

# English-Speaking Ability of the Foreign-Born Population in the United States: 2012

## American Community Survey Reports

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June 2014  
ACS-26

### INTRODUCTION

English-speaking ability is an important topic surrounding immigration in the United States. For the foreign born, fluency in English is associated with greater earnings and occupational mobility.<sup>1, 2</sup> Conversely, the presence of many people with limited English ability requires state and local governments to make costly adjustments, such as providing English as a Second Language classes in schools and translating official forms into multiple languages.<sup>3, 4, 5</sup>

English is not the native language of most immigrants in the United States. However, many do arrive knowing how to speak English, especially from countries where English is widely used. These include not only countries such as Canada, Jamaica, and the United Kingdom, where English is the primary language, but also countries where English is an official language, such as India, Nigeria, and the Philippines.<sup>6</sup> Many others learn English through years of study or practice prior to immigrating to the United States or while living in the United States.

<sup>1</sup> Jeanne Batalova and Michael Fix. "A Profile of Limited English Proficient Adult Immigrants," *Peabody Journal of Education*, 2010. 85(4): 511–534.

<sup>2</sup> Sherrie A. Kossoudji. "English Language Ability and the Labor Market Opportunities of Hispanic and East Asian Immigrant Men," *Journal of Labor Economics*, 1988. 6(2): 205–228.

<sup>3</sup> Arlene Ortiz and Shirley Woika. "Teaching to the Letter of the Law," *Language Magazine*, July 2013. Accessed April 29, 2014, <[http://languagemagazine.com/?page\\_id=6787](http://languagemagazine.com/?page_id=6787)>.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce A. Evans and Nancy H. Hornberger. "No Child Left Behind: Repealing and Unpeeling Federal Language Education Policy in the United States," *Language Policy*, 2005, 4: 87–106.

<sup>5</sup> Fernanda Santos. "Mayor Orders New York to Expand Language Help," *New York Times*, July 23, 2008. Accessed April 29, 2014, <[www.nytimes.com/2008/07/23/nyregion/23translate.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/23/nyregion/23translate.html)>.

<sup>6</sup> Central Intelligence Agency. *The World Factbook 2013–14*. Field Listing: Languages. Washington, DC. 2013. Accessed April 29, 2014, <[www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/print\\_2098.html](http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/print_2098.html)>.

### WHO ARE THE FOREIGN BORN?

The U.S. Census Bureau uses the term foreign born to refer to anyone who is not a U.S. citizen at birth. This includes naturalized U.S. citizens, lawful permanent residents (immigrants), temporary migrants (such as foreign students), humanitarian migrants (such as refugees and asylees), and persons illegally present in the United States. The terms native and native born refer to anyone born in the United States, Puerto Rico, a U.S. Island Area (e.g., Guam), or abroad of a U.S. citizen parent or parents.

There is considerable diversity in English use and English-speaking ability among the foreign born. Research has shown that educational level plays a part, as those foreign born who have a bachelor's degree or higher are more likely to have higher English-speaking ability than those with less than a high school education.<sup>7, 8</sup> English-speaking characteristics are also related to time spent living in the United States.<sup>9</sup> Many foreign-born individuals with long periods of residence in the United States speak English well. However, some have limited English-speaking ability or may not speak English at all, even after residing in the United States for many years.

Using data from the 2012 American Community Survey (ACS), this report examines English use at home and

<sup>7</sup> Julia Beckhusen, Raymond J.G.M. Florax, Thomas de Graaff, Jacques Poot, and Brigitte Waldorf. "Living and Working in Ethnic Enclaves: Language Proficiency of Immigrants in U.S. Metropolitan Areas," *Papers in Regional Science*, 2013. 92(2): 305–328.

<sup>8</sup> Edith K. McArthur. *Language Characteristics and Schooling in the United States, A Changing Picture: 1979 and 1989*. National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. 1993.

<sup>9</sup> Calvin Veltman. "Modelling the Language Shift Process of Hispanic Immigrants," *International Migration Review*, 1988. 22(4): 545–562.

English-speaking ability among the foreign born, focusing on the relationships between English-speaking ability and place of birth, level of education, and years spent living in the United States. While previous American Community Survey reports include both the native and foreign born, this report will focus on English language use and English-speaking ability among only the foreign-born population.<sup>10, 11</sup>

### Language Data From the American Community Survey

Data on English-speaking ability and language spoken at home are collected and tabulated annually in the ACS for all people aged 5 and older.<sup>12</sup> Based on self-assessment, ACS data about English-speaking ability represent the respondent's perception about his or her own ability, or the responses may reflect the perception of a household member who answered the ACS questions for the entire household. The ACS does not provide data on English-speaking ability for those who speak only English at home. Data on English use and English-speaking ability are classified into one of five categories: 1) spoke only English at home, or spoke a language other than English at home and spoke English, 2) "very well," 3) "well," 4) "not well," or 5) "not at all."

<sup>10</sup> Camille Ryan. *Language Use in the United States: 2011*. American Community Survey Reports, ACS-22. U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC. 2013.

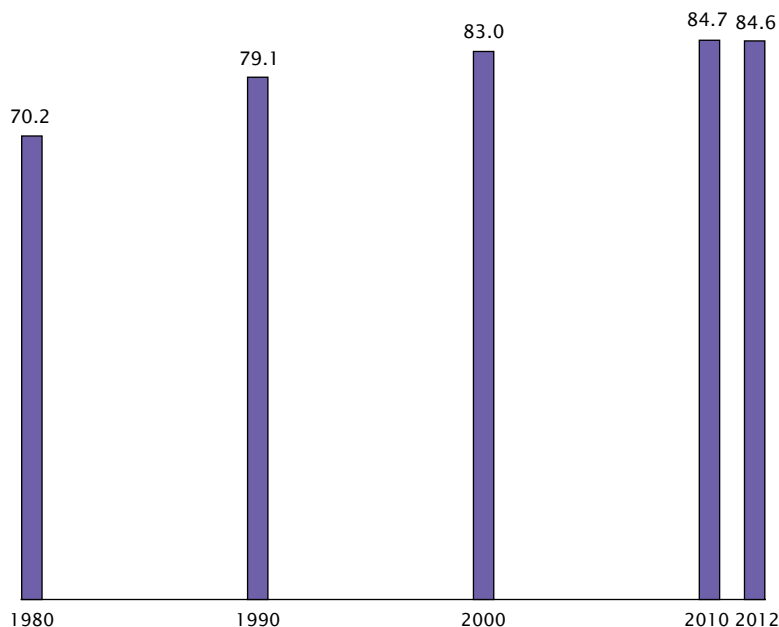
<sup>11</sup> Hyon B. Shin and Robert A. Kominski. *Language Use in the United States: 2007*. American Community Survey Reports, ACS-12. U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC. 2010.

<sup>12</sup> The language questions on the 2012 ACS mail questionnaire can be found on page 8, question 14 of the English and Spanish language versions at <[www.census.gov/acs/www/methodology/questionnaire\\_archive/](http://www.census.gov/acs/www/methodology/questionnaire_archive/)>.

Figure 1.

### Percentage of the Foreign-Born Population Who Spoke a Language Other Than English at Home: 1980 to 2012

(Foreign-born population aged 5 and older. Data based on sample. For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see [www.census.gov/acs/www/](http://www.census.gov/acs/www/))



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1980 to 2000 Decennial Censuses and the 2010 and 2012 American Community Survey, 1-year estimates.

