



Election 2023: Overview of Residents' Policy Preferences

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About the Houston Population Research Center.

The Houston Population Research Center (HPRC) collects and disseminates data to understand social and demographic change in Houston, Texas. The HPRC coordinates with other Kinder Institute centers to provide analytic and methodological support that identifies solutions to the city's most pressing problems around housing, health, education and economic mobility.

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Election 2023: Overview of Residents' Policy Preferences

Key Findings

Policies to create a safer city

- Over 80% of Houston residents agree or strongly agree with policies aimed at curbing gun deaths and injuries.
- Residents supported individual-oriented interventions, such as requiring a license and mandatory training to carry a gun and education on proper gun storage.
- Residents also supported community-oriented policies, such as funding community violence interruption programs and increasing employment opportunities in neighborhoods experiencing higher rates of gun violence.
- Houston residents would like to see more spent on first responders by the city.
 - About 55% of Houston residents would like to see the police department's budget increased.
 - About 54% of Houston residents would like to see the fire department's budget increased.

Policies to improve physical infrastructure

- Over 80% of Houston residents are willing to pay a higher "drainage fee" each month to increase the amount of money going to improve and repair water drainage systems and roadways.
 - Two-thirds of residents are willing to double the current fee, \$5 a month, to \$10.
- Houston residents support a nominal "garbage fee."
 - Two-thirds of residents are willing to pay a monthly "garbage fee"; one-third are willing to pay \$10 a month and one-third are willing to pay more.

Policies to address Houston's housing challenges

- Houston residents are supportive of a diverse set of policies to address the area's housing challenges.
 - Around 80% support the city providing down payment assistance to low-income homebuyers or helping cover the cost of repairs for homes owned by low-income families.
 - Three-quarters of Houston residents support the city providing low-income, working adults with a universal basic income.

Paying for policies and changing the property tax revenue cap

- Nearly 60% of Houston residents are open to changing the rules that currently limit the city's ability to increase property taxes.
- A slight majority favors a "sliding-scale" fee structure based on a person's income.

For each of these major policy areas, the attitudes and preferences of likely voters differed very little from attitudes and preferences of likely nonvoters.

Background

City of Houston residents will elect their 63rd mayor in November 2023. According to an earlier study, the top priorities of residents are: 1) creating a safer city, 2) improving physical infrastructure, and 3) addressing the escalating cost of housing. To better understand how Houstonians want to see these issues addressed, a follow-up study was conducted asking city residents about their views of a variety of policy and budgetary solutions in these top priority areas. In addition, residents were asked if they intended to vote in the upcoming election, allowing for policy preferences to be compared between likely voters and likely nonvoters.

Research Questions

- What policies and budgetary actions do Houston residents support to ...
 - create a safer city?
 - improve the physical infrastructure of the city?
 - address the escalating cost of housing in the city?
- Does support differ between likely voters and likely nonvoters?

Data and Methods

The Kinder Institute for Urban Research surveyed over 5,300 residents in Houston and Harris County from August to September 2023 as part of the Greater Houston Community Panel. About 4,000 respondents who were residents of the city of Houston were selected to answer questions about their support of policies and budgetary actions by the city. Responses were weighted to improve representativeness of the data. Chi-square and analysis of variance (ANOVA) bivariate analyses were used to test for associations. Because of the large sample size, statistically significant results are only discussed if they have a medium or large effect size.

Findings

Policies to create a safer city

Over 80% of Houston residents agree or strongly agree with policies aimed at curbing gun deaths and injuries.

From 2018 to 2021, there were nearly 8,700 nonfatal gun injuries and more than 1,800 people killed because of gun violence across Houston and Harris County.¹ While Houston’s rates of violent and nonviolent crime have decreased since then, and are substantially lower than the rates in the city during the 1980s and early 1990s, crime and safety were the issues most common-

ly identified by residents as the “biggest problem” facing the area as part of the [2023 Kinder Houston Area Survey](#).² Additionally, in [a previous study](#)³ about the priority issues for Houston residents, more than 80% said that creating a safer city needed to be a top priority for the city’s next mayor.

