

Houston/Harris County Gender and Sexuality Data: Annual Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This second annual UH IRWGS report on intersectional gender and sexuality data for Harris County contains analyses of the US Census Bureau's annual American Community Survey (ACS) for 2019, among other sources from 2019 and 2020, on matters such as the local gender wage gap, poverty, education, single parenting, fertility rates, political candidates, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) demographics here. We highlight connections among these factors, in the Houston context. Through evidence-based research, we aim to contribute to better understanding of and service to the community.

The data analyzed here frame the inequitable context within which the further challenges of the 2020-21 Covid-19 pandemic have occurred in Houston.

Key findings documented here include:

- Gender wage gap: in Harris County in 2019, full-time working women (of all races) made an average of 80 cents to the dollar earned by full-time working men (of all races), compared to a national gender wage gap of 81.1 cents. Thus full-time working women here averaged 20% less than full-time working men.
- In Harris County the gender wage gap was markedly larger when broken out by race/ethnicity, compared to the highest paid group, nonHispanic (NH) White men: compared to each dollar made by NH White men, NH White women here made just 70 cents, on median; NH Asian/PI women 62.5 cents; NH Black women 45 cents; and Hispanic women 37.5 cents. These relative numbers are substantially lower than national and in comparable urban counties, so women in all groups here make less relative to the highest paid group.
- Although this report focuses on the gender wage gap as it disadvantages women, this data also reveals a notable wage gap among men of various races/ethnicities in Harris County.
- In Harris County in 2019, women's poverty rate (15.1%) was 44 percent higher than the male poverty rate (10.5%). 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.
- The local gender gap in adulthood poverty rates varied by race/ethnicity, from nearly equivalent rates between women and men among Whites (6.6%F/6.2%M) and Asian/Pacific Islanders (10.4%F/10.5%M), through greater poverty among Black women (18.6%) than Black men (15.6%), to widely disparate rates between Hispanic women (21.1%) and men (11.9%).
- Single mothers raising minor children in Harris County made up 28.9% of mothers in 2019 and they experienced high levels of economic precarity as measured by median household income and poverty rates: more than one third of single mothers here lived at or under the poverty line; 50% had incomes at or below \$35,000. Hispanic single mothers/sole providers were most likely to live in poverty (43.6%).
- Fertility rates have decreased steadily since 2007, the start of the great recession, when the general fertility rate in Harris County was 81.5 births per 1,000 women aged 15-44. The rate declined to 65.0 births per 1,000 in 2019 (down from 65.8 in 2018¹), where the national rate declined to 58.3 (from 58.9 in 2018). Though the fertility rate among Hispanic women declined markedly between 2007 and 2018, it did not change in Harris County between 2018 and 2019 (71.9). Rates did fall here among NH Black women (64.4 to 60.0), American Indian/Alaska Native women (33.7 to 25.8), and NH Asian women (57.6 to 56.6), and saw a small increase among NH White women (59.0 to 59.3)
- Teen fertility rates in particular fell markedly between 2007 and 2019 – they dropped by 59.9% nationally in that period, 61.2% in Texas, and 62.3% in Harris County across all racial/ethnic groups—to 23.9 births per 1,000 women 15-19 here. But the rate of decline lessened markedly for White and especially Hispanic teens in 2019, and rates here remain high relative to the national teen rate (16.7), and to low-rate states (NH is the lowest at 6.6).

¹ Adjusted by CDC since our last report of 65.6 in 2018.

