

BECOMING AN AMERICAN: THE VIETNAMESE

**THE FIRST IN A SERIES OF EXAMINATIONS
OF ASSIMILATION AND LANGUAGE
LEARNING PATTERNS AMONG IMMIGRANTS**

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Vietnam: The Nation

A serpentine-shaped country in southeast Asia, Vietnam borders China on the north, Cambodia and Laos on the west, and the South China Sea elsewhere. Though comparable in land area to the state of New Mexico, Vietnam's population exceeds 80 million people, or more than that of California, Texas and New York combined. Vietnamese is the official language of the country; secondary languages include French, Chinese, English, and Khmer.

Vietnam's history has had alternating periods of division and unification. It enjoyed several centuries of independence after finally driving out the Chinese in 1428, and in 1757 it was briefly divided in two until it was reunited in 1802 by General Nguyen Anh. Vietnam's independence came to an end in the latter half of the 19th century, when it was conquered by the French. France ruled Vietnam as a colony from 1883 to 1939 and as a possession from 1939 to 1945, during which time it introduced modern education, Christianity, and a plantation economy.

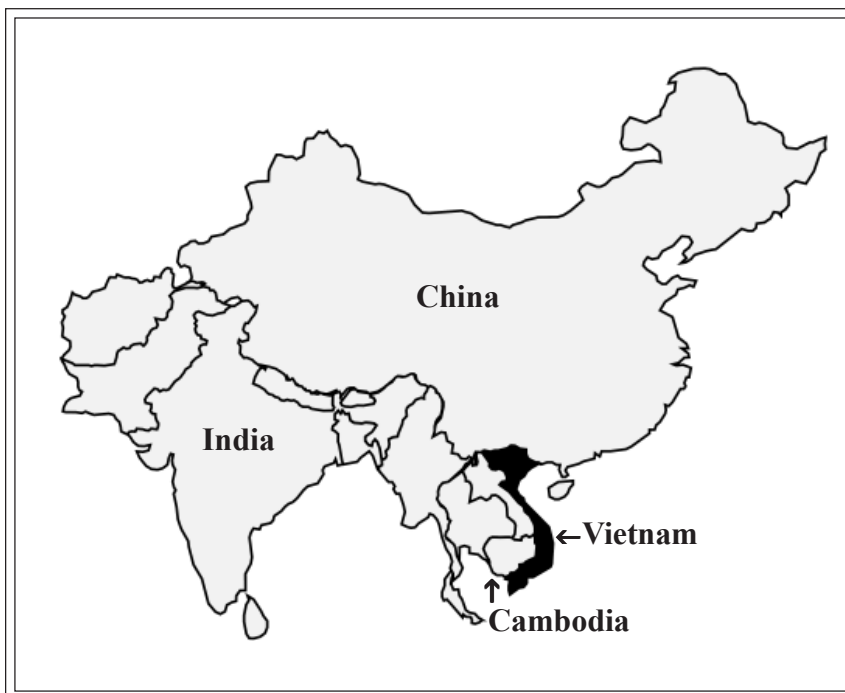
When Japan invaded French Indochina in 1941, the nationalist movement led by communist Ho Chi Minh fought first to drive out the Japanese and then to establish independence from France. The First Indochina War between the nationalists and French forces lasted from 1946 to 1954. The war ended with the Geneva Agreements, which declared a cease-fire and divided Vietnam along the 17th parallel. Northern Vietnam was given to the communists, while South Vietnam was handed to non-communist rule.

Though Vietnam's division was meant to be temporary until elections could be held in 1956, worries over the type of government that would prevail delayed the proposed unification. The disagreements between North and South eventually led to the Vietnam War, also known as the Second Indochina War.

In 1960 Communist-sponsored insurgency in South Vietnam was united into a single movement, the National Front for the Liberation of Vietnam. A period of political chaos began, with one military government after another seizing power. In 1965 the war began to escalate, with an initial March deployment of 3,500 U.S. soldiers increased to 200,000 by December. In 1967, public support for the war sharply declined, and U.S.

soldiers began withdrawing from the country in 1973. The fall of Saigon gave North Vietnam a final victory in April 1975, and hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese fled. The united country was named The Socialist Republic of Vietnam in 1976.

