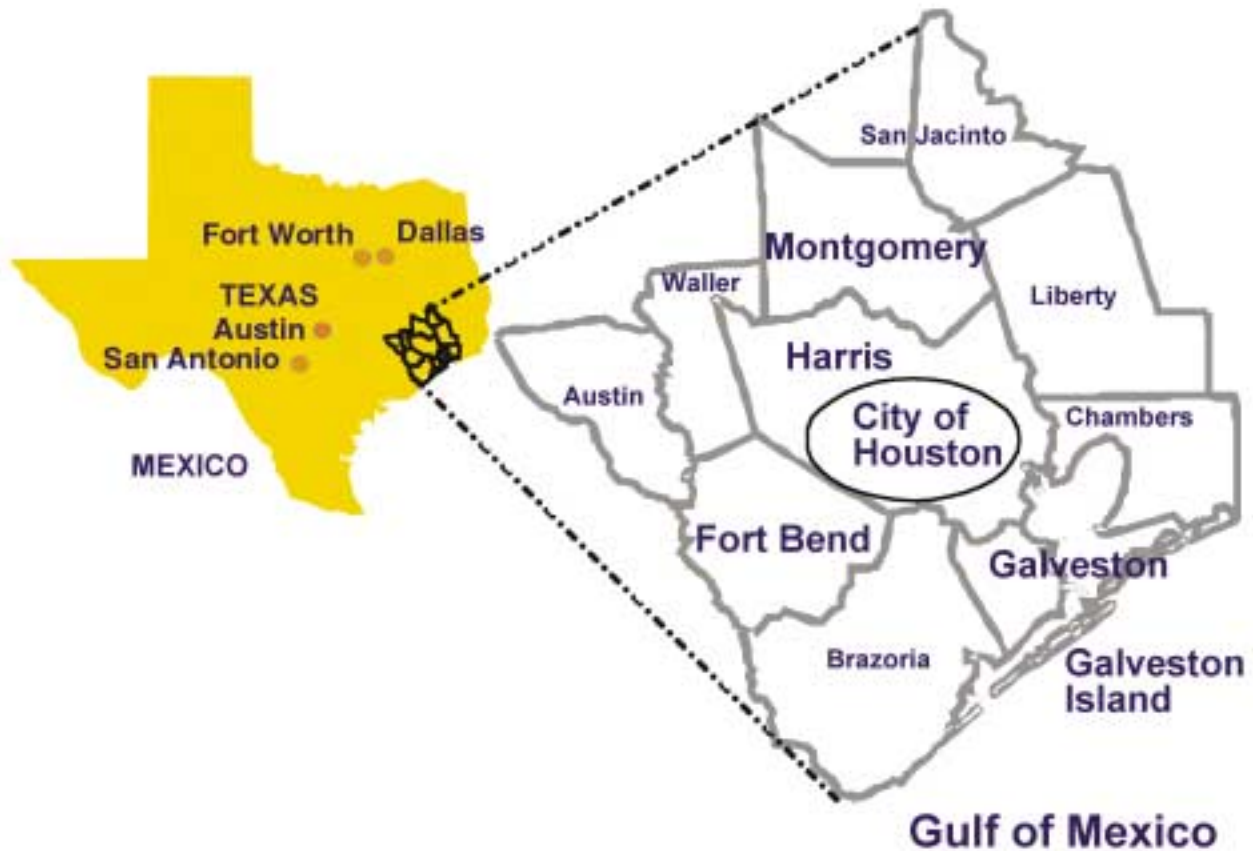




The Houston Area Survey (1982–2007)

REGIONAL PERSPECTIVES

Survey Research on the Differences in Demographic Patterns, Attitudes, and Beliefs across Six Major Sectors of the Houston Metropolitan Region



Stephen L. Klineberg

Rice University
The Center for Houston's Future

November 2007

Photo credits: Greater Houston Convention and Visitors Bureau and The Galveston Island Convention & Visitors Bureau.



CENTER FOR HOUSTON'S FUTURE

November 15, 2007

Dear Friends,

We are pleased to present Rice University Professor Stephen Klineberg's new *Regional Perspectives* survey. After conducting his remarkable Houston Area Survey for 26 years, Professor Klineberg has now provided the region with a systematic comparison of attitudes and beliefs across Harris, Fort Bend, Galveston and Montgomery counties.

This extension of the Houston surveys stemmed from our Fall 2005 Business/Civic Leadership Forum. Two community leaders and Forum participants, Barbara Crews and Pat Hebert, participated in a "learning journey" that sought to expand the geographic reach of Professor Klineberg's Houston research. Out of this learning journey has grown the *Regional Perspectives* survey, a wealth of data on attitudes across our region.

From its inception, the Center for Houston's Future has been dedicated to regional thinking, leadership, and policy planning. The challenges we face, such as air and water pollution, transportation, flooding, and other quality of life issues, are inherently regional and require regional solutions. The participation of so many from across the metropolitan area in today's community luncheon is important evidence of our shared commitment to developing an improved and enriched regional dialogue. The valuable knowledge contained in this report can inform the mutual understanding that such dialogue requires.

The new picture of our region that is revealed by this research should spur meaningful conversation about our shared priorities. We hope that the information presented here will challenge us to find better ways of defining our aspirations and of working together across boundaries to realize them.

Sincerely,

Ann Lents
President and CEO of The Center for Houston's Future

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



A graduate of Haverford College, with an M.A. from the University of Paris and a Ph.D. from Harvard, Stephen Klineberg joined Rice University's Sociology Department in 1972.

In 1982, he and his students initiated the annual "Houston Area Survey," now beginning its second quarter-century of systematic studies of the changing demographic patterns, experiences, attitudes, and beliefs of Harris County residents.

The recipient of nine major teaching awards at Rice and a frequent public speaker, Klineberg is at work on a series of articles as well as a book that will explore the way the public is responding to the economic and demographic transformations of Houston and America.

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INTRODUCTION

THE HOUSTON AREA SURVEY (1982-2007)

For more than a quarter-century, Rice University’s Houston Area Survey (HAS) has been tracking the region’s economic and demographic transformations and recording the ways area residents are responding to ongoing changes. No other city in America has been the focus of a long-term longitudinal research program of this scope. None more clearly exemplifies the trends that are radically refashioning the social and political landscape of urban America. Supported annually by local foundations, corporations, and individuals, the surveys have measured the changing demographic patterns, experiences, attitudes, and beliefs through interviews with 26 successive representative samples of Harris County residents. The overall purpose of this continuing project is to assess systematically the public’s perspectives on current trends and to make the survey findings readily available to civic and business leaders, to the general public, and to research scholars everywhere. (For further information: www.houstonareasurvey.org.)



The 656 participants in the basic 2007 Houston Area Survey were selected through the standard technique of random digit dialing, with a response rate of 38% and a cooperation rate of 68%. In each household reached by randomly generated telephone numbers, the respondent is selected randomly from all residents aged 18 or older. Using “back translation” and the reconciliation of discrepancies, each year’s questionnaire is translated into Spanish, and bilingual interviewers are assigned to the project at all times. The interviews for this year’s basic survey were conducted by the University of Houston’s Center for Public Policy between February 13 and 27, 2007. They reached representative samples of 314 area residents who live in the city of Houston and 327 from the surrounding suburbs of Harris County.

EXPANDING THE SURVEYS INTO THE WIDER REGION

Harris County is just one of the ten counties that constitute the Houston-Baytown-Sugar Land Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). This “core-based statistical area,” designated as such by the Office of Management and Budget in 2003, contains several important urban agglomerations as well as great expanses of open land. The various sectors of this far-flung region have their own identity and pride of place, but they are also inseparably interconnected. They will need to work closely together to address a variety of difficult transboundary problems, such as pollution, crime, flooding, and transportation. They share a common destiny, as parts of a single economic region, in competition with other metropolitan areas for good jobs and sustained prosperity in an increasingly challenging high-tech, knowledge-based global marketplace.

For many years, it has seemed desirable to expand the Houston surveys to reach the broader region. The importance of extending the surveys into the MSA became increasingly clear in the course of the regular reports on the HAS findings presented to the Executive Leadership Forums of the Center for Houston’s Future. The Center has sought since its inception to develop a regional perspective on the issues that will shape the future of the Houston area as a whole.

Two of the participants in the Fall 2005 Business/Civic Executive Leadership Forum, Barbara Crews and Pat Hebert, undertook a “learning journey” to see if they could secure the additional funding that would make it possible to expand the reach of the Houston surveys into Galveston and Fort Bend counties. By the fall of 2006, the funds were raised to support a survey of Galveston County, thanks to efforts led by Barbara Crews and to the contributions of BP, the Galveston County Economic Alliance Foundation, CenterPoint, GPM, the County of Galveston, and the *Galveston County Daily News*. During May and June 2007, the interviews, replicating most of the 2007 HAS questions, were conducted with representative samples of 277 respondents from Galveston Island and 323 from the Galveston Mainland.

The annual Houston Area Survey is supported by a consortium of foundations, corporations, and individuals whose names are listed, with deep appreciation, at the end of this report. Thanks to their great generosity, we were able to draw on additional funds in the HAS research account at Rice University to conduct comparable interviews during July 2007 with scientifically selected samples of 303 residents from Fort Bend County and 304 from Montgomery County.

This has meant that we are now able for the first time ever, through objective and reliable survey research and with identical questions asked of all respondents, to compare systematically the demographic patterns, life experiences, attitudes, and beliefs of the people living in the six most populated sectors of the Houston metropolitan region. On virtually every question, statistical analyses revealed significant differences (*i.e.*, ones that cannot be explained by chance variations) somewhere in the region. Almost across the board, in other words, the residents in at least one of the six sectors gave clearly different answers from those living elsewhere in the region.

This report presents the most striking and interesting contrasts. It does so in a straightforward, descriptive manner, seeking simply to present as clearly as possible the most significant findings from this first-ever systematic survey research in the greater Houston metropolitan area.



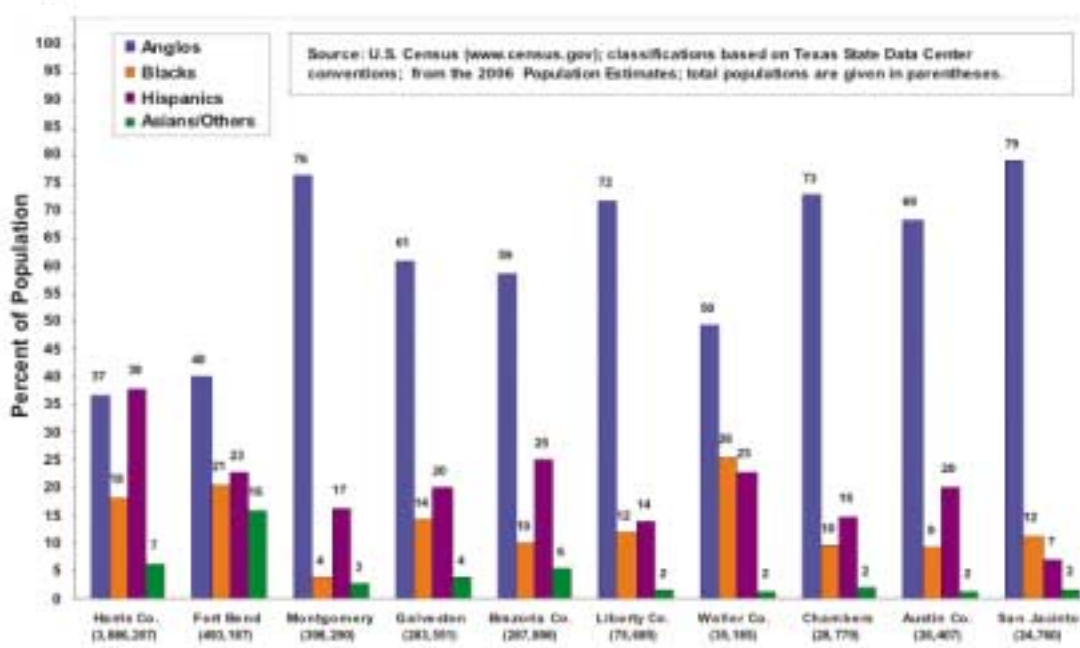
DEMOGRAPHIC DIFFERENCES

THE CENSUS FIGURES FOR 2006

Figure 1 depicts the most recent population estimates from the U.S. Bureau of the Census for the ten counties that constitute the Houston-Baytown-Sugar Land Metropolitan Statistical Area. Two striking realities stand out in this chart. First, the area as a whole is remarkably low in density and expansive in geography. The ten-county MSA covers an area of 10,062 square miles, a geographical expanse larger than the state of Maryland. No wonder Houston has been called “the blob that ate southeast Texas.” Harris County, with 3.9 million inhabitants in 2006, contains more than 70% of the 5.5 million people who live in the entire ten-county area.