As part of the 2012 ACS data collection, each household member was asked: "Does this person speak a language other than English at home?" If "yes," then two follow-up questions were asked: "What is this language?" and "How well does this person speak English? (Very well, well, not well, or not at all)." If "no," then the specific language and English-speaking ability questions were skipped. People who spoke languages other than English but did not use them at home were excluded from the follow-up questions.

## FINDINGS

### The proportion of foreign born who spoke a language other than English at home has increased since 1980.

The size of the foreign-born population has increased over the last three decades, from 14.1 million in 1980 to 40.0 million in 2010. In 2012, the foreign born numbered 40.8 million, including 40.6 million aged 5 years and over.

The proportion of the foreign-born population who spoke a language other than English at home also increased during this period. In 1980, 70 percent of the foreign-born population aged 5 and older spoke a language other than English at home, rising to 85 percent in 2010 (Figure 1). In 2012, the proportion remained at 85 percent.

Table 1.

### Language Spoken at Home by English-Speaking Ability of the Foreign-Born Population: 2012

(Foreign-born population aged 5 and older. Numbers in thousands. Data based on sample. For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see [www.census.gov/acs/www/](http://www.census.gov/acs/www/))

Language at home and English-speaking ability	Estimate	Margin of error ( $\pm$ ) <sup>1</sup>	Percent	Margin of error ( $\pm$ ) <sup>1</sup>
<b>Total</b> .....	<b>40,589</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>X</b>
Spoke only English at home .....	6,232	43	15.4	0.1
Spoke a language other than English at home and English-speaking ability				
Very well .....	14,017	76	34.5	0.2
Well .....	8,601	55	21.2	0.1
Not well .....	7,838	52	19.3	0.1
Not at all .....	3,901	43	9.6	0.1

X Not applicable.

<sup>1</sup> Data are based on a sample and are subject to sampling variability. A margin of error is a measure of an estimate's variability. The larger the margin of error is in relation to the size of the estimate, the less reliable the estimate. When added to and subtracted from the estimate, the margin of error forms the 90 percent confidence interval.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2012 American Community Survey, 1-year estimates.

### About half of the foreign-born population reported having high English-speaking ability.

Nationwide, among the nearly 41 million foreign born aged 5 and older, about 6 million spoke only English at home (Table 1). Foreign born who spoke only English at home, or who spoke another language at home and spoke English "very well," are considered to have high English-speaking ability.<sup>13</sup> When combined, about half of the

foreign-born population had high English-speaking ability in 2012. This includes 15 percent who spoke only English at home and over one-third (35 percent) of the foreign-born population who spoke a non-English language at home and also spoke English "very well."

Those who do not have high English-speaking ability are often grouped together as having limited, or less than "very well,"

English-speaking ability.<sup>14, 15</sup> Half of the foreign-born population spoke English less than "very well" in 2012 (50 percent), about the same proportion as in the 2010 American Community Survey (52 percent) and the 2000 Census (51 percent).<sup>16</sup> In 2012, this included 21 percent of the foreign born who spoke English "well," 19 percent who spoke English "not well," and 10 percent who spoke English "not at all."

### About nine in ten foreign born spoke a language other than English at home in Texas, California, and Illinois.

Nationwide, 85 percent of the foreign-born population spoke a language other than English at home, but this proportion varied widely by state (Table 2). There were six states where the percent of the foreign-born population who spoke a non-English language at home was significantly higher than the national percentage: Texas, California, Illinois, Nebraska, New

<sup>14</sup> McArthur, op. cit.

<sup>15</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. *Profile of Selected Demographic and Social Characteristics for the Foreign-Born Population: 2000*. Census 2000 Special Tabulations (STP-159). 2005. Accessed April 29, 2014, <[www.census.gov/population/foreign/files/stp-159/foreignborn.pdf](http://www.census.gov/population/foreign/files/stp-159/foreignborn.pdf)>.

<sup>16</sup> The percentages of the foreign-born population who spoke English less than "very well" from the 2000 Census, 2010 ACS, and 2012 ACS are all statistically different from one another.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Kominski. *How Good is "How Well?" An Examination of the Census English-Speaking Ability Question*. Presented at the 1989 Annual Meeting of the American Statistical Association, Washington, DC. August 6-11, 1989.

Table 2.

# Language Spoken at Home by English-Speaking Ability of the Foreign-Born Population by State: 2012

(Foreign-born population aged 5 and older. Numbers in thousands. Data based on sample. For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see [www.census.gov/acs/www/](http://www.census.gov/acs/www/))

Geography	Foreign born		Spoke a language other than English at home			
			Total		Spoke English less than "very well" <sup>1</sup>	
	Number	Margin of error (±) <sup>2</sup>	Percent of foreign born	Margin of error (±) <sup>2</sup>	Percent of foreign born	Margin of error (±) <sup>2</sup>
<b>United States . . . . .</b>	<b>40,589</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>84.6</b>	<b>0.1</b>	<b>50.1</b>	<b>0.2</b>
Alabama . . . . .	162	6	77.8	2.1	47.2	2.7
Alaska . . . . .	52	4	85.2	2.7	41.2	3.7
Arizona . . . . .	871	17	84.2	0.8	49.9	1.0
Arkansas . . . . .	128	5	81.8	2.1	51.9	2.8
California . . . . .	10,264	51	90.4	0.2	56.7	0.3
Colorado . . . . .	502	13	83.5	1.0	47.7	1.4
Connecticut . . . . .	493	13	77.8	1.1	41.2	1.2
Delaware . . . . .	76	5	78.6	3.5	37.3	3.5
District of Columbia . . . . .	89	5	70.1	3.5	32.5	3.5
Florida . . . . .	3,730	32	81.0	0.4	46.9	0.5
Georgia . . . . .	933	17	82.0	1.1	46.1	1.1
Hawaii . . . . .	250	10	84.4	1.4	53.0	1.9
Idaho . . . . .	96	6	80.2	2.5	49.2	2.5
Illinois . . . . .	1,780	21	89.8	0.5	52.1	0.8
Indiana . . . . .	300	9	82.7	1.4	47.2	1.8
Iowa . . . . .	136	6	80.1	1.9	46.8	2.4
Kansas . . . . .	185	6	85.5	1.5	51.6	1.9
Kentucky . . . . .	135	6	78.8	2.3	44.7	2.7
Louisiana . . . . .	168	7	82.2	1.9	47.8	2.3
Maine . . . . .	47	3	58.6	3.7	26.4	3.6
Maryland . . . . .	833	15	78.3	1.0	37.4	1.2
Massachusetts . . . . .	989	16	82.0	0.7	44.9	0.9
Michigan . . . . .	601	11	78.7	0.7	40.3	1.1
Minnesota . . . . .	385	10	81.7	1.2	43.6	1.5
Mississippi . . . . .	59	5	78.3	3.4	41.2	4.1
Missouri . . . . .	226	7	80.3	1.6	40.8	2.0
Montana . . . . .	18	2	49.4	5.7	21.8	4.5
Nebraska . . . . .	118	4	88.9	1.4	58.9	2.3
Nevada . . . . .	529	10	88.0	0.9	50.7	1.3
New Hampshire . . . . .	71	4	66.9	3.6	31.2	3.9
New Jersey . . . . .	1,871	22	84.8	0.6	46.4	0.8
New Mexico . . . . .	191	8	88.9	1.3	53.4	2.1
New York . . . . .	4,402	25	75.8	0.4	46.6	0.4
North Carolina . . . . .	742	15	82.9	0.8	49.5	1.1
North Dakota . . . . .	19	3	76.8	4.8	37.3	6.8
Ohio . . . . .	447	11	77.6	1.1	37.2	1.3
Oklahoma . . . . .	212	6	84.8	1.2	53.9	1.7
Oregon . . . . .	371	10	82.1	1.2	48.1	1.8
Pennsylvania . . . . .	763	16	77.4	1.0	41.7	1.1
Rhode Island . . . . .	139	6	82.2	1.7	49.4	2.4
South Carolina . . . . .	220	8	78.7	1.7	44.6	1.9
South Dakota . . . . .	23	3	78.8	5.4	53.1	6.6
Tennessee . . . . .	289	9	82.0	1.4	45.4	2.0
Texas . . . . .	4,247	39	91.3	0.3	58.8	0.5
Utah . . . . .	240	8	83.4	1.3	48.4	1.9
Vermont . . . . .	25	2	61.7	4.7	23.8	3.7
Virginia . . . . .	941	15	84.0	0.7	40.3	1.1
Washington . . . . .	909	16	83.3	0.7	46.2	0.9
West Virginia . . . . .	25	2	63.4	4.9	25.2	4.8
Wisconsin . . . . .	270	8	81.8	1.3	44.4	1.7
Wyoming . . . . .	19	2	76.3	5.8	38.4	6.0