Vietnam later fought another war against Cambodia in 1978 to remove the Khmer Rouge from power, and went to battle again in 1979, this time against China. Economic reforms in the mid-1980s led to significant growth in the economy. In 1994, the United States reestablished diplomatic relations with Vietnam for the first time in 19 years.



History of Immigration

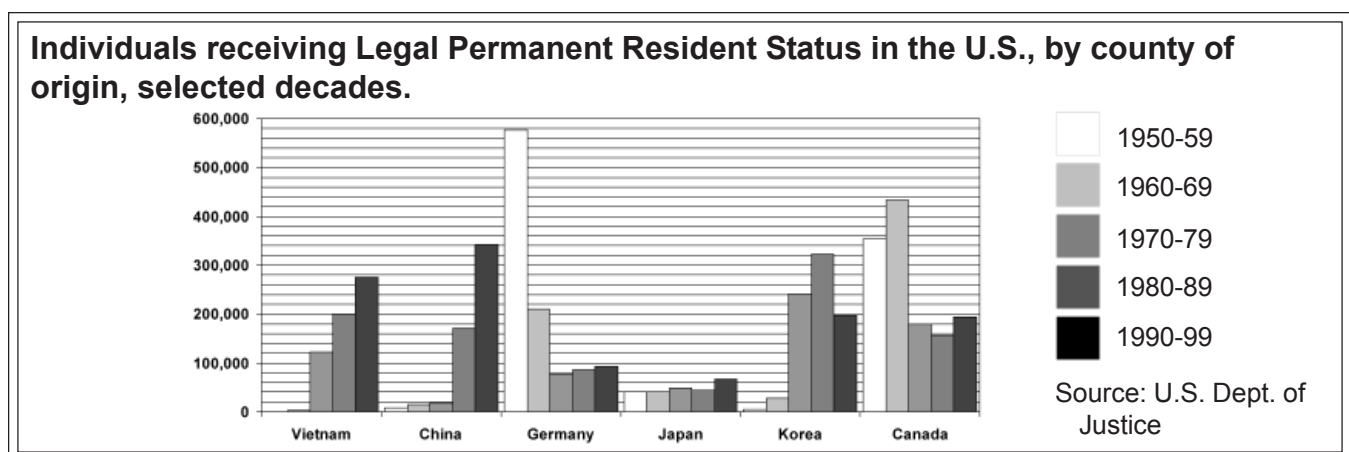
Vietnamese immigration to the United States was virtually non-existent prior to the mid-1970s. An examination of data from the United States Department of Justice indicates that the number of Vietnamese obtaining legal permanent resident (LPR) status in the United States was so small that it warranted no mention from 1820 to 1949. Not until the 1950s do we find Vietnamese receiving LPR status, and even then, the population is only 290 for the entire decade. Though the 1950s were a time of limited immigration to the United States, the Vietnamese LPR total falls far short of other nations, including Ireland (47,189), China (8,836), Egypt (1,996), Belize (1,133), even Suriname (299) [1].

In the 1960s, the number of Vietnamese obtaining LPR status increased ten-fold, but the total figure of 2,949 was still miniscule compared to other nations, and represented just 0.09% of the total. As late as 1970, the Vietnamese population was so small that the U.S. Census classified Vietnamese in the “Other” race category.

After the fall of South Vietnam in April 1975, tens of thousands of Vietnamese left the country by whatever means possible. The U.S. took in more than 100,000 Vietnamese refugees, housing them temporarily at military bases in Pennsylvania, Florida, Arkansas and California, where they were offered English classes and workshops about American culture.

The aftereffects of the Vietnam War changed the face of Vietnamese immigration to the United States. Beginning in the 1970s, the Vietnamese population transformed from a rare sight to one of the most recognized and noticeable flavors in the American melting pot. In response to policies imposed by the new communist government in Vietnam, a second wave of refugees began in 1977 and continued through the early 1980s.

