

Study: Fresno has among highest rates of workers with limited English

By Tim Sheehan

Fresno has one of the nation's highest proportions of people with limited English-language skills among its working-age population -- and a greater share are poor than in many other major metropolitan areas across the United States.

A new report issued Wednesday by the Brookings Institution revealed that in Fresno County, almost 137,000 people between the ages of 16 and 64 are considered limited-English proficient, or LEP, according to an analysis of Census Bureau data from 2012. That adds up to about 23% of the working-age population in the county.

Fresno and other metropolitan areas in the San Joaquin Valley, including Bakersfield, Modesto and Stockton, all rank in the top 10 among U.S. metro areas with sizable proportions of limited-English workers -- all at least double the national rate of 9.3%.

Spanish is the primary language for the lion's share of limited-English workers both nationally and in the Valley. Across the U.S., about 66% speak Spanish at home. In the Valley, that proportion ranges from 68% in Stockton to 79% in Fresno and as high as 92% in Bakersfield. In the Fresno area, Asian languages including Hmong represent the home-language of more than 14% of LEP workers, while various European languages amount to about 6.2%.

Whatever a person's mother tongue, report author Jill Wilson -- a Brookings senior research analyst -- said the study underscores how important English-language skills are to economic success for immigrant populations.

"The urgency of this is when you think of the lost productivity and the lack of full contribution to the local and national economies that this represents," Wilson said Tuesday. "English proficiency is the gateway to economic opportunity in this country."

And because the number of people with limited English skills is growing -- from 2000 to 2012, the limited-English population grew by almost 20% nationally, and by almost 23% in Fresno County -- "if this is the portion of the population that gets left behind, this does not bode well for our future economically," Wilson added.

Among working-age adults in Fresno County, about four out of 10 who are limited-English proficient are unemployed. If they are employed, they tend to be concentrated in lower-paying jobs that don't necessarily require employees to speak English at a high level.

In the San Joaquin Valley, that means agriculture -- a field in which 40% of the labor force is considered to have limited command of English. Other fields in which large numbers of limited-English workers are employed nationally are buildings and grounds cleaning/maintenance, production, construction, food preparation and serving, transportation and warehousing, sales, personal care, and office/administrative support.

Lower earnings

Annual average pay in each of those occupational groups falls within the lowest 40% of wages, according to Wilson's report.

Comparing the earnings of limited-English workers to the overall workforce shows the stark difference. The median annual earnings for a LEP worker in Fresno County came to about \$24,000, the Brookings report found. But overall

median earnings for all workers in the county were more than 50% higher -- about \$38,000 for men, \$35,000 for women.

Additionally, Wilson's study showed that almost 37% of limited-English workers lived in poverty, compared to about 24% of all workers in the Fresno metro area. Fresno, in fact, ranks fifth nationally among the 89 largest metropolitan areas for having the highest share of limited-English workers at or below the poverty line.

"In general, LEP individuals experience worse labor market outcomes than those who are proficient in English," the report states. "While lower educational attainment among LEP adults accounts for some of this difference, English proficiency is correlated with better outcomes at all levels of education."

Less education

Nationally, about 60% of LEP adults are high school graduates. But in Fresno and the Valley, educational achievement levels are far lower. Wilson's analysis revealed that almost two-thirds of LEP adults in Fresno County don't have a high school diploma -- second behind only Bakersfield nationally.

Blake Konczal, executive director of the Fresno Regional Workforce Investment Board, acknowledged that in the Valley, there appears to be a distinct relationship between English proficiency and attaining a high school diploma.

Workforce investment boards, which provide training workers need to find a job as well as job-placement services, are required by the U.S. Department of Labor to screen job seekers for basic math and English skills.

"Over and above the need to have an ability to communicate with clients, a basic knowledge of English is usually essential as an employer brings a new employee on board," Konczal said. "That person-to-person communication, whether formal training or informal dialogue between workers, is the sine qua non for job advancement and hence quite important."

In addition to providing remedial classes to help bring workers up to speed in English skills, the Fresno Workforce Investment Board encourages its clients to get their high-school diploma through general educational development, or GED, programs.

The Brookings report indicates that only about one-third of limited-English workers in the Fresno region are "recent immigrants" to the U.S. -- arriving since 2000. That tends to run counter to the national findings, which suggest that recent immigrants are more likely to be limited in their English proficiency.

Either way, the data show that a greater effort to provide English-language education is needed for adult immigrants. "Relying on LEP adults to 'pick up the languages' is not an efficient strategy for improving their labor market outcomes in the near-term," Wilson said. "Increasing the investment in adult English instruction now would enhance the human capital of immigrants and lead to more productive work -- benefiting whole families -- sooner."

New outreach

The unique nature of the Valley, with its rural character and concentration of LEP workers in agriculture -- including migratory farm labor -- creates special challenges for English-language instruction, "especially if we look at the traditional methods of addressing the issue," Wilson said.

But, she added, there are educational models in place in other areas of the country that could prove successful in this region. "Some of the more innovative models, particularly online or on a mobile device or regular cell phones, can get around the barriers that those (rural and migratory) issues present," Wilson said.

Wilson pointed to a program called Cell-ED that offers English lessons through a regular cell phone connection without the need for a more expensive smartphone. In New York, the state Office for New Americans is planning to launch such an effort aimed at rural or remote areas "where immigrants are less likely to have access to classroom

instruction or the Internet."

Any level of progress, she said, is likely to make a substantial difference in the fate of workers who lag in their English skills.

"With 19 million people, we're not going to have everybody become fully proficient," Wilson said. "But even some improvement in English skills can lead to better outcomes."

Limited English, limiting potential

A new analysis reveals that people who are limited English-language proficient (LEP) make up nearly one out of every four working-age people in the Fresno area. Many don't have a high-school diploma, and their average earnings are far less than proficient English-speakers.

Rank/Metro area	Working age adults LEP	Percent LEP	No high school diploma	Below poverty line	Median annual earnings
1. McAllen, Texas	154,012	32.0%	57.5%	43.7%	\$24,000
2. El Paso, Texas	156,506	29.8%	38.7%	33.1%	\$22,000
3. Los Angeles/Long Beach	2,264,513	25.7%	45.3%	24.1%	\$25,000
4. Miami/Ft. Lauderdale, Florida	865,905	23.2%	58.6%	23.3%	\$24,000
5. Fresno	136,712	22.8%	65.9%*	36.5%**	\$24,000
6. San Jose/Santa Clara	278,214	22.6%	28.9%	17.5%	\$31,100
7. Bakersfield	111,633	20.4%	66.5%	30.8%	\$22,000
8. Stockton	86,094	19.3%	47.7%	22.5%	\$28,000
9. Modesto	61,935	18.6%	58.9%	33.8%	\$24,000
10. San Francisco/Oakland	557,878	18.4%	33.0%	18.1%	\$27,000
NATION	19,151,784	9.3%	40.1%	24.6%	\$26,000

Source: Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program

* Fresno ranks 2nd in % of working-age LEP without a high-school diploma
** Fresno ranks 5th in % of working-age LEP living below the poverty line

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