

Published: 09.20.2005

Poll overestimates illegal population

General public has inaccurate view, survey finds

By Howard Fischer

CAPITOL MEDIA SERVICES

PHOENIX - A new survey suggests that if you think you know something about the language skills of the Hispanic community, there's a good chance you're wrong.

Pollster Earl de Berge said adults he queried in Maricopa County figure only about 48 percent of all Hispanics speak English well.

Yet de Berge said his own surveys over the last six years of some 4,000 heads of households who identify themselves as Latino puts the figure at 80 percent.

Conversely, the general public thinks 77 percent of Hispanics speak Spanish well; the actual number, said de Berge, is less than 60 percent.

On the question of how many people are in Arizona illegally, de Berge said U.S. Census figures indicate it could be around 367,000. That's based on the Census putting Arizona's non-citizen Hispanic population at 28 percent. With the latest Census figures putting the Hispanic population in Arizona at 1.3 million, that would put the non-citizen figure at about 367,000.

Even that may be too high because the Census includes people who are legal residents as well as illegal entrants, he said.

Yet those who made a guess in de Berge's survey put the undocumented population at 39 percent of Hispanics, which computes out to more than 511,000.

According to de Berge, that overestimation is due to all the news and comments about the problems of illegal immigration, from the media to politicians. "That kind of rhetoric so distorts reality that Latinos are first generation and all speak Spanish," de Berge said.

Rep. Russell Pearce, R-Mesa, said it may be de Berge who is distorting reality. Pearce, at the forefront of introducing bills to battle illegal border crossing, said the problem is at least as big as Arizonans believe.

He noted that a report done by the Pew Center for Hispanic Studies estimated that there were 500,000 illegal entrants in Arizona during 2003 and 2004 out of 10.3 million unauthorized migrants in the entire country.

One surprise, said de Berge, is Hispanics are more likely to guess a higher percentage of illegal entrants than non-Hispanic whites.

Legal status

- What percent of the Hispanic population in Arizona are here illegally?

Republican - 33%

Democrat - 41%

Independent - 38%

Not registered - 45%

Caucasian - 36%

Hispanic - 41%

Other - 43%

Under 35 - 41%

35-54 - 35%

55 and older - 39%

Total - 39%

Source: Behavior Research Center

Language skills

- Perceived language skills of Latinos in Arizona. Participants were asked what percentage of adult Latinos they believed were proficient in English and/or Spanish:

Skill Estimates Actual*

English 48% 80%

Spanish 77% 58%

*Taken from poll interviews during the last six years with 4,000 adult heads of households who identified themselves as Latino

The telephonic survey was conducted between Aug. 22 and Sept. 2 with adult heads of household in Maricopa County and has a margin of error of 3.8 percent.

THEMSELVES AS LATINO >

Source: Behavior Research Center

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