FIGURE 1

The Demographics of the Ten Counties in Houston’s Metro Area (2006)



Second, with the exception of Harris County (which is just 37% Anglo) and Fort Bend County (40%), the counties are disproportionately composed of non-Hispanic whites. The proportions range from 50% in Waller County to 76% in Montgomery County and 79% in San Jacinto County. Note, however, that the region’s ongoing demographic transformations, so clearly seen in the census data for Harris and Fort Bend counties, are spreading rapidly. The census reports that the percentage of Anglos living in Montgomery County dropped from 81.6% in 2000 to 76.4% in 2006. In the region as a whole during those same six years, the Anglo share declined from 48.6% to 43.6%, and the proportion of Latinos grew from 28.7% to 32.9%; 16.8% of the total population of 5.5 million in 2006 was African-American, and 6.7% was Asian or other.

In sum, with the exceptions of Fort Bend and Waller, the counties that surround Harris County and that make up the greater Houston MSA, are still today predominantly Anglo, although the Anglo dominance is rapidly shrinking. In addition, all nine of the surrounding counties have relatively small and widely dispersed populations, compared to Harris County itself.

Given the allure of empty spaces, this too is likely to change in the years ahead. Between 1970 and 2000, Harris County as a whole doubled its population, and the suburban areas of the county grew by 207%. During that same 30-year period, however, the population of Fort Bend County grew by 579%, and Montgomery County by 495%. The census depicts a regional population that is 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. It is therefore not surprising to discover, as we will see below (Figure 3), that so many newcomers into the Houston region have tended to move directly into the surrounding suburban counties.

Two final points before examining the survey findings themselves: Figure 1 indicates that 16% of the population of Fort Bend County is Asian or of some other race. No other county in the region comes close to that percentage, and Asians have had a greater impact on life in Fort Bend County than anywhere else in the greater Houston MSA. It is worth noting, however, that Harris County, which has almost eight times as many residents, contains more than three times as many Asians or others — 251,633, according to census estimates for 2006, compared to just 79,452 in Fort Bend County.

Note also that Galveston County as a whole has a higher percentage of Anglos (at 61%) than either Fort Bend or Harris counties, but as we will see in Figure 2 (below), Galveston Island is considerably more ethnically diverse than the Galveston Mainland, and more so even than Fort Bend County. By far the least ethnically diverse of the four counties reached by these surveys is Montgomery County, with a population that is more than three-fourths (76%) Anglo. Another 17% of the county residents are Latino; just 4% are black and 3% Asian.

ETHNIC DIFFERENCES IN THE SURVEYS OF THE SIX SECTORS

Members of minority communities are underrepresented in these surveys because they are more likely than Anglos to be living in larger households (with more than one or two adults) and to be among the households without land-line telephones. In addition, we were unable to conduct the interviews this year with respondents who spoke neither English nor Spanish. It should also be clear that the samples reached in these surveys inevitably miss many of the area residents whose lives have been the most disrupted by economic adversity.

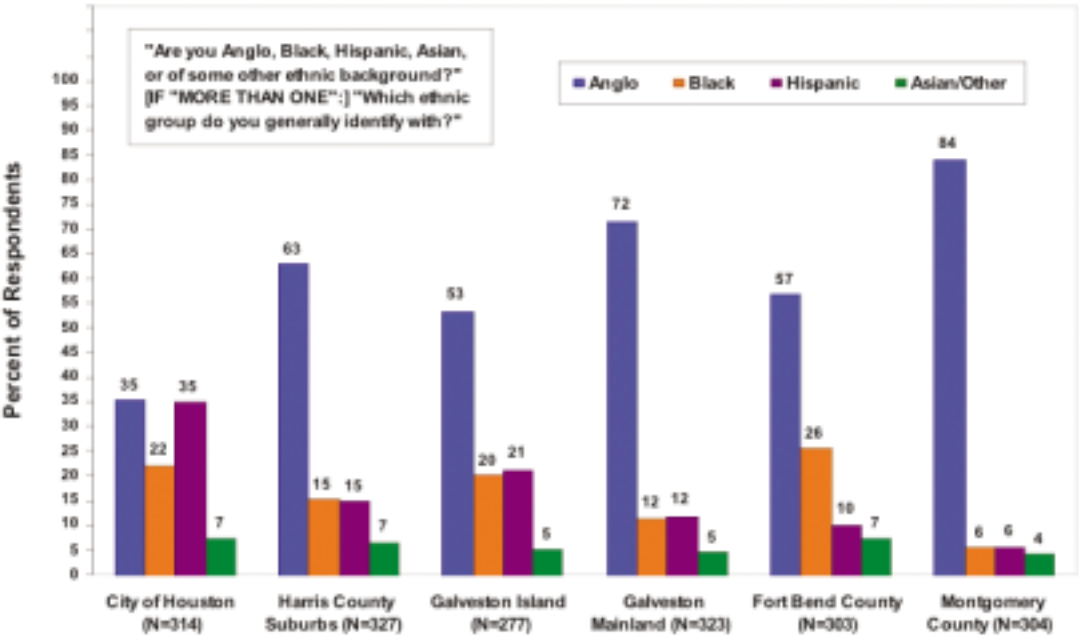


It is important to note in this connection that these and other limitations are the same across all six sectors of the region. Thus despite the inevitable biases, the contrasting responses obtained in the surveys should nevertheless provide reliable indicators of the actual differences among the six sectors in their demographic patterns and attitudinal characteristics.



Figure 2 depicts the distributions by ethnicity as revealed in the surveys of the six sectors. The differences among them are faithful reflections of the census figures presented above. Thus, 84% of the interviews in Montgomery County were conducted with Anglos, compared to just 35% in the city of Houston. White, non-Hispanic respondents also predominate in the surveys conducted on the Galveston Mainland (72%) and in the Harris County suburbs (63%). The surveys reveal substantial ethnic diversity in Fort Bend County (only 57% of the interviews were with Anglos) and on Galveston Island (53%), but the city of Houston (at 35% Anglo) is by far the most ethnically diverse of the six sectors.

FIGURE 2
Distributions by Ethnicity in the Surveys, across the Six Sectors



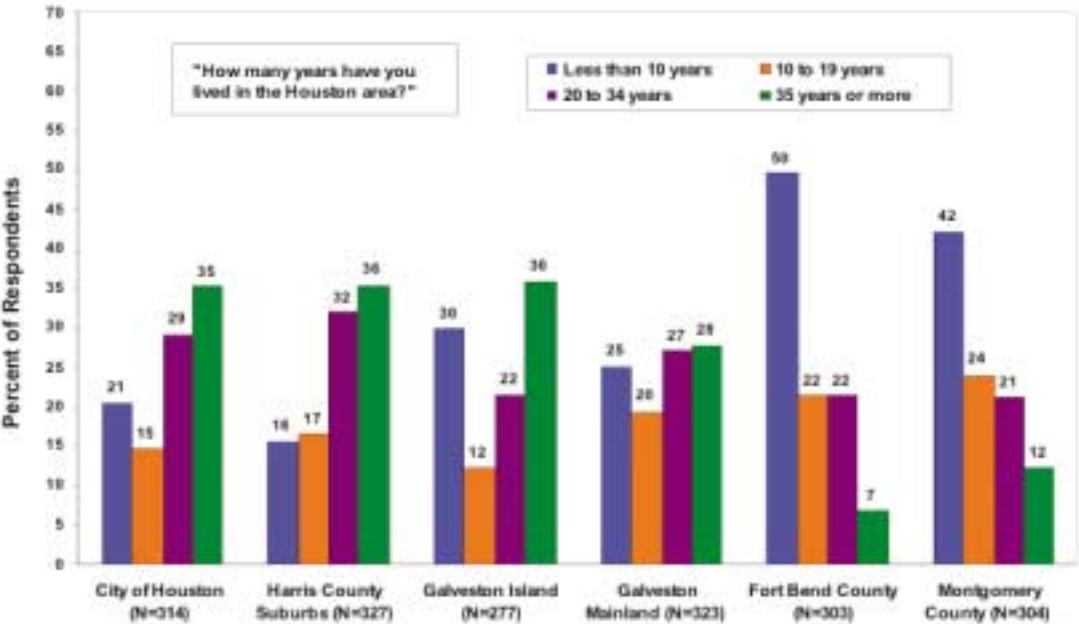
In light of these demographic differences, it will be important to ask whether the contrasts among the six regional sectors might be attributable to differences in their ethnic composition, rather than to real differences in the views of the residents themselves. Accordingly, when the surveys ask about issues on which the positions of the ethnic communities generally differ significantly — having to do, for example, with attitudes toward immigration or with assessments of interethnic relationships — the comparisons will be based on the views of just the Anglo respondents who are living in each of the six sectors.



MIGRATION PATTERNS AND FAMILY CIRCUMSTANCES

Recency of migration into the various sectors of the region. Figure 3 indicates that fully 50% of all the residents of Fort Bend County moved into the region less than ten years ago. This is also true for 42% of those living in Montgomery County. Such figures reflect the rapid growth of the two outlying counties. They do not enable us to determine how much of that growth is due to people arriving from outside the region and moving immediately into these suburban communities, and how much is due instead to area residents who had lived in Harris County or elsewhere in the region and then decided to move out to the suburbs.

FIGURE 3
Length of Time in the Houston Metro, across Six Sectors of the Region



The long-time residents of the region are far more likely to be living in the city or suburbs of Harris County. Only 16% of the survey respondents from the Harris County suburbs said they came to Houston fewer than 10 years ago; 36% moved into the Houston area 35 or more years ago, as did 36% of those now living on Galveston Island, and 35% in the city of Houston. In sharp contrast, just 7% of the respondents from Fort Bend County and 12% of those in Montgomery County said they had been living in the Houston area for 35 years or longer.

Further validating these patterns, the survey respondents were asked where they lived when growing up (when they were 16 years old). More than half (53%) of those on Galveston Island and 49% in the city of Houston said they had grown up in the Houston area, compared to just 36% and 38% in Montgomery and Fort Bend counties, respectively.

Married with children. Figure 4 confirms the strong attraction of the suburbs to those with families and children. The residents of Fort Bend (71%) and Montgomery (77%) counties are more likely to be currently married than those in other sectors of the region. Married respondents are also well represented in the Harris County suburbs (67%) and on the Galveston Mainland (59%). In the city of Houston and on Galveston Island, in contrast, half or fewer of the respondents are married, and almost one-fourth (22% on the Island; 24% in the city) have never been married, compared to just 10% of the Montgomery County residents.

