



Almost Half Speak a Foreign Language in America's Largest Cities

Nationally, one in five spoke a language other than English in 2017

By Karen Zeigler and Steven A. Camarota

Newly released Census Bureau data for 2017 shows nearly half (48.2 percent) of residents in America's five largest cities now speak a language other than English at home. Overall, the number of U.S. residents speaking a foreign language at home reached a record of nearly 67 million. The total number is up seven million since 2010 and has increased by nearly 35 million since 1990.

Among the findings:

- In 2017, a record 66.6 million U.S. residents (native-born, legal immigrants, and illegal immigrants) ages five and older spoke a language other than English at home. The number has more than doubled since 1990, and almost tripled since 1980.
- As a share of the population, 21.8 percent of U.S. residents speak a foreign language at home — roughly double the 11 percent in 1980.
- In America's five largest cities, 48 percent of residents now speak a language other than English at home. In New York City and Houston it is 49 percent; in Los Angeles it is 59 percent; in Chicago it is 36 percent; and in Phoenix it is 38 percent.¹
- In 2017, there were 85 cities and Census Designated Places (CDP) in which a majority of residents spoke a foreign language at home. These include Hialeah, Fla. (95 percent); Laredo, Texas (92 percent); and East Los Angeles, Calif. (90 percent). Perhaps more surprisingly, it also includes places like Elizabeth, N.J. (76 percent); Skokie, Ill. (56 percent); and Germantown, Md., and Bridgeport, Conn. (each 51 percent).
- Nearly one in five U.S. residents now lives in a city or CDP in which one-third of the population speaks a foreign language at home. This includes Dale City, Va. (43 percent); Norwalk, Conn., and New Rochelle, N.Y. (each 42 percent); and Aurora, Colo., and Troy, Mich. (each 35 percent).
- In contrast to many of the nation's cities, in rural areas outside of metropolitan areas just 8 percent speak a language other than English at home.²
- The data released thus far indicates that nationally nearly one in four public school students now speaks a language other than English at home.³ In California, 44 percent of school-age (5-17) children speak a foreign language at home, and it's roughly one-third in Texas, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, and Florida.
- Of school-age children (5-17) who speak a foreign language at home, 85 percent were born in the United States. Even among adults 18 and older, more than one-third of those who speak a foreign language at home are U.S.-born.⁴

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- Of those who speak a foreign language at home, 25.9 million (39 percent) told the Census Bureau that they speak English less than very well. This figure is entirely based on the opinion of the respondent; the Census Bureau does not measure language skills.⁵
- Of languages with more than 400,000 speakers in 2017, the largest *percentage* increases from 2010 to 2017 were among speakers of Telugu (up 86 percent); Arabic (up 42 percent); Hindi (up 42 percent); Urdu (up 30 percent); Chinese (up 23 percent); Gujarati (up 22 percent); and Haitian Creole (up 19 percent). Hindi, Telugu, and Gujarati are spoken in India, and Urdu is the national language of Pakistan.
- The largest *numerical* increases from 2010 to 2017 were among speakers of Spanish (up four million); Chinese (up 653,000); Arabic (up 363,000); Hindi (up 254,000); Telugu (up 192,000); Tagalog (up 173,000); Haitian Creole (up 140,000); Bengali (up 128,000); Urdu (up 118,000); and Vietnamese (up 117,000). Telugu and Tamil are spoken in India, Tagalog is the national language of the Philippines, and Bengali is spoken in India and is also the national language of Bangladesh.
- Languages with more than a million speakers in 2017 were Spanish (41 million); Chinese (3.5 million); Tagalog (1.7 million); Vietnamese (1.5 million); Arabic (1.2 million); French (1.2 million); and Korean (1.1 million).
- States with the largest share of their populations speaking a foreign language at home in 2017 were California (44 percent); Texas (36 percent); New Mexico (33 percent); New Jersey (32 percent); New York and Nevada (both 31 percent); Florida (30 percent); Arizona (27 percent); Hawaii (26 percent); and Massachusetts (24 percent).
- States with the large percentage increase in the number of foreign language speakers from 2010 to 2017 were Wyoming (up 33 percent); North Dakota (up 30 percent); Utah (up 25 percent); Delaware (up 24 percent); Nevada (up 22 percent); Maryland, Nebraska, Kentucky, and Florida (each up 21 percent); and Minnesota (up 19 percent).
- Taking the longer view, states with the largest percentage increase in foreign language speakers from 1980 to 2017 were Nevada (up 1,080 percent); Georgia (up 945 percent); North Carolina (up 771 percent); Virginia (up 488 percent); Tennessee (up 441 percent); Arkansas (up 428 percent); Washington (up 410 percent); Florida (up 384 percent); South Carolina (up 379 percent); Utah (up 368 percent); and Oregon (up 356 percent).

