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How Well Do Spanish-Speaking U.S. Residents also Speak English? Recent Data from the American Community Survey

Mark J. Salling

Cleveland State University, m.salling@csuohio.edu

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Focus on Facts

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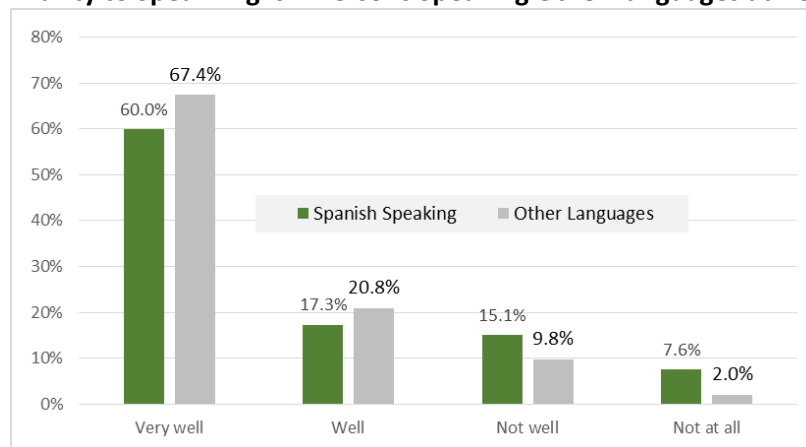
How Well Do Spanish-Speaking U.S. Residents also Speak English? Recent Data from the American Community Survey.

Mark Salling, Ph.D.

Senior Fellow and Research Associate

- A recent media controversy raised the issue of whether Spanish-speaking residents assimilate into U.S. society by learning to speak English.¹
- Studies have shown that language proficiency “is a key driver of immigrant integration. It increases job opportunities and facilitates social and political participation. However, despite its vital importance, many immigrants never reach adequate proficiency in the host country language.”²
- The Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS) includes questions about what language is spoken at home and, for persons who speak another language, how well the person speaks English. In 2017, the ACS estimates that 69.6 million U.S. residents do not use English as the principal language spoken at home. About 41 million use Spanish and 25.5 million use another language.

Figure 1: Ability to Speak English: Persons Speaking Other Languages at Home, 2017



- Figure 1 shows that the great majority of all U.S. residents who speak a non-English language at home also speak English “very well” or “well.”³ About 77.3 percent of those who speak Spanish at home also speak English “very well” or “well.” That proportion increases to 88.2 percent among those who speak other languages at home.

¹ Veteran broadcaster Tom Brokaw raised this topic during a January 27, 2019 interview on CNN.

² Ingo E. Isphording (2015). “What drives the language proficiency of immigrants?” *IZA World of Labor*, 177, p. 1.

³ American Community Survey, Public Use Microdata Sample, 2017. Data exclude residents less than 5 years old.

- Figures 2 and 3 show that a person's age is a factor. Among those under the age of 18 who speak Spanish at home, 94.2 percent also speak English "very well" or "well." That number drops only slightly among people under 18 who speak other languages at home (93.2 percent). Even among people over 60, more than half of residents whose language at home is not English, also speak English "very well" or "well" (59.6 percent among Spanish speakers and 69.3 percent among speakers of other languages).

Figure 2: Ability to Speak English: Persons Speaking Spanish at Home, by Age, 2017

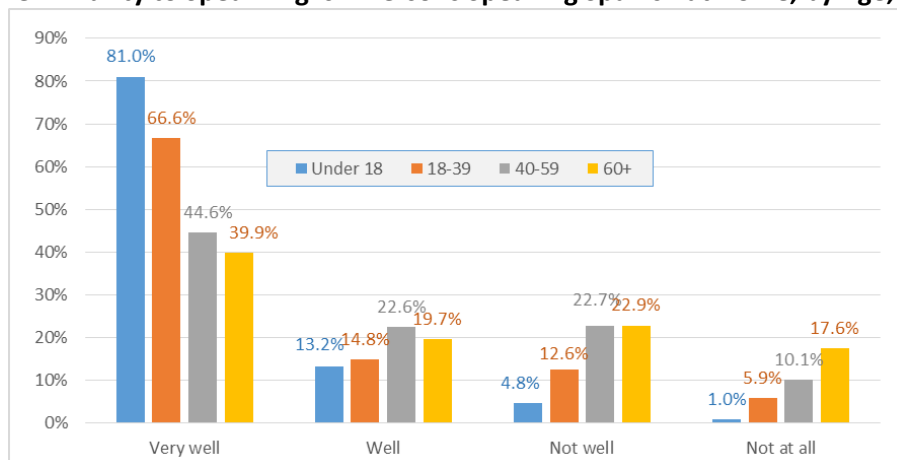
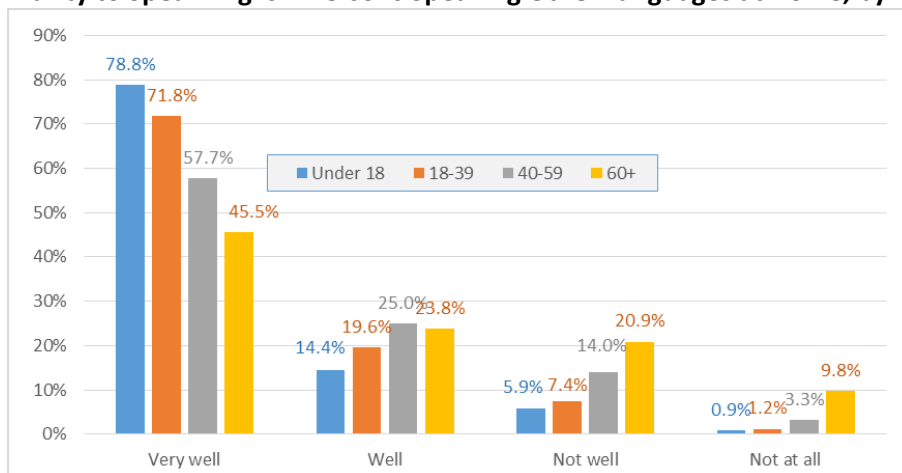


Figure 3: Ability to Speak English: Persons Speaking Other Languages at Home, by Age, 2017



- Research shows that age is not the only factor.⁴ Certainly the recency of the Latino immigration to the U.S. explains some of the difference. Other factors are: education, income, and residential segregation. It is also useful to keep in mind that current researchers dispute the notion that earlier immigrants learned English faster than recent immigrants.⁵

⁴ See Avi Wolfman-Arent, "Research Shows Spanish Speakers Take Longer To Learn English", National Public Radio, September 15, 2017. [accessed at <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2017/09/15/545629043/research-shows-spanish-speakers-take-longer-to-learn-english-why>]

⁵ See for example, Miranda E. Wilkerson and Joseph Salmons, (2008). "'Good Old Immigrants of Yesteryear' Who Didn't Learn English: Germans in Wisconsin", **American Speech**: 83; 3, pp. 259-283.