

# Language Use in the United States: 2011

## American Community Survey Reports

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### INTRODUCTION

English is the language spoken by most people in the United States. The official language of many states is English<sup>1</sup> and it is the language used in nearly all governmental functions. Despite this predominance, many people in the United States speak languages other than English, and there has long been an interest in these groups and in how well they are able to participate in civic life and interact with the English-speaking majority. Beginning in 1890, the U.S. Census Bureau started inquiring about the languages that people spoke and, with some interruptions in the middle of the twentieth century, similar questions continue to this day.

The primary purpose of the current questions on language use is to measure the portion of the U.S. population that may need help in understanding English. These data are used in a wide variety of legislative, policy, and research applications as well as for legal, financial, and marketing decisions. People who speak a particular language other than English and cannot speak English “very well” can be helped with translation services, education, or assistance in accessing government services. The federal government uses data on language use and English-speaking ability to determine which local areas must provide language-assistance services under the Voting Rights Act. These data are also used to allocate educational funds to states to help their schools teach students with lower levels of English proficiency. In 2000,

<sup>1</sup> Schildkraut, Deborah, 2001, “Official-English and the States: Influences on Declaring English the Official Language in the United States,” *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 54, No. 2: pp. 445–457.

Figure 1.  
**Reproduction of the Questions on Language From the 2011 American Community Survey**

**14** a. Does this person speak a language other than English at home?

Yes

No → SKIP to question 15a

b. What is this language?

For example: Korean, Italian, Spanish, Vietnamese

c. How well does this person speak English?

Very well

Well

Not well

Not at all

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2011 American Community Survey.

President Clinton signed an executive order requiring federal agencies to identify the need for services to those with limited English proficiency (LEP) and to implement a system to provide meaningful access to language-assistance services. Agencies rely on these data to determine how and where to provide language-assistance services.<sup>2</sup> Many other institutions, organizations, local governments, and private enterprises make use of these data in similar ways.

<sup>2</sup> See <[www.lep.gov](http://www.lep.gov)>.

Table 5.

**Distribution of Speakers of Non-English Languages for Selected Metropolitan Areas: 2011—Con.**(Metro areas where 25 percent or more of the population 5 years and over spoke a language other than English. For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see [www.census.gov/acs/www/](http://www.census.gov/acs/www/))

