



HEATHER EIDSON / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Neighborhood children take a break from playing on the front porch of Rey Gomez's home on Watson Street on Aurora's East Side Tuesday afternoon. Gomez and his family have roots in Mexico. A recent census shows Aurora's Hispanic population has jumped, accounting for nearly 40 percent.

Lowering the language barrier

Cities making more services available in Spanish

By Andre Salles and Heather Gillers
STAFF WRITERS

AURORA — Jeff Chesnutt sometimes has trouble communicating.

Chesnutt is a property maintenance

compliance officer with the city of Aurora, which means he conducts inspections for apartment licenses and reports code violations.

This job requires him to knock on doors and walk into homes without knowing the people an-

swering the door.

And often, he said, he has to do so without using words, since he speaks next to no Spanish.

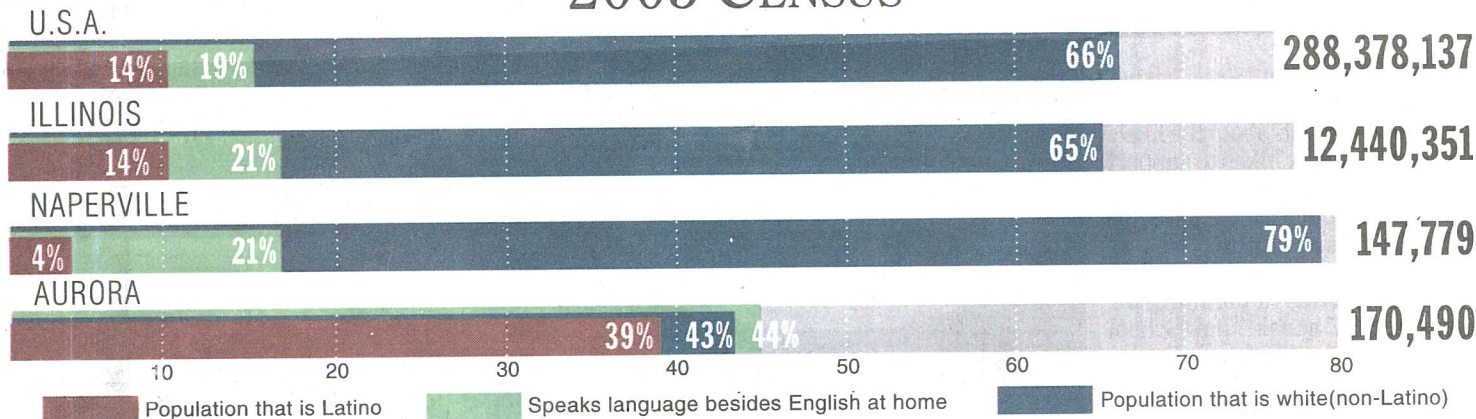
"Sometimes there will be a younger kid there who speaks English," he said, "or I can muddle through with the few things

I've picked up. But sometimes I have to get on the Nextel and call someone to translate."

According to new figures released this week by the U.S. Census Bureau, Aurora's Hispanic population has grown considerably in the past six years — up 7.2 percent. Of the estimated

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2005 CENSUS



Note: The census does not allow residents to choose 'Latino or Hispanic' as a race. So, many people who would typically describe their ethnicity as Latino choose white, black or other. They then pick Latino or Hispanic as a sub-category. Anyone of any race can indicate Latino ancestry (which has no good definition), so the combined racial percentages often add up beyond 100 percent.



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170,490 people in Aurora, 67,715 identify themselves as Hispanic, nearly 40 percent of the total population.

And though the numbers don't necessarily correlate, a similar number — 67,539 — say they speak a language other than English at home.

For Chesnutt, who works on the East Side, that language is usually Spanish. And he and his fellow English-speaking city workers have discovered that there are advantages to being bilingual.

"I don't feel comfortable entering a home unless they know what I'm doing there," he said. "I'm able to get through it, but it would be much better if we had certain phrases that we could say."

Chesnutt and some of his fellow inspectors have petitioned the city to help teach them Spanish. Beginning next month, North Aurora-based Interlate Systems Inc. will lead classes specifically geared toward property inspectors, teaching words and phrases in Spanish that will help them communicate more effectively.

Interlate already helps with translations in Aurora's Department of Neighborhood Standards, according to the department's assistant director, Mark Anderson.

Anderson said his department has been producing publications, such as the Good Neighbor Guide and the Welcome Home Guide, in both English and Spanish since 1999.

"It's important that we provide equal access to residents with regard to city services," Anderson said, noting that many of his department's publications list important property codes and are mailed out with the city's water bills.

"It's one thing to have the standards available in the office," he said, "but it's important to inform the residents of what those standards are, and it's important to do that in both English and Spanish."

Ballots, info in Spanish

And he's not alone. Across the city, government services have become more and more geared toward the Spanish-speaking community as their numbers have grown.

The Aurora Election Commission, for example, has been providing ballots for local elections in both English and Spanish since 2002, according to Assistant Director Trudi Schwartz. She said that is in compliance

with a federal law that demands ballots in languages spoken by more than 5 percent of a population area.

Additionally, the city's information line, (630) 264-INFO, has employed Spanish-speaking operators since it began in 2002. Four out of the nine employees in the call center speak Spanish, according to Dan Barreiro, the city's director of community services, and it's been part of the vision all along.

"It's a real benefit to the public, when they can communicate with someone in their language," Barreiro said, "and it helps the department provide the service, because they'd have to find a translator if they didn't speak Spanish."

Other Valley numbers

The Hispanic population growth is occurring nationwide, according to the Census Bureau. The new figures come from an annual sample called the American Community Survey, which included roughly 3 million homes in the Chicago area.

Oswego saw its Hispanic population nearly double between 2000 and 2004, jumping from 1,129 to 2,173, according to village statistics.

Trends are harder to gauge in the village of Montgomery, where the most recent number is still the 2000 U.S. Census estimate that the town is 13.5 percent Hispanic. But Village President Marilyn Michelini said that in the past five years, local government has started translating mailed notices to serve a growing number of Spanish speakers, and she hopes to begin translating the city newsletter soon.

The growth of Plano's Hispanic population is less noticeable, said Mayor Bill Roberts, because it's nothing new. While no population statistics are available, School District numbers show that about 34.4 percent of students were Hispanic in 2005, up from about 28.4 percent in 1999.

The Hispanic population, Roberts said, has long been active in local government.

"It's part of what Plano is," he said.

It's also a big part of Aurora's identity — witness the popular Hispanic Heritage Advisory Board, which presents several well-attended events per year focusing on the Hispanic population.

For city workers like Chesnutt, learning Spanish is another way that they can provide services more effectively and work with a segment of the population that continues to grow.

"It's an extra tool to have to help do the job better," he said.

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