



Identifying the Languages Spoken in Your Community

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Available at sil.org/global-diaspora under [Help from the SIL Diaspora Services](#)

Language and ethnic identity are among the highest values of diaspora people. Understanding your new neighbors and the composition of the neighborhood is extremely important to successful ministry. We can work with you and with the tools available to help identify the languages spoken in your location.

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How many languages are spoken in Britain?

Nobody really knows, but it's definitely more than the 320 sometimes quoted for London or for UK Schools¹. The question of main language was introduced for the first time in the 2011 census and reported languages in over 100 classifications.

The Census in Scotland identified 178 classifications in addition to 1,921 speakers of "Other languages" (Languages with less than 10 speakers were not listed).



How many languages are spoken in the USA?

Again, nobody knows. The 2010 census looked at information on 384 but in preparation for the 2020 census "Any language that was written in at least once between 1980 and 2015 was given a code. This resulted in 1,334 language codes!" . Full results have not been released.

How many languages are spoken in Canada?

Nobody knows. Census data tables released in 2017 list over 260 categories but match to less than 200 languages plus lots of categories of 'other'. The census document entitled, "Interpreting and presenting census language data" includes a classification of the "aboriginal" and "non-aboriginal" languages coming out of the census. Census data is accessible at a national level and by provinces/territories and almost 5000 geographic subdivisions.

How many languages are spoken in Australia?

Nobody knows. In research from 2016, population experts, [id Community](#), lists 93 languages spoken in the home (besides English). This represents 20.8% of the total population with Mandarin, Arabic, Cantonese, Vietnamese, Italian, Greek, Tagalog, Hindi, Spanish, and Punjabi as the top 10.

So how can I find which languages are spoken in my local community?

1. Internet Searching

In some countries you can access [census data](#) online at many different levels. As suggested it might not always paint the whole picture but it gives a good start. The reason for gathering such data is to enable the planning of national and local services and so data is often available at local government level either on public websites or by asking. Some websites make finding some of the information fairly easy, others can be bewildering to navigate.

¹ A list of languages is available for the UK, but does not use ISO639c codes that would make it easy to match these with other information - gov.uk/guidance/complete-the-school-census/find-a-school-census-code#language

- Broader Google searches could include “what languages are spoken in...” or “demographics of...”

One of the simpler sites to navigate for England is <http://localstats.co.uk/> which used 2011 census data to provide the top 10 countries of origin, languages, and religion for regions, towns and areas. More detailed household language data from the 2021 Census for England and Wales is at ons.gov.uk/datasets/TS024/editions/2021/versions/3.

For the USA and Canada, PeopleGroups.info, a collaborative work under the International Mission Board (IMB) is a good place to start. <https://www.peoplegroups.info/> (currently offline but with a new site coming soon). This database relies on US and Canadian census data, specifically the studies called “5-Year US ACS Foreign Born and Language Spoken at Home” and the “Canada Census Language Most Often Spoken at Home and Foreign Born”.

- More specific searches could use the name of the language/diaspora community paired with the city

This is helpful if there’s an idea of who might be in the area, but there are no details. For example, “Syrians in New York”, or “Nepalese in Chicago” (...whichever city). This should be searched in **Google AND on Facebook**. Many people are making public Facebook groups like this now, so that they can connect with each other. Finding a group in a specific city could give an idea of the size of the community, some local connecting places, events, and perhaps a few key contacts. Using discretion as to how to reach out would be key.

- It’s also helpful to search maps and Facebook for ethnic restaurants, markets, cafés, or cultural clubs

Search “Moroccan Food”, “Ethiopian restaurant”, “Persian Cultural Center”, or just “Cultural Center”, or “Burmese Market”. If the goal is to learn about and reach out to other cultures in the community one great way of starting to build relationships is to become regulars at these very restaurants, markets, cafés, shops, etc.

2. Write and request

In a number of countries you can make reasonable requests for data under freedom of information laws. When I first came across an article about 300 languages spoken in UK schools I searched for sources online and then, when I couldn’t find the source, sent a freedom of information request to the department of education. Later a simple email to a school secretary told me the number of languages spoken at home by pupils in my old high school.

3. Talk to people

You might be able to do a simple informal survey to find out the languages spoken by people in your church and other social networks. This is probably the best approach, so that you can ask someone who already trusts you, and then they can connect you to someone who trusts them. Building on existing social trust can take you far. Staff in schools, hospitals, doctors surgeries, local authorities might also be able to tell you some information including what languages they make materials available in or point you to non-confidential sources.

Be aware however that simply asking people in the street what language(s) they speak might not always get the answers you expect. Some may see it as suspicious, intrusive, or even racist. Some people have been made to feel ashamed of their heritage and so might not tell you if they speak a minority language and simply tell you the most prestigious language they speak. They might also assume you don’t want that much detail. If you ask someone where they are from and they are from a small village they might tell you they live near a place they think you’ll have heard of. In a similar way people who speak several languages might tell you about the one they think you’ll know.

Even if proud of their heritage they might have been told that their language is 'just' a dialect. For example, although the 2011 census in Scotland identified Scots as a language, many people, including those who speak it, think of it as a dialect of English and a website was set up to help people identify if they speak Scots www.ayecan.com/

Why do you want to know?

The reason schools, hospitals and local services want to know what languages people speak is mainly so that they can communicate clearly, and seek translation services if required. They don't need to know every language someone speaks, they just need to find a common language.

This is also one reason why churches might want to know and for some things finding a common language is sufficient but there is also an opportunity to go deeper.

Hidden languages

As stated, not all languages show up on official statistics, especially for smaller language communities. Information on recent refugees and migrants are not yet part of older census data and may remain hidden and/or ignored.

Caution

While you may want to know the languages and ethnicities in your communities in order to welcome and support people, others might use such data to stir prejudice and discrimination. In 2016 there were even questions in the UK parliament as to whether school census data might be used to determine immigration status².

Examples of local profiles

1. [Derby Demographics: People and Languages](#) - including national and Derby schools data 2012
2. [The people \(and languages\) of Nottingham](#)
3. [Languages of London - Living and unique](#) - not a profile but references a whole museum exhibit
4. [EthnoLA](#) - an in-depth study of the peoples and languages of Los Angeles, California.
5. [EthNYcity](#) - profiles on 82 people groups in New York City.
6. [Languages of New York City](#) - a more comprehensive database of 700+ languages of New York.
7. [Endangered Language Alliance of Toronto](#) - roughly 200+ languages listed

Further reading and resources:

brassingtons.wordpress.com/2019/09/26/how-many-languages-are-spoken-in-britain/

brassingtons.wordpress.com/2022/09/26/how-many-languages-are-spoken-in-europe/

brassingtons.wordpress.com/2019/11/28/how-many-languages-in-the-usa-and-how-many-have-bibles-a-vailable-online/

Global Gates database focuses specifically on major ethnic groups in gateway cities:

<https://globalgates.info/>.

Ten reasons for a more multilingual church

brassingtons.wordpress.com/2019/08/30/ten-reasons-for-a-more-multilingual-church/

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²en.wikipedia.org/wiki/England_school_census citing

parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2016-07-14/42842/