

2023 City of Seattle Top Languages

Updated 2/01/2024

Recommended Languages

The Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs’ Language Access team suggests the following as Seattle’s top languages for communicating **city-wide programs and services based on available data**. These recommendations prioritize languages that are used by larger populations, residents with limited English proficiency, and recent immigrants and refugees in Seattle. The data used to identify top languages are from a combination of sources and are presented later in this report. The Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs will update the data and recommendations once every three years in partnership with the City demographer.

Below are the top 15 languages in order of highest prevalence:

#	2023 Top Languages
1	Spanish
2	Chinese*
3	Vietnamese
4	Somali
5	Tagalog
6	Korean
7	Amharic
8	Russian
9	Japanese
10	Tigrinya
11	Arabic
12	Oromo
13	Hindi
14	French
15	Ukrainian

*There are two primary Chinese writing systems: Traditional and Simplified Chinese. The two systems are mutually intelligible. Considering the composition of Seattle’s Chinese language users and their English proficiency, we recommend translating into Traditional Chinese for written materials. For oral interpretation, we recommend including both Cantonese and Mandarin.

Removing the tiering structure: Language access is about helping community members access City services and information. Language access success is measured by the number of non-English speakers who can access city services and information, not by the quantity of translated or interpreted content. The 15 languages above show prevalence within Seattle city boundaries and should be used as a reference. By removing the tiering system, we are emphasizing the importance of intentional language access and are encouraging departments to tailor their strategy based on community needs. Departments can start small and gradually expand their language access efforts. Intentional strategy includes properly documenting the language preference of the program audience, measuring effectiveness of translation and interpretation services, gathering feedback from community members on how they engage with language services provided, and revising language access strategies and plans on a regular basis.

Importance of planning and budgeting ahead: Departments should plan for interpretation and translation assistance early in the project planning process. Depending on available resources and a program’s specific communication approach, departments can determine what languages to translate or interpret into. When resources are limited, the Language Access team encourages departments to ensure that a small number of languages are supported throughout the whole engagement process before expanding language services to many languages.

Considerations for communicating with newly arrived immigrants and refugees: For immigrants and refugees who are newly arrived, we recommend referring to and prioritizing languages reflected in the Public Health-Seattle & King County's Refugee Screening Clinic data below and/or [data from the WA State Department of Social and Health Services \(DSHS\) Office of Refugee and Immigrant Assistance](#) . For example, 16,739 Ukrainians have arrived in Washington and received services from DSHS between January 2022 and February 2023. In addition, Washington State welcomed more than 3,200 Afghan arrivals since October 2021.

For neighborhood-specific or sector-based community outreach:

Departments may need to prioritize a different set of languages. For example, when departments are communicating with families with school-aged children, they should prioritize the top languages that are highlighted in the Seattle Public School data. If you know that your department or program's participation is heavily based in specific Seattle neighborhoods, use the links below to target the languages most widely spoken in those neighborhoods:

- [ACS Neighborhood Profile Builder](#)
- [DON Neighborhood Snapshots](#)

Data Sources and Analysis

Below are notes on the data sources and analysis steps used to identify top languages for the City of Seattle. The language data used comes from a combination of sources: the American Community Survey (ACS), Seattle Public Schools (SPS), Public Health-Seattle & King County, Seattle Police Department, Seattle Immigration Court Cases, Seattle Housing Authority, and Seattle Municipal Court Interpreter Services on most spoken or requested non-English languages. Data from these sources are presented in the Multisource Table below (pages 3 and 4).

Here are the steps that we followed in the analysis to identify the top languages:

1. We standardized categories of languages across data sources:

- a. Chinese spoken languages such as Mandarin, Cantonese, and Taishanese were grouped under the "Chinese" category.
- b. Instances of Cambodian and Khmer were consolidated into the "Khmer" category.
- c. Instances of Farsi and Dari were merged into the "Persian" category.

2. We assigned weights and distributed the instances of individual languages in the ACS language groups using more detailed data available:

Context: From the ACS data we used 2017-2022 5-year estimates of people speaking English less than "very well," from Table B16001. Table B16001 provides the most detailed data available on languages spoken of all ACS data tables that the Census Bureau publishes using the full sample of ACS data. However, data for some non-English languages spoken commonly in our area are not reported individually in ACS table B16001 but are instead reported as a part of a broader language group.