<sup>1</sup> The classification of less than "very well" includes respondents who spoke a language other than English at home and reported speaking English "well," "not well," or "not at all."

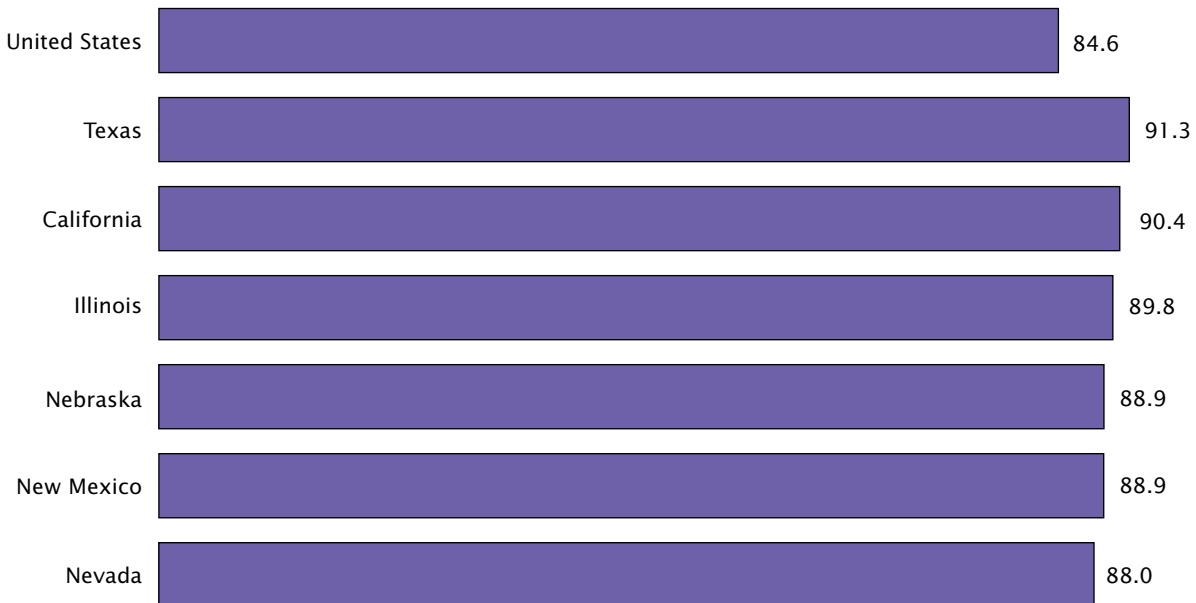
<sup>2</sup> Data are based on a sample and are subject to sampling variability. A margin of error is a measure of an estimate's variability. The larger the margin of error is in relation to the size of the estimate, the less reliable the estimate. When added to and subtracted from the estimate, the margin of error forms the 90 percent confidence interval.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2012 American Community Survey, 1-year estimates.

Figure 2.

**Percentage of the Foreign-Born Population Who Spoke a Language Other Than English at Home for Selected States: 2012**

(Foreign-born population aged 5 and older. Data based on sample. For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see [www.census.gov/acs/www/](http://www.census.gov/acs/www/))



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2012 American Community Survey, 1-year estimates.

Mexico, and Nevada (Figure 2). Among the states with the highest proportions were Texas (91 percent), California, and Illinois (each 90 percent).<sup>17,18</sup> Texas, California, and Illinois were also among the states with the largest number of foreign born. In 2012, about 40 percent of the nation's foreign-born population aged 5 and older lived in these three states.

<sup>17</sup> The percentage for Illinois was not significantly different from those for Nebraska and New Mexico. The percentages for California and Illinois were significantly different.

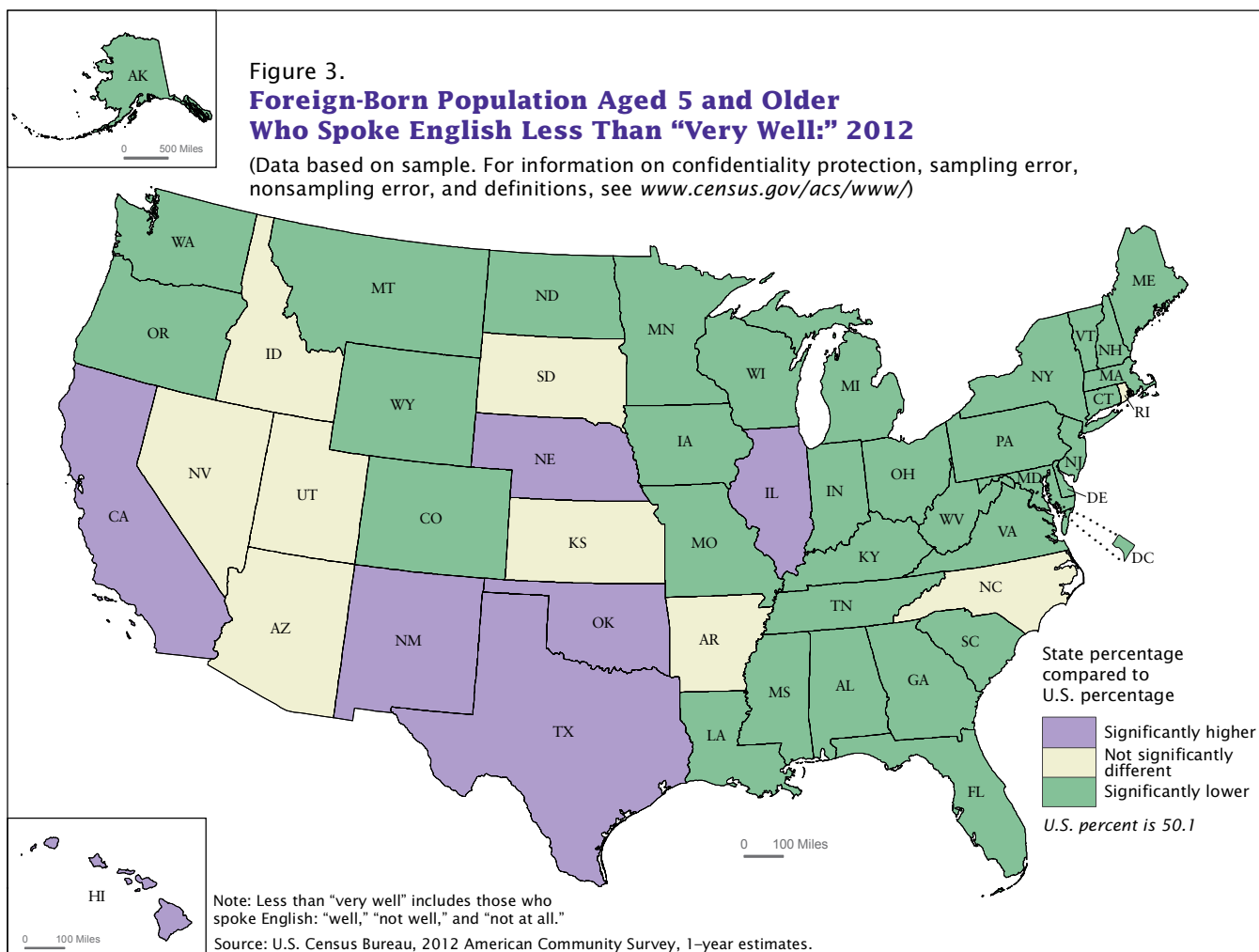
<sup>18</sup> Note that most foreign born who spoke a language other than English at home also spoke English with some level of ability.

