

Language Barriers and Mental Health Disparities among Chinese Americans

An Analysis of English Proficiency Across Demographics

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About the Authors

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Key Findings:

- *Nearly 40% of Chinese Americans report having limited English proficiency, based on data from nearly 6,500 respondents in the State of Chinese Americans 2022 Survey.*
- *Chinese Americans with lower English proficiency are significantly more likely to report poor self-rated mental health.*
- *Those who do not speak English "at all" report fair or poor mental health at nearly four times the rate of those who speak English "very well."*

Introduction

In 2022, approximately 4.7 million Chinese Americans lived in the United States, comprising 19% of the nation's total Asian American population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). As one of the largest Asian American ethnic groups, Chinese Americans play a vital role in the social, economic, and political fabric of the country. Despite this prominence and given the persistent "model minority" perception, the Chinese American community continues to grapple with structural challenges—including linguistic, racial, health, and economic barriers—that are often overlooked. The COVID-19 pandemic and the evolving U.S.–China relations have further compounded these difficulties by exacerbating vulnerabilities in mental health, social integration, and economic stability (Pew Research Center, 2023).

Historically, data capturing the full scope of Chinese American experiences has been limited. In this brief, we address this knowledge gap by analyzing the State of Chinese Americans 2022 Survey—a nationally representative study of nearly 6,500 individuals, the largest survey of Chinese Americans ever conducted. Through this lens, we explore how English proficiency intersects with mental health outcomes and ask: How does language ability shape access to care, support, and stability in daily life among the Chinese American population?

Findings reveal that nearly 40% of Chinese Americans report limited English proficiency, with pronounced disparities by birthplace, citizenship status, and region. Critically, those with lower English proficiency are far more likely to report poor mental health. These results point to an urgent need for interventions tailored not just to the linguistic barriers Chinese Americans face but also to the broader social and emotional burdens they carry. Expanding access to culturally competent mental health services and addressing language-related disparities are essential steps toward equity and inclusion.

Data: The State of Chinese Americans 2022 Survey

The data for this brief comes from *the State of Chinese Americans 2022 Survey*, a collaborative effort between Columbia University and the Committee of 100. This survey was designed to capture the diverse experiences of Chinese Americans, focusing on topics such as demographics, health, economic activities, and sociopolitical engagement. It included 6,481 respondents from across the United States and was administered in English, simplified Chinese, and traditional Chinese to enhance inclusivity. Statistical weighting was applied to adjust the sample so that its distribution of key demographics (such as gender, age, education, and region) matches the 2020 American Community Survey 5-year estimates and approximates national representation. The analytical sample for this brief includes 5,644 individuals who self-reported their English proficiency levels and mental health levels.

Results

Self-rated English Proficiency Level Among Chinese Americans

Nearly 40% of Chinese Americans reported having limited English proficiency.

While most Chinese Americans report being proficient in English, there remains a notable subset with limited or no English proficiency. Figure 1 shows that 61.7% of respondents self-report to speak English "very well," while 38.3% have varying levels of limited English proficiency (LEP). This includes those who speak English "well" (22.0%), "not well" (13.4%), and "not at all" (2.9%).

These statistics indicate that about 16% of the Chinese American population self-describe as speaking English not well or not at all, therefore facing significant challenges in navigating systems and accessing services due to language barriers. These results underscore the need for a deeper investigation into disparities among this community to better understand their specific implications and address the challenges.

