



# 65.5 Million U.S. Residents Spoke a Foreign Language at Home in 2016

Number has doubled since 1990 and nearly tripled since 1980

By Karen Zeigler and Steven A. Camarota

**N**ewly released Census Bureau data for 2016 shows that a record 65.5 million U.S. residents five years of age and older spoke a language other than English at home. The number is up six million since 2010 and has increased by nearly 34 million since 1990. As a share of the population, more than one in five U.S. residents now speaks a foreign language at home. The largest percentage increases since 2010 among languages with more than 400,000 speakers were for Arabic, Hindi, Urdu, Chinese, Persian, Haitian, and Gujarati. Hindi and Gujarati are spoken in India; Urdu is spoken in Pakistan.

Among the findings:

- In 2016, a record 65.5 million U.S. residents (native-born, legal immigrants, and illegal immigrants) spoke a language other than English at home. The number has more than doubled since 1990, when 31.8 million spoke a language other than English at home.
- Taking a longer view, the 65.5 million foreign-language speakers in 2016 is almost triple the number in 1980.
- As a share of the population, 21.6 percent of U.S. residents speak a foreign language at home — nearly double the 11 percent in 1980.
- Of languages with more than 400,000 speakers, the largest percentage increases since 2010 were among speakers of Arabic (up 42 percent), Hindi (up 33 percent), Urdu (up 22 percent), Chinese (up 20 percent), Persian and Haitian (each up 15 percent), and Gujarati (up 14 percent). Hindi is a national language of India, Urdu is the national language of Pakistan, Persian is the national language of Iran, and Gujarati is spoken in India.
- The largest numerical increases 2010 to 2016 were among speakers of Spanish (up 3.5 million), Chinese (up 564,000), Arabic (up 366,000), Hindi (up 201,000), Telugu (up 143,000), Vietnamese (up 129,000), Tagalog (up 128,000), Haitian (up 109,000), Bengali (up 101,000), Tamil (up 89,000), and Urdu (up 86,000). Telugu and Tamil are spoken in India and Tagalog is the national language of the Philippines; Bengali is spoken in India and is also the national language of Bangladesh.
- Languages with more than a million speakers in 2016 were Spanish (40.5 million), Chinese (3.4 million), Tagalog (1.7 million), Vietnamese (1.5 million), Arabic (1.2 million), French (1.2 million), and Korean (1.1 million).
- The data released thus far indicates that nearly one in four public school students now speaks a language other than English at home.<sup>1</sup> In California it is 44 percent, and in Texas, New Mexico, New Jersey, New York, and Nevada roughly one in three school-age children speaks a foreign language at home.

---

*Karen Zeigler is a demographer and Steven A. Camarota is the director of research at the Center.*

- Many of those who speak a foreign language at home are not immigrants. In fact, half of the growth in foreign language speakers since 2010 is among those born in the United States. Overall, 44 percent (29 million) of those who speak a language other than English at home are U.S.-born.<sup>2</sup>
- Of those who speak a foreign language at home, 26.1 million (39.8 percent) told the Census Bureau that they speak English less than very well. This figure is entirely based on the opinion of the respondents; the Census Bureau does not measure language skills.<sup>3</sup>
- States with the largest share of their populations speaking a foreign language at home in 2016 were California (45 percent), Texas (36 percent), New Mexico (34 percent), New Jersey (32 percent), New York and Nevada (each 31 percent), Florida (29 percent), Arizona and Hawaii (each 27 percent), and Massachusetts (24 percent).
- States with the largest percentage increases in the number of foreign-language speakers 2010 to 2016 were: Wyoming (up 25 percent), Utah (up 20 percent), Maryland (up 19 percent), Nevada (up 18 percent), Oklahoma (up 17 percent), Nebraska and North Dakota (each up 16 percent), and Virginia, Florida, and Minnesota (each up 15 percent).
- Taking the longer view, states with the largest percentage increases in foreign-language speakers 1980 to 2016 were: Nevada (up 1,040 percent), Georgia (up 926 percent), North Carolina (up 744 percent), Virginia (up 475 percent), Tennessee (up 425 percent), Arkansas (up 412 percent), Washington (up 395 percent), Florida (up 361 percent), South Carolina and Utah (each up 349 percent), Oregon (up 346 percent), and Maryland (up 345 percent).