**The proportion of the foreign-born population who spoke English less than “very well” was significantly higher than the national average in seven states.**

Figure 3 is a state map of the percentage of the foreign-born population who spoke English less than “very well,” showing whether each state's proportion was statistically higher, lower, or not significantly different from the proportion of the nation as a whole. In most states and the District of Columbia (a state equivalent), the proportion of the foreign-born population who spoke English less than “very well” was significantly lower than the national level of 50 percent.

However, this proportion was significantly higher than the national percent in seven states: California, Hawaii, Illinois, Nebraska, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas. Five of these states were also among the states with the highest percentages of foreign born who spoke a language other than English at home: California, Illinois, Nebraska, New Mexico, and Texas. Among the states with the highest proportions of foreign born who spoke English less than “very well” were Nebraska and Texas (each 59 percent) and California (57 percent).<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> The percentage for Nebraska was not significantly different from those for Texas and California.



Among states (including the District of Columbia) with foreign-born populations greater than 50,000, New Hampshire and the District of Columbia had among the lowest proportions of foreign born who spoke English less than “very well” (31 percent and 32 percent, respectively), and they also had the lowest proportions of foreign born who spoke a non-English language

at home (67 percent and 70 percent, respectively).<sup>20</sup>

### English-speaking ability differed among the world region-of-birth groups.

Among the foreign born from Asia and Latin America and the

<sup>20</sup> New Hampshire and the District of Columbia were not significantly different from each other for percent who spoke a language other than English at home or for percent who spoke English less than “very well.” The District of Columbia was not significantly different from Delaware for percent who spoke English less than “very well.”

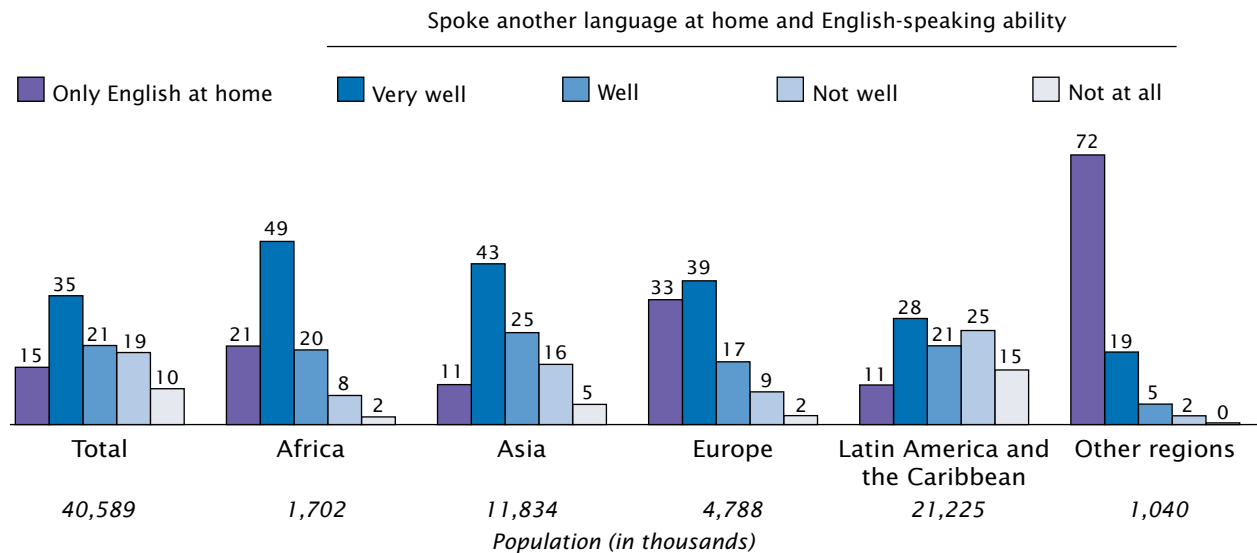
Caribbean, about 11 percent spoke only English at home compared with 21 percent of the foreign born from Africa and 33 percent of the foreign born from Europe (Figure 4). The foreign-born population from “Other regions,” which is dominated by immigrants from Canada and Australia, had the highest proportion (72 percent) who spoke only English at home.

About 61 percent of the foreign born from Latin America and the

Figure 4.

### Language Spoken at Home and English-Speaking Ability of the Foreign-Born Population by World Region of Birth: 2012

(Percentage distribution of the foreign-born population aged 5 and older. Data based on sample. For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see [www.census.gov/acs/www/](http://www.census.gov/acs/www/))



Note: Percents may not add to 100 due to rounding. Other regions includes Northern America, Oceania, and born at sea.  
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2012 American Community Survey, 1-year estimates.

Caribbean spoke English less than “very well.” The foreign born from Latin America and the Caribbean were also the most likely of all region-of-birth groups to speak English “not at all” (15 percent).

#### English-speaking ability also differed by country of birth.

The variation in English use and speaking ability seen among the region-of-birth groups was also evident among the foreign born from

different countries. The percentage distribution of English spoken at home and English-speaking ability for those speaking a language other than English at home is shown in Figure 5 for residents from countries with populations of 500,000 or more living in the United States, and in Appendix A for residents from countries with populations of 100,000 or more living in the United States.

The foreign-born populations born in Canada, Germany, Jamaica, and the United Kingdom were made up almost entirely of those with high English-speaking ability. The majority of the foreign born from India and the Philippines, where English is widely used as an official language, had high English-speaking ability (74 percent and 70 percent, respectively).