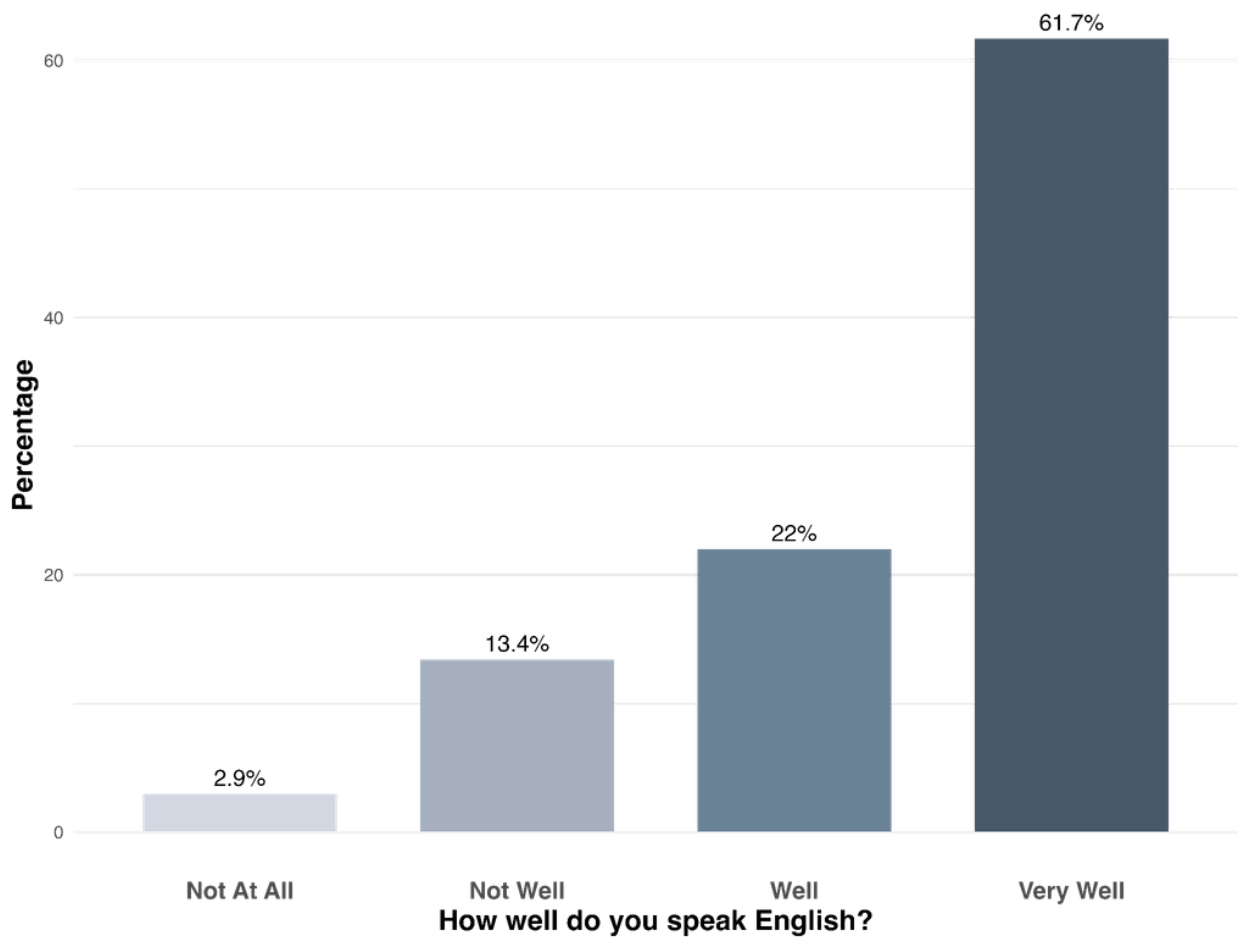


Figure 1. Distribution of Self-rated English Proficiency Levels among Chinese Americans

Self-rated Mental Health Level Among Chinese Americans

Thirteen percent of Chinese Americans self-report to have fair or poor mental health.

Based on self-reports, Figure 2 shows that 27.5% of Chinese Americans rated their mental health as “excellent,” while 34.4% reported “very good” and 25.0% reported “good.” Notably, 10.9% described their mental health as “fair” and 2.3% as “poor,” indicating that over 1 in 8 respondents experience some level of psychological distress. These findings suggest the importance of addressing mental health concerns in the Chinese American community, particularly for those who may not meet the threshold of clinical diagnosis but still struggle with low psychological well-being.