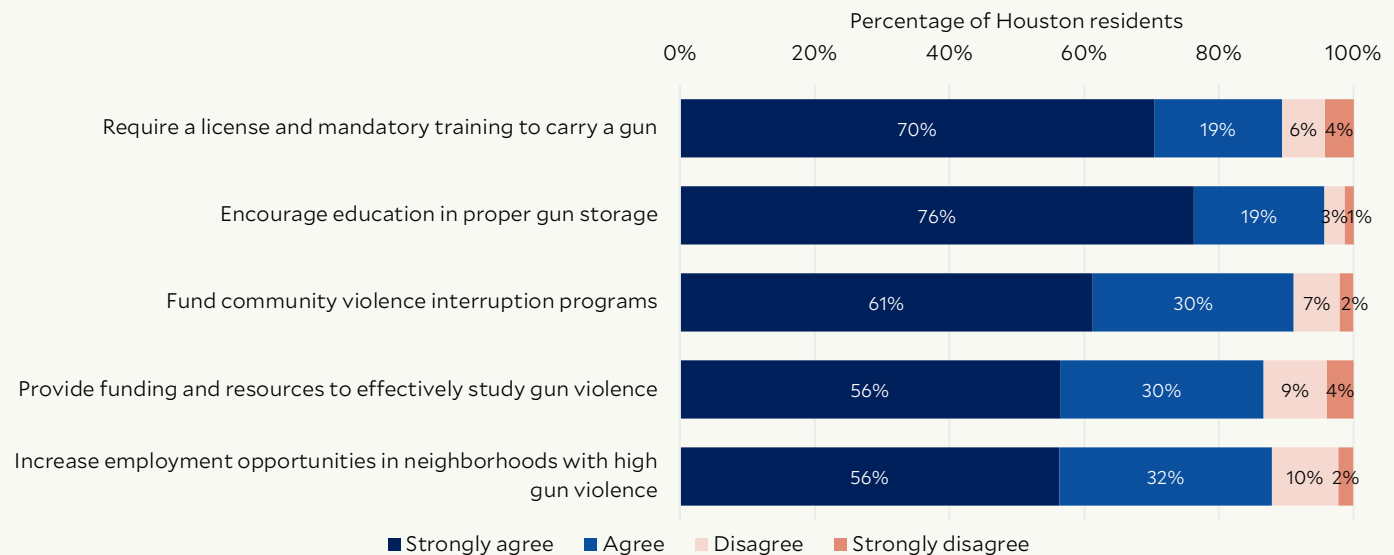
Building on the mandate heard from city residents in that earlier research, there continues to be widespread support for implementing policies to curb gun deaths and injuries. Five potential policies for doing so were given to residents, and they were asked how much they

1 Levine, N., Naik-Mathuria, B., Cain, C., Pompeii, L., and Oluyomi, A. (2023). Understanding the Risk of Firearm Violence in the Houston Area. Baker Institute Report no. 05.30.23. Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy, Houston, Texas. <https://doi.org/10.25613/y8gs-7a29>.

2 Potter, D., Pren, K., Tobin, A., Perez, K., Njeh, J., & Kim, A. (2023). Kinder Houston Area Survey: Forty-Two Years of Measuring Perceptions and Experiences of a Resilient City.

3 Potter, D., Glanzer, A., Perez, K., Tobin, A., & Pren, K. (2023). Election 2023: Priorities and Concerns of Houston Residents.

FIGURE 1 More than 80% of Houston city residents agree or strongly agree with several policies aimed at curbing gun deaths and injuries.



agreed or disagreed with each. Over 80% agreed or strongly agreed with each of the policies—and for most policies, support was at or above 90% (Figure 1). High levels of support were seen for more individual-oriented policies, such as requiring a license and mandatory training to carry a gun (89%) and encouraging education in proper gun storage (95%). Similarly high levels of support were seen for more community-oriented policies, such as funding community violence interruption programs (91%), which use trusted, credible messengers to de-escalate conflicts and build supportive relationships with those most at risk of experiencing violence.⁴ Policies to increase employment opportunities in neighborhoods most affected by gun violence also received broad support (88%). Support for each of these policies did not differ meaningfully between likely voters and likely nonvoters.

Houston residents would like to see more spent on first responders by the city.

Houston spends about \$432 per resident on its police department each year, but most residents think the city is spending less. Survey respondents were told what several cities around the state spent on their respective police departments: Dallas spends \$475 per resident, San Antonio spends \$390 per resident, and Austin

