

Language Needs of School-Age Children

Robert Kominski and Hyon Shin
US. Census Bureau

Karen Marotz
SUNY-Albany

Introduction

Increasing numbers of immigrants to the United States has resulted in sizable numbers of persons with possible language assistance needs. These individuals are not just older, adult immigrants, but their children, native or immigrants themselves.

The 2006 American Community Survey (ACS) shows that of the 53 million children ages 5-17 years, 11 million children spoke a language other than English at home and 3 million children spoke English less than “very well”.

Objective

This poster examines the size and characteristics of the school-age population (ages 5-17) with an eye toward the English-language speaking ability of these children, and the adults with whom they reside.

Data

This poster uses data from the 2006 American Community Survey (ACS). The ACS provides critical economic, social, demographic, and housing information about the U.S. and its communities. The ACS provides the same kind of detailed information previously available only when the U.S. Census Bureau conducted a population census every 10 years.

During the years when the ACS was in the developmental stages (1996 through 2004), housing unit data were collected in a limited number of counties in the United States. In 2005, the Census Bureau expanded the sample size of the ACS to 3,000,000 housing unit addresses and data were collected in all 3,141 U.S. counties, American Indian and Alaska Native areas, and Native Hawaiian areas. In 2006, the ACS sample was expanded to include the population living in group quarters. The 2006 ACS data now includes both data on the housing unit and the group quarters populations.

Language data come from a three-part question:

- a) Does this person speak a language other than English at home?
- b) What is this language?
- c) How well does this person speak English? (Very well, well, not well, not at all)

This paper examines the population at the national, state and metropolitan levels. The focus is on: (a) children ages 5-17 years; (b) their parents; (c) and the teachers of these children. The analysis will demonstrate the magnitude of the language-need issue (defined using the English-speaking ability question); map its occurrences; and show the presence of foreign language-enabled teaching staff vis-vis the population needing the language assistance.

Methods

The ACS question on English-speaking ability captures the respondents' own assessment of their English-speaking ability. The Census Bureau uses the distinction of those who report speaking English less than "very well" as having some difficulty with the English language. In 1982, the U.S. Census Bureau fielded the English Language Proficiency Survey (ELPS) and concluded that those who spoke English less than "very well" had some difficulty with the tests administered in the ELPS. No study has been conducted to measure the performance of the Census/ACS question on English-speaking ability since the 1982 ELPS.¹

First we examine the general language use and English-speaking ability characteristics of children ages 5-17 years. We look at these characteristics by their school enrollment status (enrolled or not enrolled in school) and by the grade level in which they are enrolled.

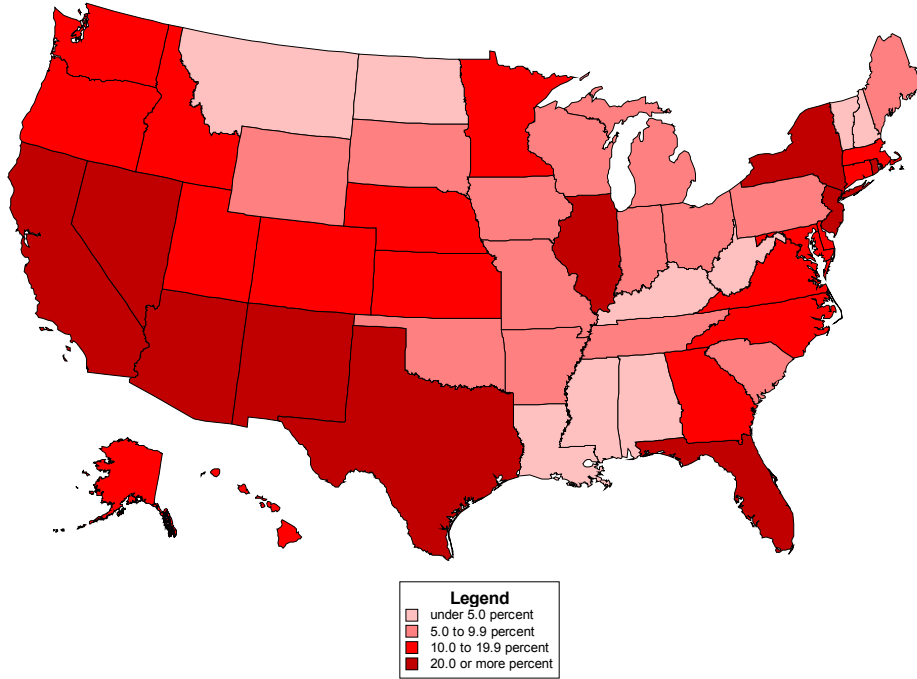
For the youngest ages (0-4 year olds), we use the language use and English-speaking ability of their parents because language use characteristics are tabulated for the population 5 years and over only.

We then examine the distribution of language use and English-speaking ability by states and metropolitan areas (see maps below).