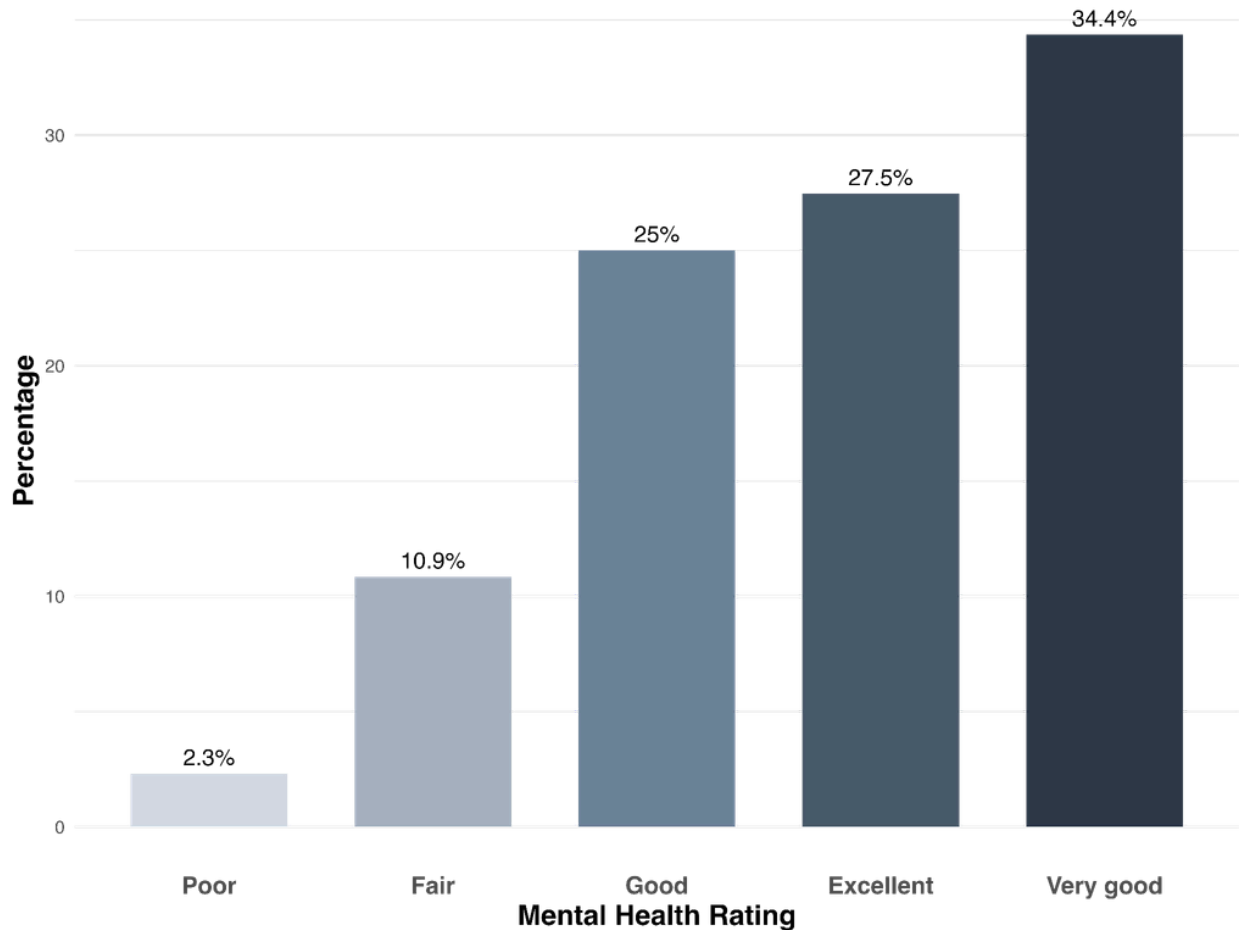


Figure 2. Distribution of Self-rated Mental Health among Chinese Americans

Language Barriers and Mental Health Among Chinese Americans

Chinese Americans with the lowest English proficiency levels report the poorest self-rated mental health, pointing to a strong link between language barriers and psychological well-being.