FIGURE 4
 Marital Status, across the Six Sectors of the Metropolitan Region

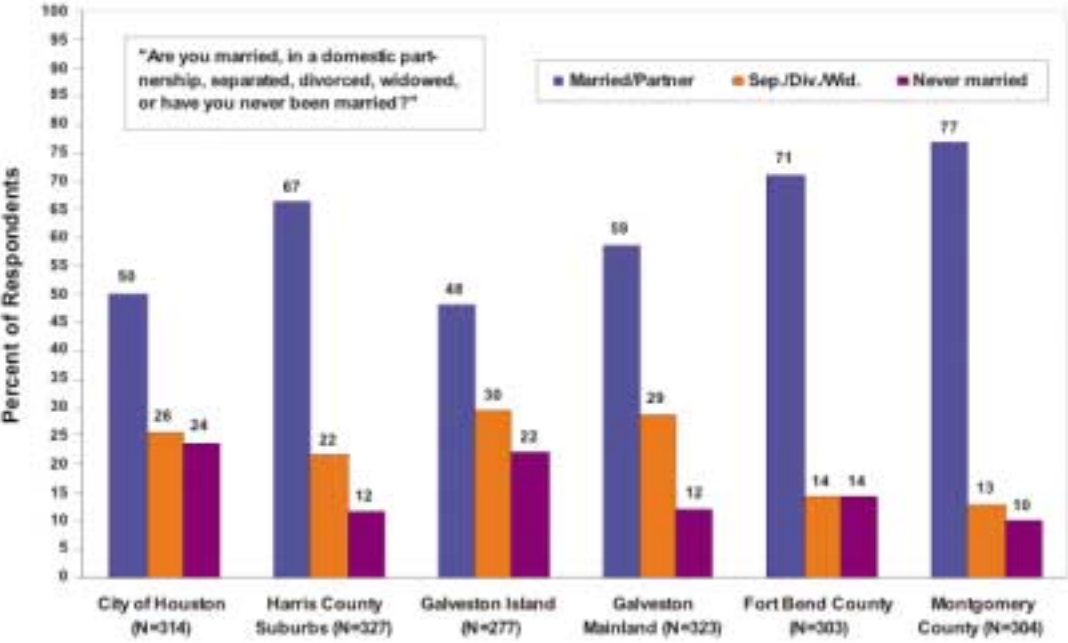
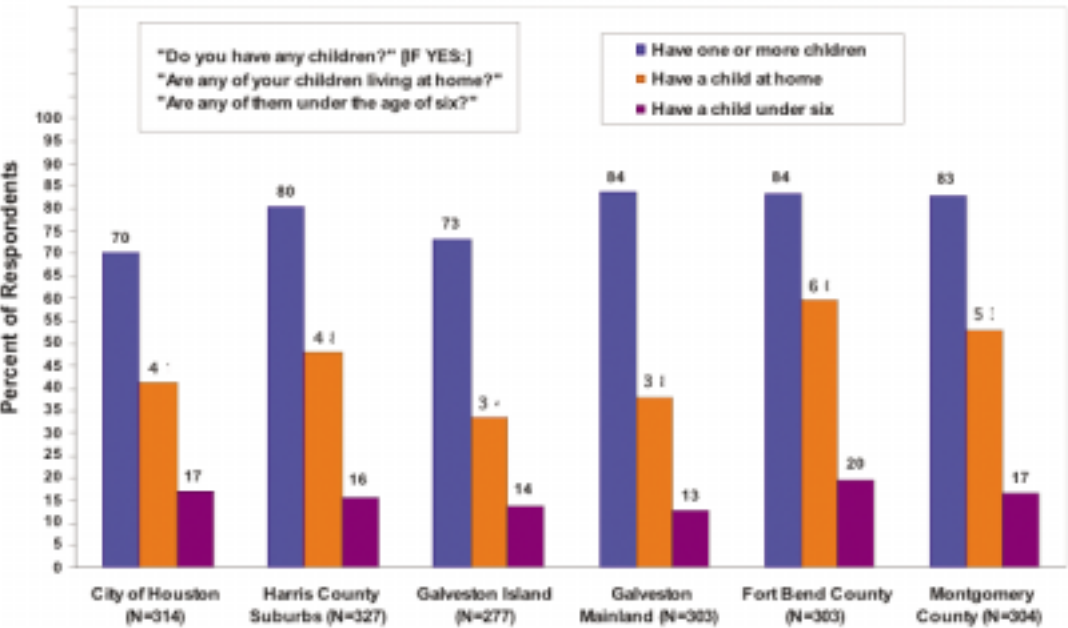


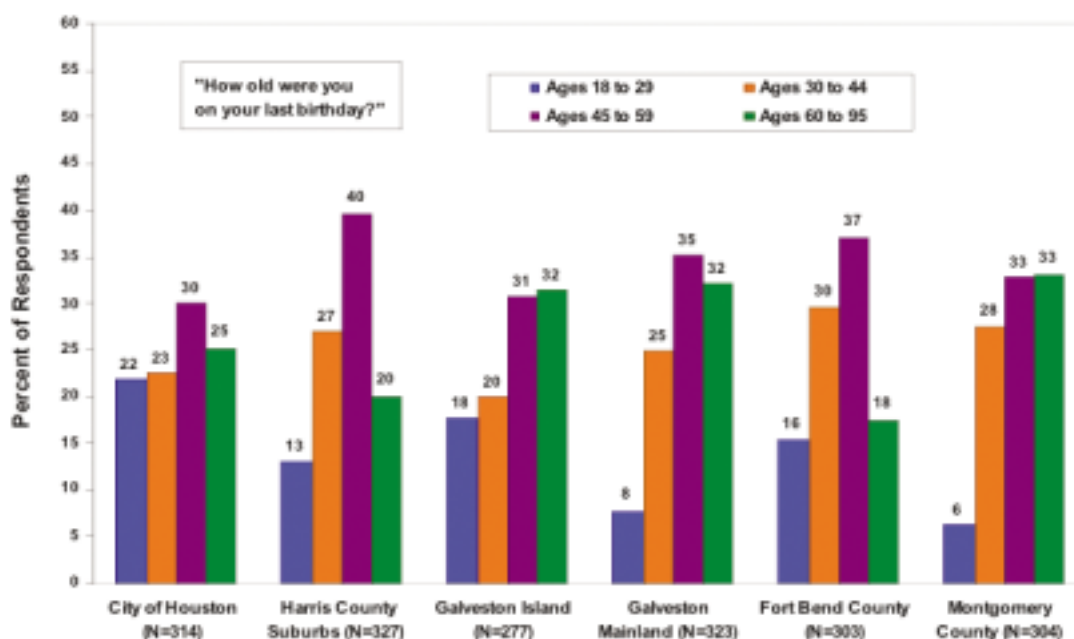
FIGURE 5
 Respondents with Children, across the Six Sectors of the Region



By the same token, Figure 5 indicates that the suburbanites are more likely to have children and to have children who are living at home. In Fort Bend County, in Montgomery County, on the Galveston Mainland, and in the Harris County suburbs, more than 80% of the respondents have children and more than 50% have children living at home. In the city of Houston, only 70% have children; and just 34% on Galveston Island have children living at home.

Age distributions. Adults under the age of 30 are particularly well represented in the city of Houston. The younger cohort constitutes 22% of all the respondents in the city, compared to 6% in Montgomery County and 8% on the Galveston Mainland. The percentage of older respondents (ages 60 or more) is unusually large in Montgomery County (33%) and in both sectors of Galveston County (each at 32%). Middle-aged adults (ages 45 to 59) predominate especially in the Harris County suburbs and in Fort Bend County.

FIGURE 6
The Respondents' Ages, across the Six Sectors of the Houston Region

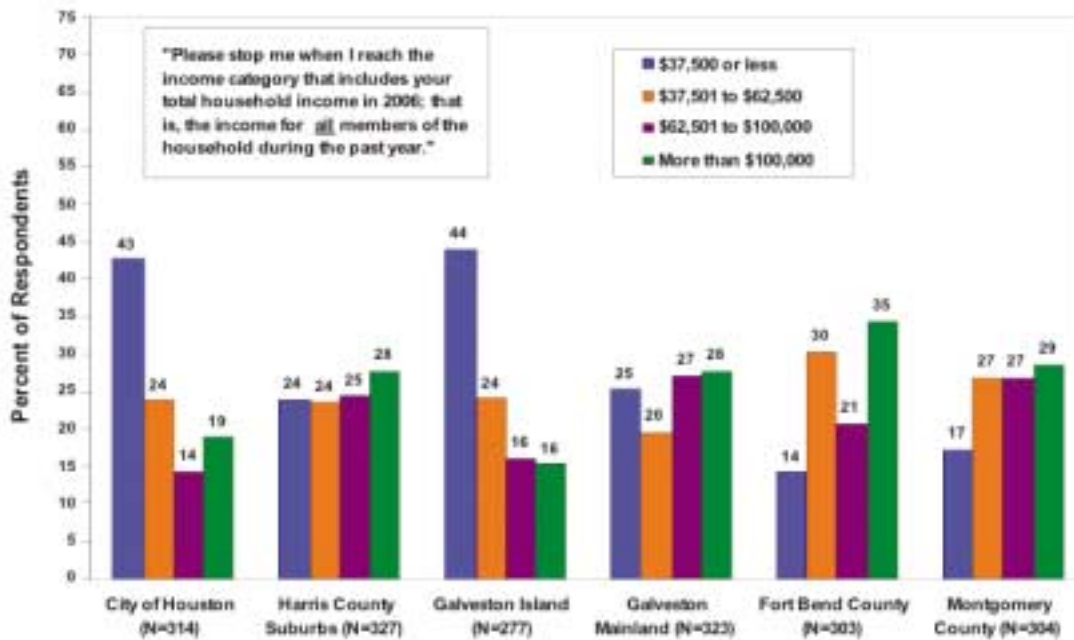


SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS AND POLITICS

It is not surprising to discover that the suburban regions have a higher percentage of more affluent residents. Figure 7 depicts the respondents' reports of their total household incomes in 2006. In Fort Bend County, fully 35% report incomes above \$100,000, compared to 19% in the city of Houston and 16% on Galveston Island. At the other end of the spectrum, the city and the Island are far more likely to have high percentages (43% and 44%, respectively) of respondents with household incomes below \$37,501.

