

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/who-is-bilingual>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

I grew up in a Spanish- and English-speaking household and feel comfortable speaking, reading, and writing in both languages. However, I've often wondered whether I can call myself truly bilingual.

English is by far my stronger language and the default language I use in academic and business settings. In college, when I studied abroad in Mexico and Chile, I realized that years of academic instruction in English had affected my ability to convey similar thoughts and ideas as effectively in Spanish. For example, an essay I could write in a few hours in English would take me a few days to write in Spanish. In Chile, I faced an additional challenge: Chileans speak a different type of Spanish than what I learned from my Mexican-born parents. To me, spoken Chilean Spanish seems to be much faster than Mexican Spanish. Also, there are certain Chilean Spanish words that are foreign to me. For example, I still remember not understanding my Chilean host mom when she asked me if I liked choclo--the Chilean Spanish word for corn. Mexican Spanish speakers call corn maize or elote. This question of when is a foreign-language speaker bilingual isn't just a personal one; it's also related to our work at Vera. As our country becomes more diverse, more and more criminal justice and public safety agencies are contending with how to provide language access to limited-English proficient (LEP) individuals. Oftentimes, jurisdictions want to address this issue, but don't know how to and are wary of expensive solutions. Using in-house bilingual staff to communicate with LEP populations seems like a quick and relatively inexpensive solution. However, agencies should be mindful that bilingualism is not a given...and sometimes the topic of conversation is not corn but things like assault or murder. Two law enforcement agencies we worked with in the past year have effectively used bilingual staff to bridge the language divide and have developed methods to ensure that the staff have the necessary language skills. Bilingual officers in the Oklahoma City Police Department are tested by a national testing center (costs start at \$50 for an online test) and receive a skill level score that determines the type of communication she or he can conduct. This ensures that fluent officers are used for high profile policing work such as murder investigations that require full fluency. Similarly, the Metropolitan Nashville Police Department requires its volunteer community interpreters to be tested by a language assessment company (cost: \$50 per volunteer). These community interpreters carry police department cell phones so that they can be reached by the police departments dispatchers when an officer needs language assistance. They then provide telephonic interpretation.

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

Vera Institute of Justice. All rights reserved.