



67.3 Million in the United States Spoke a Foreign Language at Home in 2018

In nine states, one in four residents now speaks a language other than English at home

By Karen Zeigler and Steven A. Camarota

Based on analysis of newly released Census Bureau data for 2018, the Center for Immigration Studies finds that 67.3 million residents in the United States now speak a language other than English at home, a number equal to the entire population of France. The number has nearly tripled since 1980, and more than doubled since 1990. The growth at the state level is even more pronounced. All language figures in Census Bureau data are for persons five years of age and older.

Among the findings:

- In 2018, a record 67.3 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 and almost tripled since 1980.
- Since 1980, the number who speak a foreign language at home grew nearly seven times faster than the number who speak only English at home. Even since 2010, when the number speaking a foreign language at home was already very large, the number of foreign-language speakers increased more than twice as fast as that of English speakers.¹
- As a share of the population, 21.9 percent of U.S. residents speak a foreign language at home — more than double the 11 percent in 1980.
- In nine states, more than one in four residents now speaks a language other than English at home. These nine states account for two-thirds of all foreign-language speakers. In contrast, in 1980 foreign-language speakers were one in four residents in just two states (New Mexico and Hawaii); and these two states accounted for just 3 percent of all foreign language speakers.
- The states with the largest share of their populations speaking a foreign language at home in 2018 were California (45 percent), Texas (36 percent), New Mexico (34 percent), New Jersey (32 percent), New York and Nevada (each 31 percent), Florida (30 percent), Arizona and Hawaii (each 28 percent), and Massachusetts (24 percent).
- States with the largest percentage increase in those speaking a foreign language at home from 1980 to 2018 are Nevada (up 1,088 percent), Georgia (up 952 percent), North Carolina (up 802 percent), Virginia (up 488 percent), Tennessee (up 459 percent), Arkansas (up 445 percent), Washington (up 432 percent), South Carolina (up 398 percent), Florida (up 393 percent), Utah (up 383 percent), and Oregon (up 380 percent).

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

- States with the largest percentage increase in the number of those speaking a foreign language at home since 2010 are North Dakota (up 63 percent), Utah (up 29 percent), Iowa (up 24 percent), Florida, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Washington, Maryland and Nevada (each up 23 percent), Oregon and Tennessee (each up 22 percent), North Carolina and Kentucky (each up 21 percent), and South Carolina (up 20 percent).
- In America’s five largest cities, just under half (48 percent) of residents now speak a language other than English at home. In New York City it is 49 percent; in Los Angeles it is 59 percent; in Chicago it is 36 percent; in Houston it is 50 percent; and in Phoenix it is 38 percent.²
- In 2018, there were 90 cities and Census Designated Places (CDP) with populations of at least 63,000 in which a majority of residents spoke a foreign language at home. These include Hialeah, Fla., and Laredo, Texas (each 89 percent); East Los Angeles (88 percent); and Passaic, N.J. (78 percent).³
- In 2018, there were 229 cities and CDPs in which more than one in three residents spoke a language other than English at home. Some of these places may be surprising: Providence, R.I. (50 percent); Allentown, Pa. (48 percent); Germantown, Md. (46 percent); Centerville, Va. (44 percent); New Rochelle, N.Y. (42 percent); West Valley City, Utah (39 percent); Springdale, Ark. (35 percent); and Troy, Mich. (34 percent).
- The largest numerical increases in those who speak a language other than English at home between 2010 and 2018 were among speakers of Spanish (up 4.5 million), Chinese (up 663,000), Arabic (up 394,000), Hindi (up 265,000), Tagalog (up 187,000), Telugu (up 177,000), Vietnamese (up 161,000), Bengali (up 152,000), Portuguese (up 128,000), and Tamil (up 124,000). 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 people who speak it at home in 2018 were Spanish (41.5 million), Chinese (3.5 million), Tagalog (1.8 million), Vietnamese (1.5 million), Arabic (1.3 million), French (1.2 million), and Korean (1.1 million).
- There are now more people who speak Spanish at home in the United States than in any country in Latin America with the exception of Mexico, Colombia, and Argentina.
- Of those who speak a foreign language at home, 25.6 million (38 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.⁴
- Of those who speak a foreign language at home, 45 percent were born in the United States.

