



Serving Non-English Speakers: 2007 Analysis of Library Demographics, Services and Programs

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Summary

American Library Association (ALA) study provides new information about library services and programs developed for non-English speakers, including effectiveness of services, barriers to library use, most frequently used services and most success library programs by language served.

Key Findings

Spanish is, by far, the most supported non-English language in public libraries. Seventy-eight percent of libraries reported Spanish as the priority #1 language to which they develop services and programs. Asian languages ranked second in priority at 29 percent. Another 17.6 percent of libraries indicated Indo-European languages as a second priority.

Smaller communities are serving a larger proportion of non-English speakers. The majority of libraries serving non-English speakers are in communities with fewer than 100,000 residents (484 of all responding libraries). The majority (53.6 percent) of residents in these smaller communities traveled between 1-3 miles to reach a library, and another 21 percent traveled between 4-6 miles.

Literacy is both a barrier for non-English speakers and is what most libraries support in specially designed services and programs for these patrons. Reading and library habits negatively impact use of the library by non-English speakers (76 percent). Knowledge of the services offered by the library was the second most frequent barrier to their participation (74.7 percent) identified by librarians.

Libraries reported the most successful library programs and services developed for non-English speakers were: English as a Second Language (ESL), language-specific materials and collections, computer use and computer classes, story time and special programs.

Implications

About 21 million people in the United States speak limited or no English – 50 percent more than a decade ago. Staff is faced daily with someone who needs services and does not speak English.

Over

These study findings can provide a venue for developing better and more precise materials, services and programs for those linguistically isolated. Librarians can better predict what specific language materials and services may be required to optimally serve non-English speaking groups by learning from the experiences of librarians in other parts of the country serving these groups. Research and experimentation can occur not only in a public library environment but can also use and incorporate other public agencies that are also challenged by communication with linguistically isolated populations in these studies.

Background

The study's goal was to develop an accurate baseline distribution of linguistically isolated areas in the United States relative to public library location. To do so, a comparative analysis of the US Census 2000 data category "linguistic isolation," relative to the geographic location of public library outlets, was conducted. Libraries serving these populations were identified, and subsequently, perceived effective library services, materials and activities were identified through survey of these libraries.

About 1,840 public library outlets, representing 672 unique public library entities in 41 states and the District of Columbia were identified. The states with no public library outlets within a one-mile radius of a linguistically-isolated block group were Alaska, Delaware, Mississippi, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, West Virginia, and Wyoming.

Of the 672 entities, 586 usable surveys were returned. Twenty-four were eliminated due to survey or data entry error by the surveyed library. Of the 586, 480 (82 percent) agreed they served a linguistically isolated market.

The study was funded by the 2006 World Book Goal Award and supported by the ALA Office for Research & Statistics, Office for Literacy and Outreach Services, Office for Diversity and Public Programs Office. Principal Investigators for the study were Dr. Christie M. Koontz, GeoLib Program, Florida State University (Tallahassee) and Dean Jue, independent consultant to the GeoLib Program.

Next steps

The final study report will be released in March 2008 to coincide with the Public Library Association National Conference. It also will be available online through the ALA Office for Office for Literacy and Outreach Services Web site, www.ala.org/nonenglishspeakers.

The Office for Literacy and Outreach Services and Public Programs Office will use the study data to develop advocacy and training tools for librarians that will launch at Annual Conference.

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