



May 19, 2015

Ms. Ana Celia Zentella
Professor Emerita
ICSD Department of Ethnic Studies
9500 Gilman Drive
La Jolla, CA 92093

Dear Professor Zentella:

Your letter to the National Advisory Committee regarding the American Community Survey and “linguistically isolation” term was referred to me for response.

Thank you for your support of our decision to discontinue use of the term “linguistic isolation.” It is thanks to your organization that potential problems with this term were brought to the attention of the Census Bureau, and we are glad to have been able to accommodate your request to eliminate this term.

As you are no doubt aware, the process of replacing the original term was not easy. After discussion with your organization, we settled on the accurate but unwieldy term “No one age 14 and over speaks English only or speaks English ‘very well.’” Subsequently, three of the race and ethnic advisory groups with which we work called for us to devise a simpler term. Over the course of the next year, we consulted with these groups, and with other federal agencies to devise the term currently in use, “limited English speaking households.”

Your letter suggests several alternative labels. Unfortunately, none accurately describes these households. For example, you propose the term “households where English is a second language.” However, many households that we count as “limited English speaking” do not speak English as a second language (some speak English as a primary language, others not at all). The other alternative labels have similar issues.

You also raise the important issue of how the self-assessment of English ability relates to measures based on tests (which some would take to be more valid measures of ability). We have recently continued research on this topic, and will be publishing a working paper this summer that explores how performance on the National Assessment of Adult Literacy relates to self-rated English ability. The Migration Policy Institute has also looked at this question in relation to the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies. In both cases, the overall validity of the question is confirmed.

In our research, we have not yet confronted the issue of where to draw the line between “very well,” “well,” “not well,” and “not at all,” when reducing English ability to a binary classification. For the time being, we plan to stay with our current distinction between “very well” and less than “very well,” due to the availability of statistics on this basis over many years. We are also concerned that too narrow a definition could lead to cases where people were denied language-appropriate services.

Thank you again for offering your comments. Of course, we always appreciate feedback and we are happy to continue conversation on this topic.

Sincerely,



Victoria A. Velkoff
Division Chief
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Cc: Jennifer M. Ortman, ADC, Social Characteristics
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