Data Source. In September 2019, the Census Bureau released some of the data from the 2018 American Community Survey (ACS). The survey reflects the U.S. population as of July 1, 2018. The ACS is by far the largest survey taken by the federal government each year and includes over two million households.⁵ The Census Bureau has posted some of the results from the ACS to the Bureau’s website.⁶ It has not released the public-use version of the ACS for researchers to download and analyze. Unless otherwise indicated, the information in this analysis comes directly from the Bureau’s website.

There are three language questions in the ACS for 2010 and 2018. 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, 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.⁷

Table 1. Number and Share Speaking a Language Other Than English at Home, 1980 to 2018

	1980	1990	2000	2010	2018
Number Speaking a Language Other Than English at Home	23,060,040	31,844,979	46,951,595	59,542,596	67,268,668
Share Speaking a Language Other Than English at Home	11.0%	13.8%	17.9%	20.6%	21.9%
Number of Immigrants Speaking a Language Other Than English at Home	9,729,337	15,430,434	25,497,023	33,621,360	37,082,883
Number of Natives Speaking a Language Other Than English at Home	13,330,703	16,414,545	21,454,572	25,921,236	30,185,785
Speaks English Less Than Very Well*	10,181,036	13,982,502	21,320,407	25,223,045	25,627,417

Source: Figures for 1980, 1990, and 2000 are from the decennial census. Figures for 2010 and 2018 are from the ACS data found at [Data.census.gov](https://data.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, 2018

Language	2000	2010	2018	Pct. Growth, 2010-2018
Total	46,951,595	59,542,596	67,268,668	13%
Telugu	87,543	222,977	400,186	79%
Bengali	122,375	223,395	375,143	68%
Tamil	90,625	184,454	308,857	67%
Arabic	614,582	864,961	1,259,118	46%
Hindi	317,057	609,395	874,314	43%
Punjabi	143,526	247,353	315,987	28%
Urdu	262,900	388,909	485,373	25%
Chinese	2,022,143	2,808,692	3,471,604	24%
Portuguese	564,630	688,326	816,474	19%
Persian	312,085	381,408	450,920	18%
Gujarati	235,988	356,394	419,164	18%
Spanish	28,101,052	36,995,602	41,460,427	12%
Tagalog	1,224,241	1,573,720	1,760,468	12%
Haitian (French Creole)	453,368	746,702	834,483	12%
Vietnamese	1,009,627	1,381,488	1,542,473	12%
Hmong	168,063	211,500	234,927	11%
Russian	706,242	854,955	919,279	8%
Hebrew	195,374	204,593	215,889	6%
Japanese	477,997	443,497	459,200	4%
Thai/Laotian	269,767	309,732	309,898	0%
Navajo	178,014	172,873	170,924	-1%
Armenian	202,708	240,402	232,837	-3%
Korean	894,063	1,137,325	1,086,335	-4%
French	1,643,838	1,322,650	1,232,173	-7%
Serbo-Croatian	233,865	284,077	251,596	-11%
Greek	365,436	307,178	260,192	-15%
Polish	667,414	608,333	509,062	-16%
German	1,383,442	1,067,651	889,651	-17%
Cambodian/Khmer	181,889	220,900	183,601	-17%
Italian	1,008,370	725,223	553,691	-24%
All Others	2,813,371	3,757,931	4,984,422	33%

Source: 2000 and 2010 data comes from American FactFinder at Census.gov. Data for 2018 is from data.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 2018; Ranked by Percentage Growth, 1980 to 2018

