

**SOCIETY**

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whom a foreign tongue was used—was designed to collect data on ethnicity, not on language proficiency, says McArthur, a Census Bureau statistician. But the answers have provided the numerical guidelines behind recent federal legislation to assist non-English-speaking Americans, with costly results.

Just who is a “non-English speaker”? Is it someone whose “mother tongue” (language spoken in a child’s home) is foreign, whose usual language is foreign, or who speaks no English at all? Depending on the criteria, the count in this country ranges from six million to 28 million (13 percent of the population). The definition used can have a tremendous impact on federal programs. The 1975 amendments to the Voting Rights Act of 1965, for instance, require bilingual ballots in districts where five percent or more of the population speaks a single language other than English and where that group’s election turnout is under 50 percent. The Bilingual Education Act of 1976 requires special help for children from “environments” where English is not the “dominant language.” Both rely on 1970 census data—i.e., on the “mother tongue” criteria.

Yet a special 1976 Census Bureau survey suggests that of the 28 million Americans with a foreign mother tongue, only 6.4 million usually speak it at home (Spanish accounts for one-third, followed by Italian, Chinese, and French). Some 8.6 million use it only as a second language. And only 19 percent of those who speak a foreign language reported problems with English. (Age was clearly a factor; only four percent of children aged four to 13 reported any difficulty.) Living in a household where English is not usually spoken could affect a child’s educational progress, however. Six percent of such children aged eight to 17 were not even enrolled in school, versus only two percent of all children. And 18 percent lagged two or more grades behind their peers, versus only eight percent of all children.

The 1980 census asked several language-related questions, including whether respondents usually spoke English and how well. As a result, McArthur believes, we may finally discover not only how many Americans truly are isolated beyond the language barrier but also where they live, what language they speak, and whether they are more likely to need elementary textbooks or foreign-language brochures on medicare.

*Town and Country*

“The Public and Private Worlds of City Life” by Claude S. Fischer, in *American Sociological Review* (June 1981), 1722 N St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

City life puzzles sociologists. Surveys consistently show that city dwellers are less likely to help strangers and are more exposed to conflict and violence than are their country cousins. Yet other research indicates that personal friendships thrive as vigorously in cities as in Podunk and that the pressures of the urban “jungle” do not create disproportionate psychological stress.

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Fischer, a sociologist at the University of California, Berkeley, analyzed a survey of 1,050 residents of 50 northern California communities ranging from small rural towns to central San Francisco neighborhoods. He found that, more strikingly than most, city people inhabit two worlds—one public and the other private. Surrounded by a “mosaic” of social and ethnic groups and often encountering unconventional, potentially threatening characters, city dwellers learn to “type” strangers and keep unknowns at a distance.

Indeed, fully 31 percent of the central-city households approached by Berkeley pollsters refused to be interviewed, compared with 20 percent or less elsewhere. (However, once admitted into urban homes, surveyors found their hosts just as cooperative as small-town folk.) Fischer also discovered that urbanites were far more apt to cite groups (blacks, gays, “older people”) as the best or worst aspects of their neighborhoods. City dwellers were the most likely to distrust “most people,” but they were no more likely than exurbanites to feel that way about their own neighbors. In fact, they reported chatting casually with neighbors and borrowing small items from them just as frequently as did small-town residents.

City dwellers see their relatives less frequently, but they socialize more often with friends. Fischer found no differences in the closeness of small-town and urban friendships. Nor did he turn up any correlations between urban living and “feeling upset, nervous, or depressed,” “feeling angry,” or “feeling pleased and happy.”

Life in the city, Fischer concludes, estranges individuals from “unknown, socially dissimilar” people—without affecting their capacity to form deep, long-lasting relationships.

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**PRESS & TELEVISION**
**Journalism**  
***Uber Alles?***

“The Imperial Media” by Joseph Kraft in *Commentary* (May 1981), American Jewish Committee, 165 East 56th St., New York, N.Y. 10022.

“A cross between a bootlegger and a whore”—if this description from Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur’s *Front Page* (1928) ever did fit reporters, it certainly does not now. But even as newsmen in the national media have gained in earnings, status, and influence, their credibility has nose-dived among “Middle Americans.” In response, many journalists have embraced a “self-serving”—and indefensible—“First Amendment ideology.” So charges Kraft, a syndicated columnist.

Most newsmen concede that complete objectivity is impossible. But many have defended a reporter’s autonomy by maintaining that the sheer number of news organizations and their intense rivalries cancel out any journalist’s biases. However, Kraft counters, this defense is valid only if journalists comprise a diverse group. The need for special-