

The languages spoken in Alaska

Alaska's language mix differs from the rest of the U.S.

By DAVID PHILLIPS

Alaska's unique mix of indigenous and immigrant communities has created a language use pattern unlike any other state.

About 16 percent of Alaskans primarily speak a language other than English at home, compared to 22 percent nationally.

While Alaska is slightly more English-oriented than the national average, the state has a relatively high percentage of indigenous language speakers and is one of the few states where Spanish isn't the overwhelmingly dominant second language.

Only about 3 percent of Alaskans primarily speak Spanish at home, compared to 13 percent for the U.S. That small percentage still makes Spanish the second most common language spoken in the state — but Alaska Native languages when grouped are spoken more than Spanish. (See the sidebar on page 7 for more on Native languages in these data sets.)

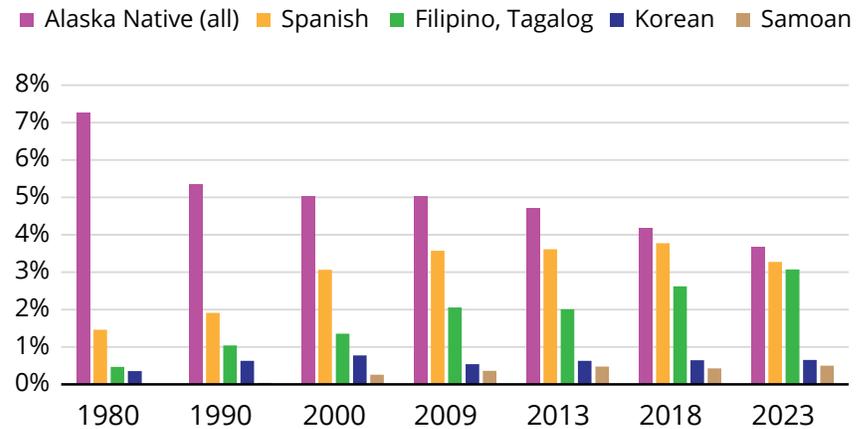
After Alaska Native languages and Spanish, the state's third most common other language is Tagalog, spoken in the Philippines. More than half of Asian Alaskans are Filipino.

How Alaska's language patterns have changed

In the 1980 Census, around 12 percent of Alaskans spoke another language at home, and the largest non-English language group was a collapsed "American Indian" category, followed by a very small Spanish-speaking population.

Besides indigenous languages and English, all other groups were tiny. They did, however, reflect some of

2023's top 5 non-English languages, over time



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, decennial censuses through 2000 and then 5-Year American Community Surveys, for Alaska

Alaska's early immigration history, with small numbers of European languages and Tagalog. Other languages from Southeast Asia were virtually absent.

German ranked fourth in 1980, at just under 1 percent and about half as common as Spanish. French was sixth, roughly tied with Tagalog at a fraction of a percent.

Alaska's language mix changed dramatically between 1980 and 2023, the most recent data year available from the Census Bureau. (See the exhibit above.)

English remains the most common by far, but its primary use fell from 87 percent to 84 percent.

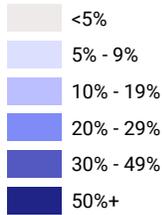
The share for Alaska Native — including Native American — languages also declined, from 7 percent in 1980 to 4 percent in 2023.

Spanish jumped from 1 percent to a little over 3 percent. Tagalog use grew considerably and is now about as common as Spanish in Alaska.