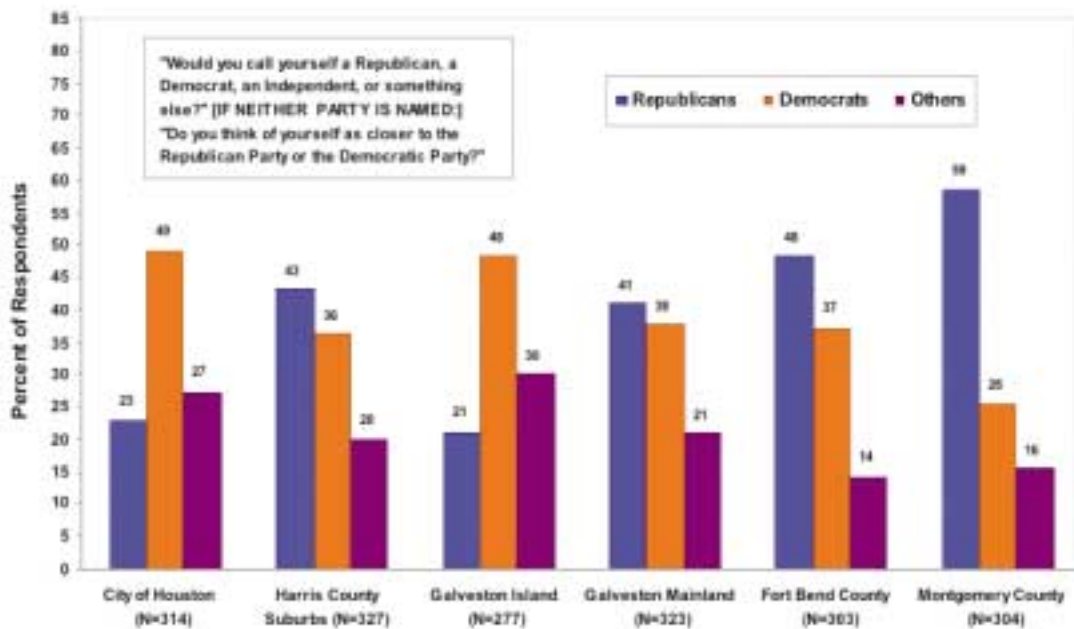
The city of Houston and Galveston Island are also the most likely of all the sectors reached in these surveys to have residents who are without medical insurance: 21% in the city, 16% on the Island, and 12% on the Mainland said that they did not have any health insurance. This was true for no more than 7% of those from the three suburban sectors of the region. Similarly, almost 40% in the city of Houston and on Galveston Island are renting the place where they live, whereas fewer than 20% in the other four sectors are renters. College graduates predominate in the Harris County suburbs (45%) and in Fort Bend County (46%). One-third of those living in the city of Houston (36%) and on Galveston Island (32%) have no more than a high school diploma; fully 15% in the city of Houston have not completed high school.

FIGURE 7
Household Incomes, across the Six Sectors of the Houston Region



Political orientations. There were only slight differences across the six sectors in the respondents' religious beliefs — the percentage of Protestants, for example, ranged from 42% on Galveston Island to 57% on the Mainland. There were no meaningful differences at all in the importance respondents attach to religion. The numbers saying that religion is “very important” in their lives ranged from 63% (on Galveston Island) to 73% (in the City of Houston).

FIGURE 8
Political Party Affiliations, across the Six Sectors of the Region



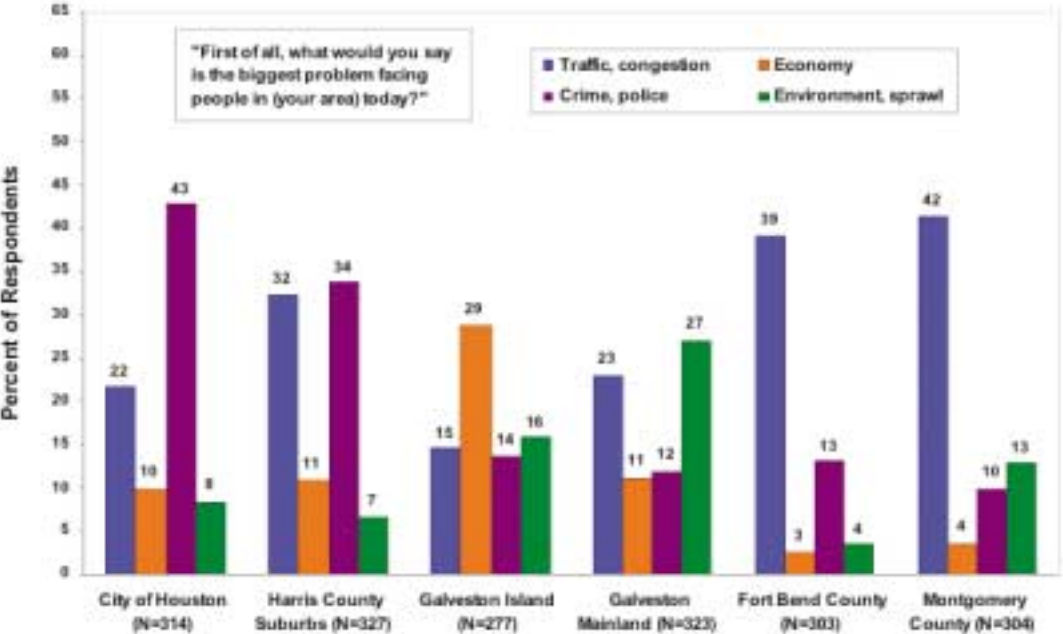
On the other hand, the differences in socioeconomic status across the sectors are clearly reflected in respondents' political orientations. As indicated in Figure 8, 59% of the residents of Montgomery County were either outright Republicans or Independents who said they felt closer to the Republican Party. Only 26% were aligned with the Democratic Party; the remaining 16% did not express a preference for either party. The Republican advantage is also evident, although to a lesser degree, in Fort Bend County, where 48% are Republicans and 37% Democrats, and in the Harris County suburbs, at 43% and 36%. In the city of Houston and on Galveston Island, with their higher percentages of low-income citizens, the Democrats prevail — by 49% to 23% and by 48% to 21%, respectively.

Similarly, when asked about political ideologies (“Do you think of yourself as conservative, moderate, or liberal in your politics?”), self-identified conservatives predominate in Fort Bend (57%) and Montgomery counties (56%). Just 28% on Galveston Island think of themselves as conservative. Only 8% in Fort Bend and Montgomery counties are self-described liberals, but this is the case for 24% in the City of Houston and 19% in the Harris County suburbs.

EVALUATIONS OF LOCAL CONDITIONS

In the open-ended question that begins the interviews, respondents were asked, “What would you say is the biggest problem facing people in [your area] today?” The responses reflect consistent themes regarding the varying preoccupations of residents from the different sectors of the region. As indicated in Figure 9, the greatest concern both in Houston and suburban Harris County is *crime*, mentioned spontaneously by 43% in the city and 34% in the suburbs.

FIGURE 9
 “What Would You Say Is the Biggest Problem in [Your Area] Today?”

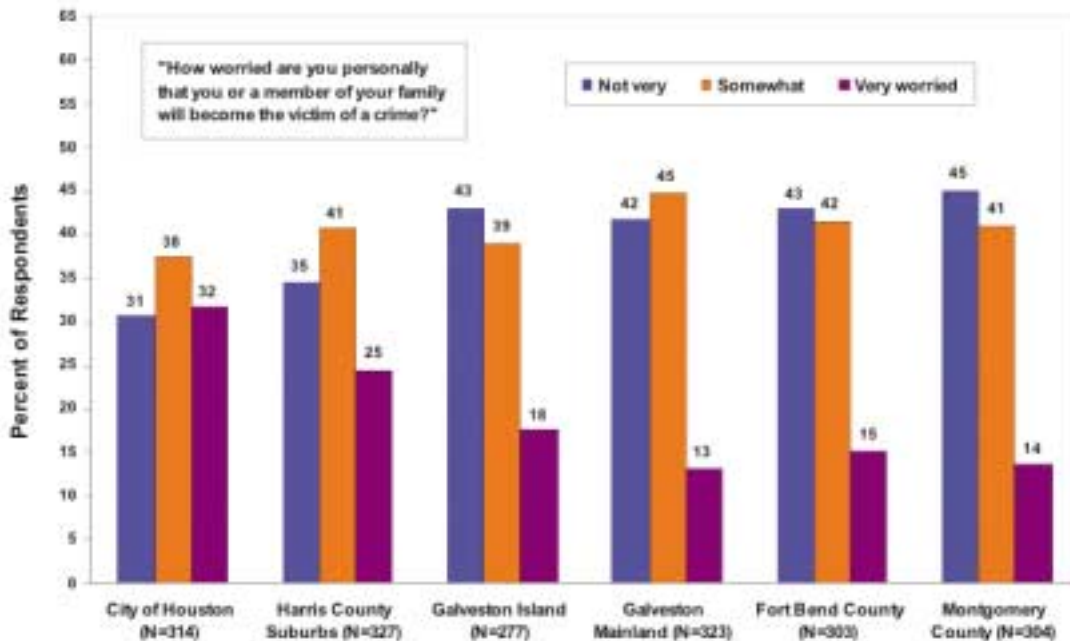


On Galveston Island, the respondents are far more likely than in the other sectors to be worried about *economic issues* (named by 29%). Those on the Galveston Mainland are the most likely (at 27%) to think of *pollution and urban sprawl* as the biggest problem facing people in their area. Traffic congestion is clearly the predominant concern in Fort Bend (39%) and Montgomery (42%) counties.

CONCERNS ABOUT CRIME

The respondents were asked directly how worried they were personally that they or a member of their family will become the victim of a crime. As indicated in Figure 10, fully 32% of those living in the city of Houston and 25% in the Harris County suburbs said they were “very worried” about becoming a crime victim. This was true of just 18% on Galveston Island, 13% on the Galveston Mainland, 15% in Fort Bend, and 14% in Montgomery County. More than 40% of those outside Harris County (in Montgomery County, the figure reached 45%) indicated that they were “not very” or “not at all” worried about being the victim of a crime; but this was the case for only 35% of those in suburban Harris County and 31% in the city of Houston.

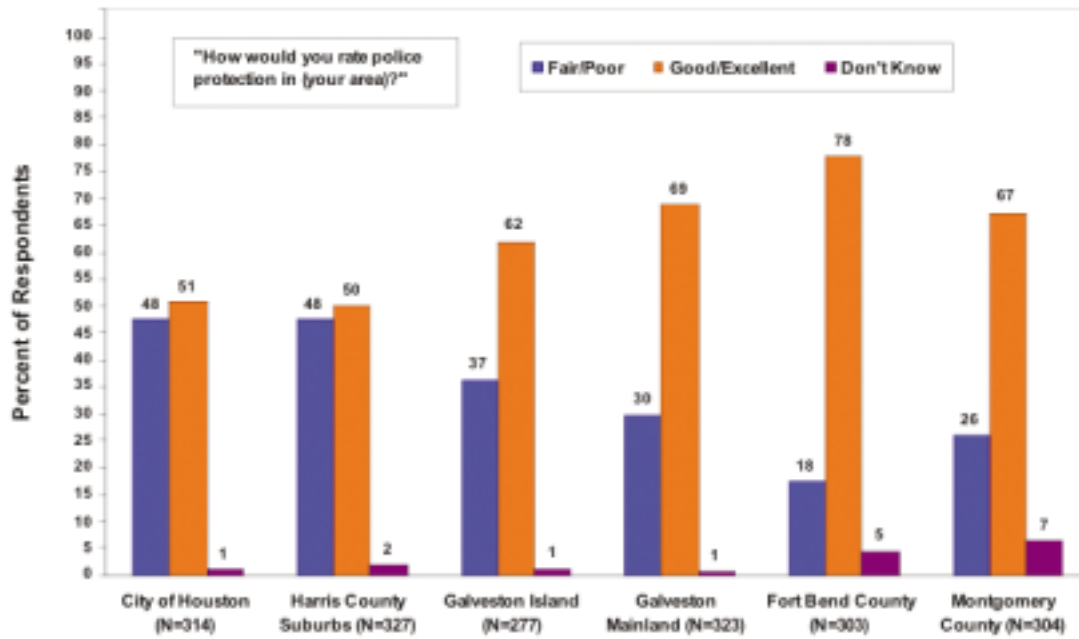
FIGURE 10
The Fear of Crime, across the Six Sectors of the Houston Region



These differences in the fear of crime are supported by the official crime statistics. The Texas Department of Public Safety has just released its figures on the number of reported offenses (murders, rapes, robberies, assaults, burglaries, larcenies, and auto thefts) committed during 2006 in each of the four counties. The rate of all such criminal offenses per 100,000 residents was 7,007 in the city of Houston and 5,667 in Harris County as a whole. The reported number of offenses per 100,000 was 4,110 in Galveston County, 2,846 in Montgomery County, and 2,277 in Fort Bend County. The differences among the survey respondents across these counties in their personal fears of crime appear to be faithful reflections of the actual risks they face.