Self-rated English proficiency levels and mental health show a strong correlation among Chinese Americans, suggesting that limited English proficiency may impact mental health outcomes. Results show that those who speak English "not at all" have the highest prevalence of "fair" or "poor" mental health ratings.

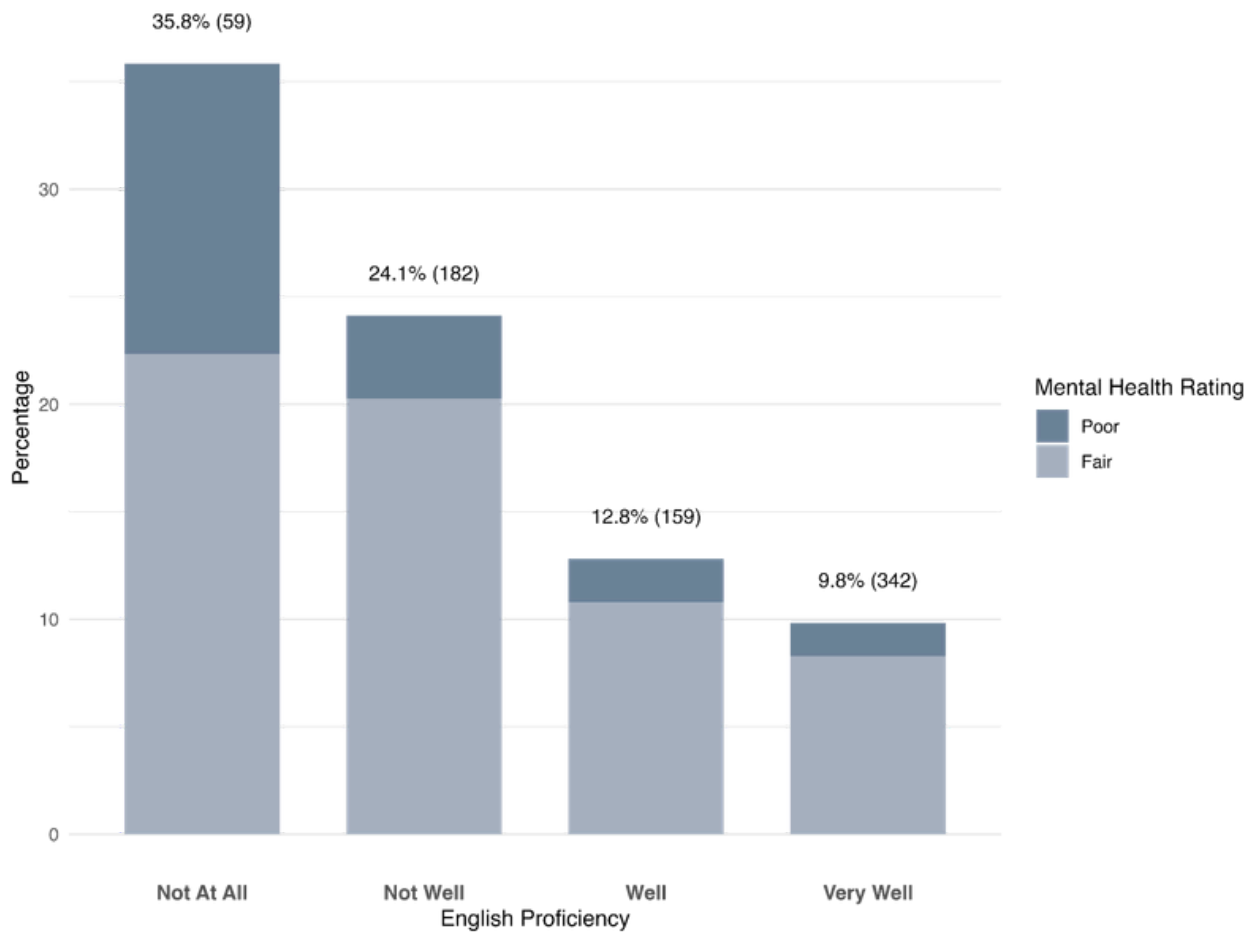


Figure 3. Self-rated Mental Health by English Proficiency Levels

Figure 3 shows a strong link between self-rated English proficiency and mental health among Chinese Americans. Those who speak no English at all report the highest levels of mental health challenges, with nearly 36% rating their mental health as "fair" or "poor." In contrast, only about 10% of those who speak English very well report the same. This sharp difference suggests that limited English proficiency may be associated with greater social isolation, difficulty accessing care, and higher stress levels, all of which point to an urgent need for mental health services that are both culturally and linguistically appropriate.

These findings are supported by the existing literature. Language barriers can make it hard to connect with others, and this isolation often leads to loneliness and depression (Leu, Walton, & Takeuchi, 2011). Without strong social networks or community involvement, it becomes harder to find emotional support or feel integrated. Additionally, navigating the mental health system is especially difficult when patients can't clearly express what they're going through—and when

providers don't speak their language or offer culturally sensitive care (Sentell, Shumway, & Snowden, 2007). This often leaves mental health issues unaddressed and worsening over time.

The stress of adjusting to a new culture faced by immigrants, especially those without strong English proficiency, can make anxiety and depression even worse (Hwang & Ting, 2008). Many individuals also face financial pressures, as limited language proficiency often means lower-paying jobs with few chances for advancement. These conditions can affect self-worth and overall well-being (Gee & Ponce, 2010). Language-based discrimination and stigma can also take a toll, leading people to feel judged or excluded (Yoo, Gee, & Takeuchi, 2009).