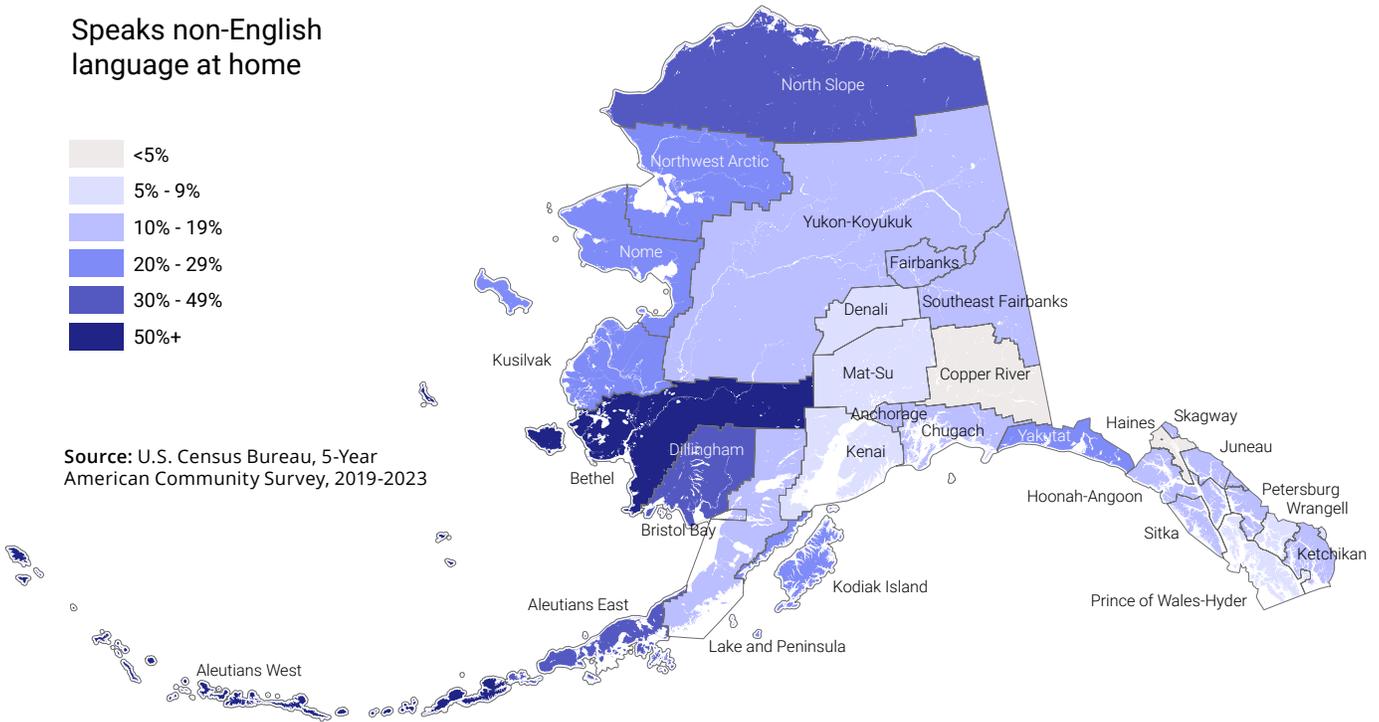
Hmong and Samoan, which were not listed in the 1980 Census, ranked among the 10 most common languages in Alaska by 2023. Hmong, or Miao, is spoken in southern China, Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand.

The percentage who speak another language at home by area, 2023

Speaks non-English language at home



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 5-Year American Community Survey, 2019-2023



The most common other European language in Alaska is now Russian, in eighth place in 2023. German was ninth, but German and Russian each represented less than 1 percent.

but its dominance is narrow, with Tagalog nearly as common after its use grew much faster than Spanish. Nationally and in almost every other state, however, no other second language comes close to Spanish.

Language in the U.S. and the dominance of Spanish

More immigration from Latin America and Asia, as well as the dwindling use of European languages aside from English and Spanish, have also been national trends.

The only states without Spanish as a strong second language are Maine and Hawaii. French is second for Maine, which borders Quebec. In Hawaii, it's Tagalog, which is even more common than Hawaiian. Only about 2 percent speak Hawaiian at home, and Spanish doesn't even rank in the top five in Hawaii.

In 1980, roughly 89 percent of Americans spoke English at home and 5 percent spoke Spanish. Other European languages were common as a second language in the U.S. at that time, with Italian, German, and French rounding out the top five.

Patterns for Alaska Native and Native American languages

By 2023, like Alaska, the U.S. top five had no European languages aside from English and Spanish. The most prominent, in seventh place, was French. Spanish use in the U.S. climbed to 13 percent.