- a. We used 5-year ACS Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) data from 2017-2022, obtained from IPUMS USA, to distribute estimates for several language groups to individual languages. ACS PUMS estimates are based on a sample of the original sample and therefore can be unreliable for small population groups. To obtain more reliable estimates, we used data for King County rather than Seattle. We assumed that the proportional distribution in Seattle of people speaking English less than very well in language groups can be reasonably approximated using the distribution in King County. Using ACS PUMS estimates, we distributed the following language groups as described below:
 - i. "Ukrainian or other Slavic languages" (not including Russian, Polish, and Serbo-Croatian languages, which are reported individually): Ukrainian 86.9%, with the remainder comprised of other Slavic languages less commonly spoken in our area
 - ii. "Ilocano, Samoan, Hawaiian, or other Austronesian languages" (not including Tagalog, which is reported individually): Samoan 26%, Ilocano 24%, Marshallese 18%, Indonesian 11%, with the remainder comprised of other Austronesian languages less commonly spoken in our area
 - iii. "Thai, Lao, or other tai-Kadai languages:" Thai 58%; Lao 42%.

b. The distribution of estimates to individual languages in the “Amharic, Somali, or other Afro-Asiatic languages” category was done using a different method because the data from IPUMS were not sufficiently disaggregated for this language group. For these languages, we used a combination of weighted instance counts in the multisource table from other sources besides the ACS (excluding the Refugee Screening Clinic) and detailed race data from the 2020 decennial Census. Based on this combination of data we assigned weights and distributed the instances of the “Amharic, Somali, or other Afro-Asiatic languages” category as follows - Somali 44%, Amharic 28%, Tigrinya 14% and Oromo 10%.

3. We calculated instances across all data sources for individual languages.

4. We calculated each data source’s percentage of total instances:

To account for the varying importance of each data source, we determined the percentage of total instances contributed by each data source.

Data Source	Sum of Instance Count	Percentage of all Instances
ACS Language Spoken at Home* by Persons Speaking English Less Than "Very Well"	49,523	50.1%
Public Health Clinic (Excluding Refugee Screening Clinic**)	6,979	7.1%
Seattle Housing Authority Units Languages	3,142	3.2%
Seattle Immigration Court Case Languages	23,039	23.3%
Seattle Municipal Court Interpreter Services Languages	2,874	2.9%
Seattle Police Department 911 Calls Languages	4,042	4.1%
Seattle Public Schools Home Language Survey Languages	9,301	9.4%
Grand Total	98,900	100.0%
Notes:		

5. We applied the percentage to find weighted counts for each language.


6. And finally, we used the weighted counts to determine the top languages.

For questions and more information:


Please contact OIRA’s Language Access Program at IMR_LanguageAccess@seattle.gov with any language access-related questions and for detailed data information on this report.

MULTISOURCE LANGUAGE DATA TABLE

	American Community Survey (ACS) Language Spoken at Home and English Proficiency 2017-2021 5-Year Estimates (Numbers and percentages shown are for Seattle residents age 5 and older) Broad estimates: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Total population age 5 and older: 692,415 Speak languages other than English: 153,324 (22.1%) Speak English "less than very well:" 51,874 (7.5%) 		Seattle Public Schools (SPS) Home Language Survey Primary Language – Language Student First Learned (Pre-K to 12) 2022-2023 School Year	Public Health-Seattle & King County (PHSKC) Public Health Patient Visits Requiring Language Assistance 2023		Number of cases pending at the Seattle Immigration Court by Language 2023 Total Cases: 25,996	Non-English Languages Spoken by Households Residing in Seattle Housing Authority (SHA) Units 2023  Total Households: 7,659	Seattle Police Department (SPD) Communications Center Language Requests 911 Calls**** 2022 Total 911 Language line Calls: 4,193	Seattle Municipal Court (SMC) Interpreter Services Requests Received for Interpretation***** 2020-2022 Total requests: 2,874 (% estimates refer to share of total requests for interpretation)
	ACS Language Spoken at Home	ACS Language Spoken at Home by Persons Speaking English Less Than "Very Well"		PHSKC - Columbia Public Health Clinic and Downtown Public Health Clinic (Excluding Refugee Screening Clinic)	PHSKC - Refugee Screening Clinic Operating out of Downtown Public Health Clinic**				
1	Chinese (including Mandarin, Cantonese) ~31,758 (4.6%)	Chinese ~15,013 (2.2%)	Spanish – 3,378	Spanish – 5,308 (14.7%)	Dari – 1,515 (55.9%)	Spanish –17,772 (68.4%)	Somali – 780 (23%)	Spanish – 2,733 (65.2%)	Spanish – 1,100 (34.8%)
2	Spanish ~28,788 (4.2%)	Spanish ~9,219 (1.3%)	Somali – 1,136	Somali – 842 (2.3%)	Pashto – 657 (24.3%)	Russian – 2,004 (7.7%)	Vietnamese – 540 (11%)	Vietnamese – 346 (8.3%)	Vietnamese – 318 (10.1%)
3	Amharic, Somali, or other Afro-Asiatic languages ~12,360 (1.8%)	Amharic, Somali, or other Afro-Asiatic languages ~6,348 (0.9%)	Vietnamese – 970	Amharic – 169 (0.47%)	Ukrainian – 119 (4.4%)	Punjabi – 685 (2.6%)	Tigrinya –540 (7%)	Mandarin – 277 (6.6%)	Amharic – 256 (8.1%)
4	Vietnamese ~11,430 (1.7%)	Vietnamese ~ 6,340 (0.9%)	Chinese-Cantonese – 700	Tigrinya – 142 (0.39%)	Arabic – 88 (3.2%)	Portuguese – 582 (2.2)	Cantonese – 252 (3%)	Cantonese -- 146 (3.5%)	Mandarin – 242 (7.7%)
5	Tagalog (including Filipino) ~7,546 (1.1%)	Tagalog (including Filipino) ~ 2,438 (0.4%)	Amharic – 563	Dari – 98 (0.27%)	Farsi – 50 (1.8%)	**Unknown – 486 (1.9%)	Amharic – 251 (3%)	Korean – 91 (2.2%)	Somali – 205 (6.5%)