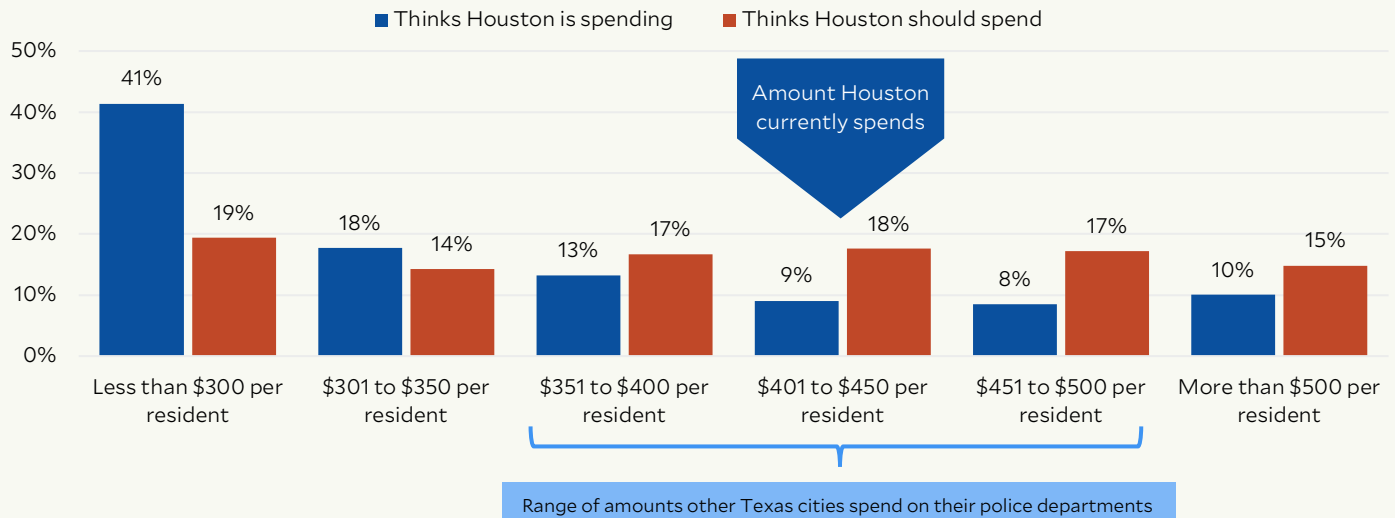
spends \$461 per resident. They were then asked to indicate how much they thought the city of Houston spends on its police department: more than 40% said \$300 or less per resident, about 18% said between \$301 and \$350, and about 13% said between \$351 and \$400. In sum, 72% of residents—having been told what other cities in the state spend—felt that Houston had to be spending less, with the most commonly selected answer suggesting that residents felt the city was spending much less.

Residents were then asked how much they think the city *should* spend on its police department per resident. About 52% chose one of three categories within the range of amounts other Texas cities spend: \$351 to \$400, \$401 to \$450, or “\$451 to \$500 (Figure 2). Another 15% chose the top category of “More than \$500 per resident,” meaning that nearly two-thirds said they thought the city should be spending as much or more than other cities in the state are spending.

Residents were then told that Houston spends about \$432 per resident on its police department, and that in 2021, Texas passed a law that prevents cities from reducing police department budgets. With this new information, residents were asked if they thought the city should increase, decrease, or keep the police budget the same, and how they would like to see that money spent to create a safer city. Over 55% said they would like to see the police department’s budget increased, with

4 U.S. Department of Justice. (2022). Community Based Violence Intervention and Prevention Initiative (CVIPI). <https://bja.ojp.gov/program/community-violence-intervention/overview>

FIGURE 2 Houston spends \$432 per resident on its police department, while residents most commonly thought the city spent less than \$300 per resident; about 52% think the city should spend as much as other cities in Texas.



40% indicating they want to see an increase go toward adding more police officers and 15% wanting to add more civilian safety officers (Figure 3). Less than 7% of residents wanted to ignore the 2021 law and decrease the police budget. Attitudes toward the police budget did not differ meaningfully between likely voters and likely nonvoters.

Houston spends \$244 per resident on its fire department, which includes both fire and medical emergency

response. Residents were presented with the per-resident annual spending on fire departments by other large Texas cities and were again asked how much they think the city of Houston is spending and how much they think it *should* be spending. Dallas spends \$178 per resident, San Antonio spends \$251 per resident, and Austin spends \$383 per resident on their respective fire departments. When given this information Houston residents said they think the city is spending on the

FIGURE 3

More than half of Houston residents want to see the police department’s budget increased, with 40% wanting the money spent on more police officers and 15% wanting the money spent on civilian safety officers.