The Census Bureau shows a static trend for indigenous languages in Alaska. The number of primary speakers has fluctuated, but it appeared to peak in 2010 and has declined slightly since.

As mentioned above, as an individual language spoken at home, Spanish ranks second in Alaska

Relative to 1980, the number of people in Alaska speaking an Alaska Native or Native American language now is about the same, although the proportion has declined as more international languages have entered the mix.

Primary languages spoken by area in Alaska, 2023

Area	English	Non-English	Breakdown of non-English			
			Spanish	Other Indo-Euro	Asian/Pac Isl	Other
Alaska	84%	16%	3%	2%	6%	4%
Aleutians East Borough	60%	40%	9%	6%	21%	5%
Aleutians West Census Area	44%	56%	9%	5%	37%	5%
Anchorage Municipality	82%	18%	5%	2%	9%	2%
Bethel Census Area	40%	60%	0%	1%	2%	56%
Bristol Bay Borough	84%	16%	3%	4%	5%	4%
Chugach Census Area	86%	14%	3%	2%	7%	1%
Copper River Census Area	96%	4%	0%	0%	0%	4%
Denali Borough	91%	9%	2%	3%	4%	0%
Dillingham Census Area	62%	38%	1%	3%	1%	33%
Fairbanks North Star Borough	90%	10%	4%	2%	3%	2%
Haines Borough	96%	4%	1%	1%	1%	1%
Hoonah-Angoon Census Area	85%	15%	3%	2%	1%	9%
Juneau City and Borough	89%	11%	3%	0%	5%	2%
Kenai Peninsula Borough	93%	7%	2%	2%	2%	1%
Ketchikan Gateway Borough	89%	11%	2%	1%	7%	1%
Kodiak Island Borough	73%	27%	4%	2%	18%	2%
Kusilvak Census Area	73%	27%	2%	0%	0%	25%
Lake and Peninsula Borough	87%	13%	0%	1%	3%	9%
Matanuska-Susitna Borough	94%	6%	2%	2%	1%	1%
Nome Census Area	75%	25%	1%	1%	2%	21%
North Slope Borough	63%	37%	4%	2%	7%	24%
Northwest Arctic Borough	74%	26%	1%	0%	3%	22%
Petersburg Borough	83%	17%	4%	2%	10%	1%
Prince of Wales-Hyder Census Area	93%	7%	1%	1%	1%	4%
Sitka City and Borough	87%	13%	4%	1%	6%	1%
Skagway Municipality	83%	17%	5%	9%	2%	2%
Southeast Fairbanks Census Area	85%	15%	2%	8%	2%	3%
Wrangell City and Borough	93%	7%	1%	0%	4%	2%
Yakutat City and Borough	79%	21%	2%	5%	9%	5%
Yukon-Koyukuk Census Area	86%	14%	1%	0%	2%	11%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 5-Year American Community Survey, 2019-2023

Combined Native American languages are the third most common category in five states: New Mexico, Arizona, South Dakota, Montana, and Wyoming.

As far as where speakers of indigenous American languages live, Arizona is first, home to 29 percent of all Native American language speakers in the country. New Mexico is second at about 23 percent, followed by Alaska at 7 percent.

Arizona and New Mexico have two corners of the Four Corners region, the vast ancestral homeland of the Navajo, Hopi, Ute, and Zuni. The Navajo reservation is the largest in the United States.