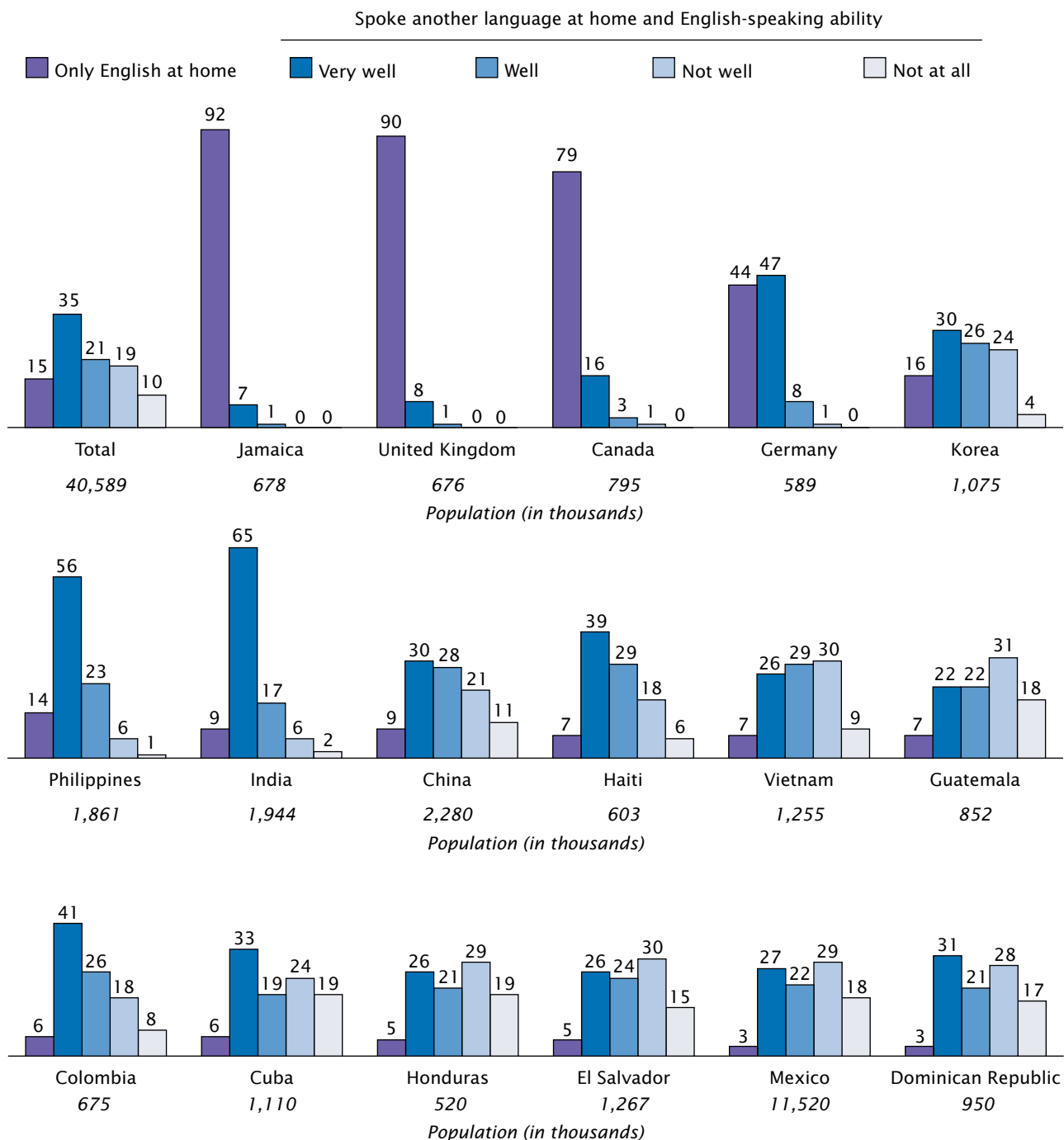
Several countries with large resident populations in the United States, including Mexico (11.5 million), China (2.3 million),



Figure 5.

# **Language Spoken at Home and English-Speaking Ability of the Foreign-Born Population by Country of Birth: 2012**

(Percentage distribution of the foreign-born population aged 5 and older. Countries of birth are shown only for those countries with over 500,000 people living in the United States. Countries are ordered by percent speaking only English at home. Data based on sample. For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see [www.census.gov/acs/www](http://www.census.gov/acs/www))



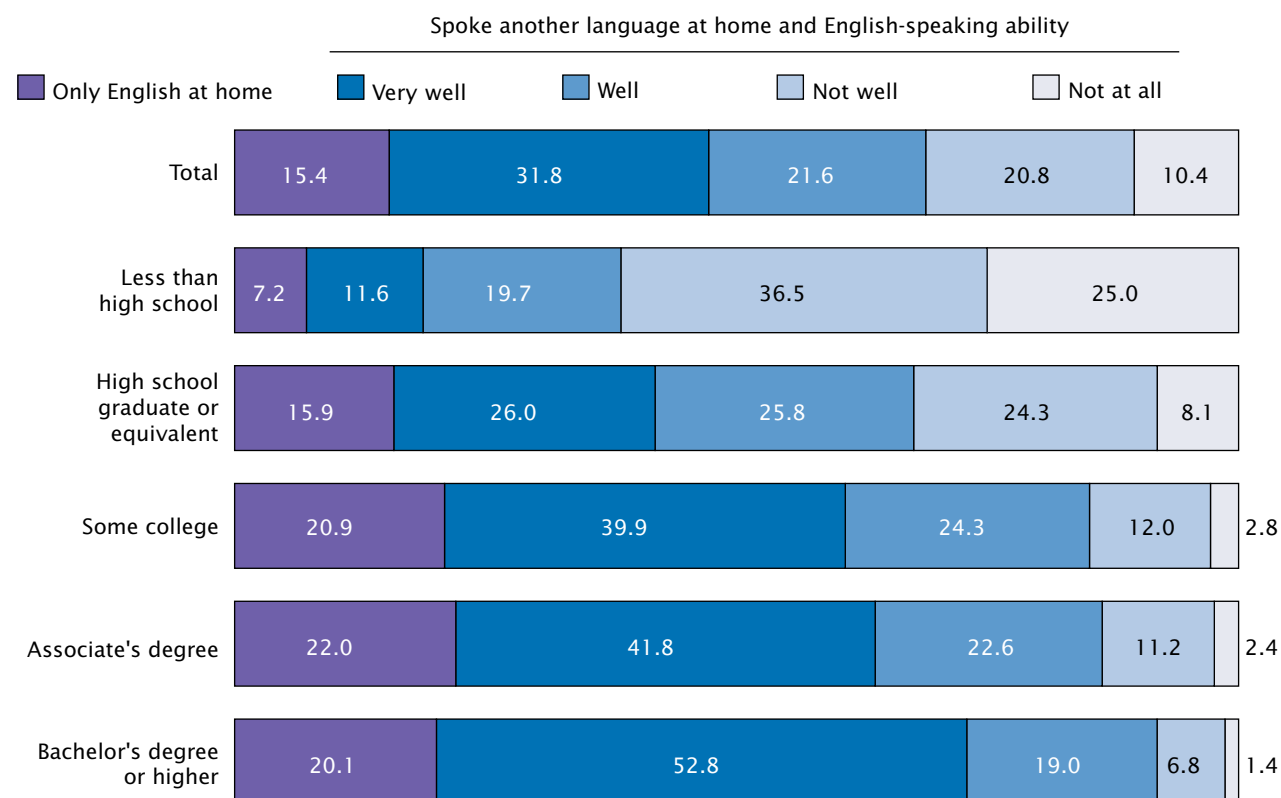
Note: Percents may not add to 100 due to rounding. Total includes all countries of birth. Responses of: China, Hong Kong, Macau, Paracel Islands, and Taiwan represent China; Korea, South Korea, and North Korea represent Korea; and United Kingdom, England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, Guernsey, Jersey, and Isle of Man represent the United Kingdom.  
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2012 American Community Survey, 1-year estimates.