Figure 11 depicts the ratings given by respondents from the six sectors to the quality of “police protection” in their area. In almost perfect correspondence with the actual crime rates reported for each area, the residents of Fort Bend County, which had the lowest reported rates of crime in 2006, were the most likely (at 78%) to give positive ratings (“excellent” or “good”) to their local police. Favorable ratings were also given by 67% in Montgomery County, and by an average of 65% in the two sectors of Galveston County. The respondents from Harris County, which had the highest rates of crime, were the least inclined to give favorable evaluations to the local police. Just 50% in the Harris County suburbs and 51% in the city of Houston thought that police protection in their area was “excellent” or “good.”

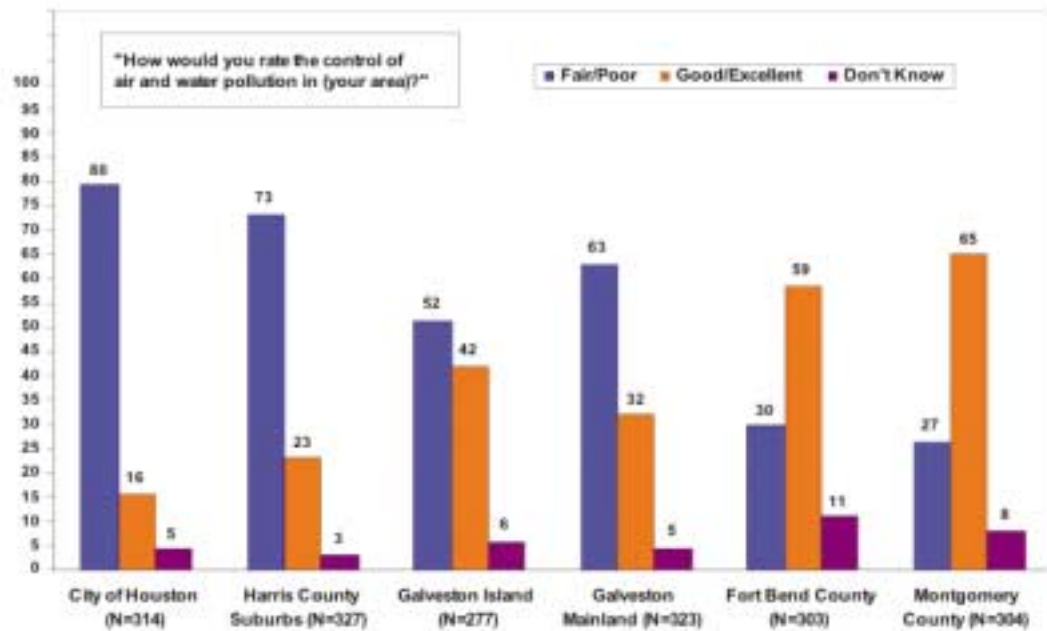
FIGURE 11
Ratings of Police Protection, across the Six Sectors of the Region



AIR POLLUTION

Figure 12 presents the ratings of “the control of air and water pollution” across the six sectors. By far the most positive ratings were given by the residents of Montgomery County (65% said pollution control was either “excellent” or “good”) and by those in Fort Bend County (at 59%).

FIGURE 12
Ratings of Pollution Efforts, Across the Six Sectors of the Region

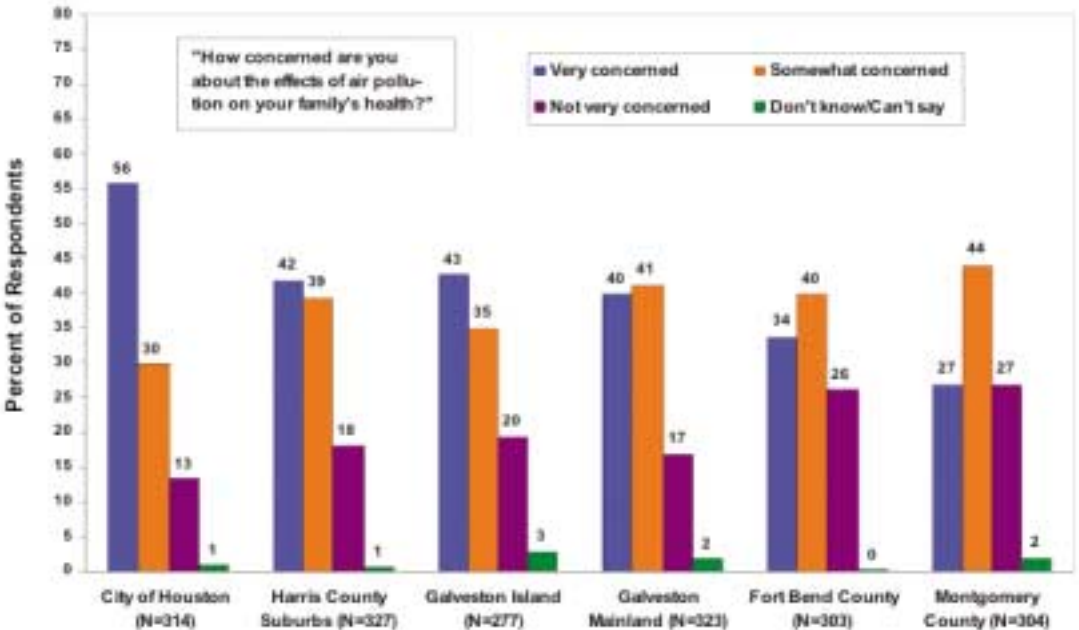


Not surprisingly, people who live in the sectors of the region with substantial amounts of heavy industry perceive a different reality: 80% of the respondents in the city of Houston, 73% in the Harris County suburbs, and 63% on the Galveston Mainland gave negative ratings (“fair” or “poor”) to their local government’s pollution control efforts. Only in the two suburban counties, which have few if any industrial plants, did the positive ratings outweigh the negative ones.

Confirming these patterns, 63% in the city of Houston and 66% in the Harris County suburbs — but only 45% in Fort Bend and 47% in Montgomery counties — said that we are spending “too little” nationally on “improving and protecting the environment.” When asked directly if they thought air pollution in their area had generally gotten better, worse, or stayed about the same during the past three years, 46% in the city of Houston said the pollution was getting worse, as did 41% of those from the Harris County suburbs and 31% on the Galveston Mainland. In contrast, only 18% on Galveston Island, 21% in Montgomery County, and 28% in Fort Bend County thought air pollution in their area had gotten worse in recent years.

Furthermore, as indicated in Figure 13, 56% in the city of Houston said they were “very concerned” about the effects of air pollution on their family’s health. This was also the case for more than 40% in the Harris County suburbs and in both sectors of Galveston County; but the numbers expressing such strong concern reached just 34% in Fort Bend County and 27% in Montgomery County.

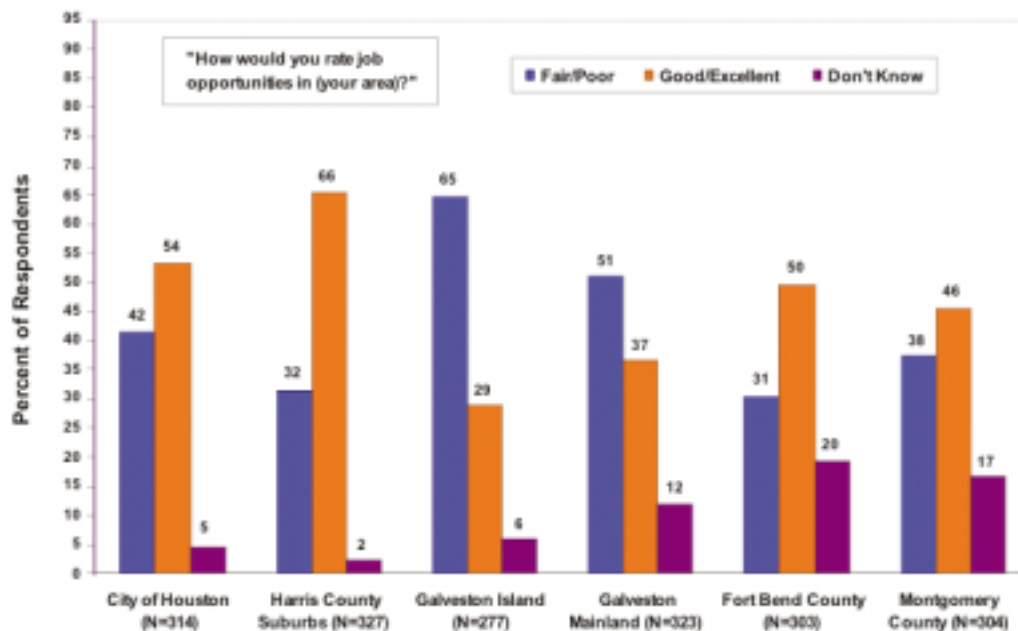
FIGURE 13
Concerns about the Health Effects of Air Pollution, in Six Sectors



ASSESSMENTS OF THE LOCAL ECONOMY

Consistent with their preoccupation with economic issues on “the biggest problem” question, respondents in Galveston County were more pessimistic than those from the other sectors of the region on a variety of measures that asked about the local economy. Figure 14 depicts the ratings of “job opportunities” in the area. Those on Galveston Island were far more likely (at 65%) to give negative ratings (“fair” or “poor”) to the local job market; 51% from the Galveston Mainland and 42% in the city of Houston also gave low marks. In contrast, only 31% of the Fort Bend respondents and 32% in suburban Harris County gave negative ratings.

FIGURE 14
Ratings of Job Opportunities, across the Six Sectors of the Region



Here again, official statistics confirm the public perceptions. According to data from the Texas Workforce Commission for September 2007, the unemployment rate in the city of Galveston was 4.9%, considerably higher than anywhere else in the region. It was 4.5% on the Galveston Mainland and 4.3% in the city of Houston. The even lower official unemployment rates in Fort Bend County (at 4.2%) and Montgomery County (3.9%) are reflected in the positive evaluations of job opportunities given by the respondents in these two suburban counties.