Data Source. In September of this year, the Census Bureau released some of the data from the 2017 American Community Survey (ACS). The survey reflects the U.S. population as of July 1, 2017. The ACS is by far the largest survey taken by the federal government each year and includes over two million households.⁶ The Census Bureau has posted some of the results from the ACS to American FactFinder on the Bureau website.⁷ 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 2017. 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 then asks what language the person speaks. Third, the survey also 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 censuses (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 population is comprised of those individuals who were not U.S. citizens at birth. It includes naturalized citizens, legal permanent residents (green card holders), temporary workers, and foreign students. It does not include those born to immigrants in the United States, including to illegal-immigrant parents, or 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.⁸

Table 1. Number and Share Speaking a Language Other Than English at Home, 1980 to 2017

	1980	1990	2000	2010	2017
Number Speaking a Language Other Than English at Home	23,060,040	31,844,979	46,951,595	59,542,596	66,592,306
Share Speaking a Language Other Than English at Home	11.0%	13.8%	17.9%	20.6%	21.8%
Number of Immigrants Speaking a Language Other Than English at Home	9,729,337	15,430,434	25,497,023	33,621,360	37,015,401
Number of Natives Speaking a Language Other Than English at Home	13,330,703	16,414,545	21,454,572	25,921,236	29,576,905
Speaks English Less Than Very Well*	10,181,036	13,982,502	21,320,407	25,223,045	25,943,695

Source: Figures for 1980, 1990, and 2000 are from the decennial census. Figures for 2010 and 2017 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, 2017

Language	2000	2010	2017	Pct. Growth, 2010-2017
Total	46,951,595	59,542,596	66,592,306	12%
Telugu	87,543	222,977	415,414	86%
Bengali	122,375	223,395	350,928	57%
Tamil	90,625	184,454	286,732	55%
Arabic	614,582	864,961	1,227,768	42%
Hindi	317,057	609,395	863,077	42%
Urdu	262,900	388,909	507,329	30%
Punjabi	143,526	247,353	310,650	26%
Chinese	2,022,143	2,808,692	3,462,091	23%
Gujarati	235,988	356,394	434,264	22%
Haitian (French Creole)	453,368	746,702	886,765	19%
Portuguese	564,630	688,326	794,836	15%
Tagalog	1,224,241	1,573,720	1,746,344	11%
Spanish	28,101,052	36,995,602	41,017,620	11%
Hmong	168,063	211,500	233,982	11%
Hebrew	195,374	204,593	226,172	11%
Persian	312,085	381,408	420,131	10%
Russian	706,242	854,955	936,344	10%
Vietnamese	1,009,627	1,381,488	1,498,874	8%
Japanese	477,997	443,497	466,976	5%
Armenian	202,708	240,402	248,187	3%
Thai/Laotian	269,767	309,732	315,410	2%
Navajo	178,014	172,873	169,072	-2%
Korean	894,063	1,137,325	1,095,161	-4%
Cambodian/Khmer	181,889	220,900	207,479	-6%
French	1,643,838	1,322,650	1,202,060	-9%
Serbo-Croatian	233,865	284,077	250,137	-12%
Greek	365,436	307,178	267,832	-13%
German	1,383,442	1,067,651	917,812	-14%
Polish	667,414	608,333	520,322	-14%
Italian	1,008,370	725,223	567,270	-22%
All others	2,813,371	3,757,931	4,745,267	26%

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 2017; Ranked by Percentage Growth, 2010 to 2017