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6	Korean ~6,317 (0.9%)	Korean ~2,227 (0.3%)	Oromo – 431	Oromo – 69 (0.19%)	Somali – 30 (1.1%)	Ukrainian – 400 (1.5%)	Oromo – 181 (2%)	Somali – 91 (2.2%)	Tigrinya– 169 (5.4%)
7	Hindi ~6,223 (0.9%)	Japanese ~1,532 (0.2%)	Tigrinya -- 415	Vietnamese – 62 (0.17%)	Spanish – 23 (0.84%)	Mam – 365 (1.4%)	Spanish – 179 (2%)	Russian – 70 (1.7%)	Russian – 138 (4.4%)
8	French (incl. Cajun) ~5,165 (0.7%)	Russian ~918 (0.1%)	Chinese-Mandarin – 398	Chinese – 56 (0.16%)	Russian – 21 (0.78%)	Hindi – 242 (0.9%)	Mandarin – 101 (1%)	Amharic – 68 (1.6%)	Cantonese – 100 (3.2%)
9	Japanese ~4,945 (0.7%)	Ilocano, Samoan, Hawaiian, or other Austronesian languages ~882 (0.1%)	Japanese – 254	Arabic – 54 (0.15%)	Swahili – 19 (0.7%)	Mandarin – 219 (0.8%)	Russian – 94 (1%)	Tigrinya (Eritrea) -- 60 (1.4%)	Arabic – 91 (2.9%)
10	German ~4,263 (0.6%)	Arabic ~668 (0.1%)	Arabic -- 251	Lingala – 52 (0.14%)	Kinyarwanda – 19 (0.7%)	Somali – 218 (0.8%)	Arabic – 62 (1%)	Arabic – 35 (0.8%)	French – 66 (2.1%)
11	Russian ~3,607 (0.5%)	Hindi ~633 (0.1%)	Tagalog – 226	French – 37 (0.1%)	Burmese – 15 (0.55%)	Konjobal – 171 (0.7%)	Cambodian – 57 (1%)	Mongolian – 34 (0.8%)	Oromo – 56 (1.8%)
12	Ilocano, Samoan, Hawaiian, or other	Thai, Lao, or other Tai-Kadai languages ~629 (0.1%)	Taishanese – 190	Portuguese – 31 (0.08%)	Oromo – 6 (0.22%)	Creole – 146 (0.6%)	Korean – 29 (0%)	Brazilian Portuguese – 30 (0.7%)	Korean – 46 (1.5%)

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Austronesian languages ~2,998 (0.4%)								
13 Other Indo-European languages ~2,774 (0.4%)	French (including Cajun) ~610 (0.1%)	Russian – 164	Russian – 24 (0.06%)		French – 127 (0.5%)	Toishanese – 29 (0%)	French – 25 (0.6%)	Tagalog – 36 (1.1%)
14 Arabic ~2,271 (0.3%)	Ukrainian or other Slavic languages ~493 (0.1%)	Soninke – 125	Mongolian – 22 (0.06%)		Arabic – 108 (0.4%)	Lao – 25 (0%)	Farsi (Persian) -- 18 (0.4%)	Farsi – 26 (0.8%)
15 Persian (incl. Farsi, Dari) ~1,795 (0.3%)	Khmer ~433 (0.1%)	French – 100	Soninke – 13 (0.04%)			Tagalog – 22 (0%)	Haitian Creole – 18 (0.4%)	Kirundi – 25 (0.8%)
16 Telugu ~1,554 (0.2%)	Other languages of Asia ~ 410 (0.1%)							
17 Thai, Lao, or other Tai-Kadai languages ~1,388 (0.2%)	German ~372 (less than 0.1%)							
18 Portuguese ~1,260 (0.2%)	Yoruba, Twi, Igbo, or other languages of Western Africa ~307 (less than 0.1%)							

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19	Other languages of Asia ~1,259 (0.2%)	Portuguese ~270 (less than 0.1%)							
20	Ukrainian or other Slavic languages ~1,255 (0.2%)	Persian (incl. Farsi, Dari) ~270 (less than 0.1%)							

Notes:
 *We provide the ACS-derived data on overall population speaking the language at home for reference, but we only use the subset who speak English less than very well in calculations for identifying top languages. ACS estimates carry margins of error which can be substantial for small populations. We use the “~” symbol in showing the ACS estimates as a reminder that the estimates are approximations. The multisource table shows ACS language groups and languages with the greatest numbers for the full set of estimates see [ACS Detailed Table B16001](#)
 **We show figures for the Refugee Screening Clinic for reference in considering needs specific to refugees but we do not directly factor these into identifying the top languages.