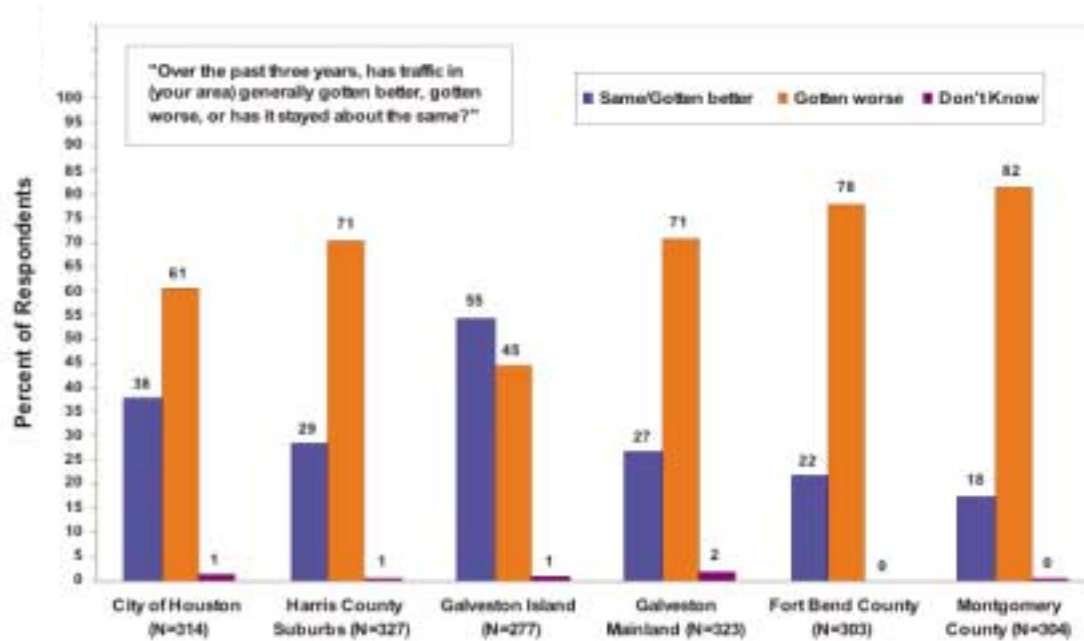
Other survey questions confirm the more pessimistic outlooks on Galveston Island. When asked, for example, if they agreed or disagreed with the statement, “If you work hard in this city, eventually you will succeed,” 81% of all respondents across the Houston region agreed; but this was true for only 69% of the residents on Galveston Island. Similarly, respondents were asked if they thought “the country is headed for better times or more difficult times.” Among the respondents across all six sectors of the region, 62% foresaw “more difficult times” ahead. This was the case for 69% on Galveston Island and 71% on the Galveston Mainland, but for only 52% in Montgomery County.

TRAFFIC CONGESTION

The respondents were asked directly whether they thought traffic in their area had generally gotten better, worse, or stayed about the same during the past three years. Consistent with the concerns expressed spontaneously when respondents were asked to identify “the biggest problem” in their area, 82% of the residents of Montgomery County and 78% in Fort Bend County said the traffic had been getting worse (Figure 15). This was the case for 71% in the Harris County suburbs and on the Galveston Mainland, and for 61% in the city of Houston. In contrast, only 45% of the respondents on Galveston Island said traffic had gotten worse; 55% thought the congestion had stayed about the same or improved during the past few years. Note also that virtually all the respondents were prepared to express an opinion on this question.

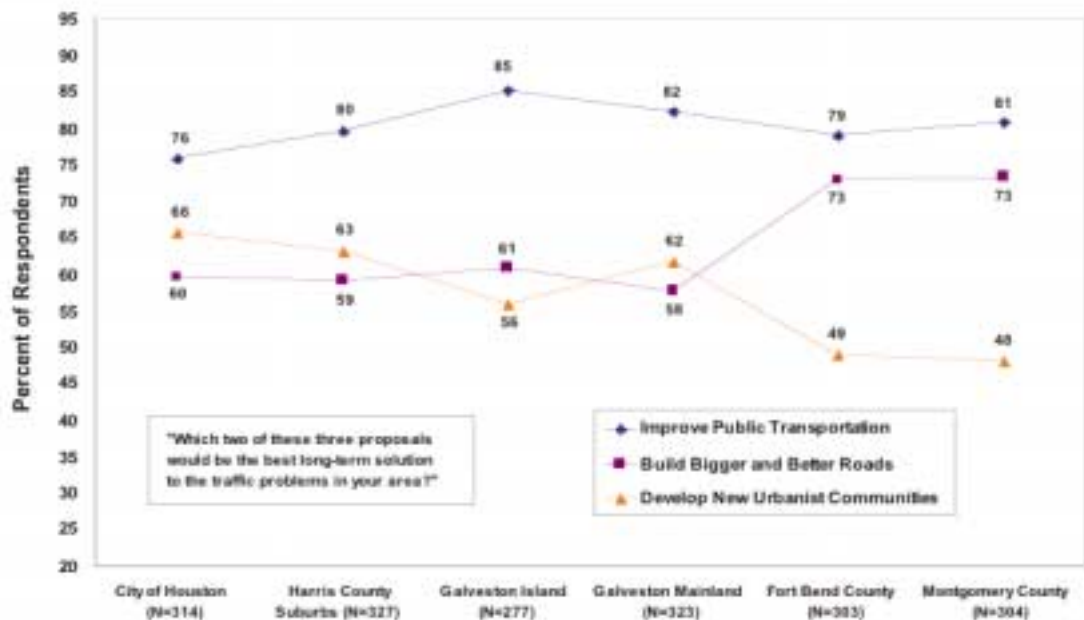


FIGURE 15
Changes in Traffic Conditions, across Six Sectors of the Region



In addition, respondents were asked to indicate which two of three proposals would be the best solution to the traffic problems in their area. In the city of Houston, as indicated in Figure 16, 66% named as either their first or second choice the prospect of “developing communities where people can live closer to where they work and shop,” but this was the preferred solution of just 49% in Fort Bend County and 48% in Montgomery County. On the other hand, 73% in both of these suburban areas called for “building bigger and better roads and highways,” compared to just 58% on the Galveston Mainland and 59% in the Harris County suburbs.

FIGURE 16
Preferred Solutions to Traffic Congestion, across the Six Sectors



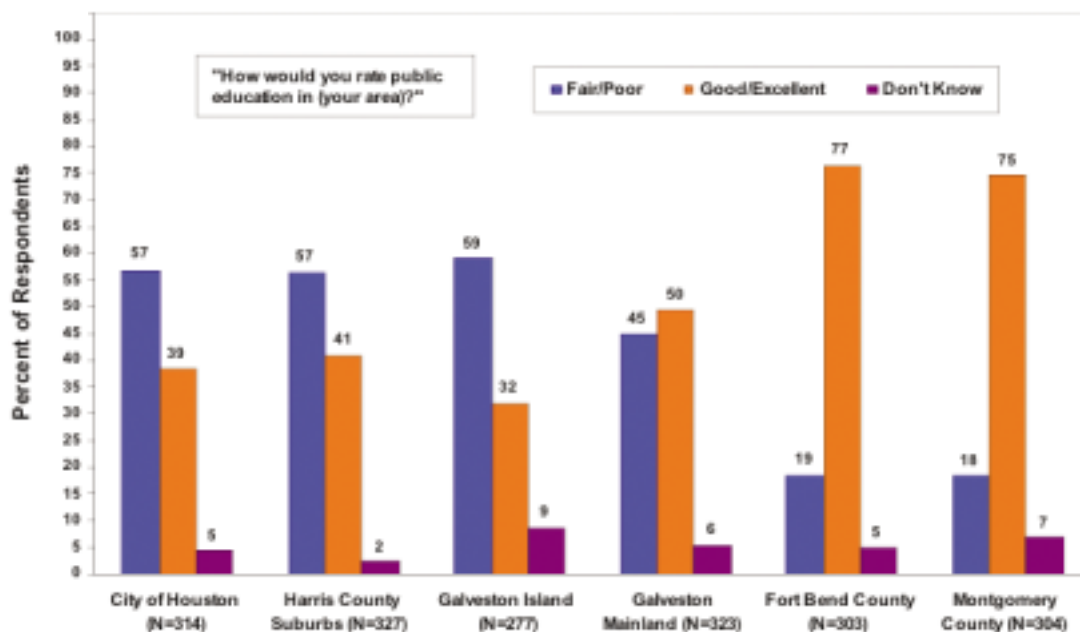
Significantly, the most widely preferred solution, chosen with equal frequency in all six sectors of the region, was “making improvements in public transportation, such as trains, buses, and light rail.” This proposal was selected in either first or second place by approximately 80% of all respondents. Better transit systems were as likely to be preferred by the residents of Montgomery County as by those on Galveston Island, in the suburbs as much as in the city.

PERSPECTIVES ON THE LOCAL SCHOOLS

When asked to evaluate the public schools in their area, more than three-fourths of the residents in Fort Bend (77%) and Montgomery (75%) counties rated the local schools as either “excellent” or “good” (Figure 17). This was true for only 39% and 41% of the respondents from Houston and the Harris County suburbs and for just 32% of those living on Galveston Island.

FIGURE 17

Ratings of the Public Schools, across Six Sectors of the Region

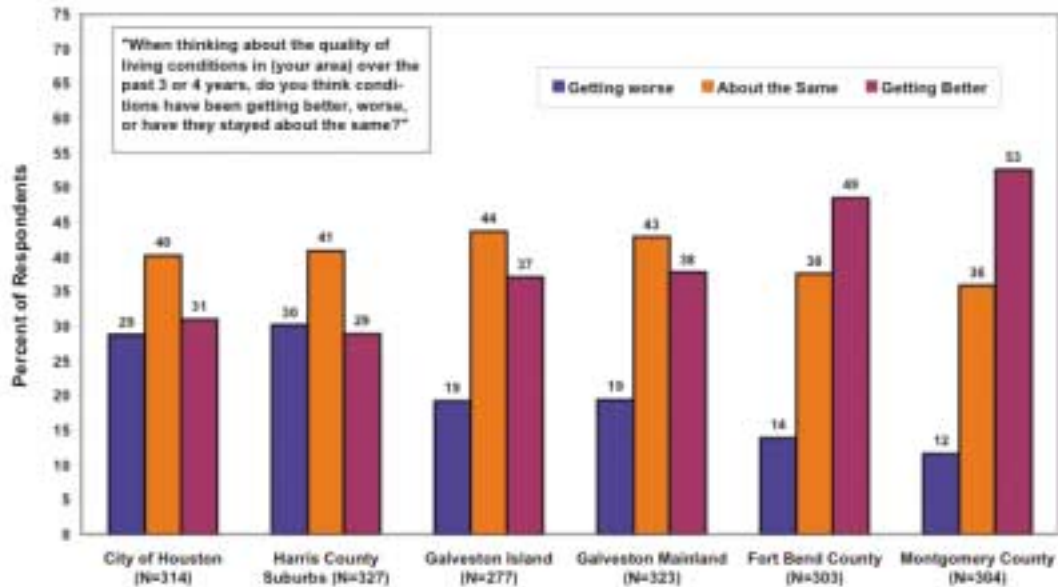


The survey respondents were also asked about two statements regarding the need for more school funding. Two-thirds in Montgomery County (67%) and in Fort Bend County (63%) believed that “the schools have enough money, if it were used wisely, to provide a quality education.” But 52% of the respondents in both sectors of Galveston County and 45% in both sectors of Harris County agreed instead that “in order for the schools to provide a quality education, significantly more money will be needed.”

