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## LIMITED ENGLISH LIMITS JOB PROSPECTS

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Almost one in 10 adults of working age in the U.S. has limited proficiency in English, more than 2.5 times as many as in 1980, curbing their job prospects and ability to contribute to the economy.

Two-thirds of the 19.2 million people who have limited English are Spanish speakers. However, Asians and Pacific Islanders are most likely to have limited proficiency relative to their size of the overall population, according to a new report produced by the Metropolitan Policy Program of the Brookings Institution.

Immigrant workers and their children will account for most of the growth in the U.S. labor force in the coming decades, independent projections show. Therefore, investing in English instruction is "critical to building and maintaining a skilled workforce," the study by the progressive Washington-based think tank says.

"English proficiency is a strong predictor of economic standing among immigrants, regardless of the amount of education they have attained, and it is associated with the greater academic and economic success of the workers' children," said Jill H. Wilson, the study's author.

About 45 million people in the U.S., or more than 20 percent of working-age adults – defined as those 16 to 64 years old – speak a language other than English at home, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. While more than half of them speak English very well, many of them struggle.

Based on data from the Census Bureau's 2012 American Community Survey, Brookings ranked U.S. metropolitan areas by the size and the share of the population that is limited English proficient and the growth in that population in recent years.

While most English-limited adults live in large metropolitan areas, traditional magnets for immigrants, their numbers have grown markedly in smaller metropolitan areas that more recently began to absorb Latin American immigrants and refugees from Asia, Africa and the Middle East.

In Los Angeles and Miami, about a quarter of the working-age population has limited English. In greater New York, limited-English residents account for 18 percent of the population.

Smaller cities, such as Indianapolis and Omaha, Neb., are for the first time facing the challenges of a sizable group with limited English. In Indianapolis, the limited-English population jumped 99 percent between 2000 and 2012; in greater Omaha, that population surged 95 percent during that period, the study showed.

"We could go 24/7 and not cover everyone who needs and wants our language services," said Mary Petersen, director of the Language & Culture School of Omaha, a nonprofit started in 2006 that offers English classes on site and at companies.

Lack of English proficiency doesn't prevent immigrant workers from obtaining employment. But those who are proficient boast higher income at all levels of educational attainment, the report says.

Becky Rogers, a community advocate in Huron, S.D., says she has seen Latinos who learn English move from low- to advanced-level jobs in construction, manufacturing and maintenance. "When companies are willing to help their immigrant employees learn English, it betters the company and the employees."

Demand for free or low-cost English classes outstrips supply in Boston, Los Angeles and many other cities. Educational access is a barrier for immigrants who can't afford to pay for classes, and federal and state funding hasn't kept pace with the influx of immigrants, the report says.

Prospective students sometimes face challenges with transportation and scheduling if they have jobs, said Kari Fritz, English-language coordinator for Exodus Refugee Immigration, an Indianapolis nonprofit agency.

Because not all immigrants have limited English and proficiency improves over time, the population that isn't proficient hasn't grown as rapidly as the overall foreign-born population. Despite the fact that the share of the foreign working-age population climbed to 16 percent in 2012 from 7 percent in 1980, the proportion with limited English was 9.3 percent in 2012, the report says.

Somalis Abdikarim Omar, 32 years old, and his sister Hana, 21, already knew some English when they moved to Indianapolis this summer. They currently take an advanced English course at the refugee resettlement agency. Mr. Omar says it has helped him reach the point where he can start interviewing for jobs in computer technology, his area of interest. His sister says, "I'm improving by the day" and hopes to enroll in college and work part-time in coming months.