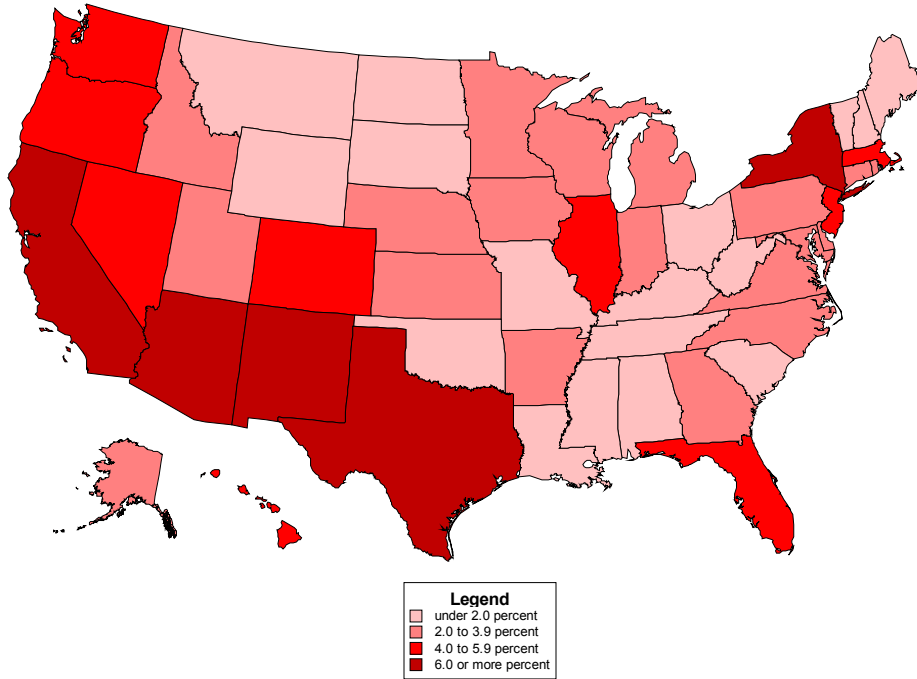
Finally, we assess the language use and English-speaking ability of teachers. The questions on language use and English-speaking ability ask about languages spoken at home and not in a workplace, but by assessing the language use of teachers, we reason that teachers may use their own language skills to assist in the language needs of their students.

¹ Kominski, Robert. 1989. How Good is "How Well"? An Examination of the Census English-Speaking Ability Question. Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Statistical Association. Washington D.C.

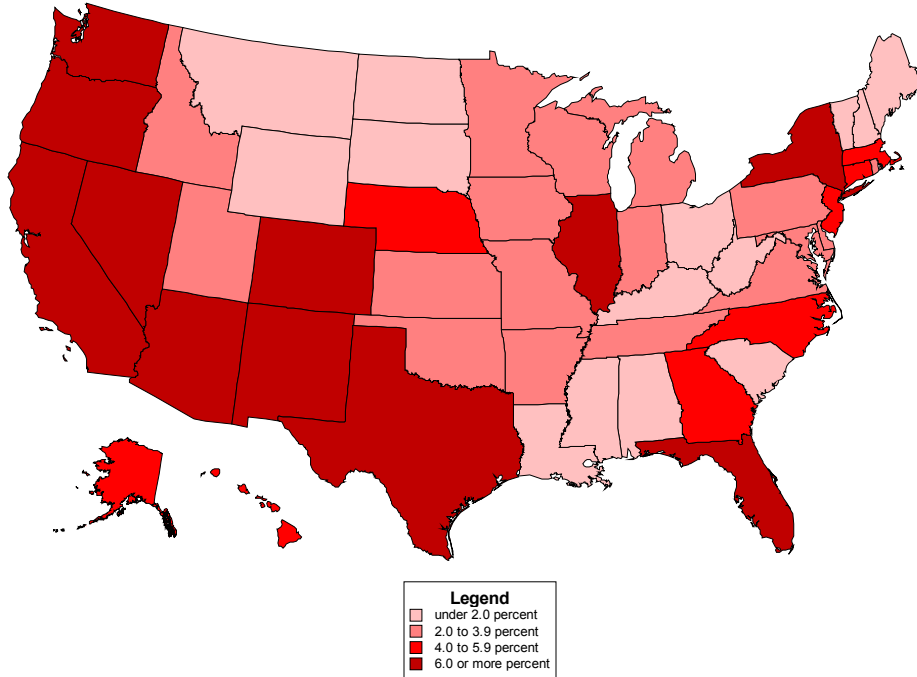
Map 1. Children 5 to 17 Years Old, Enrolled in Nursery/Kindergarten Through 4th Grade Who Spoke a Language Other Than English at Home: 2006



Map 2. Children 5-17 Years Old, Enrolled in Nursery/Kindergarten Through 12th Grade Who Spoke English Less Than "Very Well": 2006.



Map 3. Children 5-17 Years Old, Enrolled in Nursery/Kindergarten Through 4th Grade Who Spoke English Less Than "Very Well": 2006.



Map 4. Percentage of Householders Who Spoke English Less Than "Very Well" By Presence of Children Ages 0 to 4 Years: 2006.