Figure 6.

# **Language Spoken at Home and English-Speaking Ability of the Foreign-Born Population by Educational Attainment: 2012**

(Percentage distribution of the foreign-born population aged 25 and older. Data based on sample. For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see [www.census.gov/acs/www/](http://www.census.gov/acs/www/))



Note: Percents may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2012 American Community Survey, 1-year estimates.

El Salvador and Vietnam (1.3 million each), and Cuba and Korea (1.1 million each) were more likely to have lower English-speaking ability. Among the foreign-born populations from each of these countries, over half spoke English less than “very well.”

This was also true for many countries with resident populations of between 500,000 and 1 million people living the United States: Haiti, Guatemala, Colombia, Honduras, and the Dominican Republic.

## **At higher levels of educational attainment, the foreign born were more likely to have higher English-speaking ability.**

The majority of the foreign born who were college graduates had high English-speaking ability. About three-fourths (73 percent) of the foreign born with a bachelor’s degree or higher spoke only English at home or spoke another language at home and spoke English “very well” (Figure 6). However, as the level of educational attainment declines, so does the proportion with high English-speaking ability: 64 percent with an associate’s degree, 61 percent with

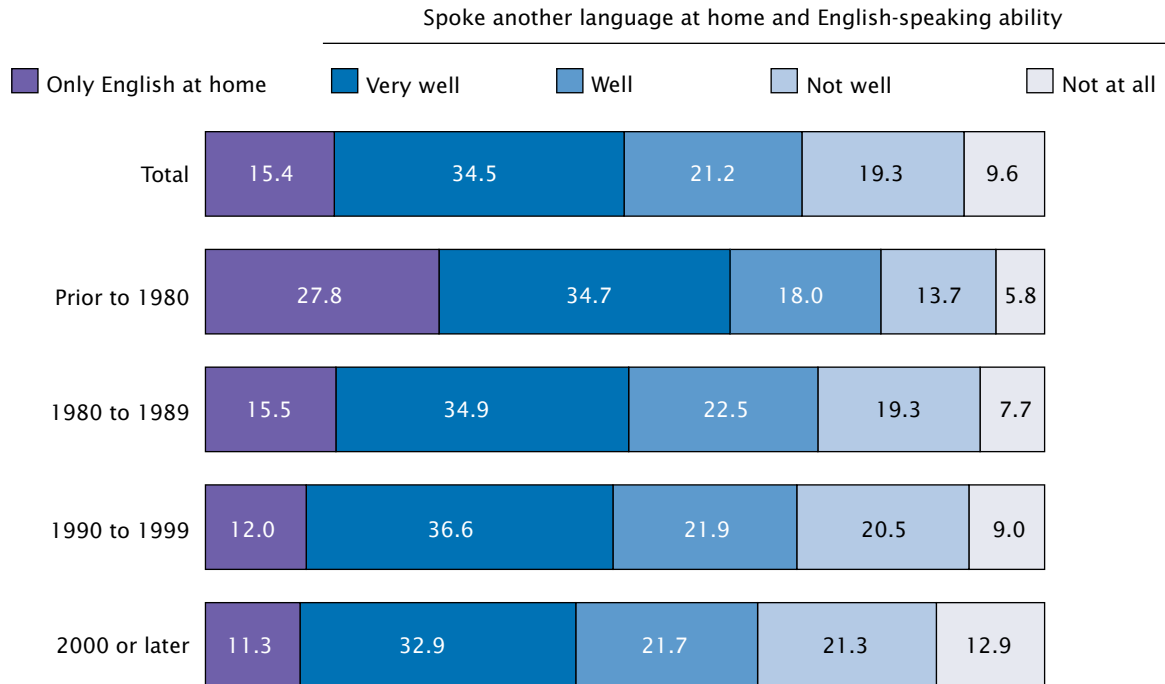
some college, 42 percent with a high school diploma or equivalent, and 19 percent with less than a high school education spoke only English at home or spoke English “very well.”

Among the foreign born who had completed some college or more, the proportion speaking only English at home was about the same at all educational attainment levels. About one out of five foreign born who had completed some college (21 percent), an associate’s degree (22 percent), or a bachelor’s degree or higher (20 percent) spoke only English at home. However, the proportion who spoke another language at

Figure 7.

### Language Spoken at Home and English-Speaking Ability of the Foreign-Born Population by Period of Entry: 2012

(Percentage distribution of the foreign-born population aged 5 and older. Data based on sample. For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see [www.census.gov/acs/www/](http://www.census.gov/acs/www/))



Note: Percents may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2012 American Community Survey, 1-year estimates.

home and spoke English “very well” was larger at higher levels of educational attainment for the foreign born who had completed at least some college: 40 percent for those with some college, 42 percent for those with an associate’s degree, and 53 percent for those with a bachelor’s degree or higher.

#### The foreign born who had less than a high school education were more likely to speak English “not well” or “not at all.”

Among the foreign born with less than a high school education, over one-third (36 percent) reported speaking a non-English language at home and speaking English “not well,” with an additional one-fourth (25 percent) who spoke English “not at all” (Figure 6). When

compared with other educational attainment groups, the foreign born with less than a high school degree had the lowest proportion who spoke only English at home (7 percent) and the lowest proportion who spoke English “very well” (12 percent).

#### Those who came to live in the United States more than 30 years ago were the most likely to speak only English at home.

The foreign born who have lived in the United States for longer periods were much more likely to speak only English at home than recent entrants to the country (Figure 7). Among the foreign born who entered in 2000 or later, 11 percent spoke only English at home, compared with 28 percent