State	Speaks a Language Other Than English at Home					Pct. Growth, 2010-2018	Pct. Growth, 1980-2018
	1980	1990	2000	2010	2018		
Nevada	74,200	146,152	427,972	718,991	881,740	23%	1,088%
Georgia	131,720	284,546	751,438	1,181,999	1,385,411	17%	952%
North Carolina	130,640	240,866	603,517	970,435	1,178,235	21%	802%
Virginia	223,320	418,521	735,191	1,112,699	1,312,386	18%	488%
Tennessee	83,320	131,550	256,516	382,245	465,909	22%	459%
Arkansas	39,800	60,781	123,755	187,658	216,718	15%	445%
Washington	266,480	403,173	770,886	1,154,249	1,417,595	23%	432%
South Carolina	70,920	113,163	196,429	294,918	353,377	20%	398%
Florida	1,217,120	2,098,315	3,473,864	4,868,267	5,996,013	23%	393%
Utah	95,280	120,404	253,249	357,694	460,616	29%	383%
Oregon	131,480	191,710	388,669	517,515	631,028	22%	380%
Maryland	240,100	395,051	622,714	896,006	1,099,219	23%	358%
Delaware	29,520	42,327	69,533	101,561	119,336	18%	304%
Kentucky	59,180	86,482	148,473	195,027	236,457	21%	300%
Idaho	48,140	58,995	111,879	152,439	178,902	17%	272%
Arizona	504,720	700,287	1,229,237	1,592,675	1,855,347	16%	268%
Alabama	68,680	107,866	162,483	230,660	243,857	6%	255%
Oklahoma	114,220	145,798	238,532	319,555	393,294	23%	244%
Texas	2,862,120	3,970,304	6,010,753	8,119,597	9,559,445	18%	234%
California	4,969,060	8,619,334	12,401,756	15,232,350	16,554,135	9%	233%
Colorado	283,620	320,631	604,019	805,147	897,184	11%	216%
Minnesota	210,460	227,161	389,988	521,350	641,880	23%	205%
Kansas	105,160	131,604	218,655	291,616	320,368	10%	205%
Nebraska	69,380	69,872	125,654	175,849	201,596	15%	191%
Iowa	92,440	100,391	160,022	210,430	261,298	24%	183%
Indiana	207,560	245,826	362,082	487,206	558,295	15%	169%
Missouri	142,520	178,210	264,281	341,861	363,864	6%	155%
Alaska	45,480	60,165	82,758	109,244	111,374	2%	145%
New Jersey	1,096,600	1,406,148	2,001,690	2,452,031	2,655,760	8%	142%
Mississippi	43,740	66,516	95,522	100,380	105,100	5%	140%
DC	47,320	71,348	90,417	83,073	111,053	34%	135%
Illinois	1,223,460	1,499,112	2,220,719	2,644,145	2,814,037	6%	130%
Massachusetts	701,020	852,228	1,115,570	1,341,035	1,590,873	19%	127%
Wisconsin	250,940	263,638	368,712	445,521	483,952	9%	93%
Pennsylvania	757,120	806,876	972,484	1,211,107	1,446,151	19%	91%
Connecticut	421,580	466,175	583,913	717,780	750,997	5%	78%
New York	3,304,880	3,908,720	4,962,921	5,464,398	5,645,392	3%	71%
Michigan	563,380	569,807	781,381	798,760	926,992	16%	65%
Hawaii	232,020	254,724	302,125	330,593	367,171	11%	58%
Ohio	515,680	546,148	648,493	719,544	807,308	12%	57%
New Mexico	446,260	493,999	616,964	701,672	673,564	-4%	51%
Rhode Island	147,360	159,492	196,624	208,445	218,045	5%	48%
Wyoming	26,940	23,809	29,485	33,308	37,914	14%	41%
Montana	38,140	37,020	44,331	43,109	44,290	3%	16%
West Virginia	37,600	44,203	45,895	38,961	42,416	9%	13%
New Hampshire	90,680	88,796	96,088	97,135	100,289	3%	11%
South Dakota	51,220	41,994	45,575	56,695	56,157	-1%	10%
Vermont	33,520	30,409	34,075	33,005	33,274	1%	-1%
Louisiana	382,500	391,994	382,364	376,677	332,889	-12%	-13%
North Dakota	67,120	46,897	37,976	31,927	52,142	63%	-22%
Maine	113,880	105,441	93,966	84,052	78,023	-7%	-31%
Total	23,109,600	31,844,979	46,951,595	59,542,596	67,268,668	13%	191%

Source: Figures for 1980, 1990, and 2000 are from the decennial census. Figures for 2010 and 2018 are from ACS data found at data.census.gov.

