

Gender & Sexuality in Houston/Harris County, Texas: Initial Report

FEBRUARY 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The University of Houston Institute for Research on Women, Gender & Sexuality (UH IRWGS) documents and analyzes gender and sexuality dynamics in Harris County, as they intersect with race, ethnicity, class, age and other identify factors, exploring their effects on individual lives and the wider economy and society. This report, the first of a series, provides baseline data to spur dialogue, especially with regard to inequalities and issues of current and future workforce, fertility, wages, family support infrastructure, health, and civic participation. Through evidence-based research, we aim to contribute to better understanding of and service to the community.

Key findings documented here include:

- In Harris County during 2017, women's poverty rate (15.3%) was nearly 50 percent higher than the male poverty rate (10.4%). This gender gap in adulthood poverty prevalence was larger than observed nationally, in Texas as a whole, and in comparable urban counties in the United States.
- Local adulthood poverty rates varied widely by race/ethnicity, and within races there was a marked gender gap as well, from essentially equivalent rates among non-Hispanic (NH) Asian/Pacific Islanders (9.2% men /9.4% women), a larger gap among NH Whites (6.3% men/ 8.9% women), to markedly disparate rates among NH Blacks (13.6% men/ 18.9% women) and Hispanics (12.3% men/20.0% women).
- In Harris County in 2017, full time working women (of all races) made a median wage of 83.3 cents to the median dollar earned by full time working men (of all races), compared to a national gender wage gap of 81.7 cents. But in Harris County the gender wage gap was markedly larger than the national when broken out by race/ethnicity and viewed in relation to the highest earning group: compared to each dollar made by NH White men, NH White women made just 69.4 cents, NH Asian women 63.3 cents, NH Black women 47.1 cents, and Hispanic women (of all races) 33.5 cents (Texas Women's Foundation, 2018).
- Women make up roughly 22% of employees in the oil and gas sector, and their representation relative to men decreases with seniority (Women in Energy, 2019).
- Low wages are part of a nexus of interrelated variables (a "gendered hardship matrix") that create and sustain economic precarity and concomitant vulnerability in women. Compounding factors may include unplanned fertility, caregiving responsibilities, poverty, violence, depression, health issues, limited access to education, and addiction.
- Thirty percent of Harris County mothers with minor children at home were unpartnered, with a median income of \$31,600, with 36% living at or below the poverty line. Contrastingly, 8.6% of dads were unpartnered, with a median income of \$54,000, with 17.2% at or below the poverty line. Harris County children with partnered parents had a median family income of \$78,000, with 11.2% living at or below the poverty line. Nationally, 26.6% of mothers were unpartnered (median \$35,200, with 31.4% in poverty), as were 8.4% of dads (median \$53,500, with 15.6% in poverty), while the median household income for partnered parents was \$87,2000, with 9.2% at or below the poverty line.
- Nationally, lack of Infrastructure to support working parents means that that public school/care is NOT available to most US children during work hours 63% of the time between the time of their birth and their high school graduation. In Harris County and Texas, the new availability of full-day pre-K for some 4-year-olds means the rate at which public school/care is NOT available during work hours in Harris County is now down to 60% for those students' families. This directly affects mothers' (and through ripple effects all women's) workforce participation.
- Fertility rates have decreased locally and nationally in the years since the start of the recession in 2007. Teen fertility rates in particular have fallen markedly—58.1% nationally, 59.1% in Texas and 60.9% in Harris County. This may have transformative economic and social effects. Though general and teen rates have declined markedly here, they remain high compared to national rates.
- Though women still hold a disproportionately low percentage of legislative seats in Texas (23.8%—up from 20.4% in 2017 [NCSL] and parallel to the 23.6% currently in the US Congress), increasing numbers of women are running for office in Harris County and statewide, and the numbers of female contest winners are also growing.
- Data on sexual orientation may be hard to track reliably due to precarity, but there are some sources of demographic insight. Gallup polls found that nationally the percentage of respondents agreeing that they "personally identified as

lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender,” increased every year between 2012 and 2017, from 3.5% to 4.5%, with rates highest among millennials (8.2%) and lowest among those born 1913-1945 (1.4%). This shift may reflect lesser reticence among younger people to self-report and/or lesser perceived social stigma about identifying as LGBTQ.

- According to 2017 ACS data, 0.9% of the population in Harris County were in a same-sex cohabiting partnership, vs. 1.5% of the population nationally. Among those in Harris County in same-sex cohabiting partnerships, 59% were male, and 41% were female.

Though the high levels are notable, it may not surprise readers that many women are poor in Houston; that women and especially women of color make less on median than men and especially white men here; or that LGBTQ Houstonians experience social stigma. But only by naming and discussing these problems as a community can we move past taking them for granted to addressing them. Likewise, only by analyzing our successes can we build upon them.

As the region’s first gender and sexuality focused think tank, the UH IRWGS aims through production of evidence-based data and analyses, to amplify discussion around the social and economic forces linked to gender and sexuality that have long gone unexamined. And to engender positive change.

Among the questions raised by the data presented here might be:

- 1) Why are gender, race and poverty so strongly linked in Houston/Harris County, and how could policy intervene to mitigate inequalities?
- 2) Why is the gender wage gap between NH White men and women of all races/ethnicities so large in Houston/Harris County, and how does it affect the power balance in daily life here?
- 3) Given the relative absence of women and people of color from high levels of management in oil and gas and other corporate sectors, what are the drivers of these disparities and the best mechanisms to actually address them and to access the full diversity of knowledge/insight?
- 4) What challenges do lack of child- and other dependent-care support pose for women overall, and particularly low-income women and single mothers, and how will those affect employers’ long-term skilled workforce needs?
- 5) What does it mean for Houston that poverty, childcare responsibility, violence, food insecurity, depression, and ill health (the “gendered hardship matrix”) are often linked, in various combinations? How does the lack of a Medicaid expansion play in?
- 6) What does it mean for Texas and Harris County that teen fertility rates here have fallen dramatically, yet remain higher than in other parts of the nation?
- 7) What will change as the result of recent increase in the numbers of women candidates for, and representatives in, political office?
- 8) What are trends around LGBTQ self-report and partnership in Houston/Harris county, and what are the policy implications? How do they relate to economics, stigma and violence?
- 9) Domestic violence is a clear problem in Houston, but specific rates are difficult to track—what are the most useful steps toward addressing it?
- 10) We know sex trafficking is a major factor in Houston, but precise prevalence is hard to track. How is it linked to the low wages earned by women relative to men here, the status that women have in the community, and the objectification of women? What would be useful steps in lowering the demand as well as the incidence overall?
- 11) What data are missing to inform policy making as it affects gender and sexuality-linked equity for all Houstonians?