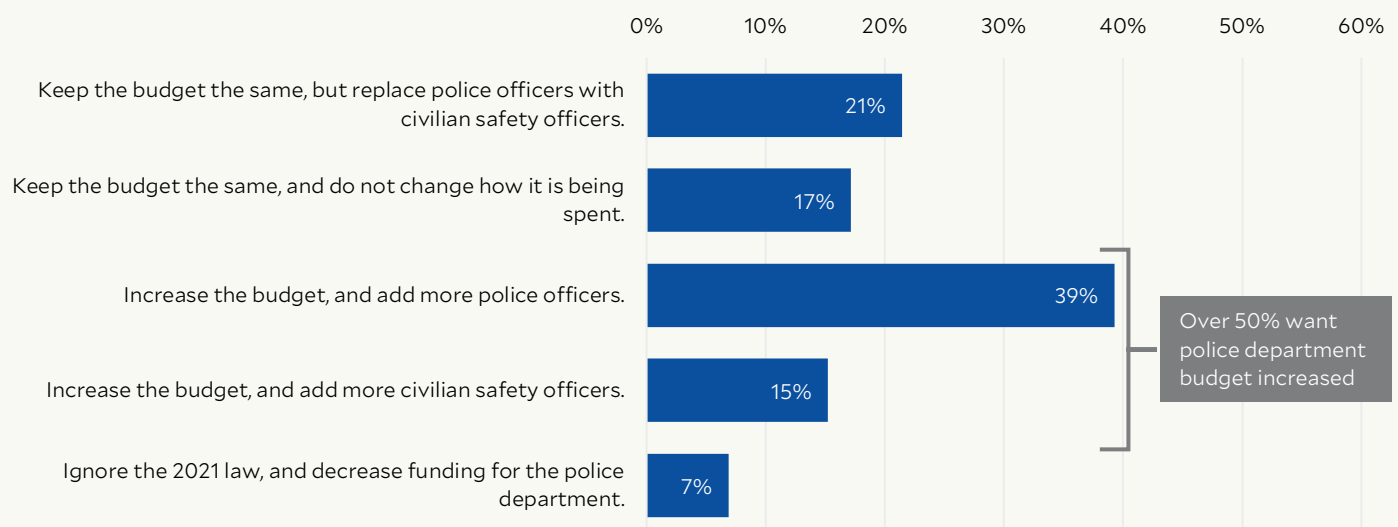
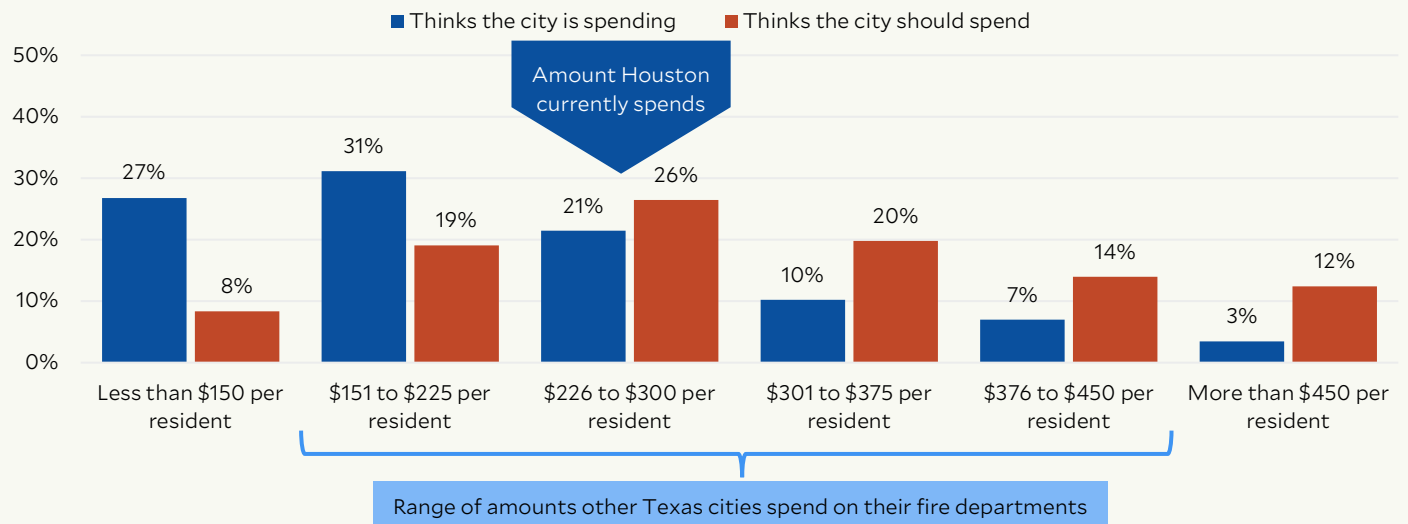


FIGURE 4

Houston spends \$244 per resident on its fire department, but residents tend to think the city is spending less than that amount, and there’s a preference for the city to be spending more.



lower end (Figure 4). Specifically, about 27% said they thought Houston spent less than \$150 per resident and 31% said the city spent between \$151 and \$225. When asked how much they thought the city *should* spend, the most commonly selected response was the range in which the city currently falls, \$226 to \$300 per resident.

After residents were informed what the city currently spends on its fire department, more than half said it should be spending more (Figure 5). Only 5% said the city should decrease the fire department’s budget. Attitudes about the fire department’s budget did not differ meaningfully between likely voters and likely nonvoters.

Policies to improve physical infrastructure

Over 80% of Houston residents are willing to pay a higher “drainage fee” each month to increase the amount of money going to improve and repair water drainage systems and roadways.