State	Speaks a Language Other Than English at Home					Pct. Growth, 2010-2017	Pct. Growth, 1980-2017
	1980	1990	2000	2010	2017		
D.C.	47,320	71,348	90,417	83,073	114,138	37%	141%
Wyoming	26,940	23,809	29,485	33,308	44,149	33%	64%
North Dakota	67,120	46,897	37,976	31,927	41,530	30%	-38%
Utah	95,280	120,404	253,249	357,694	445,799	25%	368%
Delaware	29,520	42,327	69,533	101,561	126,208	24%	328%
Nevada	74,200	146,152	427,972	718,991	875,260	22%	1080%
Maryland	240,100	395,051	622,714	896,006	1,084,339	21%	352%
Nebraska	69,380	69,872	125,654	175,849	212,756	21%	207%
Kentucky	59,180	86,482	148,473	195,027	235,901	21%	299%
Florida	1,217,120	2,098,315	3,473,864	4,868,267	5,888,202	21%	384%
Minnesota	210,460	227,161	389,988	521,350	622,849	19%	196%
Virginia	223,320	418,521	735,191	1,112,699	1,312,698	18%	488%
Tennessee	83,320	131,550	256,516	382,245	450,669	18%	441%
Washington	266,480	403,173	770,886	1,154,249	1,360,273	18%	410%
North Carolina	130,640	240,866	603,517	970,435	1,137,733	17%	771%
Oklahoma	114,220	145,798	238,532	319,555	373,624	17%	227%
Massachusetts	701,020	852,228	1,115,570	1,341,035	1,562,135	16%	123%
Georgia	131,720	284,546	751,438	1,181,999	1,376,218	16%	945%
Michigan	563,380	569,807	781,381	798,760	929,879	16%	65%
Oregon	131,480	191,710	388,669	517,515	599,026	16%	356%
Pennsylvania	757,120	806,876	972,484	1,211,107	1,396,223	15%	84%
South Carolina	70,920	113,163	196,429	294,918	339,969	15%	379%
Texas	2,862,120	3,970,304	6,010,753	8,119,597	9,347,638	15%	227%
Indiana	207,560	245,826	362,082	487,206	552,669	13%	166%
Arizona	504,720	700,287	1,229,237	1,592,675	1,802,937	13%	257%
Iowa	92,440	100,391	160,022	210,430	237,959	13%	157%
Arkansas	39,800	60,781	123,755	187,658	209,991	12%	428%
Idaho	48,140	58,995	111,879	152,439	170,308	12%	254%
Kansas	105,160	131,604	218,655	291,616	324,214	11%	208%
Colorado	283,620	320,631	604,019	805,147	890,867	11%	214%
Ohio	515,680	546,148	648,493	719,544	793,757	10%	54%
Rhode Island	147,360	159,492	196,624	208,445	229,574	10%	56%
New Jersey	1,096,600	1,406,148	2,001,690	2,452,031	2,699,710	10%	146%
California	4,969,060	8,619,334	12,401,756	15,232,350	16,479,654	8%	232%
Illinois	1,223,460	1,499,112	2,220,719	2,644,145	2,825,385	7%	131%
West Virginia	37,600	44,203	45,895	38,961	41,548	7%	11%
Connecticut	421,580	466,175	583,913	717,780	764,437	7%	81%
New York	3,304,880	3,908,720	4,962,921	5,464,398	5,769,275	6%	75%
New Hampshire	90,680	88,796	96,088	97,135	102,328	5%	13%
Wisconsin	250,940	263,638	368,712	445,521	468,859	5%	87%
Hawaii	232,020	254,724	302,125	330,593	344,880	4%	49%
Missouri	142,520	178,210	264,281	341,861	356,576	4%	150%
Mississippi	43,740	66,516	95,522	100,380	103,349	3%	136%
Alabama	68,680	107,866	162,483	230,660	234,399	2%	241%
Vermont	33,520	30,409	34,075	33,005	33,396	1%	0%
Alaska	45,480	60,165	82,758	109,244	109,454	0%	141%
Montana	38,140	37,020	44,331	43,109	42,342	-2%	11%
Louisiana	382,500	391,994	382,364	376,677	354,317	-6%	-7%
New Mexico	446,260	493,999	616,964	701,672	646,930	-8%	45%
South Dakota	51,220	41,994	45,575	56,695	51,593	-9%	1%
Maine	113,880	105,441	93,966	84,052	74,382	-12%	-35%
Total	23,109,600	31,844,979	46,951,595	59,542,596	66,592,306	12%	188%

Source: Figures for 1980, 1990, and 2000 are from the decennial census. Figures for 2010 and 2017 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, 1980-2017