OVERALL EVALUATIONS OF LOCAL LIVING CONDITIONS

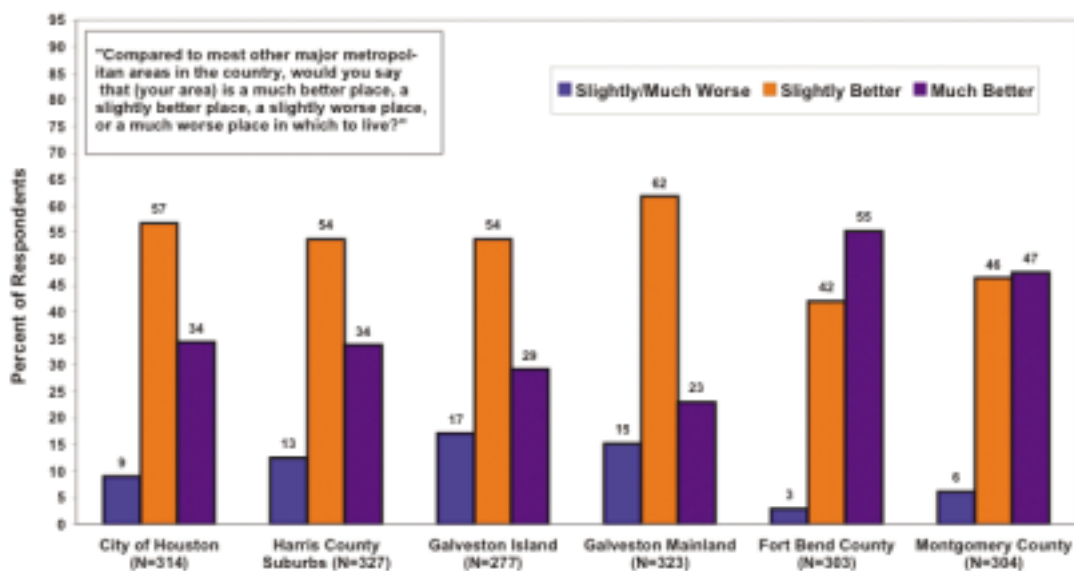
When asked for a summary judgment of the changes in living conditions over the past three years, 53% in Montgomery and 49% in Fort Bend counties said things were “getting better” in their communities, compared to just 29% in suburban Harris County and 31% in the city of Houston (Figure 18). Particularly concerned about crime and air pollution, fully 30% of the residents in both the city and suburbs of Harris County said that local living conditions were deteriorating. This was the case for just 12% in Montgomery and 14% in Fort Bend counties.

FIGURE 18
Changes in Living Conditions, across the Six Sectors of the Region



“Compared to most other metropolitan areas in the country,” respondents were asked, “would you say that [your area] is a much better place, a slightly better place, a slightly worse place, or a much worse place in which to live?” As seen in Figure 19, the numbers saying that theirs was a better place to live than elsewhere in the country never fell below 83%. Those in Fort Bend and Montgomery counties were particularly happy to be living here: 55% and 47%, respectively, said that their area was a “much better” place in which to live than virtually anywhere else in America.

FIGURE 19
Ratings of the Local Area as a Place to Live, across the Six Sectors



The residents of Galveston County, especially worried about the local economy, were somewhat less content. About one in six expressed the belief that where they were living was at least “slightly worse” than most other places in America. Only 29% on the Island and 23% on the Mainland claimed that their area was a “much better place” in which to live.

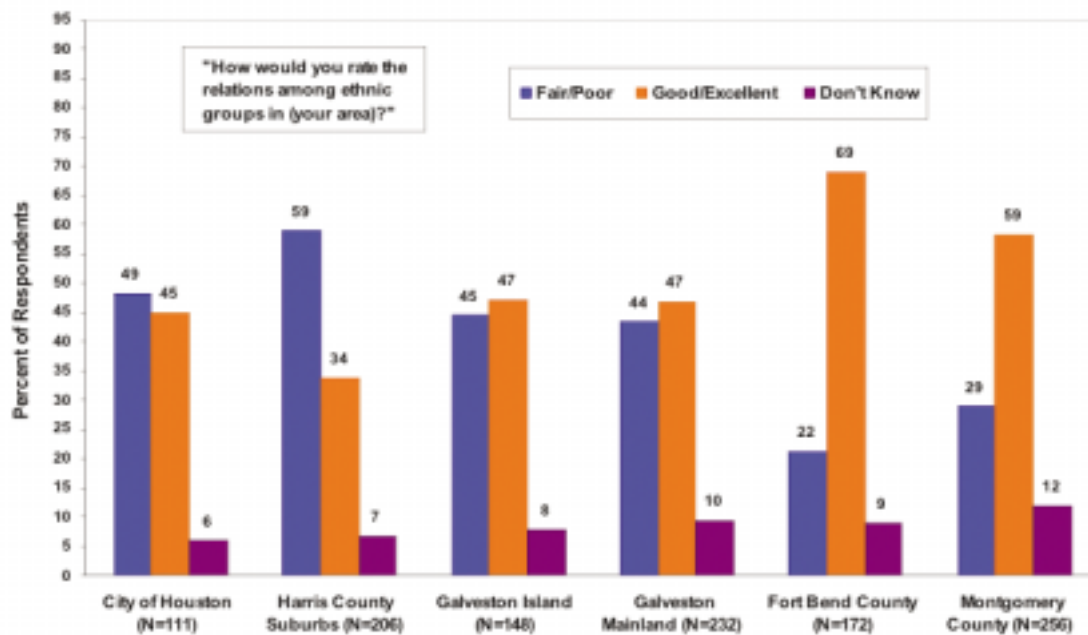
INTERGROUP RELATIONSHIPS

Because non-Hispanic whites tend to differ significantly from other ethnic communities in their perspectives on interethnic relationships, immigration, and ethnic diversity in general, this section compares the responses given by the Anglo respondents only. The data make it clear that Anglos differ significantly in their views on these important issues across the six sectors of the Houston metropolitan region.

ASSESSMENTS OF ETHNIC RELATIONS

When asked to rate “the relations among ethnic groups” in their area, 69% of the Anglo respondents from Fort Bend County rated the relationships as either “excellent” or “good” (Figure 20). In Montgomery County, the least ethnically diverse of the six sectors in the region, 59% also gave positive evaluations. On the other hand, where ethnic diversity is the most advanced, ethnic relationships are generally perceived to be more problematic: 59% of Anglos living in the Harris County suburbs and 49% of those in the city of Houston rated ethnic relations in their area as only “fair” or “poor.”

FIGURE 20
Ratings of Ethnic Relations, across the Six Sectors (Anglos Only)

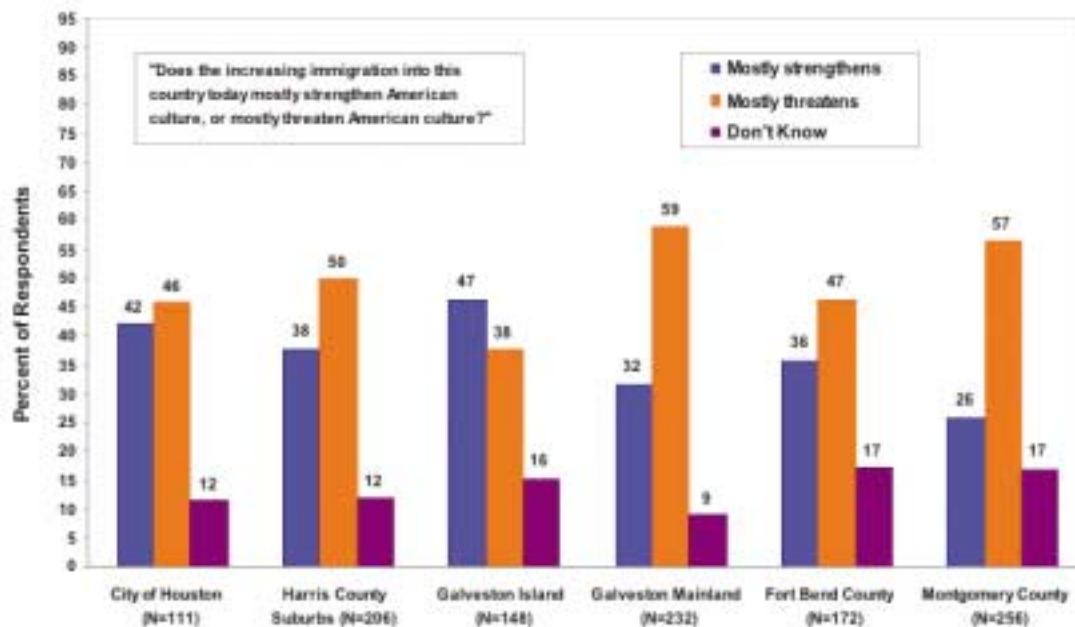


PERSPECTIVES ON THE NEW IMMIGRATION

Until 2006, the annual Houston surveys recorded growing support over the years for the burgeoning immigration that has been transforming the ethnic composition of this region and revitalizing the local economy. In 2006 and 2007, virtually all the relevant measures reversed direction. Respondents were asked, for example, if they thought the increasing immigration into this country today “mostly strengthens American culture, or mostly threatens American culture.” The proportion of Anglos in Harris County who believed that immigration strengthens the national culture grew from 36% in 1997, to 50% in 2001, to 55% in 2005, and then dropped dramatically to 40% in 2007. Conversely, the numbers saying that the increasing immigration mostly “threatens American culture” increased from 36% in 2005 to 48% in the 2007 survey.

Figure 21 compares the responses of Harris County Anglos in the 2007 Houston Area Survey with the beliefs expressed by Anglo respondents living in the other four sectors of the Houston region. Those from Galveston Island were slightly more positive in their assessments of the impact of the new immigration than Harris County residents: 47% on the Island asserted that the increasing immigration into this country today “mostly strengthens American culture,” compared to 42% in the city of Houston and 38% in the Harris County suburbs. In contrast, 57% of those in Montgomery County and 59% on the Galveston Mainland believed that the current immigration “mostly threatens American culture.”

FIGURE 21
The Perceived Impact of Immigration, in Six Sectors (Anglos Only)



On several other related questions, the same pattern prevails. Anglos living in the city of Houston or on Galveston Island generally express more positive views of the new immigration than do residents of the other four sectors of the region. For example, 39% of those on the Island and 32% in the city agreed with the suggestion that “in areas where there are a lot of non-English speaking immigrants, the public schools should offer education in their language.” This view was held by just 23% of Anglos living in the other sectors of the region.

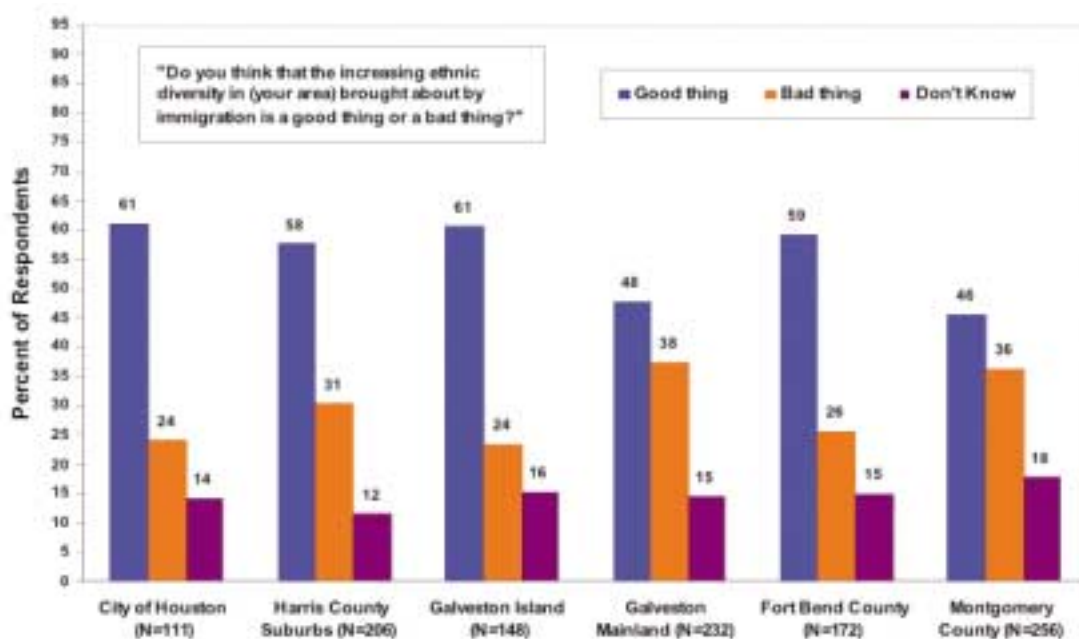
Similarly, 41% in the city of Houston and 47% on Galveston Island were in favor of “a law that would deny health and welfare services to illegal immigrants in Texas.” In the other four sectors, 57% agreed with this position. When asked about “imposing fines and criminal charges against employers in this community who hire illegal immigrants,” 71% of Anglos in the other sectors were in favor, but this was true of just 58% in the city and 57% on the Island.

