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Speakers of English on decline in America

By Christopher Ingraham
Washington Post

Last Wednesday, a U.S. Border Patrol agent in Montana stopped and questioned two U.S. citizens for over 30 minutes after he overheard them speaking Spanish at a gas station.

The day before, a lawyer in New York City went viral after he was videotaped making xenophobic comments and threatening to call Immigration and Customs Enforcement on Spanish speakers in a deli.

The incidents underscore a key fact about modern American society: As of 2016, 35 million U.S. citizens over the age of 18, or more than 15 percent, speak a language other than English at home, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

What's more, census data show that the link between U.S. citizenship and English language use has been growing steadily weaker over the past few decades. But that's not because newcomers to the country are less likely to be proficient English speakers than their peers in earlier decades. If anything, English proficiency among non-native speakers is increasing.

Pick seven adult citizens at random from the U.S. population, and the odds are at least one of them speaks something other than English at home, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey.

If you include noncitizen residents, the odds are even higher: 66 million U.S. residents age 5 and older — 21.6 percent of that population — speak something other than English at home.

The share of non-English speakers has been rising steadily for over three decades. U.S. residents today are nearly twice as likely to speak something other than English at home as residents in 1980, for instance. The census doesn't have as much long-term data on the percent of adult citizens speaking something other than English, but since 2009 it's been rising in tandem with the share of all resident non-English speakers.

Non-English speaking households tend to be concentrated in the Southwest and southern Florida, primarily because most of them speak Spanish. But you can find significant proportions of non-English speaking households in most major metropolitan areas, including Atlanta, Chicago, and the Acela corridor running from Washington to Boston.

In 39 U.S. counties, a majority of adult citizens speak something other than English at home. Most of these counties lie along the southwest edge of Texas, but the largest of them are Bronx County in New York (1.3 million people with more than 53 percent of adult citizens not speaking English) and Miami-Dade County in Florida (2.5 million people with more than two-thirds of adult citizens not speaking English at home).

The Montana Border Patrol agent who questioned the two women at the gas station told them he did so because "you guys are speaking Spanish, which is very unheard of up here."

Montana is, in fact, one of the states with the lowest percentages of non-English speaking citizens: as of 2016 3.3 percent of adult Montana citizens spoke something other than English at home. Compare that to California, the state with the highest share of non-English speaking citizens, at over 35 percent.

But even 3.3 percent is far from unheard of. Pick 30 Montanans at random; odds are at least one of them speaks something other than English at home.

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