State	1980	1990	2000	2010	2017
California	23%	31%	39%	44%	44%
Texas	22%	25%	31%	35%	36%
New Mexico	37%	36%	37%	37%	33%
New Jersey	16%	20%	25%	30%	32%
Nevada	10%	13%	23%	29%	31%
New York	20%	23%	28%	30%	31%
Florida	13%	17%	23%	27%	30%
Arizona	20%	21%	26%	27%	27%
Hawaii	26%	25%	27%	26%	26%
Massachusetts	13%	15%	19%	22%	24%
Illinois	12%	14%	19%	22%	23%
Rhode Island	17%	17%	20%	21%	23%
Connecticut	14%	15%	18%	21%	22%
Washington	7%	9%	14%	18%	20%
Maryland	6%	9%	13%	17%	19%
DC	8%	13%	17%	15%	18%
Colorado	11%	11%	15%	17%	17%
Virginia	4%	7%	11%	15%	16%
Alaska	12%	12%	14%	17%	16%
Utah	8%	8%	13%	14%	16%
Oregon	5%	7%	12%	14%	15%
Georgia	3%	5%	10%	13%	14%
Delaware	5%	7%	9%	12%	14%
Minnesota	6%	6%	8%	11%	12%
Kansas	5%	6%	9%	11%	12%
Nebraska	5%	5%	8%	10%	12%
North Carolina	2%	4%	8%	11%	12%
Pennsylvania	7%	7%	8%	10%	12%
Idaho	6%	6%	9%	11%	11%
Oklahoma	4%	5%	7%	9%	10%
Michigan	7%	7%	8%	9%	10%
Indiana	4%	5%	6%	8%	9%
Wisconsin	6%	6%	7%	8%	9%
Wyoming	6%	6%	6%	6%	8%
Louisiana	10%	10%	9%	9%	8%
Iowa	3%	4%	6%	7%	8%
New Hampshire	11%	9%	8%	8%	8%
Arkansas	2%	3%	5%	7%	7%
Ohio	5%	5%	6%	7%	7%
South Carolina	2%	4%	5%	7%	7%
Tennessee	2%	3%	5%	6%	7%
South Dakota	8%	7%	6%	7%	6%
Missouri	3%	4%	5%	6%	6%
North Dakota	11%	8%	6%	5%	6%
Maine	11%	9%	8%	7%	6%
Kentucky	2%	3%	4%	5%	6%
Vermont	7%	6%	6%	6%	6%
Alabama	2%	3%	4%	5%	5%
Montana	5%	5%	5%	5%	4%
Mississippi	2%	3%	4%	4%	4%
West Virginia	2%	3%	3%	2%	2%
Total	11%	14%	18%	21%	22%

Source: Figures for 1980, 1990, and 2000 are from the decennial census. Figures for 2010 and 2017 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 & 2017; States Ranked by Percentage in 2017