The pattern also holds for questions about poverty in general. Just 14% in the four other sectors believed that the U.S. is spending “too little” on economic aid to the poor countries of the world. This was the view of 31% of Anglos living in the city of Houston and of 22% on Galveston Island. Respondents were asked if they thought “welfare benefits generally give poor people a chance to get started again,” or whether such programs “encourage poor people to stay poor and dependent.” The proportion of Anglos who said that welfare works because it offers poor people a chance to get started again was 42% in the city and 36% on the Island — a view that was held by just 26% in the other four sectors of the region.

Summary assessments of ethnic diversity. As we have seen, Anglos living in the city of Houston and on Galveston Island are generally the most supportive of the burgeoning diversity, whereas those in Montgomery County and on the Galveston Mainland express the strongest reservations. Figure 22 presents a final illustration of this prevailing pattern.

When Anglos were asked about the overall impact in their communities of the “increasing ethnic diversity brought about by immigration,” 46% in Montgomery County and 48% on the Galveston Mainland thought the growing diversity in their area was “a good thing,” but 36% and 38% said it was “a bad thing.” In all four of the other sectors, more than 58% said the diversity was “a good thing.” In this instance, the positive views were not demonstrably more prevalent in the city of Houston and on Galveston Island (both at 61%), than in Fort Bend County (59%) or in the Harris County suburbs (58%).

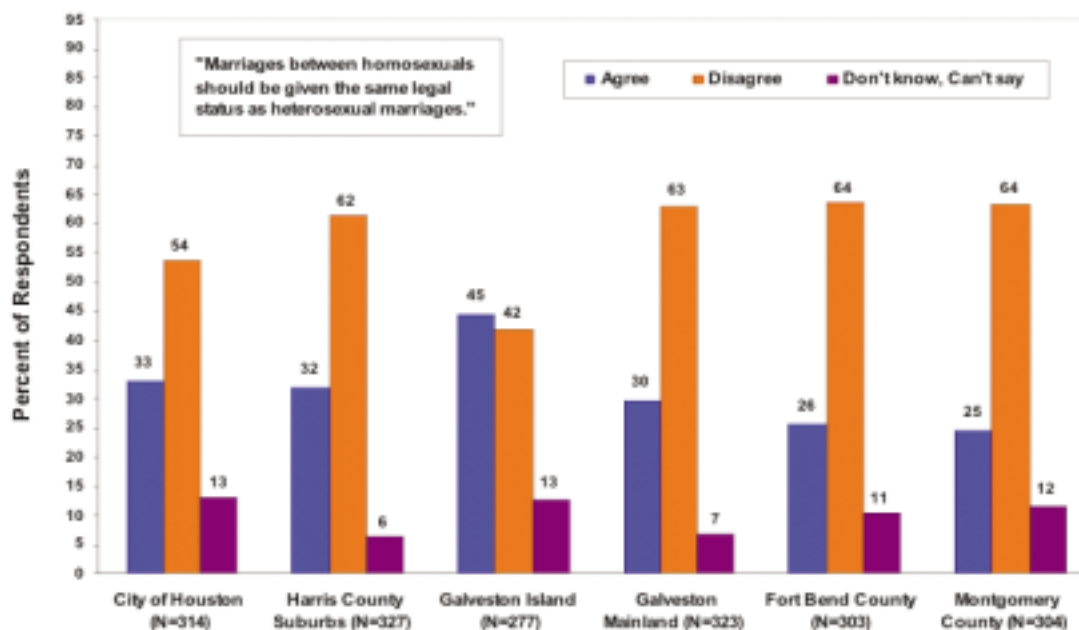
FIGURE 22
Assessments of Ethnic Diversity, in the Six Sectors (Anglos Only)



ATTITUDES TOWARD HOMOSEXUALITY

Finally, with regard to one other area of intergroup relationships, an interesting pattern was revealed in the surveys. We noted earlier that there were very few differences on measures of religiosity or in attitudes toward abortion. On questions regarding the civil rights of homosexuals, however, the residents of Galveston Island stand out from those in the other sectors of the Houston region in expressing consistently stronger support.

FIGURE 23
Support for Gay Marriage, across the Six Sectors (All Respondents)



As indicated in Figure 23, the respondents on Galveston Island were far more likely (by 45%) to agree that homosexual marriages should be given the same legal status as heterosexual marriages. In no other sector did as many as a third of the respondents express support for gay marriage. In Fort Bend and Montgomery counties, only a fourth of the respondents agreed.

Similarly, 55% of all the respondents in the five other sectors of the region said they believed that homosexuality is “morally wrong,” but this was the case for 36% of those living on Galveston Island. Of all the inhabitants of the Island, 41% believed instead that same-sex relationships are “morally acceptable,” compared to 28% in the other sectors.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This report presents the findings from the first-ever systematic set of surveys designed to measure the demographic patterns, attitudes, and beliefs of area residents who are living in the six most populated sectors of the greater Houston metropolitan region. The entire ten-county Houston-Baytown-Sugar Land Metropolitan Statistical Area covers more than 10,000 square miles. In comparison with Harris County, the outlying areas have wide swaths of undeveloped land and relatively small populations, albeit growing rapidly, and with populations that are still primarily Anglo but becoming increasingly diverse.

The residents in each sector of this far-flung metropolitan area have their own sense of identity and place, but they are inseparably interconnected — in the trans-boundary problems they need to address together and in their common destiny as a single economic region competing in the new economy. A comparative study of public perceptions across the region was long overdue. In the spring and summer of 2007, we were able for the first time to expand the reach of the annual Houston Area Survey beyond Harris County, to measure the similarities and differences in the experiences and perspectives of residents throughout the metropolitan region.

Demographic differences. The surveys confirm that by far the most ethnically diverse of the six sectors reached by these surveys is the city of Houston, followed by Galveston Island, and then by Fort Bend County. The least diverse sectors — those with the highest percentage of Anglos in their populations — are the Harris County suburbs, followed by the Galveston Mainland, and above all by Montgomery County, where fully 84% of all the interviews were conducted with Anglos, compared to 35% in the city of Houston.

The rapid population growth of Fort Bend and Montgomery counties in recent years is reflected in the much higher percentages of their residents who are recent migrants into the region as a whole. These suburban counties are also strong magnets for families and children. Unmarried residents, those without children at home, and adults under the age of 30 are more likely to be living in the city of Houston or on Galveston Island.



The city and Island are also more likely than the suburban regions to have residents reporting household incomes of less than \$37,501, and to have high percentages of inhabitants who are without health insurance and are renters rather than homeowners. The suburban counties, especially Fort Bend, have the highest proportions of the region's most affluent residents.

The differences across the sectors in socioeconomic status are reflected in their political orientations as well. The residents of the suburban counties, especially Montgomery, are more likely to be Republicans and self-defined conservatives, whereas Democrats predominate in the city of Houston and on Galveston Island.

Evaluations of local conditions. The six sectors differ importantly in their assessments of living conditions in the area and in the concerns they express about their communities. Thus, the residents of Harris County are more worried than elsewhere in the region about crime and less happy about the quality of their police protection. The official crime figures for 2006, just released by the Texas Department of Public Safety, confirm that the rates of reported criminal offenses are higher in Harris County than elsewhere in the region.

Harris County residents are also more concerned about air pollution, more likely than in other sectors of the region to believe that pollution is getting worse in their area, and more worried about its effects on their families' health. The residents of Fort Bend and Montgomery counties, with little or no heavy industry, consistently express the least concern about pollution.

Meanwhile, the residents of Galveston Island, reflecting their higher unemployment rates, are more worried about local economic conditions. They are the most likely to mention the economy when asked to name the biggest problem facing people in their area, and they give the lowest ratings to local job opportunities. They are the most pessimistic about the American future and the least content about their area in general as a place to live.

For the residents of Fort Bend and Montgomery counties, traffic congestion is the dominant concern. They are the most likely to name "traffic" as the biggest problem in their area and to assert that traffic conditions have been getting worse over the past three years. When asked which two of three proposals they thought would be the best long-term solutions to the traffic problems, respondents from the two suburban counties were more likely to call for better roads and highways. City of Houston residents were the most likely to prefer the prospect of developing new urbanist communities, where people can live closer to workplaces and stores.

Significantly, across all sectors of the region, approximately 80% chose "making improvements in public transportation, such as trains, buses and light rail" as either their first or second choice for the best way to relieve traffic congestion. The transit solution was as likely to be preferred by the residents of Montgomery County as by those on Galveston Island, in the suburbs as much as in the city.



When asked for an overall assessment of their area as a place to live, the residents of Fort Bend and Montgomery counties, who see their communities as having lower crime rates and with less pollution and better schools, give the most positive evaluations (despite their concerns about traffic). They are also the most likely to believe that local living conditions are getting better.

Serious concerns — whether about crime, pollution, the economy, schools, or traffic — are prevalent throughout the metro region. It is therefore particularly impressive to note that the proportion of respondents who believe that where they live is nevertheless a better place in which to live than most other metropolitan areas in the country never falls below 83% in any of the six sectors.

Intergroup relationships. Anglos in Fort Bend County are the most likely to give positive ratings to the relations among ethnic groups in their community. In Harris County, a sector more diverse than Fort Bend, ethnic relations are perceived to be more problematic.

On several measures of attitudes toward the new immigration, a clear pattern emerges across the various sectors of the region. Anglos living in the city of Houston and on Galveston Island generally express more pro-immigrant views than do those from elsewhere in the region. They are more inclined to believe that the new immigration “mostly strengthens” (rather than “threatens”) American culture. They call for more compassionate policies toward undocumented immigrants and are more likely to support bilingual education. Anglos in Montgomery County, as well as those on the Galveston Mainland, express the strongest reservations about the new immigration and about the region’s burgeoning ethnic diversity in general.



There were very few statistically significant differences across the sectors in the respondents’ religious orientations or in their attitudes toward abortion. It was therefore interesting and somewhat surprising to discover that the inhabitants of Galveston Island differ decisively from those in all the other sectors of the region in expressing consistently stronger support for gay rights. Respondents from the Island were more likely than elsewhere in the region to believe that marriages between homosexuals should be given the same legal status as heterosexual marriages, and to insist that same-sex relationships are “morally acceptable.”

In this, as in so many other respects, we need more research in order to clarify and extend the findings from this study. Many of the most challenging problems facing the region as a whole — such as pollution, transportation, flooding, and crime — are transboundary issues that can be successfully addressed only through cooperative investments. Most fundamental of all, perhaps, is the region’s burgeoning ethnic diversity, which will inevitably accelerate and continue to spread throughout the metropolitan area in the years ahead — as immigration persists, as the predominantly Anglo “baby boomers” move rapidly into retirement, and as the younger populations who will replace them are disproportionately non-Anglo and considerably less privileged.

It will be important to understand more fully, through additional systematic and reliable research, precisely how and why these disparate issues are perceived in such distinctive ways across the various sectors of the region. Continuing research along these lines may help to inform the new policies and pro-growth strategies that will need to be put into place if all sectors of the Houston metropolitan area are to come together in the kinds of concerted actions that can ensure the continued prosperity of the region in the high-tech, global economy of the twenty-first century.

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