

Race and Ethnicity in California: Demographics Report Series—No. 14 (June 2003)
Californians' Use of English and Other Languages: Census 2000 Summary

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Executive Summary

Forty percent of people in California speak languages other than English at home. Spanish is the second most common language used (by 26 percent of the population), followed distantly by Chinese (spoken by 2 percent of the population). Census 2000 data presented in this report consider non-English language use, household rates of linguistic isolation, and English ability among people who use other languages at home. Differences by nativity, age, and race are examined as well.

Households are considered *linguistically isolated* by the Census Bureau if “no member fourteen years old and over 1) speaks only English or 2) speaks a non-English language and speaks English ‘very well.’ In other words all members fourteen years old and over have at least some difficulty with English.” Using this definition, 31 percent of households in California that speak Asian/Pacific Island languages are linguistically isolated, as are 26 percent of Spanish-speaking households, 17 percent of “Other Indo-European language” households, and 15 percent of those that use “Other languages.”

Of the native-born population in California, 80 percent speak English only, 16 percent speak Spanish, 2 percent use Asian and Pacific Island languages, and 2 percent speak other languages. Of the foreign-born population in California, over half (51.7 percent) speak Spanish at home, 24.6 percent speak Asian/Pacific Island languages, 10.9 percent speak only English, 10.7 percent speak “Other Indo-European languages,” and 2.1 percent speak “Other languages.”

In terms of English ability, 51 percent of the Spanish-speaking foreign-born population speaks English “well” or “very well,” as do 73 percent of those who use Asian/Pacific Island languages, and 83 and 86 percent of those who speak “Other Indo-European” or “Other” languages, respectively. Also, a larger percentage of children speak English “well” or “very well,” compared to adults, regardless of language spoken at home.

About four out of five people who are Asian, Latino, or Some Other Race in California speak non-English languages at home, while small percentages of Blacks (8 percent) and Whites (10 percent) do. Pacific Islanders, American Indians, and people identified with Two or More Races have intermediate rates of non-English usage (ranging between 34 to 56 percent).

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