

Foreign Language Households and Linguistic Isolation

A language other than English is spoken in one quarter of all the region's households.

Residents who speak Spanish at home comprise 7% of the region's population, followed by Portuguese (2.7%), Chinese (2.5%) and French or French Creole (2.4%). While foreign-speaking households comprise a larger share of the population in urban municipalities such as Chelsea, Everett, and Malden (all 40% or more), there are a growing number of suburbs with an above average share of non-English households, such as Lexington, Acton, and Randolph.

Of households where a foreign language is spoken, 25% are "linguistically isolated," meaning that no one in the household 14 years and older speaks English very well, a slight increase from the year 2000 Census estimate (24%). Nearly one third of households speaking Spanish or an Asian/Pacific Islander language at home are linguistically isolated and about one fifth of households speaking other Indo-European languages (Portuguese, French, French Creole, Russian, Italian, Greek, and many others) experience difficulty speaking English.

Linguistic isolation has important implications for education, health care, and municipal services. It also affects how elections are conducted. The 1965 Voting Rights Act requires that language assistance be provided to voters in municipalities where the voting age population satisfies certain English proficiency and educational attainment criteria. In October 2011, the Census Bureau determined that Boston, Chelsea, Lynn, Quincy, and Revere are all required to provide such assistance.

Unfortunately, residents who do not speak English very well may face many barriers to learning the language. According to state education officials, there are 79 sites in the region that offer English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL) classes. However, demand dramatically exceeds supply: there is a 16,000-person waitlist for ESOL classes statewide. More resources and innovative service delivery models—such as workplace-based classes—are needed to help foreign language speakers learn English.

