

**Spreading, Growing, Adapting:
Non-English Language Use and English Ability
of School-Aged Children in the United States, 2000**

Demonstrating the Use of Data from the
American Community Survey

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This paper reports the results of research and analysis undertaken by Census Bureau Staff. It has undergone a more limited review than official Census Bureau publications. This report is released to inform interested parties of research and to encourage discussion.

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Introduction

In recent years, large increases in immigration to the United States have contributed to a dramatic rise in the number of “language minority” students. This trend has posed challenges for some school districts where resources for teaching English as a second language are scarce. It has also fueled controversies over school funding and pedagogy in parts of the country. Additionally, concerns have been raised over the English-language skill of children from families who speak languages other than English as they mature to adulthood and become citizens.

Language use and English ability are important factors in the changing composition of the U.S. population. Previous analyses (Carliner, 1999) indicate that English fluency among new immigrants has steadily decreased since the 1950s. Yet little hard evidence on the extent of non-English language use in the United States has been available since the 1990 Census (for a discussion of 1990 census results, see Bruno 1993). This analysis uses data from the Census 2000 Supplementary Survey (C2SS) -- the year 2000 test of the American Community Survey -- to examine how language use and English ability of school-aged children has changed since 1990.

The American Community Survey

The American Community Survey (ACS) is designed to collect long-form type on a regular basis, allowing up-to-date estimates of basic demographic information at detailed levels of geography. The year 2000 test of the ACS was called the Census 2000 Supplementary Survey (C2SS). It collected information at the same time as, but separate from, the decennial census. Using the questionnaire and methods developed for the American Community Survey (ACS), the C2SS collected demographic, social, economic, and housing data from a national sample of 900,000 households. These data offer a preliminary look at long-form type results and provide the most comprehensive profile of language use in the United States in over a decade.

In the ACS, as in the 1990 census, persons five years and over responded to the following questions: “Does this person speak a language other than English at home?”, “What is this language?” and “How well does this person speak English – very well, well, not well, or not at all?”

There are minor differences between ACS data and those from the 1990 census, the most prominent being the lack of coverage of the group quarters population in the ACS. We examined language use of group quarters population in 1990 and found little impact on the comparisons made here.

Key Findings

Examination of the 2000 ACS data and comparison with 1990 census results show a striking growth in the number of children age 5 to 17 who speak a language other than English at home. The major findings from this analysis are:

- The decade from 1990 to 2000 saw an increase of 3.4 million in the number of children speaking a language other than English at home.
- There were 53 percent more such children in 2000 than a decade earlier.

- Growth in the number speaking a language other than English occurred in all parts of the country.
- Growth occurred among children of all ages.
- Most of the growth in the number speaking a language other than English consisted of native-born children.
- A growing majority of children speaking a language other than English at home reported that they speak English “very well.”

Rapid Growth in the Number of Children Speaking a Language Other Than English at Home 1990 to 2000

There was a 53 percent increase in the number of children who spoke a language other than English at home, following a 38 percent increase from 1980 to 1990. From 1980 to 1990 the number climbed by 1.8 million -- from 4.6 to 6.3 million. From 1990 to 2000, the number grew by 3.4 million to 9.7 million children. Children who spoke a language other than English at home accounted for 18 percent of all children age 5 to 17, up from 14 percent in 1990.

No Major Shifts in Characteristics of Children Speaking a Language Other Than English at Home

Many characteristics of children who spoke a language other than English at home remained fairly stable. Spanish was the predominant language, accounting for 66 percent of children speaking a language other than English in 1990 and 68 percent in 2000. There was a slight downward shift in the age distribution of children speaking a language other than English, with 55 percent aged 11 or older in 1990 and 52 percent in 2000. There was no shift in the percentage who were foreign born, which remained at 25 percent both years. The proportion speaking Asian languages remained stable at between 12 and 13 percent.

The dramatic rise in the number of children speaking a language other than English at home has been observed across many population groups, including those defined by age, sex, years since entry to the United States, nativity, and language spoken at home.

Around 75 percent of children who spoke a language other than English in 2000 were born in the United States. Far more of those added between decades were native-born than foreign-born (2.6 million versus 800,000).

