



Speaking My Language:

Languages other Than English, Educational Attainment Levels, and Median Incomes in South Carolina's Minority Communities

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Summary

This report examines the interplay between educational attainment and linguistic ability for South Carolina's racial and ethnic minority populations. Furthermore, it assess how English-language abilities and educational achievement affect median personal income levels.

Education has traditionally been regarded as one of the key pathways to economic success. The refrain often goes, "The higher your educational attainment, the higher your socioeconomic prosperity." This phrase is based on the belief that economic rewards are given to those who work hard. Moreover, it forms part of the belief that poor living conditions can be overcome solely by obtaining a good education. However, English-language skills and race are two variables that contribute to decidedly unequal educational attainment and socioeconomic outcomes.

Overall, it is imperative that the basic skills taught as part of today's high school curricula meet the challenges of tomorrow. A high school diploma (or its equivalent) should open up professional opportunities by indicating that an individual has acquired the critical thinking skills necessary for success in higher education or the workforce. Nationally, from 1960 to 2020, the rate for all Americans aged 25 and up with at least a high school diploma (or equivalent) jumped from 41.1% to 90.1%. Simultaneously, the proportion of people with college or postgraduate education skyrocketed from 7.7% to 37.5%.*

For those unable to finish high school, the option to take the General Educational Development (GED) examination is available. The GED exam gauges whether an individual has acquired an equivalent level of academic skills and knowledge as a regular high school graduate. Currently, the GED exam is offered in English across the United States of America and Canada, as well as two other languages: Spanish in the United States and French in Canada. Thus, this brief assesses the effectiveness of the Spanish-language option of the GED examination, especially as it pertains to improving educational attainment and personal income measures in South Carolina. Additionally, it

assesses English language skills on wages. The brief is particularly focused on analyzing the potential impact of higher educational attainment levels on social and economic mobility for South Carolina's Hispanic population. For adults aged 20 and up, 59% (+/- 0.7%) of all persons who speak a language other than English in their home, speak Spanish. Furthermore, 76.2% (+/- 1.2%) all adults age 20 and up who do not speak English at all or "Not Well," speak Spanish.

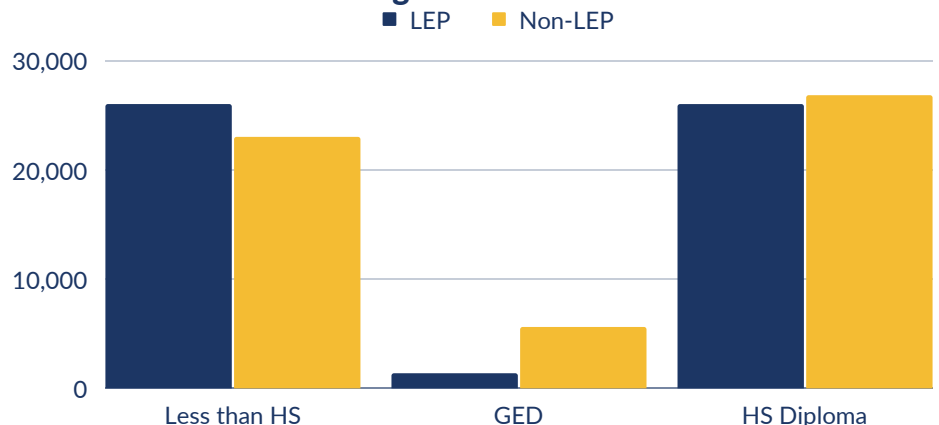
In general, people with an educational attainment of less than a high school diploma constitute a relatively small portion of the state's population of adults age 20 and above, approximately 11.5% (+/- 0.1%). However, more than half of all adults without a high school diploma or equivalent are racial minorities, with around 35.5% identifying as African American and 12.1% identifying as Hispanic. Indeed, nearly 30% of all adult Hispanics do not have a high school diploma or its equivalent.

Language Skills and the Non-College Educated

For all South Carolinian adults without higher-level academic experience, 61.4% graduated high school, another 10.5% received their GED, and nearly 28.1% did not finish high school or receive their GED. Of these groups, those with less than high school equivalent education had a median personal income of around \$12,000 (+/- \$128) per year in 2020, while those who received a high school diploma earned around \$20,000 (+/- \$153). Adults who received their GEDs had median incomes of \$18,000 (+/- \$382).

Among native Spanish-speakers aged 20 and older who have not attended an institute of higher education, 52.9% (+/- 2.4%) were unable to complete high school or attain a GED. Around 39.6% (+/- 2.3%) graduated high school, while 7.5% (+/- 1.3%) opted for a GED. We also analyzed those who claimed that their command of the English language was "not well" or "not at all," and found that this group's "less than high school" share was 69.8% (+/- 3.7%) while the share that opted for a GED declined to 3.7% (+/- 1.6%). In other words, the facility

Educational Attainment of Adult Spanish-speaking Population that Did Not Attend Institutions for Higher Education



See: Duffin, Erin (2022) <https://www.statista.com/statistics/184260/educational-attainment-in-the-us/>

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau: 2020 American Community Survey Public Use Microdata Sample. Margins of Error at 95% Confidence interval.



with which Spanish speakers can engage effectively with the English language contributed significantly to the proportion of non-college educated individuals who obtained a high school diploma or GED. One of the reasons for this state of affairs is that, despite the general availability of the GED test in Spanish, in the state of South Carolina its use has yet to be approved.

