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Title

The Intersection of Language, Race/Ethnicity, Immigration Status, and Poverty

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Author

Rumberger, Russell W.

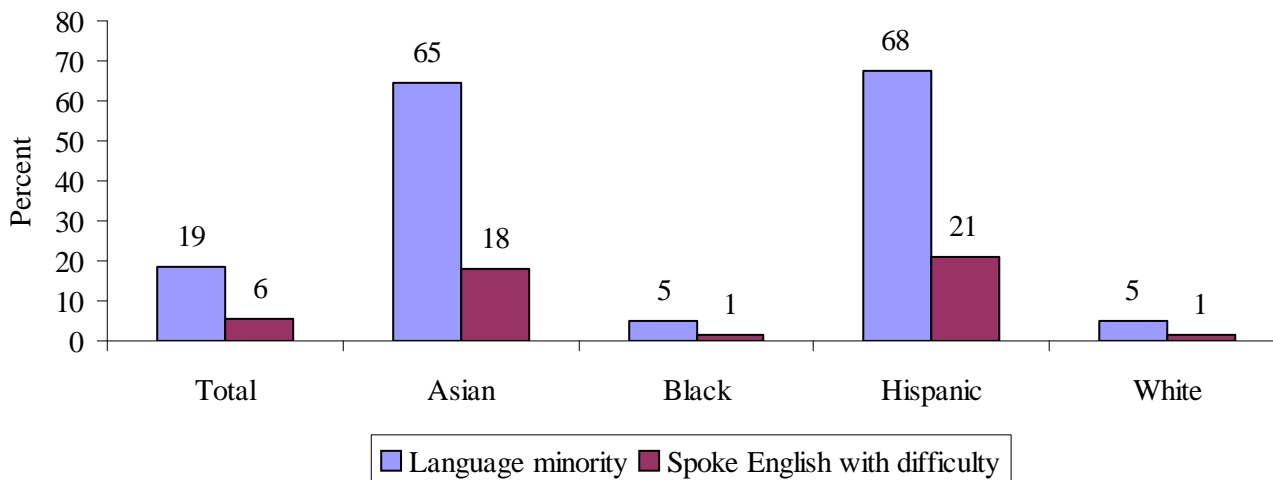
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Researchers, policymakers, and practitioners are often interested in a number of demographic characteristics of students, such as race and ethnicity, language background, immigration status, and poverty. For example, the federal *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) legislation requires schools and districts to report student test scores separately for major racial and ethnic groups, English learners, disabled students, and poor students. Yet while demographic populations are often viewed as distinct, in fact, these populations frequently intersect.

For example, according to U.S. Census data, 19 percent of school-age children (5 to 17 years of age) in the United States in 2003 were language minorities, which means they spoke a language other than English at home (Figure 1).¹ But among some ethnic and racial minorities, the percentage was much higher: 65 percent of Asian children were language minorities and 68 percent of Hispanic children were language minorities.² Census data also reveal that a relatively small proportion of school-age language minorities report speaking English with some difficulty. Among all children, only 6 percent did not speak English well, while among Asian children 18 percent did not speak English well and among Hispanic children 21 percent did not speak English well.³

Figure 1
 Language Background of Children 5-17 Years of Age by Race/Ethnicity, 2003



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2005). *The Condition of Education 2005*, NCES 2005—094. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, Indicator 5. Retrieved September 29, 2005 from: <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2005/section1/indicator05.asp>.

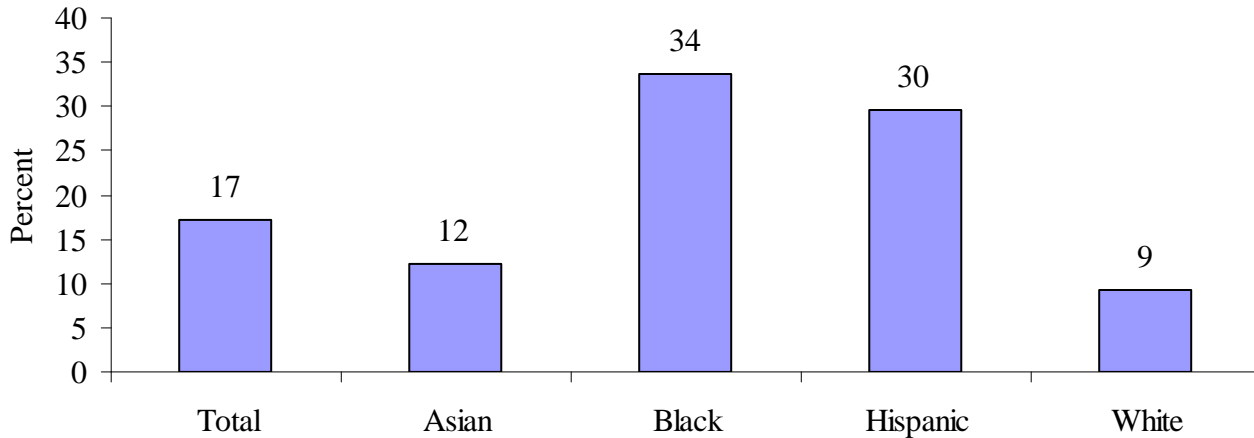
¹ The 19 percent figure is more than double the 9 percent figure for the year 1979. Of course in some areas of the country, the percentage of language minorities is much higher or has grown much faster than the national average. For example, in some areas of the country, more than 75 percent of the population speaks a language other than English at home. See U.S. Census 2000 Brief, *Language Use and English-Speaking Ability*, October 2003 (<http://www.census.gov/prod/2003pubs/c2kbr-29.pdf>).