Increased Ability to Speak English among Those Who Speak a Language Besides English at Home

As the number of children speaking a language other than English at home rose, a relatively small increase took place in the number of children who spoke English less than “very well.” The overall growth was 3.4 million; the growth in the number speaking less than very well was only 580,000. As a result, the percentage speaking less than very well fell from 38 percent to 31 percent of children who speak a language besides

English at home.

The decrease in percentage speaking less than very well was observed among various segments of the population. No subgroup had a higher percentage speaking English less than very well in 2000 than in 1990. The shift toward greater English ability occurred among both foreign-born and native children speaking a language besides English.

Increased Ability to Speak English with Time Spent in the U.S.

Both year of entry and age affected English skills. The pattern of percentages suggests that year of entry affected English ability more strongly than did age. Among those who had entered the country between 1997 and 2000, only 5 percentage points separated the youngest and oldest group. The gap between those eleven and older who had been in the country since 1990 and those who had entered between 1997 and 2000 was much larger – 46 to 49 percent. Age had little effect on this difference. In fact, age only seems important among those age 10 or less. This may be due to effect of school on learning English, with the preschool years having much less of an effect.

The 1990 pattern of language ability with age and time since entry to the U.S. was very similar to the 2000 pattern, though the percentage who spoke English less than very well was higher across the board. It appears, then, that there has been no fundamental shift in the development of English language ability once children have arrived in this country.

Non-English Language Associated with Non-Enrollment

Children who spoke a language other than English at home made up 30 percent of all children age 15 to 17 not enrolled in school. They formed less than 20 percent of those of the same age who were enrolled. There may be several reasons for this. One may be difficulty with school by those unfamiliar with English. Another may be education outside the U.S., where school is often completed at younger ages. Some may be studying English rather than attending regular school. Finally, many groups who speak languages other than English also have low socioeconomic status, which is associated with leaving school at earlier ages.

Language Ability by Region

As might be expected, English ability varies by region. The West had the largest proportion of children who spoke a language other than English at home, and the Midwest the lowest. In the West, 31 percent of all children 5 to 17 spoke a language other than English, and 10 percent spoke English less than very well.

Growth from 1990 to 2000 - Growth Outside the Major States

Seven states experienced an increase from 1990 to 2000 of 100,000 or more children speaking a language other than English. These were: California, Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois, Arizona, and New Jersey. These seven states also had the largest number of children speaking a language other than English in both 1990 and 2000. However, the rate of growth in these states, taken as a group, was lower than in other states (50.1 percent versus 64.4 percent). Only Arizona and Florida had especially large rates of growth (at 88 percent and 64 percent, respectively).

In both years, California accounted for close to 30 percent of the U.S. total children speaking a language other than English. In no state was there a higher portion of children who spoke a language other than English in the school-aged population. Although the increase in California was no higher than the national average in percentage terms, the absolute growth was nearly one million children. By 2000, nearly three million (2.9 million) children in California spoke a language other than English at home, out of a total school age population of 6.7 million in that state.

Language Spoken, Nativity and Ability to Speak English

The ten most common languages (besides English) in 2000 were Spanish, Chinese, French, Vietnamese, German, Korean, Tagalog, Arabic, Russian and French Creole. Note that the composition of this list is affected by choices about definitions of languages. For instance, the category “Chinese” includes respondents that listed Mandarin, Cantonese and several other dialects, along with those who listed “Chinese” as their language on the census form. If other language groups had been grouped similarly (e.g., South Asian languages), this list would have been different.

No matter how the languages are grouped, Spanish is by far the predominant language among school aged children who speak a language other than English at home. After Spanish, the most common languages reflect great diversity. Counted in the top ten languages of children in the United States are four from Europe, four from Asia, one from North Africa and one with its origins in the Western Hemisphere.

Conclusion

The decade from 1990 to 2000 was one of enormous growth in the number of children who speak a language other than English at home. While this growth may put pressure on schools and other institutions, the impact is not focused on one or two states. Growth in the number of children speaking non-English languages at home has been widespread, rather than concentrated in states where large populations already existed. At the same time, the percentage of these children who spoke English less than very well declined.

References:

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