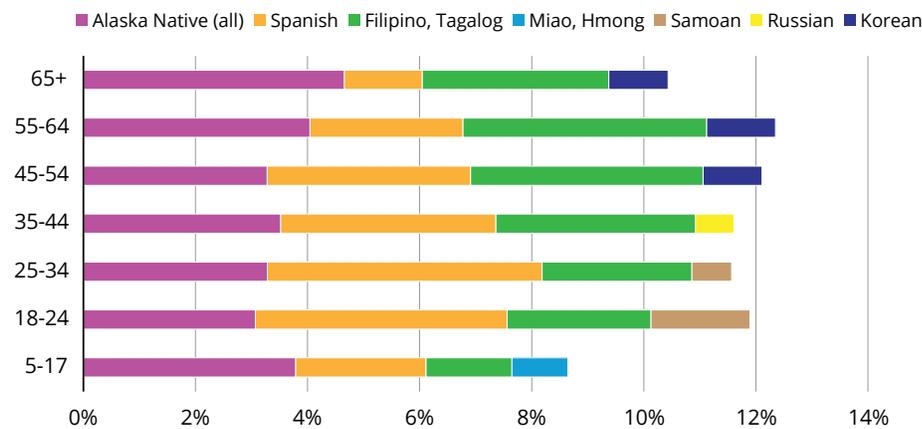
What is spoken around Alaska

By area, northern and western Alaska have the highest proportions of people primarily speaking a language other than English at home, and they are the majorities in the Bethel and Aleutians West census areas. (See the map on the previous page and the table on the left.)

Language data at the local level are less detailed and reliable than at the state level. The only categories available are English, Spanish, other Indo-European languages, Asian and Pacific Islander languages, and "other" languages.

In the Bethel Census Area, 56 percent speak a language in the "other"

Top languages vary by age group in Alaska, 2023



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 5-Year American Community Survey, 2019-2023

category, which includes all Native American and Alaska Native languages. That reflects both the Alaska Native majority in that part of Alaska and the focus on learning, teaching, and using Native languages.

The Aleutians West Census Area, on the other hand, shows 37 percent speaking an Asian or Pacific Islander language, 9 percent speaking Spanish, and 5 percent speaking another Indo-European language. The area has a diverse commercial fishing industry and immigrant populations in fishing communities such as Unalaska.

Among urban areas, Anchorage has the largest share of primary non-English speakers, with 18 percent speaking a language other than English at home.

All other urban boroughs have a higher percentage of solely English speakers than statewide. Only about 6 percent of Mat-Su residents mainly speak a different language, followed by Kenai at 7 percent, Fairbanks at 10 percent, and Juneau at 11 percent.

The most common languages differ by age group in Alaska

The difference in primary languages by age group in Alaska also reflects the shifts in immigration over time, shown in the exhibit at the bottom of the previous page.

About 88 percent of kids in Alaska, ages 5 to 17, speak primarily English at home. Native languages are second, followed by Spanish, Tagalog, and Hmong. Hmong only made the top five for the youngest age group, and a plurality of Alaskan Hmong speakers are under 18.

Among young adults and younger middle-aged adults, Spanish is the second most common language in Alaska. In the 45-to-54-year-old group, Tagalog surpasses Spanish for second place.

The higher rates for Tagalog and Spanish in Alaska's middle age groups reflect immigration patterns among generations, where immigrants

About the data

Data from the U.S. Census Bureau's decennial censuses and American Community Survey on languages spoken at home are for ages 5 and older. These numbers are for individuals who primarily speak a different language in their home, but it does not mean they don't speak English.

Categorizing Alaska Native languages

Alaska Native languages are typically grouped in Census data collections, including with other Native American languages. Native American languages in general have been inconsistently grouped and labeled over the decades.

The only detailed breakdown of individual Native languages in Alaska came during the 1990 Census, and it was an inconsistent list with some mislabeled or misspelled categories.

The 1990 Census showed Alaska Natives speaking primarily Yupik. "Inupik/Innuait" was a distant second, at less than half the Yupik speakers, followed in order by "Eskimo," "Athapascan," Aleut, St. Lawrence Island Yupik, Kuchin, Tsimshian, Apache, Koyukon, and Tanaina.

from Latin America and the Philippines are likely to speak their first language at home while their children are more likely to speak English first.

Native languages are the second most common among Alaskans over age 65, at 5 percent.

Older Alaskans speak Spanish at a much lower rate than other age groups — only about 1 percent — and 3 percent speak Tagalog, which is similar to middle-aged Alaskans.

About 1 percent of Alaskans 45 and older speak Korean, a language that doesn't make the top five for any other age group.

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