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Toward 2050 in Texas

A Roundtable Report on Houston's Experience as One of the Most Diverse Metros in the Nation

Julie Ajinkya March 2013

Introduction and summary

The United States is rapidly approaching the point where there will no longer be any clear racial or ethnic majority—the most recent census projections predict this will happen as early as 2043.¹ At the same time, the fastest-growing racial and ethnic groups were hit first and worst by the recent economic downturn and face persistent barriers to achieving the levels of education, health, and employment that our nation needs to succeed in the global economy. As the entire country undergoes this dramatic demographic transformation, leaders in government, business, philanthropy, and the civic sector must take steps now to prepare for a more diverse future.

In many communities, these demographic shifts are well underway. People of color are already the majority in four states and in more than 300 counties across the country.² And children of color comprise the majority of children in 10 states and 35 large metro areas.³ Community leaders working in these places may well have wisdom and relevant strategies to share with other communities preparing for similar population shifts.

It is in this spirit that Progress 2050—a project of the Center for American Progress—and PolicyLink—a national research and action institute advancing economic and social equity—partnered to hold a series of roundtables in communities that have already experienced aspects of this demographic shift. Over the last year we have traveled around the country to these bellwether communities to have a local dialogue with key community members about three questions:

- What are the opportunities and challenges of these demographic changes?
- What strategies are working at the local level that can inform other places and national policy?
- How can advocates shift the conversation—that most often occurs around demographic change—from one that focuses on deficits and gaps to one that is squarely focused on the opportunity of diversity?

This is the fifth report in a series documenting these roundtable discussions and describes a conversation that took place in Houston, Texas, in March 2012. Previous roundtables took place in Arlington, Virginia (July 2011); Los Angeles, California (October 2011); San Joaquin Valley, California (October 2011); and Raleigh, North Carolina (December 2011).

Roundtable participants included community activists, policy researchers, business leaders, academics, and staff from elected offices. (See the full list of convening participants on page 18.) The range of their expertise was diverse, spanning issues including—but not limited to—economic development, fair lending, financial security, education, incarceration, civil rights, and civic engagement.

We chose Texas—and specifically the city of Houston—as the site for this discussion because the Houston area is now the eighth-most diverse metro area in the nation, with 60 percent of its residents coming from communities of color.⁴ Over the past three decades, Houston has experienced explosive population growth—growing from 3.2 million people to 5.9 million people—mostly driven by the region’s communities of color. People of color accounted for 78 percent of the area’s population growth in the 1980s, 91 percent of growth in the 1990s, and 93 percent of growth in the 2000s.⁵ And as the 2012 election turned all eyes on the massive demographic shift that our nation is experiencing, Texas is a prime example of a state where both parties will be paying close attention and actively trying to engage its diverse population in the democratic process.

Houston has also experienced consistently strong job growth. Houston’s leisure and hospitality sector, for example, saw a job growth rate of 8.4 percent in the past year—four times the sector’s national increase of 2.1 percent. Moreover, its construction employment increased by 7 percent, compared to just 0.1 percent nationally.⁶ Many of these new jobs, however, are low wage, depressing incomes as a result. And since the Great Recession of 2007–2009, job growth is not keeping pace with the growing labor force. At the same time, the region’s fastest-growing groups face some of the highest poverty and unemployment and low levels of educational attainment.

Even still, our roundtable participants were optimistic that, with the right investments and changes in policy, the Houston area could make huge gains and take advantage of all the opportunities inherent in the region’s growing diversity.

We begin our account with some demographic context about Texas, particularly the Houston region. We then discuss the prominent themes—employment and education, integration, and civic engagement—that roundtable participants explained were the most pressing issues to address in the region, all the while highlighting best practices in the Houston area that can be employed on the national level.

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