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Title

California's Growing Bilingual Population

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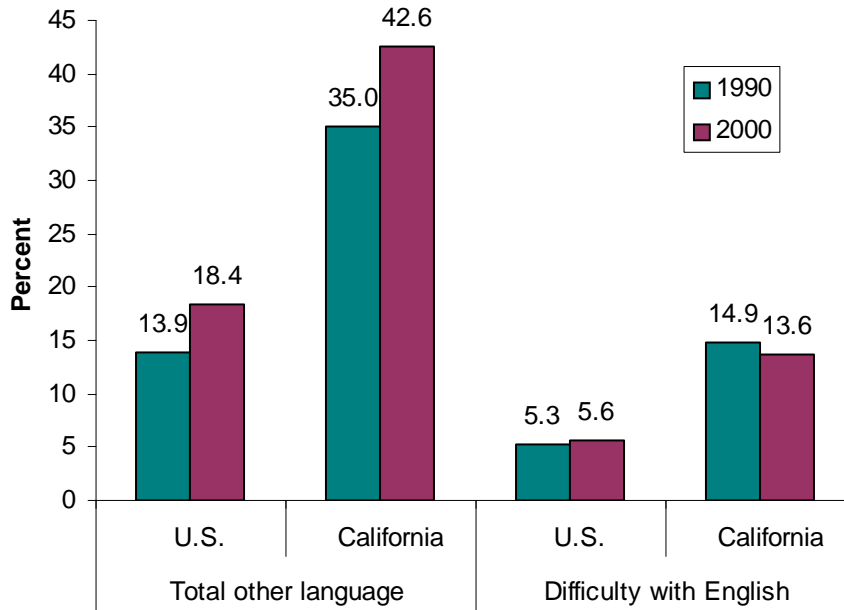
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Percent of Population 5-17 Years of Age Who Report Speaking a Language Other Than English and Speaking English with Some Difficulty, California and U.S., 1990 and 2000



SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990 and 2000 Decennial Census.

Data from the last two U.S. decennial censuses provide an estimate of the bilingual population. In the 1990 and 2000 censuses, respondents (or parents of children) were asked whether they speak a language other than English at home and, if they do, how well they speak English. Although the data do not reveal how well respondents read and write English, which may be more important for performance in school or at work, they do provide valuable information on the language background of the U.S. and California populations.

The data reveal that the bilingual population has grown much faster than the overall population in California and the U.S. As shown above, the percent of school-aged children, 5 to 17 years of age, in the United States who spoke a language other than English increased from 14 percent in 1990 to over 18 percent in 2000. Similar growth rates occurred in California, although California has always had a much higher percentage of its population who were bilingual. Between 1990 and 2000, the percent of school-aged children who spoke a language other than English increased from 35 percent to almost 43 percent of the population. As a result of these trends, California is home to an increasing share of the nation's bilingual population. In 2000, more than 40 percent of all bilinguals and almost 30 percent of school-aged bilinguals resided in California. In both the US and California, about two-thirds of bilinguals report speaking Spanish.

Census data also reveal that most bilinguals report that they speak English very well. Consequently, the size of the bilingual population who report that they speak English with some difficulty is much smaller than the overall bilingual population. In the entire U.S., the percent of school-aged children who spoke English with some difficulty increased slightly in the last decade, from 5.3 percent to 5.6 percent. In California, the percent decreased slightly, from 14.9 percent to 13.6 percent. These figures are substantially smaller than the 25 percent who are reported as English learners by their public schools. This discrepancy results from the fact that students must demonstrate proficiency in English reading and writing and not just spoken English before they are reclassified as proficient in English.