

Linguistic Characteristics

Center for Social and Demographic Research on Aging

Gerontology Institute

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Fact Sheet

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Highlights

- Nearly 106,000 Massachusetts older adults do not speak English well or at all.
- About 60,000 older adults in Massachusetts live in “linguistically isolated” households, in which all members have some difficulty speaking English.
- Other than English, Spanish is the language most commonly spoken at home among older adults.

Residents of Massachusetts age 65 and over

Massachusetts is home to a diverse population of individuals from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds, including a large number of first-generation United States residents. In a diverse cultural and ethnic setting, English proficiency and languages spoken are important characteristics to understand, particularly for older adults who may experience limited access to services and resources due to communication barriers.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of English-speaking proficiency for Massachusetts residents age 65 and older. Though most of the older population speaks only English (83%), a sizable portion (17%) speaks a language other than English at home. Additionally, about 7% of older adults do not speak English very well or do not speak the language at all, representing almost 106,000 older adults. Many of these older adults without sufficient English proficiency may have limited access to programs and services and reduced social interactions in the community.

Linguistic isolation as well as limited English proficiency pose challenges for many older adults in Massachusetts. Almost 60,000 older Massachusetts residents are linguistically isolated, representing 6% of all Massachusetts older adults age 65 and older (see **Figure 2**). Linguistically isolated individuals live in households in which members who speak English, if any, do not speak the language very well.

Figure 1. English Proficiency, Massachusetts residents age 65+, 2017

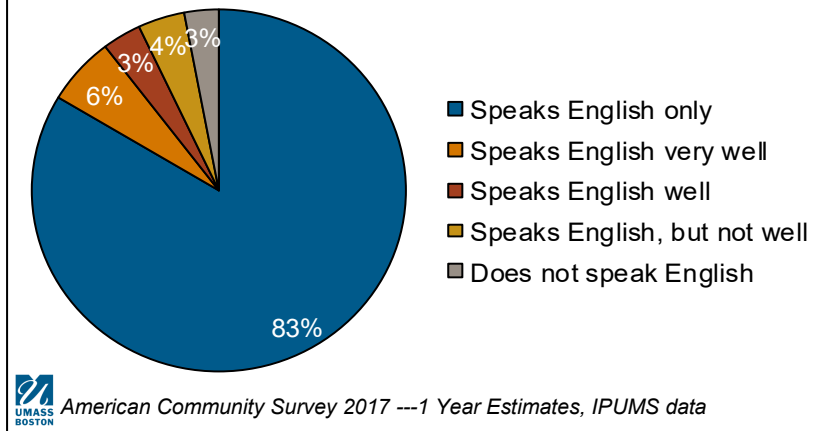
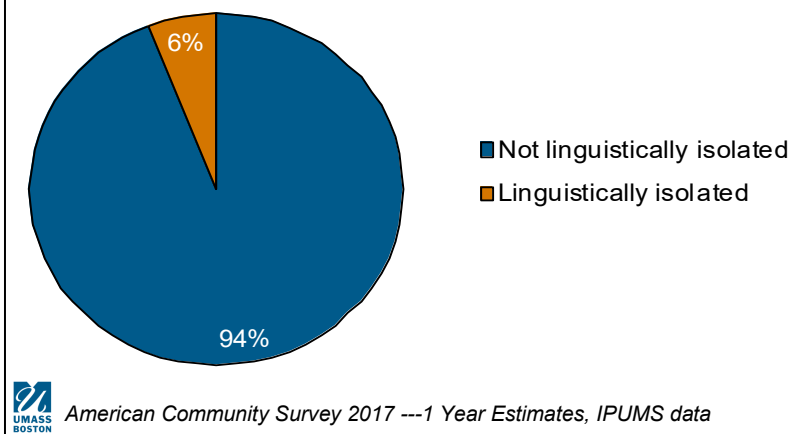
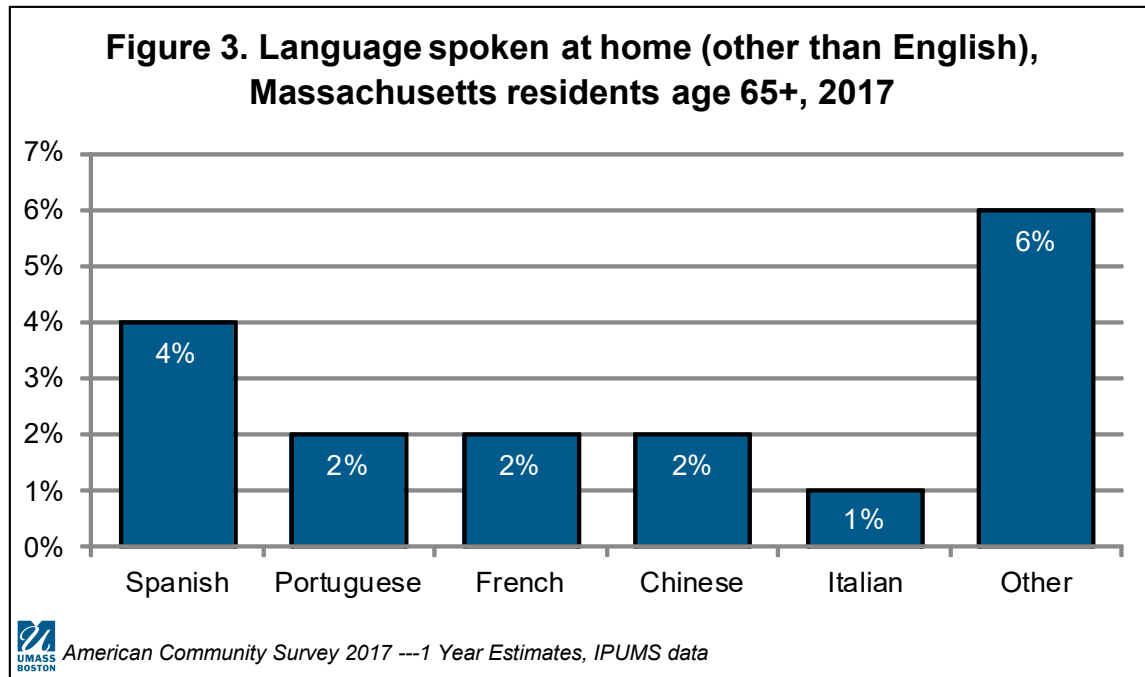


Figure 2. Massachusetts residents age 65+ living in linguistically isolated households, 2017



The most frequently spoken languages other than English among Massachusetts adults 65 and older include Spanish, Portuguese, French, Chinese, and Italian (see **Figure 3**).

Spanish has become the most common non-English language spoken at home by older adults in Massachusetts, surpassing Russian, Greek, and some other European languages commonly spoken in past decades.



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