

PRESS RELEASE

Embargoed Until 12:01 AM ET, Wednesday, September 24, 2014

CONTACT: Allison Courtin, 202-238-3556, acourtin@brookings.edu

Read more at: <http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports2/2014/09/english-skills-embargo>

Limited English Proficient Workers More Productive with Increased Investment in English Skills

Brookings Releases First-Ever Metro-Level Analysis of Limited English Proficient Workers in U.S. Metropolitan Areas

(Washington, DC) – Almost one in ten adults of working age in the United States lacks full proficiency in English. English proficiency is a strong predictor of economic standing among immigrants regardless of the amount of education they have attained, and it is associated with the greater academic and economic success of the workers' children. Conversely, limited English proficiency represents a loss of productivity that results in not only lower wages, but also lower tax revenues and consumer spending for local areas.

Immigrant workers and their children will account for virtually all of the growth in the US labor force in the coming decades. Investing in their skills—including English proficiency—is critical to building and maintaining a skilled workforce, according to a new report by the Brookings Institution's Metropolitan Policy Program.

Investing in English Skills: The Limited English Proficient Workforce in U.S. Metropolitan Areas is the first study to date to track the working-age limited English proficient (LEP) population on a metropolitan level. Based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2012 American Community Survey, the report identifies 89 of the most populous U.S. metro areas and ranks them for 1) size and share of their population that is LEP and 2) growth or decline in their LEP population since 2000. It also provides detailed characteristics of metro areas' LEP workforce, including the languages they speak, the occupations and industries in which they work, employment rates, median income and educational attainment.

“National, state, and regional leaders can enhance both the human capital and economic mobility of their current and future workforce by investing in English instruction,” said Jill H. Wilson, senior research analyst and associate fellow, and author of the report. “As the nation discusses how to build a skilled workforce, a focus on

enabling immigrants to become more productive members of society will help everyone in the long run.”

Nearly 1 in 10 working age U.S. adults—19.2 million persons aged 16-64—is considered LEP. Two-thirds of this population speaks Spanish, but speakers of Asian and Pacific Island languages are the most likely to be LEP. Working age LEP adults earn as much as 25-40 percent less than their English-proficient counterparts. While the vast majority of LEP adults are immigrants, 13 percent are native born, mostly from Puerto Rico.

Funding for adult English instruction has stagnated while the LEP population has increased. The size of the working-age LEP population is more than 2.5 times what it was in 1980, and the LEP share of the U.S. working-age population has almost doubled from 4.8 in 1980 to 9.3 percent in 2012. However, funding for adult education at the federal level has not kept pace.

Individuals wishing to enroll in English classes face access difficulties. A 2006 study showed that 57 percent of 187 education providers across the US. had waiting lists, with wait times ranging from a few weeks to over three years. A 2010 survey of 1,368 providers found that 72 percent (in all 50 states) had waiting lists of individuals who had a desire to access services but could not. Moreover, wait times had doubled since the survey two years prior.

“English proficiency is the most essential means of opening doors to economic opportunity for immigrant workers in the United States,” noted Wilson. “Yet access to acquiring these skills is persistently limited by a lack of resources and attention.”

LEP workers are concentrated in low-paying jobs for which high levels of education are not a requirement, with two-thirds of working age LEP adults concentrated in just six industry categories: manufacturing, accommodations/food services, construction, retail trade, health/social services, and administrative/waste management services. The private households category has the highest share (33 percent), followed by agriculture (27 percent).

Metro areas with high concentrations of immigrants—especially metro areas in **California** and **Texas**—dominate the list of metros with the highest share of their working-age populations that is LEP. Among the top ten metros, **Miami** is the only area not in California or Texas. Miami and Los Angeles stand out both for their number and share of population that is LEP; in each of the metro areas, LEP adults represent about a quarter of the working age population. **San Francisco** is the only other metro area that ranks among the top 10 for both the number and percent of its working-age population who are LEP. **New York City** - where 2.3 million LEP individuals make up 18 percent of the population, ranks 11th for LEP share. **Cape Coral** more than doubled its

working-age LEP between 2000-2012, and **Lakeland, Indianapolis, and Omaha** each saw between 95-99 percent growth. Los Angeles was the only metro area to experience a decline in its LEP population.

By providing metro-level data, the Brookings report provides regional decision makers with data they need to tailor their outreach depending on the languages spoken, educational attainment, employment status, income and other characteristics of their LEP population. It also provides federal policymakers with a better understanding of the demand for and gaps in adult English instruction. This topic is particularly important should there be changes to our immigration system that require some level of English proficiency.

The report's recommendations include:

- Increased funding from the Workforce Investment Act, the main source of federal funding for adult education, including English instruction, as well as at the state and local level
- Employer-initiated English education programs particularly in the industries with the highest numbers of LEP workers
- Targeted outreach based on knowledge of the LEP population size, growth, and period of arrival, as well as knowledge of languages spoken, educational attainment and earnings, and industry and occupation
- Instructional innovation enabling LEP adults to access instruction at the worksite, online, and by mobile device

“Given the large number of LEP workers in the United States and the fact that virtually all of the growth in the U.S. labor force over the next four decades is projected to come from immigrants and their children, it is in our collective interest to tackle this challenge head on,” notes Wilson.

###

The Metropolitan Policy Program at Brookings provides decision-makers with cutting-edge research and policy ideas for improving the health and prosperity of metropolitan areas. To learn more, please visit: www.brookings.edu/metro. Follow us on Twitter at www.twitter.com/brookingsmetro.

This information is being sent to you by:

Brookings Institution
1775 Massachusetts Ave NW, Washington, DC 20036
<http://www.brookings.edu/>