- The size of state populations also affects the actual number of births. New Hampshire saw 275 teen births in 2019, where Arkansas, with the highest rate at 30.0, saw 2,882 teen births. Texas, the second largest state, with a teen rate of 24.0, saw by far the largest total number of teen births at 24,109 in 2019, of which 3,775 were in Harris County.
- Women still hold a disproportionately low percentage of legislative seats in Texas (women are 50% of Texans, but 26.5% of Texas legislators [13R; 35D]—up from 23.8% in 2019 and parallel to the 26.5% currently in the US Congress). But increasing numbers of women are running for office in Harris County and statewide, and the numbers of female contest winners are also growing. The number of women in the Texas delegation to the US Congress increased by one, to total seven in 2021 (2R; 5D).
- Data on sexual identity is hard to track, but there are some sources of demographic insights. Gallup polls found that nationally the percentage of respondents agreeing that they “personally identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender” increased each year between 2012 and 2017, from 3.5% to 5.6%, with rates highest (15.9%) among Generation Z (aged 18 to 30 in 2020) and lowest (1.3%) among those born 1913-1945. This shift may reflect lesser reticence among younger people to self-report and/or lesser perceived social stigma about identifying as LGBT.
- Per 2019 ACS data, 0.7% of the population in Harris County were in a same-sex domestic partnership, vs. 0.9% of the population nationally. Among those in Harris County in same-sex partnerships, 55.7% were male and 44.3% were female.

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.

Related analyses include:

- The double wage gap created by the intersection of race/ethnicity and gender is informed by the low overall level of, and wide variation in, funding of education and other human capital investments in the state.
- The combination of the highly paid oil and gas and ancillary industries disproportionately populated by NH White men and an unregulated, low-paid immigrant labor market is peculiar to Houston and creates huge disparities for all.
- Lower relative wages for women may create financial dependency and suggest lower civic and business power. Financial dependency, particularly when children are involved, may correlate to higher rates of domestic violence.
- Unusually low wages and low status for women and unusually high wages and status for men may also create a predatory environment where women are viewed as less than, heightening objectification of women and demand for paid sex. It also creates a pool of women workers who either have no better economic option than to supply it or who are trafficked in a context of limited protection for women.
- Low wages are part of a nexus of interrelated variables that we call the “gendered hardship matrix,” creating and sustaining economic precarity and concomitant vulnerability in women. Compounding factors in addition to low wages may include but are not limited to: unplanned fertility, caregiving responsibilities, violence, depression, poverty, food provision duties, health issues, and addiction, among other factors.
- The higher proportion of Hispanic single mother sole providers living in poverty (43.6%) may link to lack of access (real or perceived) to federal benefits among undocumented (Hanson et al., 2014) and may affect the large difference between poverty rates experienced by Hispanic men and women here.
- Lack of childcare informs women’s greater poverty and lower wages and has slowed their advance into business and civic leadership roles. As noted in our previous report, nationally, lack of Infrastructure to support working parents means that even in nonpandemic times public school/care is NOT available to most US children during work hours 63% of the time between the time of their birth and high school graduation. The pandemic has much worsened the situation. Post-pandemic policy innovations could helpfully involve changes to the “traditional” school schedule, including expanded childcare access for all families, and summer and afterschool public education to mimic the work day for those who want that.
- Policies at the state level coalesce and contribute to poverty and inequity in Texas. These inequities affect all family members. Among the policy areas in which inequity flourishes here are: Education, Reproductive Health Access, Healthcare Access, Immigration, Preschool and Childcare, and Criminal Justice. Failure to invest in the human capital infrastructure that would allow lower income Texans to move up reproduces misery. Positive investment in such infrastructure would activate a wider range of skills, perspectives, insights and innovation, which could positively transform the economy and increase our understanding of and valuation of all members of our community.

- The state of local data needs work. There are many challenges to accessing and validating data with state and local government providers and nonprofit community partners in the Houston/Harris County region, due to lack of adequate technical support and up-to-date equipment, overwork among service providers, training issues, and underfunding. State and local jurisdictions must make larger investments in data collection efforts and software, to adequately track the community's needs, to develop policies to responsibly address those needs, and to effectively provide services.
- Additionally, populations at risk of stigma, violence, deportation, and other dangers often don't want to share their data, and researchers seek to collect information in a way that would not put people at risk. But lack of data makes delivery of empirically supported services impossible and means we do not understand critical aspects of our community. So further work in this realm is much needed.

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.

Questions for discussion:

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?