



District of Columbia

STATE DATA CENTER MONTHLY BRIEF ^{May} 2010

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Linguistic Diversity in the Nation's Capital

Introduction

The District of Columbia is known for its cultural diversity as its residents reflect the world and its people. However, the degree to which diversity in language exists in the District is often overlooked. This report provides information on the number and characteristics of people in the District of Columbia in 2008 who spoke a language other than English at home. The 2008 American Community Survey was used to describe the language use of the population aged 5 and over. Information on the speakers of languages other than English and on their English-speaking ability is of importance, not only as a portrait of the population at a point in time, but these data are used in a variety of areas such as legislative, policy, research, financial, legal, and marketing that need to make decisions regarding language-based issues.

Table 1 provides some basic information about the speakers of non-English languages and their English-speaking ability in 2008. Of the

555,473 people aged 5 and over in the District of Columbia, 80,204 (14.4 percent) spoke a language other than English at home.

Of the 80,204 people who spoke a language other than English at home, 47.5 percent spoke Spanish (38,088 speakers), 28.0 percent spoke Other Indo-European language (22,493 speakers), 11.9 percent spoke Asian and Pacific Island languages (9,523 speakers), and 12.6 percent spoke Other languages (10,100 speakers). The majority of speakers (69 percent) across all four of these major language groups reported speaking English "very well." English-speaking ability of "very well" ranged from 60 percent for Spanish language speakers to 83.5 percent for speakers in Other Indo-European languages group (Table 1).

People speaking at a level below the "very well" category are thought to need English assistance in some situations. An estimated 24,783 people reported their English-speaking ability as something less than "very well." Higher percentages of people needing English assistance were present for speakers of Spanish (40 percent) and Asian and Pacific Island (34.4 percent) than among Other languages (24.8 percent) and Other Indo-European languages (16.5 percent).

While the Census Bureau codes 381 detailed languages, data tabulations are generally available for smaller sets of "language groups." The simplest set has four major groups: Spanish; Other Indo-European languages; Asian and Pacific Island languages; and All Other languages. These groups are explained below.

Major Language Groups besides English

Spanish includes Spanish, Spanish Creole, and Latino.

Other Indo-European languages include most languages of Europe and the Indic languages of India. These include the Germanic languages, such as German, Yiddish, and Dutch; the Scandinavian languages, such as Swedish and Norwegian; the Romance languages, such as French, Italian, and Portuguese; the Slavic languages, such as Russian, Polish, and Serbo-Croatian; the Indic languages, such as Hindi, Gujarati, Punjabi, and Urdu; Celtic languages; Greek; Baltic languages; and Iranian languages.

Asian and Pacific Island languages include Chinese; Korean; Japanese; Vietnamese; Hmong; Khmer; Lao; Thai; Tagalog or Pilipino; the Dravidian languages of India, such as Telugu, Tamil, and Malayalam; and other languages of Asia and the Pacific, including the Philippine, Polynesian, and Micronesian languages.

All Other languages include Uralic languages, such as Hungarian; the Semitic languages, such as Arabic and Hebrew; languages of Africa; native North American languages, including the American Indian and Alaska native languages; and indigenous languages of Central and South America.

Table 1. Population Five Years and Older Who Spoke a Language Other Than English at Home by Language Group and English-Speaking Ability: District of Columbia 2008

Characteristic	Total People	English-speaking Ability	
		"Very Well"	Less than "Very Well"
Number			
Population 5 years and older	555,473	(X)	(X)
Spoke only English at home	475,269	(X)	(X)
Spoke a language other than English at home	80,204	55,421	24,783
Spoke a language other than English at home	80,204	55,421	24,783
Spanish or Spanish Creole	38,088	22,815	15,273
Other Indo-European languages	22,493	18,782	3,711
Asian and Pacific Island languages	9,523	6,247	3,276
Other languages	10,100	7,595	2,505
Percent			
Population 5 years and older	100.0%	(X)	(X)
Spoke only English at home	85.6%	(X)	(X)
Spoke a language other than English at home	14.4%	69.1%	30.9%
Spoke a language other than English at home	100.0%	69.1%	30.9%
Spanish or Spanish Creole	47.5%	60.0%	40.0%
Other Indo-European languages	28.0%	83.5%	16.5%
Asian and Pacific Island languages	11.9%	65.6%	34.4%
Other languages	12.6%	75.2%	24.8%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2008 American Community Survey.