**Data Source.** In September of this year, the Census Bureau released some of the data from the 2016 American Community Survey (ACS). The survey reflects the U.S. population as of July 1, 2016. The ACS is by far the largest survey taken by the federal government each year and includes over two million households.<sup>4</sup> The Census Bureau has posted some of the results from the ACS to American FactFinder on the Bureau's website.<sup>5</sup> It has not released the public-use version of the ACS for researchers to download and analyze. However, a good deal of information can be found at FactFinder. Unless otherwise indicated, the information in this analysis comes directly from FactFinder.

There are three language questions in the ACS for 2010 and 2016. The first asks whether each person in the survey speaks a language other than English at home. Second, for those who answer "yes", the survey asks what the language the person speaks at home. Third, the survey asks how well the person speaks English. Only those who speak a language at home other than English are asked about their English skills. The 1980, 1990, and 2000 decennial census (long form) asked almost the exact same questions.

In this report we provide some statistics for the immigrant population, referred to as the foreign-born by the Census Bureau. The foreign-born are comprised of those individuals who were not U.S. citizens at birth. It includes naturalized citizens, legal permanent residents (green card holders), temporary workers, foreign students, and illegal immigrants. It does not include those born to immigrants in the United States, including to illegal immigrant parents; nor does it include those born in outlying U.S. territories such as Puerto Rico. Prior research by the Department of Homeland Security and others indicates that some 90 percent of illegal immigrants respond to the ACS.<sup>6</sup>

**Table 1. Number and Share Speaking a Language Other Than English at Home 1980 to 2016**

	1980	1990	2000	2010	2016
Speaking a Language Other Than English at Home	23,060,040	31,844,979	46,951,595	59,542,596	65,518,938
Share Speaking a Foreign Language at Home	11.0%	13.8%	17.9%	20.6%	21.6%
Immigrant	9,729,337	15,430,434	25,497,023	33,621,360	36,523,534
Native-Born	13,330,703	16,414,545	21,454,572	25,921,236	28,995,404
Speaks English Less Than Very Well*	10,181,036	13,982,502	21,320,407	25,223,045	26,072,683

**Source:** Figures for 1980, 1990, and 2000 are from the decennial census. Figures for 2010 and 2016 are from the ACS data in American FactFinder at Census.gov.

\* Based on respondents' self-assessment.

**Table 2. Language Spoken by Those Who Speak a Language Other Than English at Home in 2000, 2010, 2016**

Language	2000	2010	2016	Pct. Growth, 2010-2016
Total	46,951,595	59,542,596	65,518,938	10%
Telugu	87,543	222,977	365,566	64%
Tamil	90,625	184,454	273,332	48%
Bengali	122,375	223,395	324,008	45%
Arabic	614,582	864,961	1,231,098	42%
Hindi	317,057	609,395	810,877	33%
Urdu	262,900	388,909	474,481	22%
Chinese	2,022,143	2,808,692	3,372,930	20%
Punjabi	143,526	247,353	287,491	16%
Persian	312,085	381,408	438,448	15%
Haitian (French Creole)	453,368	746,702	856,009	15%
Gujarati	235,988	356,394	407,520	14%
Portuguese	564,630	688,326	767,210	11%
Hebrew	195,374	204,593	225,147	10%
Spanish	28,101,052	36,995,602	40,489,813	9%
Vietnamese	1,009,627	1,381,488	1,509,993	9%
Tagalog	1,224,241	1,573,720	1,701,960	8%
Russian	706,242	854,955	909,374	6%
Hmong	168,063	211,500	224,133	6%
Japanese	477,997	443,497	463,535	5%
Thai/Laotian	269,767	309,732	307,422	-1%
Armenian	202,708	240,402	237,550	-1%
Korean	894,063	1,137,325	1,088,788	-4%
Navajo	178,014	172,873	163,784	-5%
Greek	365,436	307,178	288,255	-6%
French	1,643,838	1,322,650	1,216,668	-8%
Cambodian/Khmer	181,889	220,900	203,115	-8%
Polish	667,414	608,333	539,151	-11%
German	1,383,442	1,067,651	905,691	-15%
Serbo-Croatian	233,865	284,077	236,731	-17%
Italian	1,008,370	725,223	576,154	-21%
All Others	2,813,371	3,757,931	4,622,704	23%

**Source:** Data comes from American FactFinder at Census.gov. Public-use ACS and Census data were used to generate estimates for several smaller languages in 2000 and 2010. For a discussion of how languages are defined see [here](#).

