

Abstract

The large, diverse, and growing Hispanic population in the United States spans a range language backgrounds and contexts. Based on American Community Survey (ACS) responses, approximately 60% of Hispanic people either speak English “very well” or only speak English, while the remaining 40% either speak English “well,” “not well,” or not at all. Do Hispanic residents in urban areas report varying levels of English language use depending on where they live? In order to understand individual-level variation in English language use in the Hispanic population, I introduce a measure of language segregation using ACS contextual data. By comparing the spatial distribution of Hispanic residents (by each level of English language use) across census tracts in urban areas, I examine whether Hispanic language skills are related to their local context. Language segregation captures, for example, how far apart Hispanics who only speak English live from Hispanics who speak another language. I find that Hispanic residents living in urban areas marked by high levels of language segregation are less likely to report speaking English. By contrast, those living in suburbs with high levels of language segregation are more likely to speak English. I discuss the implications of examining variation in the language experiences of Hispanic residents and the insights gained from measuring language segregation.