² There could also be considerable variation within these major ethnic and racial groups depending on the country of origin.

³ These figures are lower than the percentage of children who are classified by their schools as English learners since language minority students must often demonstrate both language proficiency and academic achievement to be classified as fluent English proficient.

Race and ethnicity also intersect with poverty status. According to the U.S. Census data, in 2003, 17 percent of children under 18 were living in families with incomes below the federal poverty level, but 34 percent of Black children were poor and 30 percent of Hispanic children were poor, compared to 12 percent of Asian children and 9 percent of White children.⁴

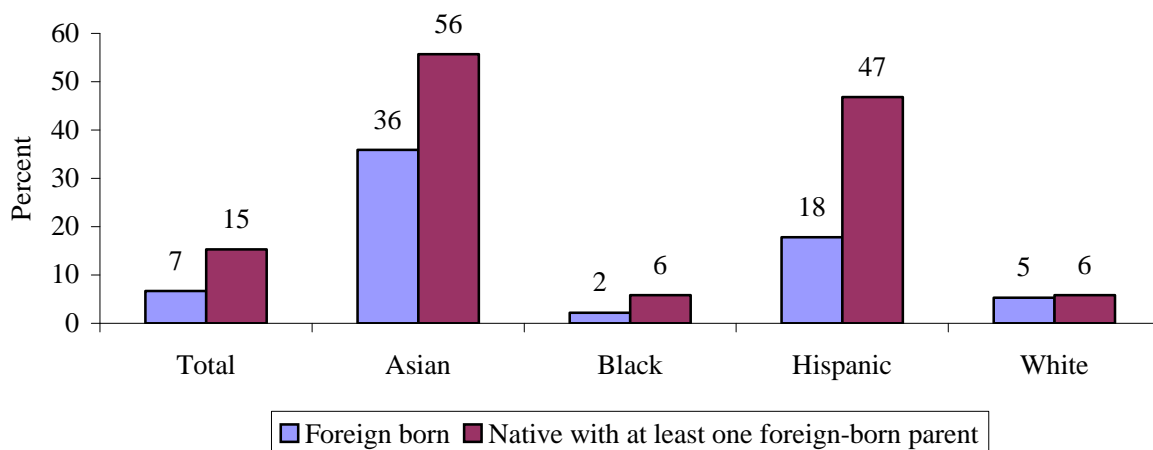
Figure 2
Poverty Status of Children Under 18 by Race/Ethnicity, 2003



SOURCE: DeNavas-Walt, C., Proctor, B. D., & Lee, C. H. (2005). *Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2004*. U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, P60-229. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, Table B-2. Retrieved September 29, 2005 from: <http://www.census.gov/prod/2005pubs/p60-229.pdf>.

Finally, race and ethnicity intersect with immigration status. Again according to 2003 U.S. Census data, 7 percent of all students in the United States (including college students) were foreign born (first generation) and another 15 percent were native with at least one parent born outside of the United States (second generation) (Figure 3). Yet among Asian students, 36 percent were first generation and another 58 percent were second generation; among Hispanic students, 18 percent were first generation and another 47 percent were second generation.

Figure 3
Percent of Students Foreign Born or Native with at Least one Foreign-Born Parent by Race/Ethnicity, 2003



SOURCE: Shin, H.B. (2005). *School Enrollment—Social and Economic Characteristics of Students: October 2003*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau, Table 8. Retrieved September 29, 2005 from: <http://www.census.gov/prod/2005pubs/p20-554.pdf>.

⁴ Some scholars have argued that current definitions of poverty understate the problem. See the UNICEF report, *Child Poverty in Rich Countries 2005* (<http://www.unicef-icdc.org/publications/>).