**Table 3. Number Speaking a Language Other Than English at Home by State, 1980 to 2016; Ranked by Percentage Growth, 2010 to 2016**

State	Speaks a Language Other Than English at Home					Pct. Growth, 2010-2016	Pct. Growth, 1980-2016
	1980	1990	2000	2010	2016		
D.C.	47,320	71,348	90,417	83,073	109,280	32%	131%
Wyoming	26,940	23,809	29,485	33,308	41,791	25%	55%
Utah	95,280	120,404	253,249	357,694	427,482	20%	349%
Maryland	240,100	395,051	622,714	896,006	1,069,068	19%	345%
Nevada	74,200	146,152	427,972	718,991	846,121	18%	1040%
Oklahoma	114,220	145,798	238,532	319,555	375,410	17%	229%
Nebraska	69,380	69,872	125,654	175,849	203,828	16%	194%
North Dakota	67,120	46,897	37,976	31,927	36,889	16%	-45%
Virginia	223,320	418,521	735,191	1,112,699	1,283,167	15%	475%
Florida	1,217,120	2,098,315	3,473,864	4,868,267	5,610,309	15%	361%
Minnesota	210,460	227,161	389,988	521,350	597,727	15%	184%
Georgia	131,720	284,546	751,438	1,181,999	1,351,449	14%	926%
Tennessee	83,320	131,550	256,516	382,245	437,030	14%	425%
Washington	266,480	403,173	770,886	1,154,249	1,318,810	14%	395%
Delaware	29,520	42,327	69,533	101,561	115,948	14%	293%
Massachusetts	701,020	852,228	1,115,570	1,341,035	1,527,229	14%	118%
North Carolina	130,640	240,866	603,517	970,435	1,102,606	14%	744%
Texas	2,862,120	3,970,304	6,010,753	8,119,597	9,216,808	14%	222%
Oregon	131,480	191,710	388,669	517,515	586,749	13%	346%
Pennsylvania	757,120	806,876	972,484	1,211,107	1,362,725	13%	80%
Michigan	563,380	569,807	781,381	798,760	891,833	12%	58%
Idaho	48,140	58,995	111,879	152,439	170,008	12%	253%
Indiana	207,560	245,826	362,082	487,206	542,814	11%	162%
West Virginia	37,600	44,203	45,895	38,961	43,400	11%	15%
Kentucky	59,180	86,482	148,473	195,027	217,067	11%	267%
Colorado	283,620	320,631	604,019	805,147	889,202	10%	214%
Arizona	504,720	700,287	1,229,237	1,592,675	1,758,615	10%	248%
Rhode Island	147,360	159,492	196,624	208,445	228,048	9%	55%
New Jersey	1,096,600	1,406,148	2,001,690	2,452,031	2,672,419	9%	144%
Arkansas	39,800	60,781	123,755	187,658	203,808	9%	412%
Kansas	105,160	131,604	218,655	291,616	315,905	8%	200%
South Carolina	70,920	113,163	196,429	294,918	318,363	8%	349%
California	4,969,060	8,619,334	12,401,756	15,232,350	16,388,313	8%	230%
Iowa	92,440	100,391	160,022	210,430	226,154	7%	145%
Hawaii	232,020	254,724	302,125	330,593	354,815	7%	53%
Mississippi	43,740	66,516	95,522	100,380	107,676	7%	146%
Connecticut	421,580	466,175	583,913	717,780	768,991	7%	82%
Wisconsin	250,940	263,638	368,712	445,521	477,303	7%	90%
Ohio	515,680	546,148	648,493	719,544	761,251	6%	48%
New York	3,304,880	3,908,720	4,962,921	5,464,398	5,769,755	6%	75%
Missouri	142,520	178,210	264,281	341,861	358,170	5%	151%
Illinois	1,223,460	1,499,112	2,220,719	2,644,145	2,761,244	4%	126%
Alaska	45,480	60,165	82,758	109,244	114,021	4%	151%
Alabama	68,680	107,866	162,483	230,660	234,206	2%	241%
New Hampshire	90,680	88,796	96,088	97,135	98,159	1%	8%
Vermont	33,520	30,409	34,075	33,005	32,856	0%	-2%
New Mexico	446,260	493,999	616,964	701,672	674,288	-4%	51%
Louisiana	382,500	391,994	382,364	376,677	352,978	-6%	-8%
Maine	113,880	105,441	93,966	84,052	78,401	-7%	-31%
South Dakota	51,220	41,994	45,575	56,695	52,065	-8%	2%
Montana	38,140	37,020	44,331	43,109	36,384	-16%	-5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>23,109,600</b>	<b>31,844,979</b>	<b>46,951,595</b>	<b>59,542,596</b>	<b>65,518,938</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>184%</b>

