

English loses ground

Nearly 20% of Americans speak a different language at home.

Listen to conversations around America's dinner tables these days and the voices you hear may well be holding forth in Spanish, Russian or Chinese.

Nationally, nearly one of every five people over the age of 5 spoke a foreign language at home in 2007, the Census Bureau says. That is a dramatic change since 1990, when just 13.8% of people spoke a foreign language at home.

The changes are due, in part, to the burgeoning growth of the Latino population, which has doubled in size since 1990.

More than 34.5 million people older than 5 spoke Spanish at home in 2007; another 8.3 million spoke Chinese or another Asian language at home.

California is the state with the highest concentration of foreign-language speakers, 42.6%. And in some pockets of the country, it's rare to hear English at all. In Hialeah, Fla., just 7.5% of its residents spoke English at home in 2000.

The nation has started to see a growing number of linguistically isolated households, in which no one over 14 years old speaks English well. More than 5.5 million households were linguistically isolated in 2007, including about one of every four Spanish-speaking households. It's a serious barrier for them, hampering not only their job prospects, but also their ability to get emergency help from doctors, police or firefighters.

"There's a tremendous hunger to learn English," says John Trasvina, president and general counsel of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund. But there aren't enough places that teach the language. Gone are the old night schools that once taught English to immigrants. Now, there are year-long waiting lists for English classes in some areas of the country, Trasvina says.

Recent lawmaking exacerbates the situation. Last year, Arizona banned undocumented people from paying in-state rates for community college classes. A decade ago, California passed a law restricting bilingual education in public schools. And today, more than half of U.S. states have laws mandating English as their official language.

-- Rochelle Sharpe

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In more than 5.5 million "linguistically isolated" households, no one over 14 can speak English well.