

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF LA RAZA

CENSUS INFORMATION CENTER

LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND ABILITY FACT SHEET

OVERVIEW

- **English is the most common language spoken in the United States.** According to the 1990 U.S. Census, 97% of all U.S. residents speak English.
- **The majority of persons five years and over in the U.S. spoke only English at home.** Of all persons in the U.S., 86.2% spoke only English at home in 1990.
- **More than 31.8 million persons five years of age and older spoke a language other than English at home.** Slightly less than one in seven persons (13.8%) spoke a language other than English at home. Of these, 19.9% were between the ages of 5 and 17; 68.2% were between 18 and 64; 6.7% were between 65 and 74; and 5.3% were aged 75 and over.

LANGUAGE ABILITY

- **Of all those who speak a language other than English at home, over half spoke English "very well," and one in five spoke English "not well" or "not at all."** Over half (56.1%) of other-than-English speakers spoke English "very well," compared to almost one-quarter (23.0%) who spoke English "well." One in seven (15.2%) spoke English "not well," and one in sixteen (5.8%) spoke English "not at all."
- **Spanish speakers made up the majority of other-than-English speakers.** Of other-than-English speakers, the majority (55.3% -- 17.3 million) spoke Spanish at home. One half (52.1%) spoke English "very well," one in five (21.9%) spoke English "well," 17.5% spoke English "not well," and 8.4% spoke English "not at all."
- **Of the 4.5 million persons five years and over who spoke an Asian or Pacific Island language at home, roughly three in ten spoke English "not well" or "not at all."** Less than one-half (45.0%) spoke English "very well," 27.3% spoke English "well," 20.1% spoke English "not well," and 7.6% spoke English "not at all."
- **Native American languages were spoken by 332,000 other-than-English speakers.** About 1.0% of other-than-English speakers spoke a Native American language at home. Of Navajo speakers (148,530 individuals over five), 55.4% spoke English "very well," 29.9% spoke English "well," 9.5% spoke English "not well," and 5.1% spoke English "not at all."

LINGUISTIC ISOLATION

- **One in four persons of Asian or Pacific Island race were in linguistically-isolated households in 1990.** Of Asian or Pacific Islanders five years and over in households, 24.2% (1.6 million) were in linguistically-isolated households.
- **Almost one in four persons of Hispanic origin were in linguistically-isolated households in 1990.** Hispanics were slightly less likely than Asian or Pacific Islanders to be linguistically isolated, with 23.8% of other-than-English speaking Hispanics in linguistically isolated households. Of these, 66.9% were between the ages of 18 and 64.

NATIVE-BORN STATUS

- **Just over one-half of other-than-English speakers were native-born in 1990.** Of all individuals who reported speaking a language other than English at home, 48.1% were born in the 50 states or D.C.; 4.1% were born in Puerto Rico or other U.S. outlying areas.
- **Almost one-third of individuals who spoke English "with difficulty" were native-born.** Of those individuals who reported speaking English "with difficulty," 24.4% were born in the 50 states or D.C.; 5.5% were born in Puerto Rico or other U.S. outlying area.

LANGUAGE ORIENTATION

- **Research shows a continued shift in language orientation among later-generation Hispanics.** Calvin Veltman's 1988 study showed that, by the time they have been in the country for 15 years, 75% of Hispanic immigrants speak English frequently each day. In addition, his study showed that immigrant ethnolinguistic groups, including Hispanics, shift to the use of English within one or two generations.
- **Studies show that the use of English in the workplace is not a significant factor in an immigrant's shift to use of English.** Studies by Loo (1987), Lopez (1978 and 1982), and Veltman (1983 and 1988), show that the rate of shift is influenced by the educational level, social class, age at immigration, and by the influx of new immigrants from the same language community, not by the use of English in the workplace.
- **Recent studies also show negative psychological effects when a person gives up a native language.** According to Berry (1983), when a person gives up their native language, the result may be the loss of their identity with no real feeling of identity for the host culture to replace it, leading to the condition of marginality.

LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND MOTIVATION

- **Research indicates a link between proficiency in one's native language and acquisition of English skills.** Evidence suggests that the stronger the language and literacy abilities of learners in their native language, the more likely it is that they will develop similarly strong language and literacy abilities in English. (Burtoff, 1985; Collier, 1989; Cummins, 1981, 1984; Robson, 1982) In addition, studies indicate that higher degrees of bilingualism are associated with higher levels of "cognitive attainment" (Hakuta and Garcia, 1989).
- **Research indicates that the use of native language does not interfere in any negative way with the development of a second language.** In fact, the rate of acquisition of a second language is highly related to the proficiency level in the native language, which suggests that the learning process is additive, rather than competitive (Hakuta and Garcia, 1989).
- **According to the Latino National Political Survey, the vast majority of U.S. citizen Latinos believe that citizens and residents of the U.S. should learn English.** Over 90% of Mexicans, Cubans, and Puerto Rican U.S. citizens agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that citizens and residents of the U.S. should learn English.
- **Positive attitudes toward native languages and ethnicities are tied to educational attainment and acquisition of English.** Studies with French-speaking community college students showed that those French speakers who did not feel that their own ethnic identities were threatened were the more competent speakers of English (Taylor, 1987). In addition, studies have shown that language loyalty, or the encouragement of positive attitudes toward's one's native language, is critical for literacy education (Kádár-Fulop, 1988).
- **According to experts in education and psychology, the English-only movement uses arguments which promote interethnic group tensions and prejudice.** The English-only movement has been described by psychologists as being "socially divisive...and it can have negative consequences on psychosocial development, intergroup relations, academic achievement, and psychometric and health-service delivery systems." (American Psychological Association, 1991)

SOURCES

American Psychological Association, "The English-Only Movement -- Myths, Reality and Implications for Psychology," 1991; Center for Applied Linguistics, *Adult Biliteracy in the United States*, David Spener, Editor, 1994; *Language Loyalties -- A Source Book on the Official English Controversy*, James Crawford, Editor, 1992; de la Garza, Rodolfo, et al., *Latino Voices -- Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Cuban Perspectives on U.S. Politics*, Westview Press, 1992; Hakuta, Kenji, and Garcia, Eugene E., "Bilingualism and Education," *American Psychologist*, February, 1989; 1990 Decennial Census, U.S. Bureau of the Census; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Language Characteristics and Schooling in the United States, A Changing Picture: 1979 and 1989*, November 1993.

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