All told, the number of Vietnamese obtaining LPR status soared from 2,949 in the 1960s to 121,716 in the 1970s, the latter figure representing nearly three percent of all LPR grantees. In the 1980s, LPR status was obtained by 200,632 Vietnamese, and in the 1990s, by 275,379 more. Figures from 2000-2007 indicate that the most recent numbers will match or exceed this record [1].



Consequently, the number of Vietnamese living in the United States has soared. Among those classifying themselves as Vietnamese, the population has risen from 245,025 in 1980 to 1,122,528 in 2000 to an estimated 1.5 million in 2006. The Vietnamese-born population, that is, the number of people living in the United States who immigrated from Vietnam, increased from 543,262 in 1990 to 988,174 in 2000 to 1.12 million in 2006.

Settlement Patterns

During the mass resettlement of 125,000 Vietnamese refugees in 1975, the U.S. government hoped to avoid the formation of linguistic enclaves by scattering the new immigrants in communities across the nation. It was hoped that spreading out the Vietnamese refugees, who tended to have minimal English skills, would minimize the impact on local schools, social service programs, and economies [2].

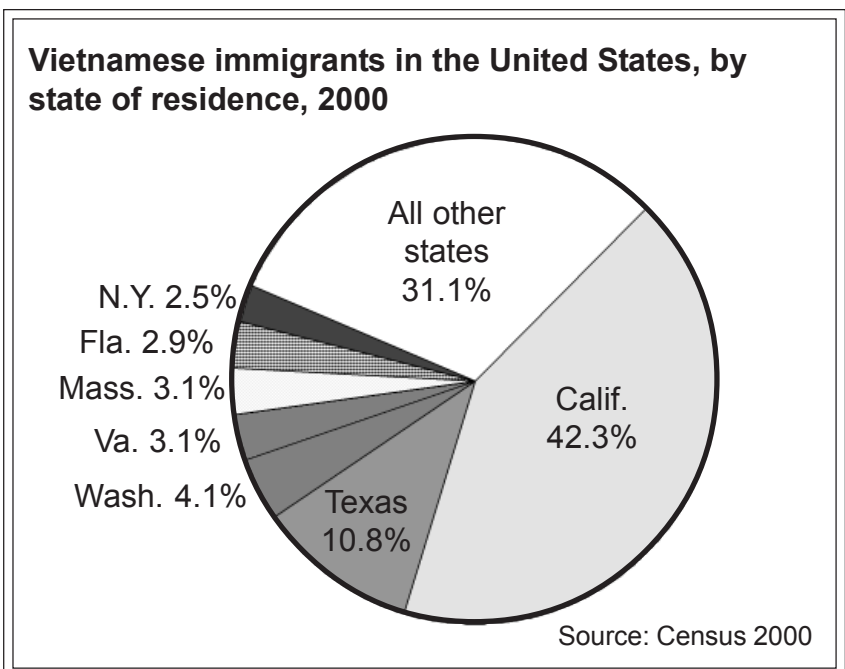
From military bases in four states, groups of Vietnamese refugees were scattered across the nation. Many were placed with church groups and families who agreed to sponsor the newcomers until they could earn a living on their own. Sponsors were asked to help immigrants find jobs, enroll children in schools, and assist with their English skills and acculturation to America.

Though there was control of where Vietnamese refugees were settled, there were no rules barring these new Americans from resettling anywhere they chose. Some immigrants moved for job opportunities, others moved to get out of the cold, unfamiliar climates, still more moved to be closer to other Vietnamese immigrants. Less than 15 years after the arrival of the first large wave of Vietnamese immigrants, the community was no longer dispersed throughout the nation. The 1990 Census found that almost half of the Vietnamese living in the United States resided in California, with another 11.3 percent in Texas. More than three-quarters of the Vietnamese living in the United States lived in just nine states [3].

In the ensuing 10 years, not much changed. California has the highest number of Vietnamese immigrants, with Texas a distant second. Washington State places third, although the Vietnamese population of Washington is less than half that of Texas and less than one-third that of California. Virginia ranks fourth, followed by Massachusetts, Florida and New York [4].

