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A City of Many Voices

Data: Almost half of NYers are bilingual

By Mae M. Cheng
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Daniel Kim speaks flawless English, yet the language of choice at home is Korean. Even if the sentence starts out in English, it'll end in Korean, he said.

Kim, 28, of Douglaston, is like nearly one of every two New Yorkers, according to Census Bureau data being released today which provides a glimpse of how New Yorkers live.

According to the figures, 46.7 percent of New Yorkers over the age of 5 speak a language other than English at home; 52.2 percent of those speak English "very well." About half — or 53 percent — of those who used a foreign language at home spoke Spanish.

"There aren't that many cities in the world where you can find such a large number of bilingual people," said Kim, who immigrated to the United States with his family in 1987 and had his first English lesson in seventh grade.

Nationwide, only 18 percent of people 5 and older spoke a foreign language at home, with 60 percent of them speaking Spanish, according to the Census Bureau data. Los Angeles, the second most populous U.S. city after New York, had more bilingual speakers than the five boroughs, but its linguistic mix was more dominated by Spanish. About 69 percent of Angelenos spoke a foreign language at home, with 72 percent of them speaking Spanish.

In New York, by contrast, 27 percent of foreign-language speakers used an Indo-European language other than Spanish at home, and 15 percent spoke an Asian or Pacific Islander tongue. Specific languages were not noted.

Evidence of linguistic change has been clear in the city over the last decade. In Queens, for instance, business owners have hung up Korean and Chinese-language signs in downtown Flushing, Spanish signs in Jackson Heights and Corona, Russian signs in Forest Hills and Bengali signs in Astoria.

"Getting so many foreign language speakers from so many different places is a testimony to how diverse things have gotten in New York City," said Joseph Salvo, director of the City Planning Department's Population Division. "That's a really spectacular statement."

The data makes it clear that the city will need to provide more English-language classes and to ensure better access to services for non-English speakers, said Margie McHugh, the executive director of The New York Immigration Coalition.

"The language diversity in the city has greatly increased, but attempts to break down language barriers are few and far between," McHugh said.

Some city agencies are moving in that direction. The Board of Education, for instance, recently asked the chancellor to offer information in more languages.

Linguistic diversity in New York City seems to be growing. According to the 1990 Census, about 41 percent of New Yorkers spoke a language other than English at home.

Census officials and city demographers, however, cautioned against comparing the supplemental survey released today with the 1990 decennial count in areas smaller than states. The two surveys differ in methodology, they said, and today's figures do not in-

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Newsday Photo / Moises Saman

At Therese Cervini Head Start in Corona, many students speak both English and Spanish.

Numbers Tell How New Yorkers Live

Data being released today by the Census Bureau gives a glimpse at who New Yorkers are, how they live their lives and under what conditions.

The figures, compiled from a supplemental survey taken last year, are not from Census 2000, a decennial population count. But the survey offers a view of some of the findings from the Census 2000 long form, which will be released next year.

Among the findings for New York City are:

- 90 percent had lived in the same place for at least a year.
- 75 percent of people 25 years old and older had at least a high school education, and 28 percent had a bachelor's degree or higher.
- 15 percent of people 5 years old or older had a disability.
- 48 percent of workers 16 and older reported being employed in the service sector and 12 percent in the finance, insurance, real estate or leasing industry.
- 56 percent of the city's workers took public transportation to work, 24 percent drove alone and 6 percent carpooled. Two percent worked at home. Nationwide, only 5 percent commuted using public transportation.
- For those who commuted, it took an average of 39 minutes to get to work.
- 54 percent of the households did not have access to an automobile for private use. Nationwide, 9 percent did not have a vehicle.
- The median income of households in 2000 was $39,605. For the country, it was $41,349.
- 18 percent of people lived in poverty, compared to 13 percent nationwide.
- 68 percent of occupied housing units were rentals, compared to 34 percent nationwide.
- The median monthly housing cost for owners with mortgages was $1,580; for renters it was $724. Nationwide it was $1,085 for owners with mortgages and $612 for renters.

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