**Source:** Figures for 1980, 1990, and 2000 are from the decennial census. Figures for 2010 and 2016 are from the ACS data in American FactFinder at Census.gov.

**Table 4. Share of Pop. Speaking a Language Other Than English at Home by State, 1980-2016**

State	1980	1990	2000	2010	2016
California	22.6%	31.5%	39.5%	43.7%	44.6%
Texas	21.9%	25.4%	31.2%	34.8%	35.6%
New Mexico	37.4%	35.5%	36.5%	36.5%	34.5%
New Jersey	15.9%	19.5%	25.5%	29.7%	31.7%
New York	20.1%	23.3%	28.0%	30.0%	31.0%
Nevada	9.9%	13.2%	23.1%	28.6%	30.7%
Florida	13.2%	17.3%	23.1%	27.4%	28.8%
Arizona	20.2%	20.8%	25.9%	26.7%	27.1%
Hawaii	26.0%	24.8%	26.6%	25.9%	26.5%
Massachusetts	13.0%	15.2%	18.7%	21.7%	23.7%
Illinois	11.5%	14.2%	19.2%	22.0%	22.9%
Rhode Island	16.5%	17.0%	20.0%	20.9%	22.8%
Connecticut	14.4%	15.2%	18.3%	21.3%	22.7%
Washington	7.0%	9.0%	14.0%	18.3%	19.3%
Maryland	6.1%	8.9%	12.6%	16.5%	18.9%
DC	7.8%	12.5%	16.8%	14.5%	17.1%
Colorado	10.6%	10.5%	15.1%	17.1%	17.1%
Alaska	12.4%	12.1%	14.3%	16.5%	16.5%
Virginia	4.5%	7.3%	11.1%	14.8%	16.2%
Utah	7.5%	7.8%	12.5%	14.2%	15.3%
Oregon	5.4%	7.3%	12.1%	14.4%	15.2%
Georgia	2.6%	4.8%	9.9%	13.1%	14.0%
Delaware	5.4%	6.9%	9.5%	12.0%	12.9%
Kansas	4.8%	5.7%	8.7%	11.0%	11.7%
Minnesota	5.6%	5.6%	8.5%	10.5%	11.6%
North Carolina	2.4%	3.9%	8.0%	10.9%	11.5%
Nebraska	4.8%	4.8%	7.9%	10.4%	11.5%
Pennsylvania	6.8%	7.3%	8.4%	10.1%	11.3%
Idaho	5.7%	6.4%	9.3%	10.5%	10.8%
Oklahoma	4.1%	5.0%	7.4%	9.1%	10.3%
Michigan	6.6%	6.6%	8.4%	8.6%	9.5%
Wisconsin	5.8%	5.8%	7.3%	8.3%	8.8%
Indiana	4.1%	4.8%	6.4%	8.0%	8.7%
Louisiana	9.9%	10.1%	9.2%	8.9%	8.1%
New Hampshire	10.6%	8.7%	8.3%	7.8%	7.7%
Iowa	3.4%	3.9%	5.8%	7.4%	7.7%
Wyoming	6.3%	5.7%	6.4%	6.4%	7.6%
Arkansas	1.9%	2.8%	5.0%	6.9%	7.3%
Tennessee	2.0%	2.9%	4.8%	6.4%	7.0%
Ohio	5.2%	5.4%	6.1%	6.7%	7.0%
South Carolina	2.5%	3.5%	5.2%	6.8%	6.8%
South Dakota	8.1%	6.5%	6.5%	7.5%	6.5%
Missouri	3.1%	3.8%	5.1%	6.1%	6.3%
Maine	10.9%	9.2%	7.8%	6.7%	6.2%
Vermont	7.0%	5.8%	5.9%	5.6%	5.5%
North Dakota	11.2%	7.9%	6.3%	5.1%	5.2%
Kentucky	1.8%	2.5%	3.9%	4.8%	5.2%
Alabama	1.9%	2.9%	3.9%	5.2%	5.1%
Mississippi	1.9%	2.8%	3.6%	3.6%	3.8%
Montana	5.2%	5.0%	5.2%	4.6%	3.7%
West Virginia	2.1%	2.6%	2.7%	2.2%	2.5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>11.0%</b>	<b>13.8%</b>	<b>17.9%</b>	<b>20.6%</b>	<b>21.6%</b>

