

# The Integration of Immigrants into **AMERICAN SOCIETY**

## ISSUE BRIEF: Language Integration

The United States prides itself on being a nation of immigrants, and it has a long history of absorbing people from across the globe. Today, one of every four members of the American population is either an immigrant or has a parent who is an immigrant. How well they are successfully integrating is an important and pressing question.

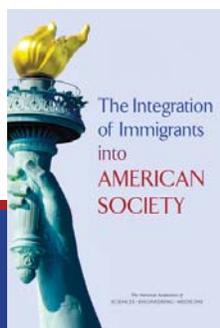
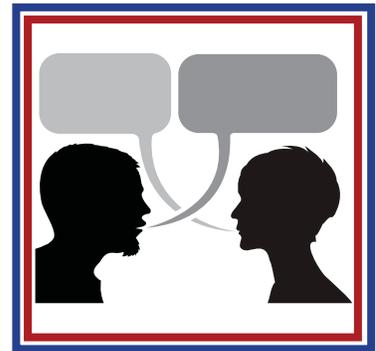
A panel of experts appointed by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine examined the available evidence to assess how immigrants are integrating into U.S. society in a range of areas—education, employment and earnings, language, and health, among others. The committee's findings are presented in its report, *The Integration of Immigrants Into American Society* (2015). The report concludes that across all measurable outcomes, current immigrants and their descendants are integrating into U.S. society.

**One facet of integration examined in the study was the rate at which immigrants are learning English. There is evidence that today's immigrants are learning English as fast or faster than did the waves of immigrants who arrived in America earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.**

### **Today's Immigrants Acquiring English as Quickly as Earlier Immigrants**

The vast majority of the U.S. population, whether born in the U.S. or abroad, agree that it is very or fairly important to be able to speak English. Language has a well-demonstrated effect on the ability of immigrants and their descendants to integrate in various aspects of societal life. English proficiency affects educational outcomes, employment opportunities, and earnings. Acquisition of English also affects immigrants' ability to engage in civic organizations, understand political discourse, and become citizens. Difficulty in communicating effectively with health care providers has been found to have a negative impact on health.

Language diversity in the U.S. has grown as the immigrant population has increased and become more varied. Today, about 85 percent of the foreign-born population speaks a language other



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than English at home. The most prevalent language by far is Spanish; 62 percent of all immigrants speak Spanish at home.

However, a more accurate measure of language integration is English-language proficiency—how well people speak English. According to current survey data, 66 percent of the foreign born who speak a language other than English at home report speaking English “very well” or “well,” while less than 10 percent speak it “not at all.”

Children of immigrants (the second generation) and later generations are acquiring English and losing their ancestors’ language at roughly the same rates as past immigrant waves; the transition to speaking solely English usually occurs within three generations. Spanish speakers and their descendants, however, appear to be acquiring English and losing Spanish more slowly than other immigrant groups. Yet research has found that even in the large Spanish-speaking concentration in Southern California, Mexican Americans’ transition to English dominance is all but complete by the third generation; only 4 percent still speak primarily Spanish at home.

While acquiring proficiency in English is important, there are potential benefits for immigrants and their descendants in retaining proficiency in their original language. There is some evidence that bilingualism in second-generation immigrants may be linked to better educational outcomes and expanded opportunities for employment. Various studies have found that bilingualism is associated with positive cognitive outcomes. Bilingualism also may benefit children’s social and emotional health.

## **Funding for English Language Education Has Declined**

Although the outlook for linguistic integration is generally positive, the barriers to English proficiency—particularly for immigrants who are low-skilled, poorly educated, residentially segregated or undocumented—are cause for concern. Funding for English-as-a-second-language classes has declined even as the population of English language learners has grown. English language learners account for 9 percent of all children in the K-12 system—and this presents challenges for many school systems. Overall, resources for education in English as a second language are limited for both adults and children, which may present barriers to successful integration, particularly in the first generation.

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This issue brief is one in a series prepared by the Committee on Population based on the report *The Integration of Immigrants Into American Society*. The study was sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Russell Sage Foundation, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services of the Department of Homeland Security, and the National Science Foundation, with additional support from the National Academy of Sciences Kellogg fund. Any findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the study committee and do not necessarily reflect those of the sponsors.