Table 2. Characteristics of the Population by Language Spoken at Home: District of Columbia 2008

Subject	Total	People who speak only English at home	People who speak a language other than English at home
Population 5 yrs and over	555,473	475,269	80,204
Age			
5-17 yrs	13.6%	14.3%	9.7%
18-64 yrs	73.7%	72.6%	80.4%
65 yrs and over	12.7%	13.2%	10.0%
Citizenship Status			
Native population 5 yrs and over	86.1%	94.1%	38.8%
Foreign-born population 5 yrs and over	13.9%	5.9%	61.2%
Naturalized U.S. citizen	4.8%	2.2%	20.6%
Not a U.S. citizen	9.0%	3.7%	40.6%
Poverty Status			
Population 5 yrs and over for whom poverty status is determined	526,192	450,893	75,299
Below poverty level	16.6%	17.1%	13.5%
Educational Attainment			
Population 25 years and over	403,768	341,558	62,210
Less than high school graduate	14.2%	13.5%	18%
High school graduate	19.8%	21.2%	12.1%
Some college or associate's degree	17.7%	18.7%	12.3%
Bachelor's degree or higher	48.2%	46.5%	57.5%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2008 American Community Survey.

Characteristics of People Speaking a Language Other Than English at Home

While the majority of people spoke only English at home, differences exist across some social characteristics. Table 2 shows the characteristics of people by the language spoken at home by age, citizenship status, poverty status and educational attainment in 2008. The group aged 18 to 64 had the largest percentage of English-only speakers (72.6 percent), compared to 14.3 percent aged 5 to 17, and 13.2 percent aged 65 and over. Conversely, foreign-language speakers numbered 80.4 percent among 18 to 64 year olds, 10 percent among the 65 and over year olds, and 9.7 percent among the 5 to 17 year olds.

Of the population 5 years old and over who spoke only English at home, 94 percent were native-born compared to 5.9 percent foreign-born (Table 2). For the people who spoke a language other than English at home, 61.2 percent were foreign-born compared to 38.8 percent native-born. The percentage of people who earned a Bachelor's degree or higher was higher among people who speak only English at home (46.7 percent), compared to people who speak a language other than English at home (43.4 percent). Similarly, the percentage of those having less than high school graduate was higher among people who speak a language other than English at home (30.9 percent), compared to people who speak only English at home (13.5 percent).

Table 3 shows the growth of some languages since 1990 as well as the relative decline of others. In 1990, 498,936 (87.4 percent) of the population 5 years old and over spoke only English at home. By 2000 this figure had dropped to 449,240 (83.2 percent), with the

major contributing factor being the decline of the overall population from 606,000 to 572,000. By 2008, estimates show both the number and percent of English only speakers rising once more to 475,269 people or 85.7 percent. For Spanish or Spanish Creole speakers, both the number and percent followed a similar path as the English only speakers by declining from 1990 to 2000, and increasing thereafter to 38,088 or 6.9 percent in 2008. For French and German languages, both the number and percentage remained fairly stable throughout the period from 1990 to 2008. However, three groups of language speakers showed continued increase. These are the Slavic language speakers (include Russian, Polish and Croatian), Other Asian and Pacific Island (include Thai, Hmong, Telugu, Philippine and Polynesian) and Other and unspecified languages (include Arabic, Hebrew and African). While immigration led to gains for some language groups, other groups experienced aging populations and dwindling migrant flows into the United States.

Language by State

Some areas have high percentages of speakers of non-English languages, while others have low levels. Table 4 shows the proportion of people who spoke a language other than English at home across the 50 states and the District of Columbia. These proportions vary substantially across states; just two percent in West Virginia spoke a language other than English at home, as against 42 percent in California. High levels of people speaking a language other than English at home were more common in the Southwest and in larger immigrant gateway states of the East, such as New York, New Jersey, and Florida.

