

The Humanities in Our Lives



MOVEMENTS TOWARD MULTILINGUALISM

A majority of speakers of languages other than English are heritage speakers—born in the U.S. and raised in a non-English-speaking household—but the rate of language attrition, or language loss, between generations has historically been high. Until recently, social and educational policies actively discouraged bilingualism, reflecting a public mindset that speaking a language other than English was a deficit in society and the workforce.

Decades of research have largely dispelled this notion, and it is now widely accepted that multilingualism benefits the individual, community, and nation. This change in cultural mindset has catalyzed policy shifts and social, educational, and workforce development programs toward the promotion of multilingualism for all Americans, including both the acquisition of additional languages by monolingual English-speakers and the preservation of heritage languages for native speakers of languages other than English.

THE VALUE OF LANGUAGES

There is perhaps no trait more unique to humanity than language. Language allows humans to exchange information, express complex thoughts and emotions, and collectively solve problems better. Each of the world's 7,000 languages is its own unique cognitive filter for understanding the world. In the United States today, over 400 languages are used.

KEY FACTS

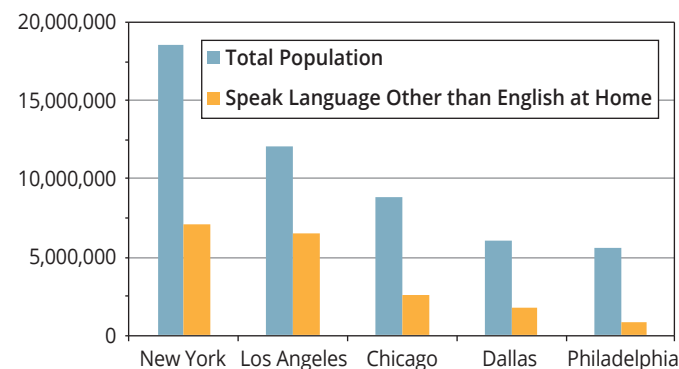
In 2015, the U.S. Census Bureau released the largest data set yet on speakers of languages other than English, providing a snapshot of multilingualism across the nation:

- 1 in 5 residents speak a language other than English.
- Between 100 and 200 languages are spoken in each of the 15 largest metro areas, which together account for over one-third of the U.S. population.

LANGUAGE USE IN THE U.S.

Upward of 350 languages are spoken in the U.S., although school districts estimate higher numbers. An estimated 40–50 million speakers of languages other than English are Spanish-speakers, making the U.S. the second-largest Spanish-speaking nation in the world, on track to become the largest by 2050.

Population That Speaks a Language Other than English—Five Largest Metro Areas



The Humanities in Our Lives series (#HumInOurLives) highlights the many and diverse forms of humanities activities in the nation, and key facts about the health of the field.

THE ANDREW W. MELLON FOUNDATION

For more on the broad trends that mark American engagement with various forms of the humanities, visit humanitiesindicators.org or email humanitiesindicators@amacad.org.

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