Table 4. Share of Pop. Speaking a Language Other Than English at Home by State, 1980-2018

State	1980	1990	2000	2010	2018
California	23%	31%	39%	44%	45%
Texas	22%	25%	31%	35%	36%
New Mexico	37%	36%	37%	37%	34%
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%
Hawaii	26%	25%	27%	26%	28%
Arizona	20%	21%	26%	27%	28%
Massachusetts	13%	15%	19%	22%	24%
Illinois	12%	14%	19%	22%	23%
Connecticut	14%	15%	18%	21%	22%
Rhode Island	17%	17%	20%	21%	22%
Washington	7%	9%	14%	18%	20%
Maryland	6%	9%	13%	17%	19%
D.C.	8%	13%	17%	15%	17%
Colorado	11%	11%	15%	17%	17%
Virginia	4%	7%	11%	15%	16%
Alaska	12%	12%	14%	17%	16%
Oregon	5%	7%	12%	14%	16%
Utah	8%	8%	13%	14%	16%
Georgia	3%	5%	10%	13%	14%
Delaware	5%	7%	9%	12%	13%
Minnesota	6%	6%	8%	11%	12%
North Carolina	2%	4%	8%	11%	12%
Pennsylvania	7%	7%	8%	10%	12%
Kansas	5%	6%	9%	11%	12%
Nebraska	5%	5%	8%	10%	11%
Idaho	6%	6%	9%	11%	11%
Oklahoma	4%	5%	7%	9%	11%
Michigan	7%	7%	8%	9%	10%
Indiana	4%	5%	6%	8%	9%
Iowa	3%	4%	6%	7%	9%
Wisconsin	6%	6%	7%	8%	9%
New Hampshire	11%	9%	8%	8%	8%
Arkansas	2%	3%	5%	7%	8%
Louisiana	10%	10%	9%	9%	8%
South Carolina	2%	4%	5%	7%	7%
North Dakota	11%	8%	6%	5%	7%
Ohio	5%	5%	6%	7%	7%
Tennessee	2%	3%	5%	6%	7%
Wyoming	6%	6%	6%	6%	7%
South Dakota	8%	7%	6%	7%	7%
Missouri	3%	4%	5%	6%	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 2018 are from ACS data found at data.census.gov.

End Notes

¹ In 1980 there were 23.06 million who spoke a foreign language at home and 187.19 million who spoke only English at home. In 2018, there were 67.27 million people who spoke a foreign language at home and 240.25 million who spoke only English at home. This means that the number of foreign-language speakers increased 192 percent between 1980 and 2018, compared to a 28 percent increase for those who speak only English. It also means the number of foreign-language speakers increased 13 percent between 2010 and 2018 and the number who speak only English increased 5 percent. All figures are for persons five years of age and older.

² Figures for 552 cities and CDP are shown in Table 5, available [here](#). The 48 percent is based on the entire population of these five 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 at home.

³ The Census Bureau at [census.data.gov](https://www.census.gov) reports population figures for 629 cities and CDPs. Of these, language data is available for the 552 shown in [Table 5](#). The total population (not just those 5 and older) in the smallest of these cities was slightly over 63,000.

⁴ 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 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.

⁵ Detailed information on the survey methodology, questions, and other information on the American Community can be found [here](#).

⁶ ACS data on the Census Bureau's website can be found at data.census.gov.

⁷ 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”, July 2017.