“From 1990 to 2008, both the number and percentage of people speaking Slavic languages, Korean and Asian or Pacific Island languages increased.”

Table 3. Language Spoken at Home: District of Columbia 1990, 2000 & 2008

Subject	1990		2000		2008	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Population 5 Years and Over	570,284		539,660		555,473	
Speak only English	498,936	87.4%	449,240	83.2%	475,269	85.6%
Spanish or Spanish Creole	35,021	6.1%	49,460	9.2%	38,088	6.9%
French (including Patois, Creole, Cajun)	9,783	1.7%	9,685	1.8%	9,833	1.8%
German or other West Germanic languages	3,693	0.6%	3,265	0.6%	3,372	0.6%
Slavic languages	1,430	0.3%	3,155	0.6%	3,395	0.6%
Other Indo-European languages	7,418	1.3%	7,615	1.4%	5,493	1.0%
Korean	664	0.1%	710	0.1%	1,031	0.2%
Chinese	2,506	0.4%	2,910	0.5%	3,011	0.5%
Vietnamese	569	0.2%	1,610	0.3%	1,143	0.2%
Tagalog	1,424	0.1%	1,355	0.3%	1,376	0.2%
Other Asian or Pacific Island languages	860	0.2%	2,390	0.4%	2,962	0.5%
Other and unspecified	7,980	1.4%	8,260	1.5%	10,500	1.9%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1990 and 2000 Census, and 2008 American Community Survey.

Table 4. Population 5 Years and Older Speaking a Language Other Than English at Home by State: 2008

State	Spoke a language other than English at home		
	Population 5 years and older	Number	Percent
United States	283,149,507	55,783,998	19.7
Alabama	4,354,717	177,894	4.1
Alaska	634,669	93,660	14.8
Arizona	5,984,859	1,646,654	27.5
Arkansas	2,656,308	163,130	6.1
California	34,063,760	14,417,271	42.3
Colorado	4,583,067	776,988	17.0
Connecticut	3,290,599	652,950	19.8
Delaware	813,290	86,021	10.6
District of Columbia	555,473	80,204	14.4
Florida	17,188,403	4,447,448	25.9
Georgia	8,954,056	1,114,970	12.5
Hawaii	1,202,441	305,591	25.4
Idaho	1,402,689	142,055	10.1
Illinois	12,007,133	2,624,323	21.9
Indiana	5,933,181	427,143	7.2
Iowa	2,803,768	180,499	6.4
Kansas	2,599,846	256,772	9.9
Kentucky	3,986,609	168,691	4.2
Louisiana	4,102,457	333,042	8.1
Maine	1,245,193	88,900	7.1
Maryland	5,261,641	794,432	15.1
Massachusetts	6,116,518	1,284,488	21.0
Michigan	9,379,127	827,801	8.8
Minnesota	4,865,059	469,784	9.7
Mississippi	2,722,890	97,423	3.6
Missouri	5,512,995	306,405	5.6
Montana	905,840	42,238	4.7
Nebraska	1,652,677	150,969	9.1
Nevada	2,401,766	671,141	27.9
New Hampshire	1,241,116	98,076	7.9
New Jersey	8,125,179	2,268,296	27.9
New Mexico	1,837,092	649,892	35.4
New York	18,285,349	5,307,839	29.0
North Carolina	8,575,899	838,569	9.8
North Dakota	600,752	32,889	5.5
Ohio	10,739,072	643,333	6.0
Oklahoma	3,379,963	284,702	8.4
Oregon	3,548,439	497,624	14.0
Pennsylvania	11,709,565	1,102,332	9.4
Rhode Island	990,203	198,351	20.0
South Carolina	4,179,822	252,939	6.1
South Dakota	746,145	44,625	6.0
Tennessee	5,800,458	332,811	5.7
Texas	22,314,134	7,547,043	33.8
Utah	2,468,046	345,939	14.0
Vermont	588,192	30,963	5.3
Virginia	7,251,279	967,077	13.3
Washington	6,115,594	1,019,939	16.7
West Virginia	1,710,685	36,768	2.1
Wisconsin	5,266,534	425,912	8.1
Wyoming	494,958	29,192	5.9

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2008 American Community Survey

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