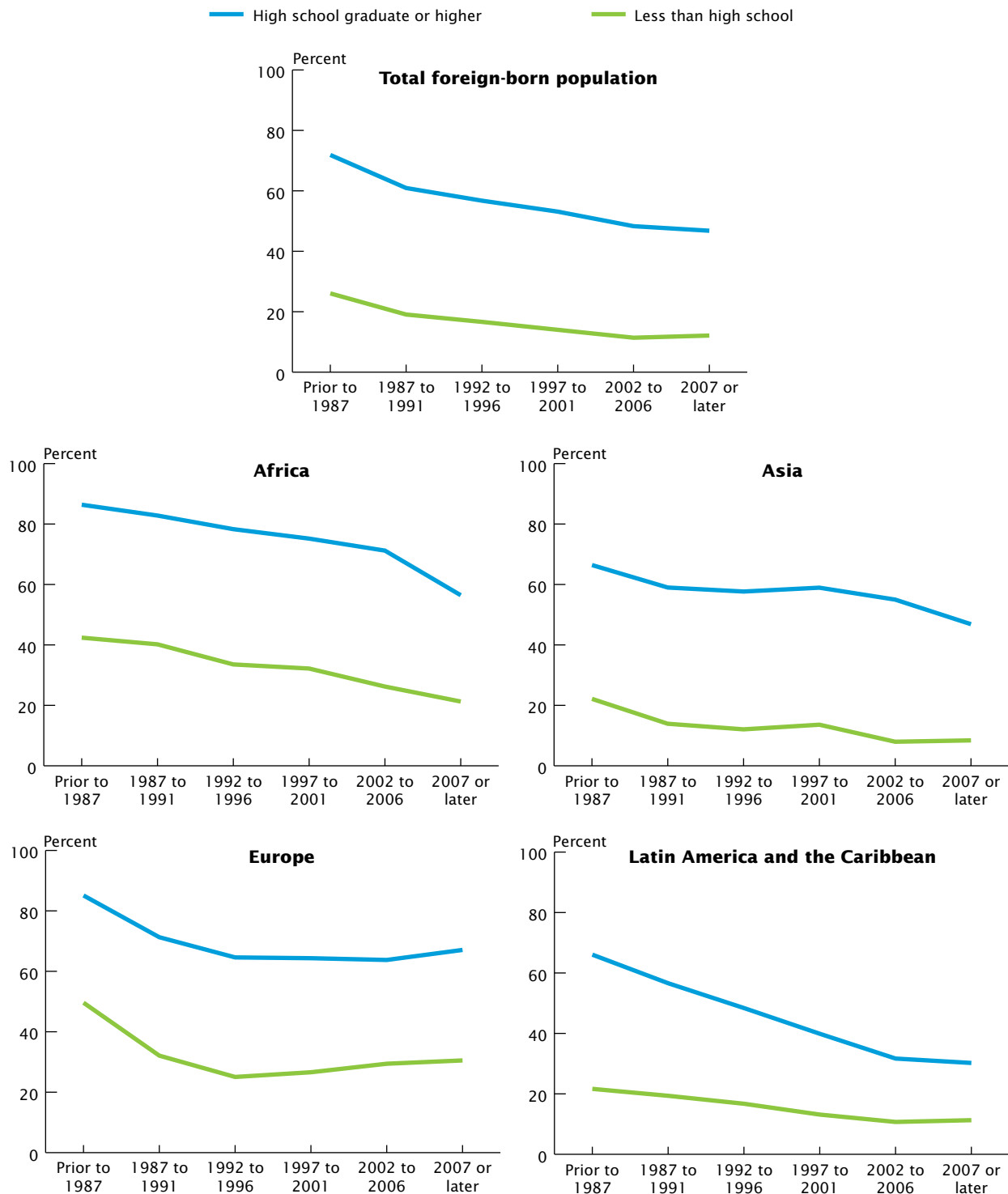
of the foreign born who entered before 1980. When the population speaking only English at home is combined with those who spoke English “very well,” 44 percent of the foreign born who arrived in 2000 or later had high English-speaking ability, compared with 63 percent of those who arrived prior to 1980.

In addition, recent entrants were also more likely to speak English “not at all.” About 13 percent of the foreign born who came to live in the United States in 2000 or later spoke English “not at all,” compared with about 6 percent of those who arrived prior to 1980.

Figure 8.

**Percent of the Foreign-Born Population With High English-Speaking Ability by Period of Entry, World Region of Birth, and Educational Attainment: 2012**

(Foreign-born population aged 25 and older. Data based on sample. For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see [www.census.gov/acs/www/](http://www.census.gov/acs/www/))



Note: High English-speaking ability refers to those who spoke only English at home or who spoke another language at home and spoke English "very well."

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2012 American Community Survey, 1-year estimates.

**Among different world regions of birth for the foreign born, English-speaking ability was higher for those who have been in the United States longer and have higher educational attainment.**

In general, the foreign born who entered the United States a long time ago speak English better than those who entered recently, and the foreign born who have a high school education or higher speak English better than those with less than a high school education. This pattern of English-speaking ability remains when time in the United States, world region of birth, and educational attainment are considered together. Figure 8 shows the percentage that had high English-speaking ability by world region of birth, year of entry, and educational attainment. High English-speaking ability is defined as speaking only English at home or speaking another language at home and speaking English “very well.”

For most regions of birth, newer immigrants to the United States were significantly less likely to have high English-speaking ability than foreign born who arrived 10, 20, or 25 years ago or more. Similarly, there was a notable difference in English-speaking ability for the foreign born with less than a high school education, compared with the foreign born with a high school degree or higher, across

all periods of entry and all world regions of birth.

## SUMMARY

There are varying patterns of native language retention and English adoption among the foreign born. Some foreign born arrived in the United States knowing how to speak English or came from countries where English is the dominant language, while some who are not from English-speaking countries gain English fluency through years of study and practice. English-speaking ability may depend on world region and country of birth, level of educational attainment, and year of entry characteristics. Level of education was positively associated with higher English-speaking ability, as was years of residency. More than 60 percent of the foreign born with at least some college education spoke only English at home or spoke another language at home and spoke English “very well.” A longer period of residence in the United States was associated with a higher proportion speaking only English at home and greater English-speaking ability for those speaking a non-English language at home.

This report describes only a few of the relationships between the English-language ability of the foreign born and selected demographic and social characteristics. There are many other interesting

analyses of economic outcomes related to English language ability among the foreign born which are outside the scope of this report.<sup>21, 22, 23</sup> Future research using American Community Survey data might focus on the relationship between English-speaking ability and wages or occupational mobility of the foreign born. Further exploration of the multitude of characteristics related to language use may shed light on complex patterns associated with English-speaking ability among the foreign born.

## WHAT IS THE AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY?

The American Community Survey (ACS) is a nationwide survey designed to provide communities with reliable and timely demographic, social, economic, and housing data for the nation, states, congressional districts, counties, places, and other localities every year. It has an annual sample size of about 3.5 million addresses and includes both housing units and group quarters (e.g., nursing

<sup>21</sup> Barry R. Chiswick and Paul W. Miller. “The Endogeneity between Language and Earnings: International Analyses,” *Journal of Labor Economics*, 1995. 13(2): 246–288.

<sup>22</sup> Gilles Grenier. “The Effects of Language Characteristics on the Wages of Hispanic-American Males,” *Journal of Human Resources*, 1984. 19(1): 35–52.

<sup>23</sup> Judith Hellerstein and David Neumark. *Ethnicity, Language and Workplace Segregation: Evidence from a New Matched Employer-Employee Data Set*. National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 9037, 2002. Accessed April 29, 2014, <[www.nber.org/papers/w9037.pdf](http://www.nber.org/papers/w9037.pdf)>.

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facilities and prisons). For information on the ACS sample design and other topics, visit <[www.census.gov/acs/www/](http://www.census.gov/acs/www/)>.

### **WHY IS LANGUAGE INFORMATION COLLECTED IN THE AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY?**

One of the main purposes of collecting information on languages spoken at home and English-speaking ability is to determine bilingual election requirements under the Voting Rights Act. For more information about the Voting Rights Act, go to the U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division Web site at <[www.justice.gov/crt/about/vot/intro/intro\\_b.php](http://www.justice.gov/crt/about/vot/intro/intro_b.php)>.

### **SOURCE AND ACCURACY**

The data presented in this report are based on the ACS sample interviewed from January 2012 through December 2012. The estimates based on this sample describe the

average values of person, household, and housing unit characteristics over this period of collection. Sampling error is the uncertainty between an estimate based on a sample and the corresponding value that would be obtained if the estimate were based on the entire population (as from a census). Measures of sampling error are provided in the form of margins of error for all key estimates included in this report. All comparative statements in this report have undergone statistical testing, and comparisons are significant at the 90 percent level unless otherwise noted. In addition to sampling error, nonsampling error may be introduced during any of the operations used to collect and process survey data, such as editing, reviewing, or keying data from questionnaires. For more information on sampling and estimation methods, confidentiality protection, and sampling and nonsampling errors, please see the 2012 ACS

Accuracy of the Data document located at <[www.census.gov/acs/www/Downloads/data\\_documentation/Accuracy\\_of\\_ACS\\_Accuracy\\_of\\_Data\\_2012.pdf](http://www.census.gov/acs/www/Downloads/data_documentation/Accuracy_of_ACS_Accuracy_of_Data_2012.pdf)>. Additional information about the foreign-born population is available on the Census Bureau's Web site at <[www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/foreign/index.html](http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/foreign/index.html)>.