Personal Income and English Language Abilities

There is an unstated assumption associated with these estimates, "How much does not being able to speak English well cost non-native speakers?" As mentioned previously, factors such as linguistic abilities, educational attainment, as well as race and ethnicity, play significant roles in both individual and state-level social and economic development. In 2020, estimates indicate that speakers of languages other than English as a whole had a median income of \$22,000 (+/- \$587), and for those with Limited English Proficiency (LEP) that figure was \$15,000 (+/- \$382). For those that only speak English, median personal income was \$25,010 (+/- \$153). There is an interesting anomaly in that those non-native English speakers that claim they speak English very well count on median personal incomes of \$28,000 (+/- \$1,020), a figure buttressed by higher levels of educational attainment.

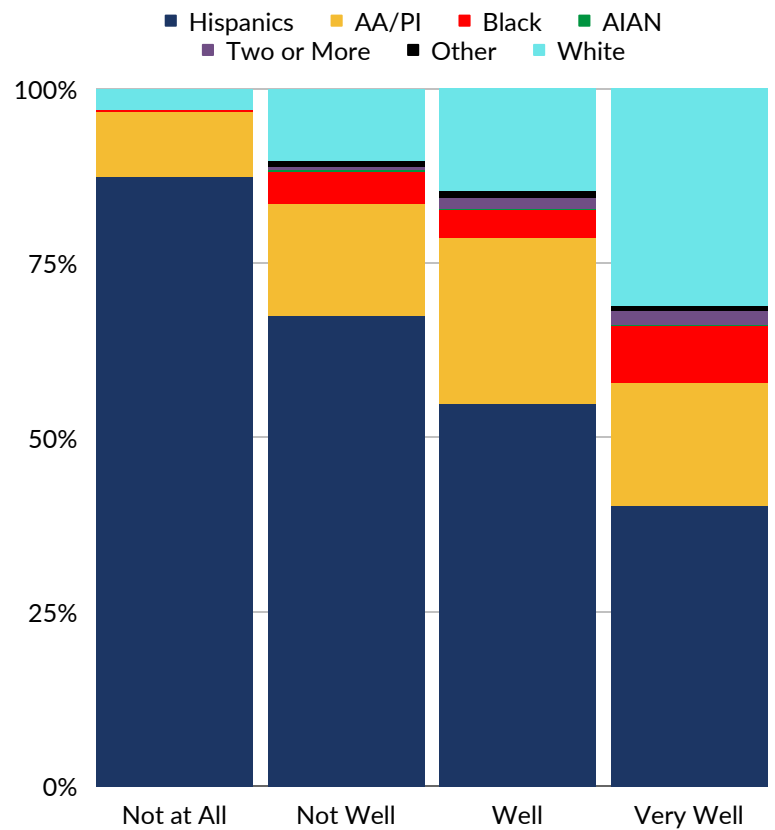
This data from the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey indicates that one's ability to speak English directly influences how capable an individual is of actively participating in the labor force. Indeed, the median age for all adults aged 20 and above for every category except "Only English" was between 43.2-44.3 years of age. Despite a 14.5% difference in the labor force participation rates of those who speak English "Very Well" and those who do not speak it at all, we find less than six months difference in median age. When controlling for those in the labor force, we find significantly lower median ages for all groups, including those who speak "Only English."

Considering that Hispanics and Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AA/PI) comprise the vast majority of the state's LEP population, this issue is one that deeply affects the state's minority communities. As such, of LEP individuals that do not speak English at all, 87.3% identify as Hispanic and 9.3% as AA/PI, and of all that do not speak it well 67.3% identify as Hispanic and 16.1% as AA/PI. Pragmatically, the state could promote personal and economic development by permitting the GED examination to be given in Spanish and French. In addition, providing all non-Native English speakers with greater access to courses in English as a Second Language (ESL) might increase labor force participation as younger immigrant cohorts of all races and ethnicities come to call South Carolina home.

Summary Profile of Adults Age 20 and Up by English Language Ability

English Speaking Ability	Percent of Total	Median Income	Percent Bachelor's and Up	Percent in Labor Force
Not at All	0.3%	\$10,400	3.2%	58.6%
Not Well	1.2%	\$16,000	12.5%	64.7%
Well	1.4%	\$20,100	22.8%	69.7%
Very Well	3.9%	\$28,000	39.9%	73.1%
Only English	93.1%	\$25,010	27.3%	60.9%

Racial Breakdown of Non-Native English Speakers by English Speaking Ability



Summary Profile of Adults in the Labor Force Age 20 and Up by English Language Ability

English Speaking Ability	Percent of Total	Median Income	Percent Bachelor's and Up	Unemployment Rate
Not at All	0.3%	\$18,000	2.1%	3.2%
Not Well	1.3%	\$23,400	11.5%	4.4%
Well	1.6%	\$28,000	21.2%	2.6%
Very Well	4.7%	\$36,000	43.3%	5.0%
Only English	92.1%	\$35,000	31.8%	5.0%

All data and graphics produced and generated by the authors using R Studio. Graphics created in ggplot2 package. Data processed and analyzed with the help of tidycensus and svyr packages.

Please contact the S.C. Commission for Minority Affairs Research Program Director, Dr. Robert Fenton, regarding any questions and concerns pertaining to this document. rfenton@cma.sc.gov

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau: 2009-2019 American Community Survey Public Use Microdata Sample,