California's position as leader in Vietnamese immigrant settlement should not come as a surprise on its face. California was home to more people than any other state – 12 percent of the American population according to the 2000 Census – and by logical conclusion should have more of every immigrant population. In order to give this fact some merit, we must compare the percentages of the total population and Vietnamese population, to determine whether Vietnamese immigrants are more likely to settle in a particular location [4].

When we perform this type of analysis, California remains the leader by a substantial margin. In 2000, California was home to 12.0 percent of the overall U.S. population, but 42.3 percent of Vietnamese immigrants. This is 30 percentage points higher than we would expect if Vietnamese immigrants were evenly spread out among the states according to the population.



The vast number of Vietnamese living in California leaves only seven other states where the Vietnamese population is larger than would be expected in our perfect model. In only two of these states – Texas and Washington – does the difference exceed one percentage point.

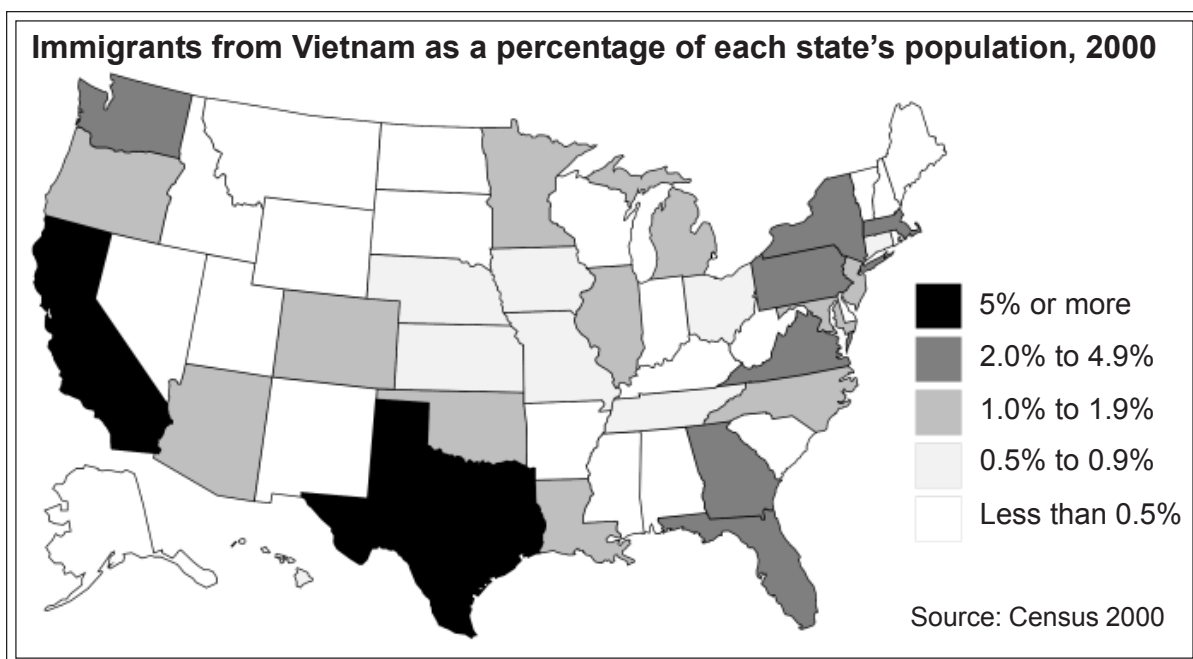
| State | Vietnamese-born | Pct. [1] | State Population | Pct. [2] | Diff. |
|---------------|-----------------|----------|------------------|----------|-------|
| California | 418,249 | 42.3% | 33,871,648 | 12.0% | 30.3% |
| Texas | 107,027 | 10.8% | 20,851,820 | 7.4% | 3.4% |
| Washington | 40,879 | 4.1% | 5,894,121 | 2.1% | 2.0% |
| Massachusetts | 30,457 | 3.1% | 6,349,097 | 2.3% | 0.8% |
| Virginia | 30,730 | 3.1% | 7,078,515 | 2.5% | 0.6% |
| Hawaii | 8,775 | 0.9% | 1,211,537 | 0.4% | 0.5% |
| Oregon | 16,523 | 1.7% | 3,421,399 | 1.2% | 0.5% |
| Louisiana | 16,767 | 1.7% | 4,468,976 | 1.6% | 0.1% |