### **CONTACT**

For additional information on these topics, please call the U.S. Census Bureau Customer Service Center at 1-866-758-1060 (toll free) or visit <[www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)>.

### **SUGGESTED CITATION**

Gambino, Christine P., Yesenia D. Acosta, and Elizabeth M. Grieco. *English-Speaking Ability of the Foreign-Born Population in the United States: 2012*. American Community Survey Reports, ACS-26. U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC. 2014.

Appendix A.

**Language Spoken at Home and English-Speaking Ability of the Foreign-Born Population by Country of Birth: 2012**

(Foreign-born population aged 5 and older. Numbers in thousands. Countries of birth are shown only for those with 100,000 or more people aged 5 and older living in the United States. Data based on sample. For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see [www.census.gov/acs/www/](http://www.census.gov/acs/www/))

Country of birth	Foreign born		Only English at home		Spoke a language other than English at home and English-speaking ability			
	Number	Margin of error (±) <sup>1</sup>	Percent of foreign born	Margin of error (±) <sup>1</sup>	Very well		Less than very well	
					Percent of foreign born	Margin of error (±) <sup>1</sup>	Percent of foreign born	Margin of error (±) <sup>1</sup>
<b>Total . . . . .</b>	<b>40,589</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>15.4</b>	<b>0.1</b>	<b>34.5</b>	<b>0.2</b>	<b>50.1</b>	<b>0.2</b>
Argentina . . . . .	176	8	9.9	1.3	55.7	2.3	34.4	2.2
Bangladesh . . . . .	186	11	4.4	0.9	41.9	2.2	53.7	2.2
Bosnia and Herzegovina . . . . .	121	8	4.2	1.2	47.2	2.8	48.6	3.0
Brazil . . . . .	324	12	10.9	1.0	48.3	2.0	40.8	2.0
Burma . . . . .	115	8	6.4	1.3	19.8	2.3	73.8	2.5
Cambodia . . . . .	159	10	7.9	1.4	25.9	2.2	66.2	2.3
Canada . . . . .	795	12	79.4	0.8	16.1	0.7	4.5	0.4
China . . . . .	2,280	33	8.6	0.3	30.4	0.6	61.0	0.6
Colombia . . . . .	675	21	6.2	0.5	41.3	1.1	52.5	1.2
Cuba . . . . .	1,110	25	5.8	0.4	32.6	0.9	61.6	0.9
Dominican Republic . . . . .	950	20	3.2	0.3	31.4	1.0	65.4	1.0
Ecuador . . . . .	419	17	4.6	0.6	32.3	1.5	63.1	1.6
Egypt . . . . .	170	11	12.3	1.5	48.7	2.3	39.0	2.3
El Salvador . . . . .	1,267	32	4.6	0.4	25.7	0.7	69.7	0.7
Ethiopia . . . . .	193	13	9.9	1.5	48.6	2.4	41.5	2.4
France . . . . .	165	8	24.8	1.9	57.0	2.4	18.2	1.9
Germany . . . . .	589	13	43.9	1.0	46.5	1.1	9.5	0.7
Ghana . . . . .	129	10	17.3	2.2	60.6	2.9	22.1	2.1
Greece . . . . .	135	6	14.2	1.6	45.1	2.0	40.7	2.1
Guatemala . . . . .	852	29	6.5	0.7	21.7	0.9	71.7	1.1
Guyana . . . . .	259	12	92.6	1.4	5.1	1.0	2.3	0.6
Haiti . . . . .	603	18	7.3	0.8	39.1	1.4	53.6	1.3
Honduras . . . . .	520	21	4.7	0.7	26.1	1.3	69.2	1.3
India . . . . .	1,944	31	9.2	0.5	65.0	0.6	25.8	0.7
Iran . . . . .	378	14	9.4	0.8	48.3	1.7	42.4	1.6
Iraq . . . . .	174	12	6.5	1.2	39.3	2.8	54.2	2.7
Ireland . . . . .	132	6	89.1	1.5	9.5	1.4	1.4	0.4
Israel . . . . .	136	8	19.5	2.3	59.5	2.4	21.0	2.2
Italy . . . . .	353	10	23.9	1.1	39.8	1.3	36.2	1.3
Jamaica . . . . .	678	20	91.7	0.9	6.7	0.8	1.6	0.3
Japan . . . . .	325	11	18.4	1.0	32.3	1.3	49.3	1.6
Kenya . . . . .	105	8	17.0	2.4	62.7	2.7	20.3	2.7
Korea . . . . .	1,075	23	16.2	0.7	29.8	0.8	54.0	0.8
Laos . . . . .	198	10	7.6	1.0	32.1	2.2	60.2	2.3
Lebanon . . . . .	121	7	11.7	2.0	54.1	2.5	34.2	2.5
Mexico . . . . .	11,520	72	3.5	0.1	27.1	0.2	69.4	0.2
Nicaragua . . . . .	258	14	5.5	1.0	36.5	2.4	58.0	2.5
Nigeria . . . . .	237	14	27.3	2.4	60.7	2.4	12.0	1.2
Pakistan . . . . .	311	15	6.4	0.8	57.8	1.9	35.8	1.7
Panama . . . . .	103	6	20.6	2.2	54.1	2.6	25.4	2.3
Peru . . . . .	425	17	5.4	0.6	40.1	1.4	54.5	1.3
Philippines . . . . .	1,861	28	14.0	0.5	56.1	0.7	29.9	0.6
Poland . . . . .	440	16	12.8	1.1	40.7	1.3	46.5	1.5
Portugal . . . . .	157	8	13.5	1.6	37.5	2.0	49.0	2.4
Romania . . . . .	166	9	17.2	1.8	49.4	2.0	33.4	2.2
Russia . . . . .	396	12	20.7	1.4	39.6	1.4	39.7	1.5
Thailand . . . . .	233	9	13.6	1.5	37.8	1.9	48.6	2.2
Trinidad and Tobago . . . . .	239	10	95.9	0.7	3.4	0.7	0.7	0.3
Turkey . . . . .	107	7	12.8	1.8	52.8	3.0	34.4	2.9
Ukraine . . . . .	340	10	9.1	0.8	37.4	1.7	53.6	1.7
United Kingdom (including Crown Dependencies) . . . . .	676	15	90.4	0.6	8.4	0.6	1.2	0.2
Venezuela . . . . .	193	10	6.3	1.0	58.9	2.2	34.8	2.1
Vietnam . . . . .	1,255	29	6.9	0.4	25.6	0.7	67.5	0.6
All other countries . . . . .	3,861	40	25.8	0.5	41.9	0.5	32.3	0.5

<sup>1</sup> Data are based on a sample and are subject to sampling variability. A margin of error is a measure of an estimate's variability. The larger the margin of error is in relation to the size of the estimate, the less reliable the estimate. When added to and subtracted from the estimate, the margin of error forms the 90 percent confidence interval.

Note: Percents may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. Responses of: China, Hong Kong, Macau, Paracel Islands, and Taiwan represent China; Korea, South Korea, and North Korea represent Korea; Portugal, the Azores, and Madeira represent Portugal; and United Kingdom, England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, Guernsey, Jersey, and Isle of Man represent the United Kingdom.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2012 American Community Survey, 1-year estimates.