Metropolitan areas	Population 5 years and over (Number)	Spoke a language other than English at home		Language spoken of those who speak a language other than English at home							
				Spanish		Other Indo-European languages		Asian and Pacific Island languages		Other languages	
		Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent
Laredo, TX . . . . .	230,506	212,319	92.1	209,847	98.8	581	0.3	1,832	0.9	59	0.0
McAllen-Edinburg-Mission, TX . . . . .	720,446	614,621	85.3	605,325	98.5	2,668	0.4	5,885	1.0	743	0.1
El Centro, CA . . . . .	163,107	118,711	72.8	116,345	98.0	366	0.3	1,705	1.4	295	0.2
El Paso, TX . . . . .	754,849	547,397	72.5	532,372	97.3	7,459	1.4	6,654	1.2	912	0.2
Brownsville-Harlingen, TX . . . . .	377,563	263,074	69.7	260,237	98.9	1,049	0.4	1,578	0.6	210	0.1
Los Angeles-Long Beach-Santa Ana, CA . . . . .	12,103,230	6,571,923	54.3	4,413,269	67.2	640,467	9.7	1,398,593	21.3	119,594	1.8
Salinas, CA . . . . .	388,612	208,721	53.7	183,699	88.0	5,929	2.8	16,365	7.8	2,728	1.3
Las Cruces, NM . . . . .	197,651	104,655	52.9	100,672	96.2	2,470	2.4	1,068	1.0	445	0.4
Yuma, AZ . . . . .	185,598	96,918	52.2	93,220	96.2	1,997	2.1	994	1.0	707	0.7
Miami-Fort Lauderdale-Miami Beach, FL . . . . .	5,342,714	2,740,101	51.3	2,139,173	78.1	486,727	17.8	70,605	2.6	43,596	1.6
Visalia-Porterville, CA . . . . .	407,905	206,897	50.7	189,574	91.6	4,774	2.3	11,603	5.6	946	0.5
San Jose-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara, CA . . . . .	1,737,443	877,451	50.5	334,549	38.1	142,287	16.2	380,937	43.4	19,678	2.2
Merced, CA . . . . .	237,573	119,028	50.1	97,433	81.9	12,157	10.2	8,660	7.3	778	0.7
Fresno, CA . . . . .	863,371	382,344	44.3	291,503	76.2	26,979	7.1	59,346	15.5	4,516	1.2
Odessa, TX . . . . .	127,828	55,765	43.6	53,895	96.6	984	1.8	661	1.2	225	0.4
Madera, CA . . . . .	141,380	60,691	42.9	55,539	91.5	2,278	3.8	2,557	4.2	317	0.5
Bakersfield, CA . . . . .	778,854	327,031	42.0	289,041	88.4	15,927	4.9	17,834	5.5	4,229	1.3
Modesto, CA . . . . .	479,014	200,726	41.9	151,626	75.5	21,636	10.8	10,649	5.3	16,815	8.4
Hanford-Corcoran, CA . . . . .	141,291	58,722	41.6	51,884	88.4	2,568	4.4	3,581	6.1	689	1.2
Santa Barbara-Santa Maria, CA . . . . .	399,458	162,367	40.6	136,637	84.2	11,151	6.9	12,538	7.7	2,041	1.3
Riverside-San Bernardino-Ontario, CA . . . . .	3,983,998	1,615,123	40.5	1,322,026	81.9	81,921	5.1	180,171	11.2	31,005	1.9
San Francisco-Oakland-Fremont, CA . . . . .	4,130,311	1,670,902	40.5	678,359	40.6	269,017	16.1	685,063	41.0	38,463	2.3
Stockton, CA . . . . .	641,685	253,878	39.6	168,367	66.3	30,977	12.2	50,263	19.8	4,271	1.7
Yakima, WA . . . . .	225,246	88,659	39.4	84,221	95.0	1,538	1.7	2,067	2.3	833	0.9
New York-Northern New Jersey-Long Island, NY-NJ-PA . . . . .	17,838,980	6,981,683	39.1	3,518,126	50.4	2,025,713	29.0	1,095,595	15.7	342,249	4.9
San Antonio, TX . . . . .	2,035,868	777,946	38.2	714,314	91.8	31,512	4.1	23,358	3.0	8,762	1.1
Napa, CA . . . . .	130,131	49,664	38.2	39,493	79.5	2,820	5.7	6,973	14.0	378	0.8
San Diego-Carlsbad-San Marcos, CA . . . . .	2,933,575	1,106,849	37.7	729,347	65.9	89,904	8.1	235,773	21.3	51,825	4.7
Houston-Sugar Land-Baytown, TX . . . . .	5,604,644	2,091,768	37.3	1,617,957	77.3	174,242	8.3	242,529	11.6	57,040	2.7
Corpus Christi, TX . . . . .	402,206	147,850	36.8	139,200	94.1	2,994	2.0	4,807	3.3	849	0.6
Santa Fe, NM . . . . .	137,904	50,245	36.4	45,075	89.7	2,367	4.7	1,020	2.0	1,783	3.5
Oxnard-Thousand Oaks-Ventura, CA . . . . .	776,660	282,683	36.4	222,652	78.8	21,593	7.6	32,297	11.4	6,141	2.2
Farmington, NM . . . . .	117,861	42,444	36.0	14,150	33.3	741	1.7	372	0.9	27,181	64.0
Las Vegas-Paradise, NV . . . . .	1,831,695	614,625	33.6	423,841	69.0	52,000	8.5	120,260	19.6	18,524	3.0
Santa Cruz-Watsonville, CA . . . . .	249,132	80,238	32.2	66,016	82.3	6,350	7.9	7,111	8.9	761	0.9
Naples-Marco Island, FL . . . . .	311,342	99,321	31.9	73,660	74.2	19,639	19.8	5,105	5.1	917	0.9
Albuquerque, NM . . . . .	838,920	263,567	31.4	214,162	81.3	14,614	5.5	8,972	3.4	25,819	9.8
Yuba City, CA . . . . .	154,104	48,278	31.3	31,649	65.6	10,586	21.9	5,830	12.1	213	0.4
Midland, TX . . . . .	129,109	39,627	30.7	36,494	92.1	1,107	2.8	1,647	4.2	379	1.0
Dallas-Fort Worth-Arlington, TX . . . . .	6,022,507	1,809,206	30.0	1,381,478	76.4	156,259	8.6	207,267	11.5	64,202	3.5
Orlando-Kissimmee, FL . . . . .	2,039,583	595,470	29.2	433,912	72.9	106,337	17.9	45,711	7.7	9,510	1.6
Chicago-Naperville-Joliet, IL-IN-WI . . . . .	8,876,347	2,580,089	29.1	1,547,235	60.0	627,153	24.3	288,927	11.2	116,774	4.5
Tucson, AZ . . . . .	927,411	264,996	28.6	218,043	82.3	18,044	6.8	16,123	6.1	12,786	4.8

See note at end of table.