In 2010, voters approved a ballot measure to allow the city to create a “drainage fee” that serves as a pay-as-

you-go fund for building, maintaining, repairing, and replacing infrastructure used to move water around the city. Currently, the fee is \$0.032 per square foot of impervious surface area on a property, which works out to about \$5 a month for most homeowners and brings in over \$100 million each year. The program, which has withstood several court challenges, has also faced criticism for not moving fast enough to repair streets.⁵ Still, residents were asked if they would support increasing this monthly fee, and if so, by how much. Over 80% said they would support an increase of at least \$1 a month, and over two-thirds supported an increase of at least \$5 a month to help repair streets and drainage pipes, ditches, and water detention basins (Figure 6). Support for an increase to the drainage fee was shared by both likely voters and likely nonvoters.

5 Groogan, G. (2023, February 8). City street, drainage fee delivering too little pavement for Houston drivers. Fox 26 Houston. <https://www.fox26houston.com/news/city-street-drainage-fee-delivering-too-little-pavement-for-houston-drivers>

FIGURE 5 About 5 in 10 Houston residents would like to see the fire department’s budget increased.

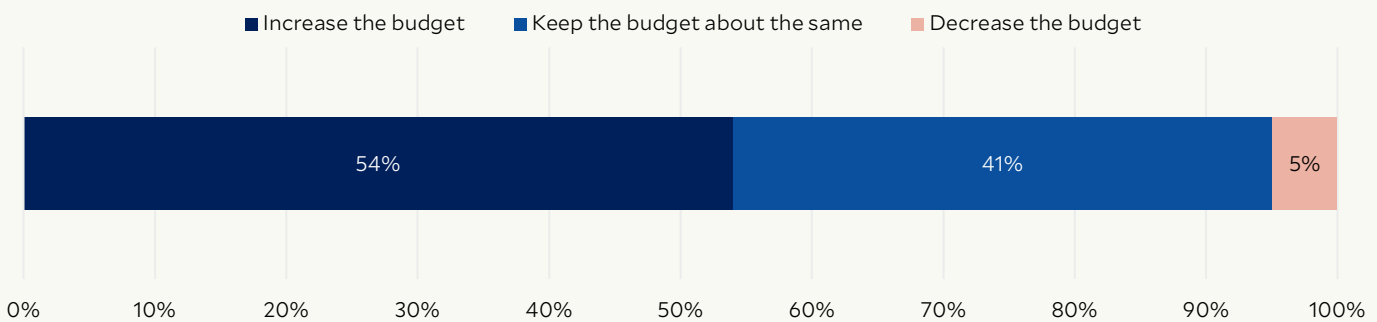
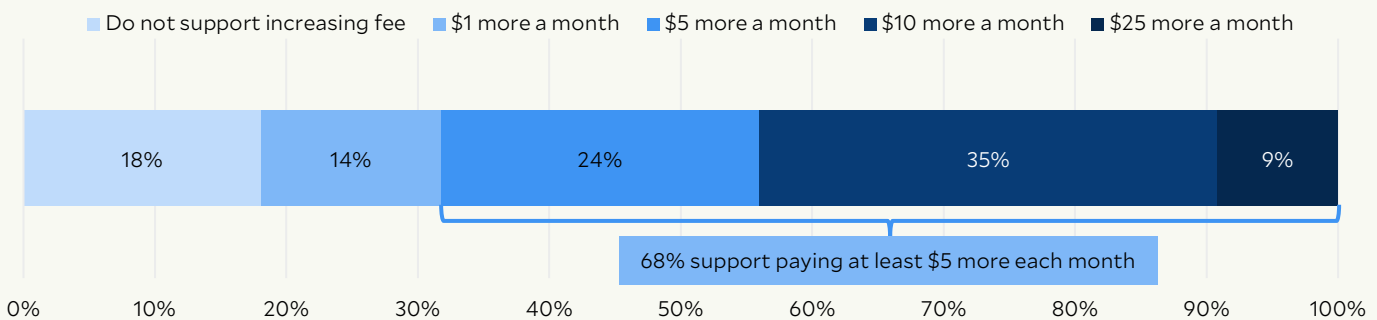


FIGURE 6 More than 80% of Houston residents would be willing to pay more for the drainage fee each month, with two-thirds supporting paying at least \$5 more.



Two-thirds of Houston residents are willing to pay a monthly “garbage fee.”

Houston is the only large city in Texas that does not have a “garbage fee” to help pay for regular trash and recycling pickup. Dallas’s garbage fee is \$34 per month, Austin’s ranges from \$23 to \$50 a month, and San Antonio’s ranges from \$18 to \$30 per month. [Prior research](#)⁶ has shown that Houston’s garbage pickup, particularly recycling pickup, is one of the most poorly rated city services; nearly 30% of residents rated recycling pickup as either “poor” or “failing.”



