

Annual study finds Houstonians' attitudes sour toward immigration

Houstonians are increasingly concerned about immigration and its effects on the region, according to the latest annual Houston-Area Survey. This finding comes, however, as the same survey finds Latino immigrants are quickly assimilating into U.S. society.

The results of the 2008 survey, designed and directed by Rice University sociology Professor Stephen Klineberg and his students, was conducted by the Center for Public Policy at the University of Houston between Feb. 15 and March 5.

The number of respondents who described the arrival of large numbers of illegal immigrants as a “very serious” problem for Houston rose from 43 percent in 2006 to 61 percent this year. By far the most frequently cited reason for this concern was the perceived strain on public services caused by illegal immigrants. The negative attitudes have spread beyond undocumented immigrants: The proportion of area residents who favor taking action to reduce the number of new immigrants (legal and otherwise) who are coming to America grew from 48 percent in 2004 to 63 percent today.

A majority still backs granting illegal immigrants a path to legal citizenship, if they speak English and have no criminal record, but that majority has slipped to 56 percent from 68 percent in just the last 12 months.

“No matter how you ask the question,” Klineberg said, “every measure shows growing anti-immigrant sentiment.” The public seems increasingly to believe that the nation is being swamped by a rising tide of unassimilable foreigners that it cannot absorb.

The data on the actual experiences of Latino immigrants in Houston, meanwhile, reveal a steady and rapid assimilation into the American mainstream. The proportion of the immigrants who report household incomes above \$35,000, for example, grows from 16 percent for those who have lived in the U.S. for nine years or less, to 22 percent and to 42 percent among the immigrants who have been in America for more than nine and more than 19 years; the numbers rise to 52 percent in the second generation (U.S.-born Latinos with immigrant parents) and to 57 percent in the third generation.

Similarly, the proportion of the Latino respondents who conducted the interviews in English rather than Spanish grows from 17 percent among the most recent immigrants to 49 percent of those who have lived in the U.S. for 20 years or more, and to 98 percent of the third-generation Latinos. Similarly, the proportions who think of themselves as “primarily Hispanic” drop progressively from 85 percent among the most recent immigrants to 17 percent in the third generation.

Perhaps the most interesting of the findings with regard to Latino attitudes was their perspectives on future immigration. Thirty-nine percent of the Latino immigrants who have been in the United States for fewer than 10 years said the U.S. should admit more immigrants. That number drops to 29 percent among those who have lived in America for 20 or more years, to 25 percent among second-generation Latino immigrants and to just 14 percent in the third generation.

The Houston-Area Survey has been measuring relations among ethnic groups since its inception in 1982, and the data revealed a significant negative trend in the last two years. This year’s survey found a mild reversal of that trend. The percentage of Anglos, blacks and Latinos who rated “the relations among ethnic groups in the Houston area” as “excellent” or “good” rose over the past year after dropping sharply between 2005 and 2007. Moreover, a solid majority (65 percent) of the survey respondents now agrees with the

statement, “The increasing ethnic diversity in Houston will eventually become a source of great strength for the city,” up from 60 percent in 2006.

No comparable reversal has occurred with regard to perceptions of immigration. The increasingly negative attitudes of the past two years have become more negative in this year’s survey, and the mounting concerns about the press of immigrants on public services has also affected evaluations of the Katrina evacuees.

When asked to assess “the overall impact of the Katrina evacuees on Houston,” a growing majority considers the impact to have been a “bad thing” for the city, rising from 47 percent in 2006 to 65 percent in 2007 and to 70 percent this year. Despite such concerns, however, two-thirds of area residents said the Houston community should respond to the evacuees with the same amount or more assistance if another hurricane like Katrina hit in 2008. Only 28 percent thought the community should offer less assistance.

Some part of the anti-immigrant attitudes uncovered in the survey may be related to the overall economic downturn, Klineberg suggested. Four years of an upward trend in positive ratings of local job opportunities turned south in this year’s survey. When asked to name the biggest problem facing Houstonians today, the economy crept up from 10 percent last year to 12 percent this year. On that same question, mentions of crime dropped to 24 percent from 38 percent, while the numbers citing traffic congestion jumped from 25 percent last year to the top spot at 35 percent today.

The new salience of traffic concerns may be partly due, Klineberg thought, to the public’s growing recognition that another one million people will likely be added to the Harris County population during the next 20 years. The surveys document powerful support for efforts to guide that growth in the years ahead. Fully 61 percent of the survey respondents agreed that more land-use planning would “improve the region’s quality of life and long-term prosperity.” Only 23 percent believed instead that such planning “will slow economic growth and increase the cost of housing.” And 83 percent were in favor of a “general plan to guide Houston’s future growth,” with fewer than 11 percent opposed.

Source: Rice University

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