**Source:** Figures for 1980, 1990, and 2000 are from the decennial census. Figures for 2010 and 2016 are from the ACS data in American FactFinder at Census.gov.

**Table 5. School-Age (5-17) Children Speaking a Language Other Than English at Home, 1990, 2000, 2010 & 2016; States Ranked by Percentage in 2016**

State	1990		2000		2010		2016	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
California	1,878,957	35%	2,879,695	43%	3,098,013	46%	2,921,395	44%
Texas	974,282	28%	1,380,888	32%	1,775,318	36%	1,884,115	36%
Nevada	24,055	12%	93,637	26%	159,090	33%	168,202	34%
New York	700,788	23%	928,518	27%	908,316	29%	946,749	31%
New Jersey	245,795	19%	366,687	24%	422,614	28%	445,927	30%
New Mexico	94,719	29%	118,218	31%	120,625	32%	107,822	30%
Arizona	156,782	23%	284,061	29%	353,085	30%	347,547	29%
Florida	360,452	18%	637,410	24%	819,003	28%	864,158	29%
Illinois	302,087	14%	460,661	19%	543,533	24%	513,726	24%
Massachusetts	143,528	15%	207,155	19%	223,333	21%	237,126	23%
Rhode Island	25,970	16%	38,726	21%	39,241	24%	35,526	23%
Washington	78,267	9%	161,751	14%	246,402	22%	264,968	22%
Connecticut	78,041	15%	108,362	18%	120,092	20%	123,901	22%
Colorado	51,202	8%	115,992	14%	176,872	20%	192,173	21%
Hawaii	29,600	15%	39,558	18%	37,614	17%	43,855	20%
Oregon	36,776	7%	87,636	14%	121,730	19%	127,471	20%
D.C.	9,444	12%	12,223	15%	8,683	13%	14,938	19%
Maryland	67,904	8%	113,726	11%	156,700	16%	186,080	19%
Virginia	74,634	7%	134,306	11%	203,120	15%	221,587	16%
Georgia	55,976	5%	148,700	9%	256,050	14%	289,612	16%
North Carolina	54,382	5%	117,463	8%	228,200	14%	263,129	15%
Utah	25,434	6%	52,587	10%	81,687	13%	100,866	15%
Kansas	25,036	5%	49,553	9%	68,944	13%	75,869	15%
Nebraska	11,256	4%	28,137	8%	46,379	14%	48,157	14%
Minnesota	42,163	5%	93,472	10%	121,731	13%	130,697	14%
Delaware	7,403	6%	13,318	9%	20,233	13%	20,751	14%
Alaska	11,158	10%	18,541	13%	18,733	14%	17,337	13%
Idaho	13,241	6%	26,582	10%	39,124	13%	40,820	13%
Pennsylvania	136,203	7%	189,885	9%	232,026	11%	248,579	13%
Oklahoma	28,351	5%	50,497	8%	69,303	10%	86,655	12%
Wisconsin	51,171	6%	86,905	8%	105,804	11%	105,397	11%
Michigan	95,963	5%	150,818	8%	166,568	10%	171,374	11%
Indiana	51,651	5%	72,821	6%	116,073	10%	120,699	10%
Iowa	20,740	4%	35,640	7%	51,668	10%	51,843	10%
Arkansas	13,587	3%	26,906	5%	47,801	9%	50,380	10%
Tennessee	28,694	3%	46,673	5%	77,953	7%	101,016	9%
South Carolina	23,346	4%	36,725	5%	63,440	8%	70,128	9%
Wyoming	3,940	4%	5,265	5%	6,206	6%	8,704	8%
South Dakota	5,849	4%	9,066	6%	13,131	9%	11,649	8%
New Hampshire	8,561	4%	12,522	5%	14,629	7%	14,754	8%
Missouri	33,731	4%	53,576	5%	69,689	7%	73,206	7%
Ohio	100,589	5%	119,711	6%	141,080	7%	136,570	7%
Alabama	23,122	3%	31,159	4%	46,682	6%	54,882	7%
Kentucky	20,063	3%	28,832	4%	44,078	6%	47,139	6%
Louisiana	49,382	6%	51,109	6%	48,362	6%	51,236	6%
Vermont	3,212	3%	5,095	4%	5,481	6%	4,693	5%
Maine	9,886	4%	9,630	4%	9,720	5%	8,997	5%
Mississippi	16,594	3%	18,647	3%	18,734	3%	24,374	5%
North Dakota	3,456	3%	5,046	4%	5,137	5%	5,238	4%
Montana	6,382	4%	8,419	5%	7,958	5%	5,257	3%
West Virginia	9,129	3%	7,256	2%	6,542	2%	5,944	2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>6,322,934</b>	<b>14%</b>	<b>9,779,766</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>11,782,530</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>12,093,218</b>	<b>22%</b>