[1] - Of total Vietnamese-born population in the U.S. [2] - Of total American population

Conversely, there were 42 states and the District of Columbia where the Vietnamese population did not meet the expectation. Even some of the states with larger Vietnamese populations fell far short of what would be expected with an even distribution. For example, Florida and New York were home to the sixth most and ninth most Vietnamese immigrants, respectfully, but featured some of the lowest figures when compared to the expected.

| State | Vietnamese-born | Pct. [1] | State Population | Pct. [2] | Diff. |
|----------|-----------------|----------|------------------|----------|-------|
| New York | 25,141 | 2.5% | 18,976,457 | 6.7% | -4.2% |
| Ohio | 8,710 | 0.9% | 11,353,140 | 4.0% | -3.2% |
| Florida | 28,790 | 2.9% | 15,982,378 | 5.7% | -2.8% |
| Illinois | 17,075 | 1.7% | 12,419,293 | 4.4% | -2.7% |
| Michigan | 10,869 | 1.1% | 9,938,444 | 3.5% | -2.4% |
| Indiana | 4,078 | 0.4% | 6,080,485 | 2.2% | -1.7% |

[1] - Of total Vietnamese-born population in the U.S. [2] - Of total American population



Language Learning

Vietnamese is the seventh most common language spoken at home nationwide, with slightly more than one million speakers, according to Census 2000. The Vietnamese-speaking population is heavily concentrated in California, which is home to more than 40 percent of the nation's Vietnamese-speaking population, and Texas, which is home to 12 percent. No other state exceeds four percent [4].

Within California, the Vietnamese-speaking population is also heavily concentrated in certain counties. Just three counties – Orange, Santa Clara and Los Angeles – are home to more than 285,000 speakers, more than one-quarter of the overall population nationwide. More than 1-in-18 Santa Clara County residents and nearly 1-in-20 Orange County residents speaks Vietnamese at home [4].

With 988,000 Vietnamese immigrants in 2000 and 1.01 million people who speak Vietnamese at home in the United States, it would be intuitive to discern that most, if not all, Vietnamese immigrants stick to their native tongue. In fact, the difference is less than 100 in 14 states and the District of Columbia, including several states where numbers are nearly identical. Some examples include:

| | <u>Immigrants</u> | <u>Speakers</u> | <u>Difference</u> |
|----------------|-------------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| Maine | 909 | 911 | +2 |
| New Hampshire | 1,440 | 1,449 | +9 |
| North Carolina | 13,608 | 13,594 | -14 |
| Vermont | 796 | 812 | +16 |
| Wyoming | 32 | 49 | +17 |
| Delaware | 565 | 543 | -22 |

Other states show evidence that assimilation is occurring as early as the first generation. California, New York and Nevada are notable for having fewer Vietnamese speakers than people who immigrated from Vietnam. In Nevada, the number of Vietnamese speakers is less than four-fifths of the Vietnam immigrant population.

| | <u>Immigrants</u> | <u>Speakers</u> | <u>Difference</u> |
|------------|-------------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| California | 418,249 | 407,120 | -11,129 |
| New York | 25,141 | 20,250 | -4,891 |
| Nevada | 4,902 | 3,808 | -1,094 |

But in many states, the number of Vietnamese speakers is quite a bit higher than the number of Vietnamese born people living in that state. In other words, these states contain a population of American born individuals who predominantly speak Vietnamese at home.