Photo by Edmond Dantès

For this study, residents were told the garbage fee amounts for other large Texas cities (as described above) and then asked if they would support paying a monthly fee to improve trash and recycling services and combat illegal dumping. Two-thirds said they would support a monthly garbage fee (Figure 7). About 1 in 3 said they would support paying \$10 a month, while 1 in 5 said they would pay \$20 a month. Only 1 in 10 residents said they’d be willing to pay \$35 a month—an amount that would be on par with the fees in Dallas, Austin, and San Antonio. Houston residents may not support paying what other cities are paying, but there seems to be a willingness to pay more to the city if it went toward improving trash pickup services. Support for a garbage fee was shared by both likely voters and likely nonvoters.

6 Potter, D., Glanzer, A., Perez, K., Tobin, A., & Pren, K. (2023). Election 2023: Priorities and Concerns of Houston Residents.

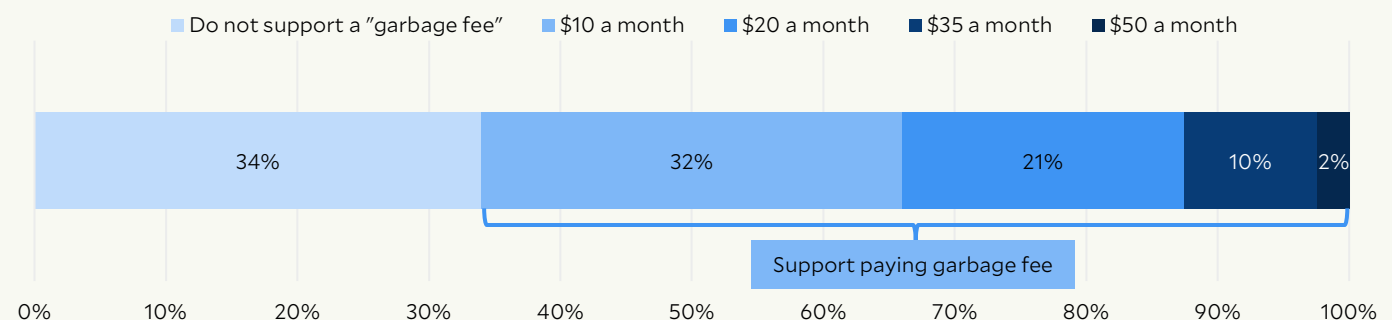
Policies to address Houston’s housing challenges

Houston residents are supportive of a diverse set of policies to address the area’s housing challenges.

Since 2011, the median price of a house in the city of Houston has more than doubled and now stands north of \$330,000. Despite having a median home price below that of most other major cities around the country, the cost of housing in Houston has outpaced what the typical Houstonian can afford, putting homeownership further out of reach and saddling families and households with increasing costs. [In a prior report](#),⁷ nearly three-quarters of Houston residents said it was very important for the next mayor to do something to address the cost of housing. To understand the types of policies

7 Potter, D., Glanzer, A., Perez, K., Tobin, A., & Pren, K. (2023). Election 2023: Priorities and Concerns of Houston Residents.

FIGURE 7 Two-thirds of Houston residents support a monthly garbage fee of \$10 or more.



residents might want to see the next mayor implement to address Houston’s housing challenges, including issues with affordability, this study focused on seven potential policy solutions. Residents were asked if they supported spending public dollars to fund each policy. All seven policies received broad support (Figure 8), including paying private developers to build apartments for low-income families (66%), providing down payment assistance to low-income homebuyers (78%), and helping to cover the cost of repairing damaged or deteriorated homes owned by low-income families (81%).

In addition to supporting policies aimed at building more affordable housing and helping people buy and maintain their homes, residents also supported policies to improve housing stability for renters, including

creating a permanent emergency rental assistance fund (77%) and ensuring that anyone facing eviction has legal representation (81%).

Residents also indicated support for policies that would work with landlords to preserve existing affordable housing units while improving their condition by paying for repairs if the landlord guaranteed the unit would stay affordable for a set period of time (68%).

Finally, three-quarters of city residents supported using public dollars to provide low-income, working adults with a universal basic income as a means of addressing housing challenges.

FIGURE 8 Two-thirds or more support spending public dollars on policies that address the housing challenges facing Houston residents.

