

The Humanities in Our Lives

AMERICA'S NATIVE LANGUAGES

The United States has always been a land of many languages. Before Europeans arrived, more than 300 indigenous languages were spoken in North America. As a result of forced cultural assimilation, Native American, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian communities suffered massive losses of language and culture. Since the civil rights era, many of these communities have begun to reclaim and preserve their languages and encourage their revitalization.

Data corroborate that instruction in indigenous languages offers substantial benefits for Native American society that extend beyond mere bilingualism. With the Native American Languages Act of 1990, these languages were recognized with a distinctive political status and cultural importance.

KEY FACTS

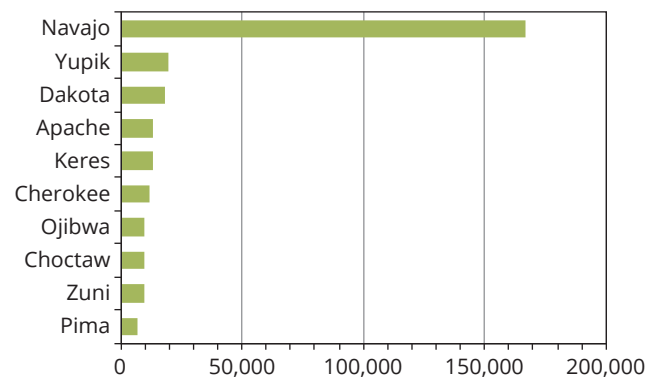
- The U.S. Census reports that 150+ Native American languages are still in use today in the U.S. Some estimates project that, without sustained intervention, only around 20 will remain by 2050.
- These languages are collectively spoken by over 450,000 people, with the top 10 spoken by nearly half this number.

INNOVATIVE PROGRAMS

Efforts to revitalize the Hawaiian language began in 1983 with private, nonprofit preschools known as *Pūnana Leo* (language nests), which used immersion methods to teach Hawaiian to a handful of children. At the time, fewer than 50 children under age 18 spoke the language at home. Thousands of children are now enrolled annually in these schools. Data from 2013–2015 suggest that students from these schools graduate from high school at rates above both the state-wide and Native Hawaiian averages and attend college at rates above the Native Hawaiian average.

In 1978, Hawaiian was made an official language of the state alongside English, marking an end to policies that had suppressed the language since 1896. Members of the Native Hawaiian community develop instructional materials and train teachers, while also promulgating best practices that can be replicated in other Native American communities.

The Ten Largest Native North American Languages by Number of Speakers over the Age of 5



The Humanities in Our Lives series (#HumInOurLives) highlights the many and diverse forms of humanities activities in the nation, and key facts about the health of the field.

THE ANDREW W. MELLON FOUNDATION

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