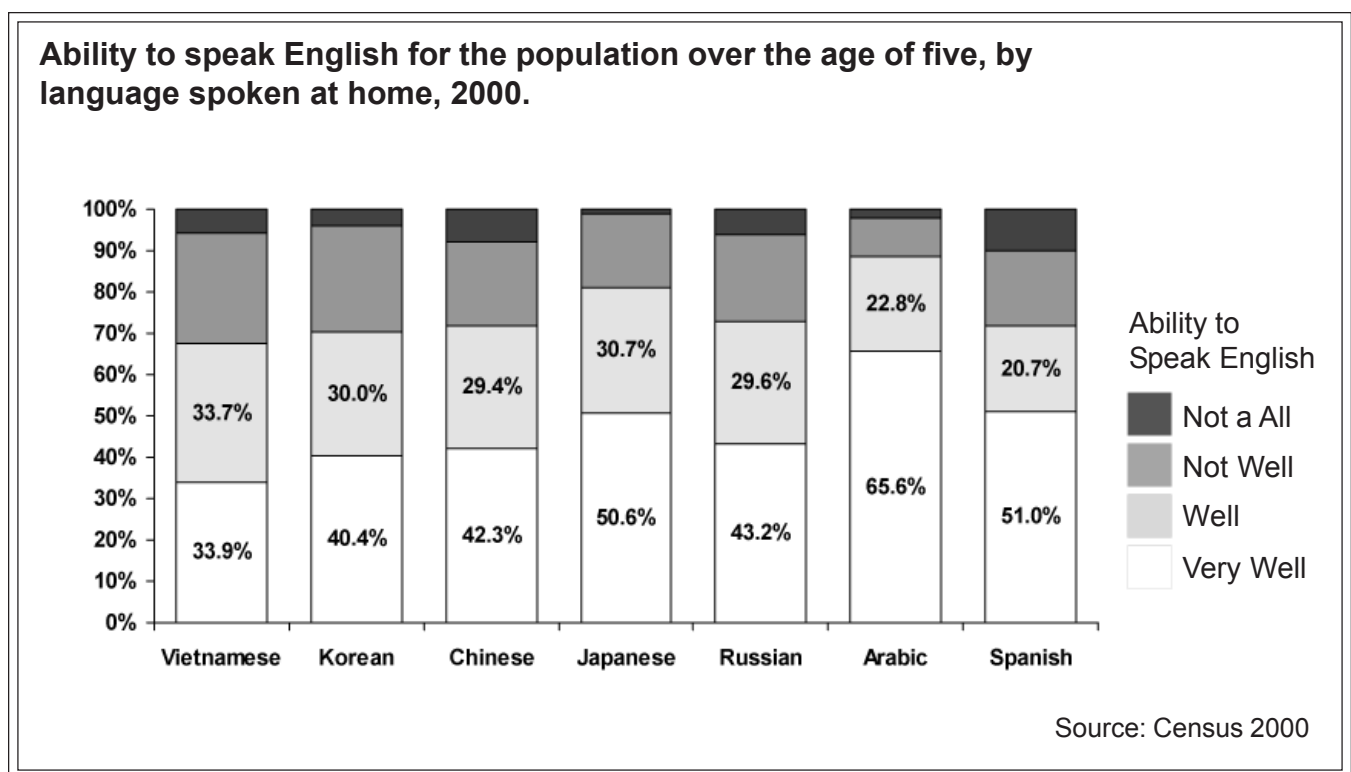
| | <u>Immigrants</u> | <u>Speakers</u> | <u>Difference</u> |
|-------------|-------------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| Texas | 107,027 | 122,515 | +15,478 |
| Louisiana | 16,767 | 23,325 | +6,588 |
| Mississippi | 3,338 | 4,916 | +1,578 |

In all, there are 35 states where the number of Vietnamese speakers exceeds the number of Vietnamese immigrants. In a majority of these states, the difference is less than 600. In others, such as Texas, Louisiana, and Alabama, there are a significant number of American-born who use Vietnamese at home. The population

of Vietnamese speakers is greater than the population of Vietnamese immigrants by 47 percent in Mississippi, 39 percent in Louisiana and 34 percent in Alabama. To determine whether this variance is a factor of comfort by people who can speak English but prefer to speak Vietnamese around family or an inability to speak English altogether, we must study English proficiency factors.

Overall English proficiency rates for Vietnamese speakers are disappointing. According to the 2000 Census, Vietnamese speakers are the least likely to be English proficient among the major language groups in the United States. Only 34 percent of those who speak Vietnamese at home speak English “very well,” meeting the Census definition of English proficiency. This figure is well below that of Korean speakers (40 percent), Chinese speakers (42 percent) and Russian speakers (43 percent), and significantly below that of Spanish speakers (51 percent), Japanese speakers (51 percent) and Arabic speakers (66 percent) [5].