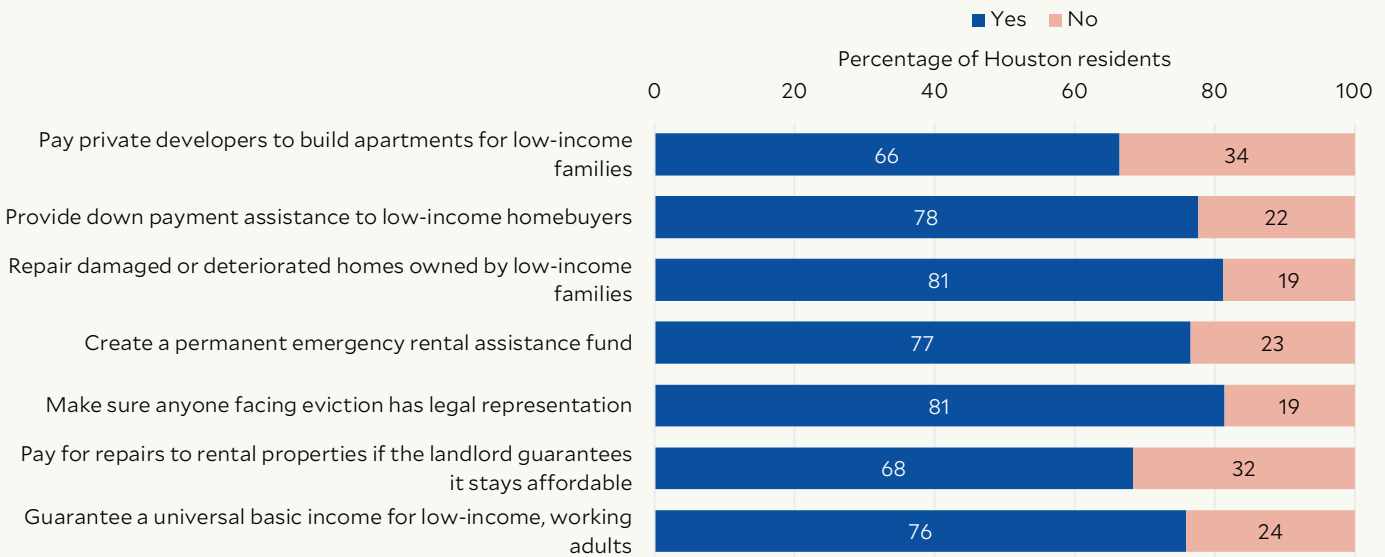
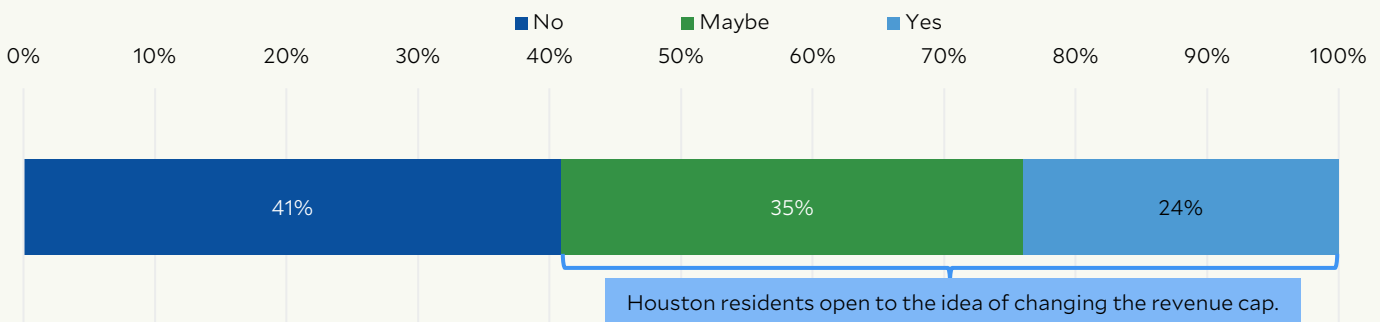


FIGURE 9 Nearly 60% of Houston residents are open to the idea of changing the property tax revenue cap to allow the city to collect more taxes.



Across all seven policies, there were no meaningful differences between likely voters and likely nonvoters.

Paying for policies and changing the property tax revenue cap

Nearly 60% of Houston residents are open to changing the property tax revenue cap.

In 2004, Houston voters approved a property tax revenue cap (“revenue cap”) to limit how much tax revenue can increase in the city from one year to the next. As property values have increased over the past decade, the city has been forced to cut property tax rates nine times in order to comply with this revenue cap, resulting in an estimated \$1.9 billion in revenue uncollected between 2015 and 2023.⁸ In other words, if the property tax rate had remained unchanged from what it was in 2014, the city would have raised an additional \$1.9 billion over that time span. That additional revenue could have been spent on improving city services, accelerating the maintenance and repair of streets and roads, beautifying parks and greenspace, supporting public libraries, or investing in high-quality affordable housing. Although voters approved a carveout in 2007 that allows the city to collect an additional \$90 million each year in revenue to fund police, fire, and emergency medical services, that amount represented only about 5% of the total public safety budget for fiscal year 2023.

Residents were asked if they would support changing the rules to allow the city to raise taxes in order to spend more on a variety of essential services. Nearly 60% of residents were open to the idea, with one-quarter saying “yes” and another 35% saying “maybe” (Figure 9). At the same time, 41% said “no,” so there is a solid base of residents who do not want to see the revenue cap change. Attitudes toward changing the revenue cap did not meaningfully differ between likely voters and likely nonvoters.

