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Majority of Santa Clara County families speak foreign language at home

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Mercury News

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After decades of immigration from Asia and Latin America, Silicon Valley has hit a linguistic milestone that is rare in America: For the first time, a majority of Santa Clara County residents speak a language other than English at home.

In 2007, Santa Clara was one of just 10 counties in the United States where more than 50 percent of residents speak a foreign language at home, according to new U.S. Census Bureau data being released today.

Most of those counties are home to Spanish speakers on the Mexican border or multilingual populations in large cities like New York, Los Angeles and Miami. But Santa Clara County, which is suburban in character, is home to a different kind of phenomenon, with highly educated workers and students drawn to the high-tech job mecca of Silicon Valley as orchards and farm fields gradually gave way to office space and cul-de-sacs.

The change has been steady and consistent. As recently as 1990, less than one-third of South Bay residents spoke a foreign language at home. But by

2000, that number grew to 45 percent, as new arrivals from India, Mexico and China joined earlier immigrants from Vietnam, the Philippines and other countries.

About 51 percent of Santa Clara County households speak another language at home. Spanish is the most common foreign language, spoken by about 312,000 people. About 280,000 people speak Chinese, Vietnamese or Tagalog at home.

Silicon Valley's ability to emboss cultural diversity onto a suburban boilerplate makes it unique not just in the United States now, but to some degree in the nation's history, said Hans Johnson, a demographer with the Public Policy Institute of California.

The valley does not reflect the traditional 20th century immigrant story of moving into a poor ethnic neighborhood and scrimping and saving for the next generation. "What's really driving this is the addition of highly skilled, high-tech workers who come directly into the middle class here in the United States," Johnson said.

The linguistic and cultural diversity of Silicon Valley is also greater than other tech centers in the United States, said Bill Frey, a demographer with the Brookings Institution.

"I think it's the origin of the whole area, the fact there's been a strong Asian presence in Northern California for a long time," Frey said. "Silicon Valley is different than Austin or the Research Triangle or even Route 128" outside Boston.

The growing number of Chinese and Spanish speakers in Santa Clara County doesn't mean English is losing ground. Even as the number of Spanish speakers has grown rapidly this decade, 51 percent of Spanish-speakers were also fluent in English in 2007, up from 48

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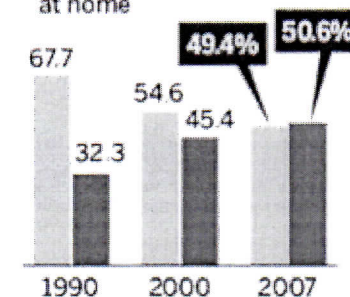
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percent in 2000, the new Census data show.

County hits milestone in languages spoken at home

The majority of Santa Clara County households speak a language other than English at home.

Speak only English at home
 Speak another language at home



Source: Census Bureau MERCURY NEWS

(Click on image to enlarge.)

That diversity is showing up in Milpitas, which looks a world away from Ellis Island, but it's one of just nine U.S. cities where a majority of the population is foreign-born, according to today's Census data on about 800 cities with at least 65,000 residents.

The Milpitas Unified School District has students who speak at least 42 languages, but a weekend afternoon presents a typical American suburban scene of yard sales, ice cream trucks, guys tinkering with boats in the driveway, and yard signs for

politicians running for mayor or city council. Some of that foreign-born population gathers at the India Community Center near Calaveras Boulevard, where a creative-writing class might be mostly in Hindi, but where much of the talk, whether it's a discussion of the presidential election or the merits of arranged marriage, is in English.

Because people from across India speak so many different languages, English "is the only language in which we can communicate with everybody here," said Prabhakar Kulkarni, a retired doctor from Mumbai who speaks the language Marathi at home with his wife, Rajani.

It's what they grew up speaking in Mumbai and still feel most comfortable with, even though they have lived permanently in the South Bay since 1995, and their California-born grandchildren have trouble speaking Marathi back to them.

While there are plenty of ethnic tongues in Milpitas, there's little or no ethnic turf, said Police Chief Dennis Graham, who grew up in town.

"There is no such thing as a ghetto in Milpitas, where one group of people live exclusive of other ethnic groups," Graham said. "If you look at the diversity we have in Milpitas, we have very little racial tension here."

At Murphy Park down the street from James Staten's house, the battle for playing fields tends to be between people playing cricket and those playing soccer, rather than those playing baseball or football.

"We represent the changing face of America," said Staten, a 51-year-old New Jersey native who has lived in Milpitas for 15 years and who is a teacher in San Jose. "That's one of the things I like about it — you have people from all walks of life."

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