Table 5.

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				Spanish		Other Indo-European languages		Asian and Pacific Island languages		Other languages	
		Number	Per-cent	Number	Per-cent	Number	Per-cent	Number	Per-cent	Number	Per-cent
Bridgeport-Stamford-Norwalk, CT . . .	870,100	247,017	28.4	127,732	51.7	88,781	35.9	22,751	9.2	7,753	3.1
Vallejo-Fairfield, CA . . . . .	390,169	110,111	28.2	63,385	57.6	9,557	8.7	35,825	32.5	1,344	1.2
Austin-Round Rock, TX . . . . .	1,654,442	464,933	28.1	366,576	78.8	46,107	9.9	45,774	9.8	6,476	1.4
Sacramento—Arden-Arcade— Roseville, CA . . . . .	2,033,096	568,262	28.0	262,979	46.3	128,150	22.6	167,443	29.5	9,690	1.7
Trenton-Ewing, NJ . . . . .	345,584	96,326	27.9	44,888	46.6	29,193	30.3	19,118	19.8	3,127	3.2
Atlantic City, NJ . . . . .	257,871	70,762	27.4	42,378	59.9	14,272	20.2	11,783	16.7	2,329	3.3
Kennewick-Richland-Pasco, WA . . . .	242,237	66,106	27.3	55,038	83.3	6,040	9.1	4,581	6.9	447	0.7
Honolulu, HI . . . . .	901,726	243,991	27.1	17,736	7.3	11,328	4.6	214,043	87.7	884	0.4
Washington-Arlington-Alexandria, DC-VA-MD-WV . . . . .	5,319,973	1,420,987	26.7	638,181	44.9	333,850	23.5	300,327	21.1	148,629	10.5
Gainesville, GA . . . . .	169,018	45,018	26.6	40,731	90.5	1,841	4.1	2,374	5.3	72	0.2
Victoria, TX . . . . .	106,954	28,441	26.6	25,185	88.6	959	3.4	1,802	6.3	495	1.7
Phoenix-Mesa-Scottsdale, AZ . . . . .	3,955,933	1,037,554	26.2	806,286	77.7	90,785	8.7	93,206	9.0	47,277	4.6
Dalton, GA . . . . .	132,462	34,332	25.9	32,380	94.3	560	1.6	137	0.4	1,255	3.7
Wenatchee, WA . . . . .	104,787	26,968	25.7	24,815	92.0	664	2.5	727	2.7	762	2.8

Note: Margins of error for all estimates can be found in the Appendix Table 5 <[www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/language/data/acs/Table5.xls](http://www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/language/data/acs/Table5.xls)>. Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2011 American Community Survey. For more information on the ACS, see <[www.census.gov/acs/www/](http://www.census.gov/acs/www/)>.

and San Jose-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara, California, where Spanish speakers were also outnumbered by those who spoke Asian and Pacific Island languages. The other metropolitan area was Farmington, New Mexico. In this area, the overwhelming majority spoke the Native American language of Navajo.

New York and Los Angeles stand out for the large number of speakers of languages other than English that reside there—more than 6 million in each metropolitan area. In the New York metropolitan area, about 50 percent of those who spoke a language other than English spoke Spanish. Another

29 percent of these people spoke Other Indo-European languages. In the Los Angeles metropolitan area, over two-thirds of those who spoke a language other than English spoke Spanish.

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## SUMMARY

This report provides illustrative evidence of the continuing and growing role of non-English languages as part of the national fabric. Fueled by both long-term historic immigration patterns and more recent ones, the language diversity of the country has increased over the past few decades. As the nation continues to be a destination for people from other lands, this pattern of language diversity will also likely continue. Given the patterns of location and relocation over time, local areas may see specific or diverse changes in the languages spoken in any given locality.

## SOURCE OF THE DATA

Estimates in this report are from the 2011 American Community Survey (ACS). The population represented (the population universe) in the 2011 ACS includes both the household and the group quarters populations (that is, the resident population). The group quarters population consists of the institutionalized population (such as people in correctional institutions or nursing homes) and the non-institutionalized population (most of whom are in college dormitories).