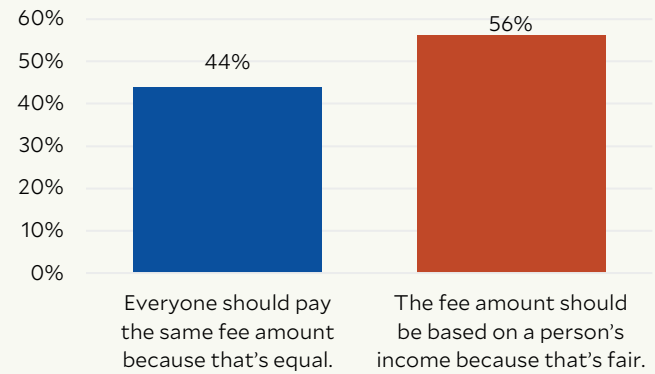
A slight majority favors a “sliding-scale” fee structure based on a person’s income.

Each of the policies put forward in this study comes with a price tag—some larger than others, but none of them would be free to implement. Given the budgetary constraints the city faces with its property tax

⁸ Sander, E. (2023, Sept. 27). Houston cuts tax rate for the ninth time in 10 years, but property tax bill will likely increase. Houston Chronicle. <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/politics/houston/article/houston-tax-rate-cut-increase-18365317.php>

FIGURE 10

Slightly more than half of Houstonians favor a sliding-scale payment system, such that any fee amount should be based on a person’s income.



revenue cap, finding ways to pay for potential policies and programs poses a challenge. While residents may be open to changing the city’s revenue cap, even if Houston voters were to remove their locally imposed cap, the state passed a 3.5% cap in 2019 that would still place limits on how much the city could increase the amount of property taxes it collects each year without voter approval. An alternative to higher property taxes could be to follow and potentially expand the model of Houston’s current “drainage fee”—which collects a monthly sum of money to cover costs as a pay-as-you-go system for repairing streets and drains. Residents expressed a willingness to pay a higher “drainage fee” for improving water drainage and roadways, and an openness to a new fee that would pay to improve trash and recycling pickup as well as to combat illegal dumping. Residents do not support a garbage fee as large as what’s in other cities in the state, but are willing to pay more than they are currently to cover the costs of improved services.

As city leaders grapple with how to pay for the significant costs of running a city as large as Houston, they may consider a “sliding-scale” fee structure, where the amount paid varies based on an individual’s earnings, in contrast to everyone paying the same amount. In Houston, a slight majority of residents prefer a sliding-scale structure (Figure 10). This slight majority support did not meaningfully differ between likely voters and likely nonvoters.

Conclusion

Residents want action by city leaders, including Houston’s next mayor, to create a safer city, improve the physical infrastructure, and address the area’s housing challenges. Support exists for a wide range of policies aimed at curbing gun deaths and injuries, as well as increasing the police department’s budget to allow it to hire more police officers and more civilian safety personnel—all aimed at creating a safer city.

Residents also support policies to increase the “drainage fee” in order to increase the funding going toward improving the water drainage system and roadways, and there is an appetite for a new fee for garbage and recycling services. Wide-ranging support also exists for policies to address the housing challenges facing the city. Houston residents support policies aimed at tenants, homeowners, landlords, and developers, including the establishment of a permanent emergency rental assistance fund and universal basic income for low-income, working adults.

Finding the money to pay for policies and programs will be critical for the city, especially as it continues to bump up against its voter-approved property tax revenue cap. To some extent, voters may be open to removing the revenue cap and increasing budgets for the city, but with 41% already saying “no” to the idea, it would be an uphill effort to get such a repeal approved.

Finally, the policy position of Houston residents did not differ meaningfully depending on someone’s likelihood of voting. Though likelihood of voting does not mean a person will vote, the symmetry between likely voters and likely nonvoters suggests the patterns and responses highlighted by this report are shared by those who will vote in November to put Houston’s next mayor into office.

Implications

Overall, Houston residents were open to a variety of policy ideas and solutions for improving the city. This openness means city leadership should not feel constrained, and instead lean into efforts that put forward policies attempting to address the city’s issues from a variety of angles using a variety of tactics.

No single policy is going to make all Houston residents feel completely safe, and residents are ready to support multiple and diverse policies that will work to reduce crime and increase feelings of safety.

No single policy is going to address all of Houston’s housing challenges, and residents are ready to approach current challenges from different angles that will enable several solutions to be implemented and working at the same time.

Single-policy solutions are not what residents want, nor do residents feel like the city can simply spend its way out of each issue, as evidenced by a willingness to introduce only a nominal garbage fee.

Money will need to be spent on new policies, but how it is collected is something residents may be willing to see done fairly rather than equally, by applying a sliding scale so those with more contribute more and those with less contribute less.

Mission

The Kinder Institute for Urban Research builds better cities and improves lives through data, research, engagement and action.



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