When those who speak Vietnamese at home, but speak English “well” are added to the equation, the picture improves, but ranking does not. Sixty-eight percent of those who speak Vietnamese at home speak English very well or well. Adding those who speak English “well” eliminates most, but not all, of the gap between Vietnamese speakers and Korean speakers (70 percent speak English “very well” or “well”), Chinese speakers (71 percent), Spanish speakers (72 percent), and Russian speakers (73 percent) [5].



It would be natural to assume that the rate at which Vietnamese speakers are proficient in English would depend heavily on the population of Vietnamese speakers within the state. Common logic would dictate that a higher number of Vietnamese speakers leads to the likelihood of more Vietnamese speaking enclaves, where residents can speak the native language at home, at work, and in the neighborhood. After all, the creation of these “English-optional” enclaves is a main reason why Spanish speakers in the American southwest tend to have lower English proficiency levels.

However, in the case of Vietnamese speakers, there seems to be little relation between population density and linguistic proficiency. In California, home to both the greatest number of those who speak Vietnamese at home and the highest percentage of residents speaking Vietnamese at home, the percentage of Vietnamese speakers who speak English “very well” or “well” almost identically matches the U.S. average of 67.61. In Texas, home to the nation’s second largest Vietnamese speaking population, proficiency rates are nearly two points higher than average. Of the 38 states and District of Columbia with more than 1,500 Vietnamese speakers, the percentage who speak English “very well” or “well” falls within three percentage points of the national average in 20 states, and falls within one percentage point in 10 states. Only eight states and the District of Columbia fall outside of five percentage points from the national average. The three with larger Vietnamese populations can be found at both the top (Virginia, 72.84 percent) and bottom (Hawaii, 59.68 percent, and Georgia, 56.98 percent) of the list [5].

Conclusion & Discussion

The Vietnamese immigration story to the United States does not follow the typical pattern of most immigrants from Europe and the Americas. Prior to the mid-1970s, very, very few individuals came over from Vietnam to the United States. Not until the end of the Vietnam War did large scale immigration take place, and rather than a gradual increase, it was a sudden spike.

The recency of immigration also makes the Vietnamese population stand out from other immigrant groups. Due to the waves of Vietnamese that came over as refugees in the 1970s and 1980s, most of the population consists of first- and second-generation Americans. In part due to their refugee status, they are also more likely to be U.S. citizens.

While the U.S. government-instituted program of resettlement may have made Vietnamese immigrants the least likely to congregate in certain areas, the results demonstrate how difficult it can be to avoid the creation of ethnic enclaves. Despite the best attempts of the federal government to disperse the population, more than 40 percent of all Vietnamese immigrants live in California and more than half live in just two states, California and Texas.

The recency of immigration may be one of the chief reasons why Vietnamese speakers are more likely to struggle with English than almost every other major linguistic group. Just over one-third of Vietnamese speakers speak English “very well,” while just over two-thirds speak English “well” or better. Surprisingly, the low rates of English acquisition do not seem to be related to demographic dominance within a state or states.

Despite being one of the newest immigrant groups in America, the Vietnamese have put down roots, started businesses, and have flourishing communities in California, Texas, Virginia, Maryland and elsewhere. With many Vietnamese having achieved citizenship and few wishing to return to Vietnam, it is imperative that English fluency be made a priority among the entire population. Though this will be more beneficial to the younger members of the community, even small gains in English fluency will be beneficial to older Vietnamese.

With an emphasis on English fluency, the Vietnamese community has the potential to follow in the footsteps of some of the greatest assimilation accounts in American history. However, if English learning levels are allowed to languish, the Vietnamese population may become the group with the greatest amount of unrealized potential.

Sources

- [1] Department of Homeland Security. Persons Obtaining Legal Permanent Resident Status by Region and Selected Country of Last Residence: Fiscal Years 1820 to 2006, Table 2. Yearbook of Immigration Statistics: 2006. <<http://www.dhs.gov/ximgtn/statistics/publications/LPR06.shtm>>. (13 September 2007).
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