**Source:** Figures for 1990 and 2000 are from the decennial census. Figures for 2010 and 2016 are from the ACS data in American FactFinder at Census.gov.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, the Census Bureau has not released the public-use data for 2016 yet, but we do know from the 2015 public-use ACS that 22.9 percent of students in public school spoke a language other than English at home in that year. We also know that in 2015, 22 percent of all school-age children ages five to 17 (in public or private schools) spoke a language other than English at home. The data released so far from the 2016 ACS shows 22.5 percent of all school-age children speak a language other than English at home. Based on the pattern in 2015, we estimate that 23.3 percent of public school students in 2016 spoke a language other than English at home. It should be pointed out that immigrants are more likely to send their children to public school than are natives. As a result, foreign-language students comprise a somewhat larger share of students in public schools than they do the overall school-age population.

<sup>2</sup> Of the native-born who speak a language other than English at home 10.3 million (35.6 percent) are ages five to 17; the remaining 64.4 percent (18.7 million) are adults.

<sup>3</sup> There is some other data that does measure the English language ability of U.S. residents, including those who speak a foreign language at home. The Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) measured English literacy among a representative sample of Americans between 2012 and 2014. Publicly available data from the PIAAC shows that among people who spoke a foreign language most often at home, 49 percent scored “below basic” on an objective test of English literacy — including immigrants and the native born. “Below basic” has been likened to functional illiteracy. These results must be interpreted with caution, however, due to differences in question wording. The PIAAC asks which language is spoken most often at home, whereas the Census simply asks if a non-English language is spoken at home. Furthermore, about a third of PIAAC participants did not answer the question about language use at home, for reasons that are unclear. See Jason Richwine, [“Immigrant Literacy: Self-Assessment vs. Reality”](#), Center for Immigration Studies, June 21, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Detailed information on the survey methodology, questions, and other information on the American Community can be found [here](#).

<sup>5</sup> American FactFinder can be found [here](#).

<sup>6</sup> The Department of Homeland Security uses the ACS as the basis for its estimates of the illegal immigrant population. For its most recent iteration of the unauthorized immigrant population, see Bryan Baker and Nancy Rytina, [“Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States: January 2012”](#), Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, March 2013.