Even within families, language gaps—especially between immigrant parents and their more acculturated children—can cause misunderstandings and conflict. These intergenerational tensions can be another major source of stress and emotional strain (Kim, Chen, Wang, Shen, & Orozco-Lapray, 2013).

Taken together, these challenges show how deeply limited English proficiency can affect mental health for Chinese Americans. They also underscore the importance of creating services that recognize and respond to these cultural and linguistic needs.

Implications

Limited English proficiency is associated with reduced access to and quality of mental health care among Asian American populations such as Chinese Americans, as shown by evidence in this brief based on a national, large-scale survey conducted in 2022 (Bauer, Chen, & Alegría, 2010). These findings offer important implications for policy and services that can meet the needs of community members and enhance their capabilities and well-being.

Expanding bilingual, culturally concordant services by recruiting and funding Mandarin-, Cantonese-, and other Chinese-dialect-speaking clinicians and embedding professional interpretation with translated materials can mitigate these barriers. Peer-support programs have been shown to reduce loneliness and social isolation among older Chinese immigrants (Lai, Ou, & Li, 2020), indicating that culturally tailored peer-support groups and community wellness workshops could address social isolation linked to limited English proficiency.

Anti-stigma education and outreach campaigns, including mass-media initiatives, have the potential to reduce public stigma toward mental illness effectively (Corrigan, Morris, Michaels, Rafacz, & Rüsçh, 2012). Integrating brief mental-health screenings and resource referrals into adult English as a Second Language classes can enhance engagement and health literacy among community members who have limited English proficiency (Wagner, 2019). Partnerships with Chinese-language media, faith organizations, and student associations can help normalize help-seeking and highlight inspiring recovery narratives.

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