

BY WILLIAM H. FREY

English may be the world's lingua franca, but the largest English-speaking country must increasingly make room for others. The latest Census statistics show that 55 million Americans over the age of five speak a language other than English at home – an increase of 73 percent since 1990.

The rise of this new Tower of Babel goes hand in hand, of course, with large-scale immigration. The number of residents speaking Spanish at home has doubled to 34 million since 1990. Other important languages include Chinese, Tagalog, Vietnamese and Korean, as well as French (including Cajun), German and Italian.

This demographic reality has not been lost on marketers (and politicians) who are increasingly attempting to get their messages across to the new constituencies. But to succeed they must be nimble. For while there are no surprises in the list of states with the highest proportions of non-English speakers (California, Texas, New York, New Jersey, Florida), immigrants are spreading into unexpected places ranging from Nevada to Kansas to Georgia. Nor can one follow the trends simply by following Latinos; Spanish speakers represent fewer than half of non-English speakers in 22 states.

The good news is that the majority of those speaking another language at home also speak English well. And those who aren't bilingual can often lean on their American-

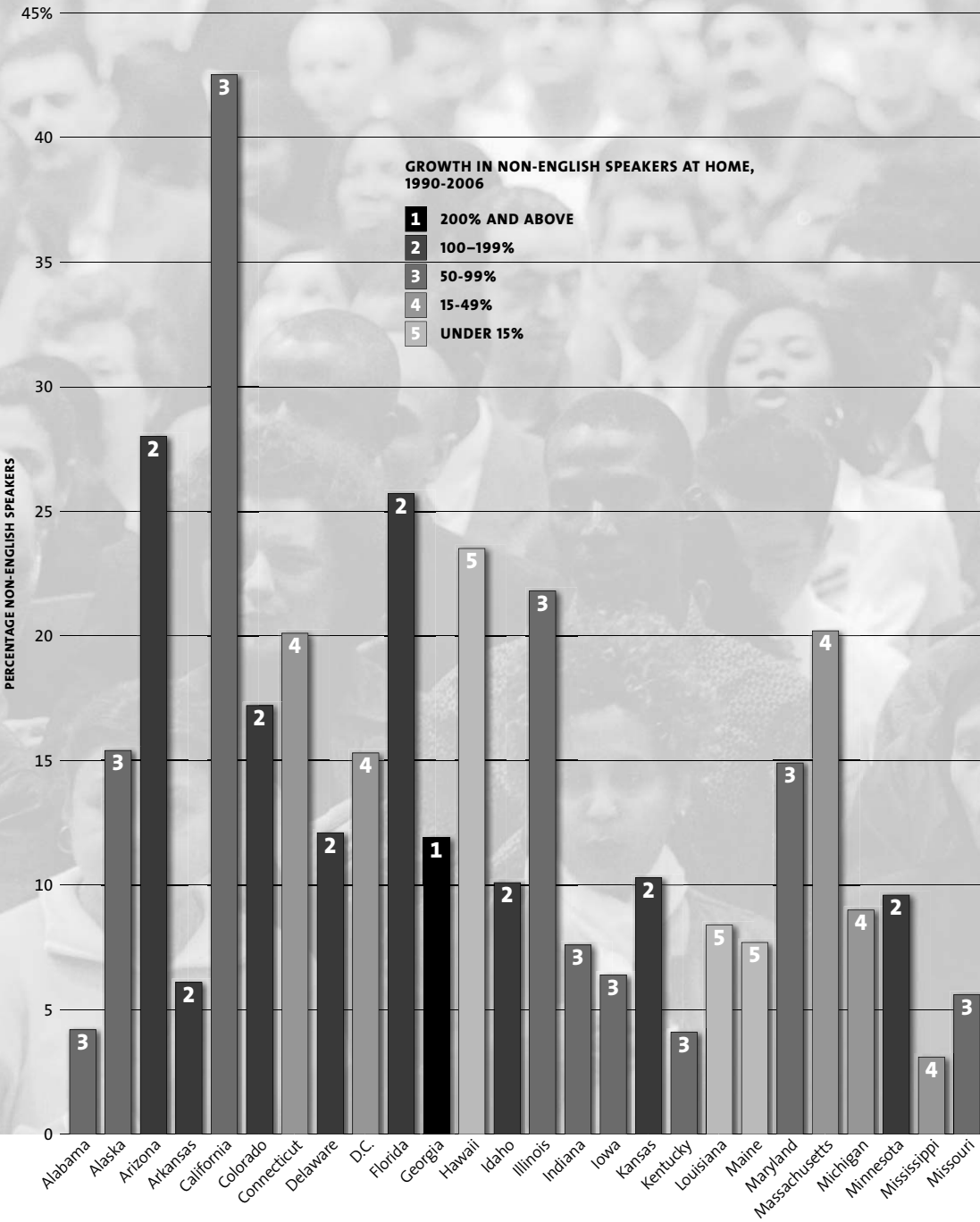


born children for translations.

Moreover, people demanding that English be declared America's "official" language miss an important point: America's immersion in other tongues strengthens the country's prospects in the global economy. For while the great majority of immigrants eventually learn to speak English – and thus do not erode productivity in the workplace – a broad and deep pool of other-language speakers gives businesses important advantages in foreign markets. Indeed, probably the only way for America to remain the center of the world economy is to learn to live comfortably with the cultural sensibilities and languages of the rest of the world.

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SPEAKING NON-ENGLISH LANGUAGES AT HOME, 2006



SOURCE: William H. Frey analysis of U.S. Census and the 2006 American Community Survey.