## ACCURACY OF THE ESTIMATES

Statistics from sample surveys are subject to sampling error and nonsampling error. All comparisons presented in this report have taken sampling error into account and are significant at the 90 percent confidence level.<sup>18</sup> This means the 90 percent confidence interval for the difference between estimates being compared does not include zero. Nonsampling error in surveys may be attributed to a variety of sources, such as how the survey was designed, how respondents interpret questions, how able and willing respondents are to provide correct answers, and how accurately answers are coded and classified. To minimize these errors, the Census Bureau employs quality control procedures in sample selection, the wording of questions, interviewing, coding, data processing, and data analysis.

The final ACS population estimates are adjusted in the weighting procedure for coverage error by controlling specific survey estimates to independent population controls by sex, age, race, and Hispanic origin. This weighting partially corrects for

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<sup>18</sup> The tables reporting the margins of error for all the tables in this report can be accessed at <[www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/language/data/acs/2011/appendix.html](http://www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/language/data/acs/2011/appendix.html)>.

bias due to over- or undercoverage, but biases may still be present, for example, when people who were missed differ from those interviewed in ways other than sex, age, race, and Hispanic origin. How this weighting procedure affects other variables in the survey is not precisely known. All of these considerations affect comparisons across different surveys or data sources. For information on sampling and estimation methods, confidentiality protection, and sampling and nonsampling errors, please see the “2011 ACS Accuracy of the Data” document located at <[www.census.gov/acs/www/Downloads/data\\_documentation/Accuracy/ACS\\_Accuracy\\_of\\_Data\\_2011.pdf](http://www.census.gov/acs/www/Downloads/data_documentation/Accuracy/ACS_Accuracy_of_Data_2011.pdf)>.

## MORE INFORMATION

Detailed tabulations, related information, and historic data are available on the Internet at the Language Use page on the Census Bureau’s Web site at <[www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/language/index.html](http://www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/language/index.html)>. For additional questions or comments, contact the Education and Social Stratification Branch at 301-763-2464 or e-mail Camille L. Ryan at <[Camille.L.Ryan@census.gov](mailto:Camille.L.Ryan@census.gov)>.

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## APPENDIX A.

### LANGUAGE QUESTIONS USED IN DECENNIAL CENSUSES

**2000:** (Collected for all ages; retained for persons 5 years old and over)

Does this person speak a language other than English at home?

What is this language?

How well does this person speak English (very well, well, not well, not at all)?

**1990:** (Persons 5 years old and over)

Does this person speak a language other than English at home?

What is this language?

How well does this person speak English (very well, well, not well, not at all)?

**1980:** (Persons 3 years old and over; tabulated for 5 years old and over)

Does this person speak a language other than English at home?

What is this language?

How well does this person speak English (very well, well, not well, not at all)?

**1970:** (No age for question, tabulations limited)

What language, other than English, was spoken in this person's home when he was a child?

(Spanish, French, German, Other (specify)\_\_\_\_\_, None, English only)

**1960:** (Foreign-born)

What language was spoken in his home before he came to the United States?

**1950:** (Not asked)

**1940:** (For persons of all ages; asked under the category of "Mother Tongue [or Native Language] of Foreign Born")

Language spoken at home in earliest childhood.

**1930:** (Foreign born; asked under the category of "Mother Tongue [or Native Language] of Foreign Born")

Language spoken in home before coming to the United States.

**1920:** (Foreign born)

Place of birth and mother tongue of person and each parent.

Whether able to speak English.

**1910:**

Mother tongue was collected for all foreign-born persons, to be written in with place of birth; also collected for foreign-born parents. Specific instructions on correct languages to write in and a list of appropriate European languages were provided to the enumerator. Similar instructions may have carried over to 1920.

Whether able to speak English; or, if not, give language spoken.

**1900:** (All persons 10 years old and over)

"Can speak English" was asked after the two questions "Can read" and "Can write."

**1890:** (All persons 10 years old and over)

"Able to speak English. If not, the language or dialect spoken" was asked after the questions "Able to Read" and "Able to Write."

**1790–1880:**

No evidence of language questions or English-ability questions.

*Note: The universe used for data collection may not be the same as in tabulations. In some cases, data were tabulated for foreign-born only or White foreign-born only. Consult publications.*

[www.mla.org/map\\_main](http://www.mla.org/map_main)

[www.ethnologue.com/](http://www.ethnologue.com/)