State	1990		2000		2010		2017	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
California	1,878,957	35%	2,879,695	43%	3,098,013	46%	2,906,191	44%
Texas	974,282	28%	1,380,888	32%	1,775,318	36%	1,898,868	36%
Nevada	24,055	12%	93,637	26%	159,090	33%	162,255	32%
New Jersey	245,795	19%	366,687	24%	422,614	28%	448,776	31%
New York	700,788	23%	928,518	27%	908,316	29%	907,409	30%
Florida	360,452	18%	637,410	24%	819,003	28%	909,277	30%
Arizona	156,782	23%	284,061	29%	353,085	30%	351,449	29%
New Mexico	94,719	29%	118,218	31%	120,625	32%	100,505	28%
Illinois	302,087	14%	460,661	19%	543,533	24%	522,638	25%
Massachusetts	143,528	15%	207,155	19%	223,333	21%	235,159	23%
Rhode Island	25,970	16%	38,726	21%	39,241	24%	34,901	23%
Washington	78,267	9%	161,751	14%	246,402	22%	268,570	23%
Connecticut	78,041	15%	108,362	18%	120,092	20%	122,595	22%
Oregon	36,776	7%	87,636	14%	121,730	19%	134,546	21%
Colorado	51,202	8%	115,992	14%	176,872	20%	189,969	20%
Delaware	7,403	6%	13,318	9%	20,233	13%	15,857	20%
Maryland	67,904	8%	113,726	11%	156,700	16%	192,042	20%
D.C.	9,444	12%	12,223	15%	8,683	13%	25,351	17%
Hawaii	29,600	15%	39,558	18%	37,614	17%	36,187	17%
Virginia	74,634	7%	134,306	11%	203,120	15%	225,789	17%
Georgia	55,976	5%	148,700	9%	256,050	14%	295,861	16%
North Carolina	54,382	5%	117,463	8%	228,200	14%	262,883	15%
Minnesota	42,163	5%	93,472	10%	121,731	13%	142,184	15%
Utah	25,434	6%	52,587	10%	81,687	13%	101,048	15%
Nebraska	11,256	4%	28,137	8%	46,379	14%	50,682	15%
Kansas	25,036	5%	49,553	9%	68,944	13%	71,559	14%
Alaska	11,158	10%	18,541	13%	18,733	14%	18,093	14%
Pennsylvania	136,203	7%	189,885	9%	232,026	11%	246,030	13%
Oklahoma	28,351	5%	50,497	8%	69,303	10%	81,324	12%
Michigan	95,963	5%	150,818	8%	166,568	10%	181,660	11%
Idaho	13,241	6%	26,582	10%	39,124	13%	36,600	11%
Indiana	51,651	5%	72,821	6%	116,073	10%	125,291	11%
Wisconsin	51,171	6%	86,905	8%	105,804	11%	101,712	11%
Arkansas	13,587	3%	26,906	5%	47,801	9%	51,182	10%
Wyoming	3,940	4%	5,265	5%	6,206	6%	9,720	10%
Iowa	20,740	4%	35,640	7%	51,668	10%	51,315	10%
Tennessee	28,694	3%	46,673	5%	77,953	7%	101,002	9%
South Carolina	23,346	4%	36,725	5%	63,440	8%	72,669	9%
Ohio	100,589	5%	119,711	6%	141,080	7%	151,540	8%
Alabama	23,122	3%	31,159	4%	46,682	6%	55,860	7%
New Hampshire	8,561	4%	12,522	5%	14,629	7%	13,213	7%
Missouri	33,731	4%	53,576	5%	69,689	7%	68,152	7%
Kentucky	20,063	3%	28,832	4%	44,078	6%	45,893	6%
South Dakota	5,849	4%	9,066	6%	13,131	9%	9,382	6%
Louisiana	49,382	6%	51,109	6%	48,362	6%	49,009	6%
Vermont	3,212	3%	5,095	4%	5,481	6%	4,650	5%
Montana	6,382	4%	8,419	5%	7,958	5%	7,929	5%
Maine	9,886	4%	9,630	4%	9,720	5%	8,436	4%
North Dakota	3,456	3%	5,046	4%	5,137	5%	4,976	4%
Mississippi	16,594	3%	18,647	3%	18,734	3%	18,862	4%
West Virginia	9,129	3%	7,256	2%	6,542	2%	4,868	2%
Total	6,322,934	14%	9,779,766	18%	11,782,530	22%	12,131,919	23%

Source: Figures for 1990 and 2000 are from the decennial census. Figures for 2010 and 2017 are from the ACS data in American FactFinder at Census.gov.

End Notes

¹ Figures for 539 cities and Census Designated Places (CDP) are in the Excel spreadsheet available [here](#). The 48.2 percent figure is based on the entire population of these cities. If the share for each city is averaged together without regard to each city's size, then 46 percent speak a language other than English. As for the school-age children (5-17) in these cities, more than half (50.3 percent) speak a foreign language.

² In the nation's Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs) defined by the Census Bureau, 24 percent of the population speak a language other than English at home, in the areas of the country outside of MSAs only 8.4 percent of the population speak a foreign language at home.

³ Unfortunately, the Census Bureau has not released the public-use data for 2017 yet. From the data that has been released for 2017, we do know that for those ages five to 17, 22.5 percent spoke a foreign language at home. In the 2016 ACS, 22.5 percent of those in this age group also spoke a foreign language at home. The 2016 data shows that 23.3 percent of students in public schools spoke a language other than English at home. It seems very likely that when all the data from 2017 is released, it will also show that 23.3 percent of public school students speak a foreign language 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 of the overall school-age population.

⁴ Of the native-born who speak a language other than English at home, 10.3 million or 34.9 percent are ages 5-17; the remaining 65.1 percent (19.3 million) are adults. Of those ages 5 to 17, 10,323,101 in 2017 were native-born and 1,808,818 were immigrants. Of adults 18 and older, 19,253,804 were native-born and 35,206,583 were immigrants.

⁵ 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. It seems likely that the self-assessment reported in the ACS overstates English-language ability while the PIAAC probably does a better job of capturing language ability. However, the PIAAC data must be interpreted with caution 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.

⁶ Detailed information on the survey methodology, questions, and other information on the American Community Survey can be found [here](#).

⁷ FactFinder can be found [here](#).

⁸ See Table 2 on page 5 in Bryan Baker, "[Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States: January 2014](#)", Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics", Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, July 2017.