

DATA BRIEF:

ASIAN AMERICAN LANGUAGE NEEDS IN LA WILDFIRES

Paul Ong, Chhandara Pech, Jonathan Ong, Melany De La Cruz-Viesca,
Silvia R. González, and Bryzen Enzo Morales

Photo from Mayra Beltran / Los Angeles County

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INTRODUCTION



Photo from Irfan Khan. Search and Recovery continues in Eaton Fire ravaged area of Altadena, CA, Wednesday, January 15, 2025.

The January 2025 fires in Los Angeles County rank among the most devastating disasters in American history with estimated economic losses exceeding \$250 billion¹, significant displacement of residents, extensive structural damage, and tragic loss of life. The fires have affected all segments of the population—rich and poor, residents and workers, and people from every racial and major ethnic group. **This includes Asian Americans, who face unique challenges, particularly those with limited English proficiency (LEP).**² Language barriers can hinder access to critical emergency notifications, which are essential for timely evacuations and ensuring safety during wildfires. Effective communication is also crucial during the recovery and rebuilding process. Reaching LEP Asian communities is especially challenging because they speak dozens of different languages.

INTRODUCTION

This data brief is part of a research series examining the impacts of the wildfires on LA's communities, focusing on how different racial and ethnic groups have been affected by the January 2025 wildfires.³ This brief is organized into three key focus areas.

1

Limited English Proficiency Among Asian Americans

- * Examines LEP rates across Los Angeles County, analyzing variations by ethnicity, age, and geography.
- * This section explores how language barriers impact access to critical information and services, particularly in emergency situations.

2

Asian Residents and Language Needs in Evacuation Zones

- * Estimates the number of Asian American residents within the four designated evacuation zones, with a focus on those with LEP.
- * This section also identifies the Asian languages spoken in these zones, offering critical insights for emergency response planning. Understanding these language needs is essential for ensuring that emergency notifications and recovery materials are effectively communicated, improving access to life-saving information, and fostering an inclusive disaster response.

3

Conclusion and Recommendations

- * Summarizes key findings and outlines policy strategies to address language barriers in emergency communication and recovery efforts.
- * This section highlights actionable steps that government agencies, emergency responders, and community organizations can take to improve outreach, accessibility, and multilingual support for LEP Asian American communities.

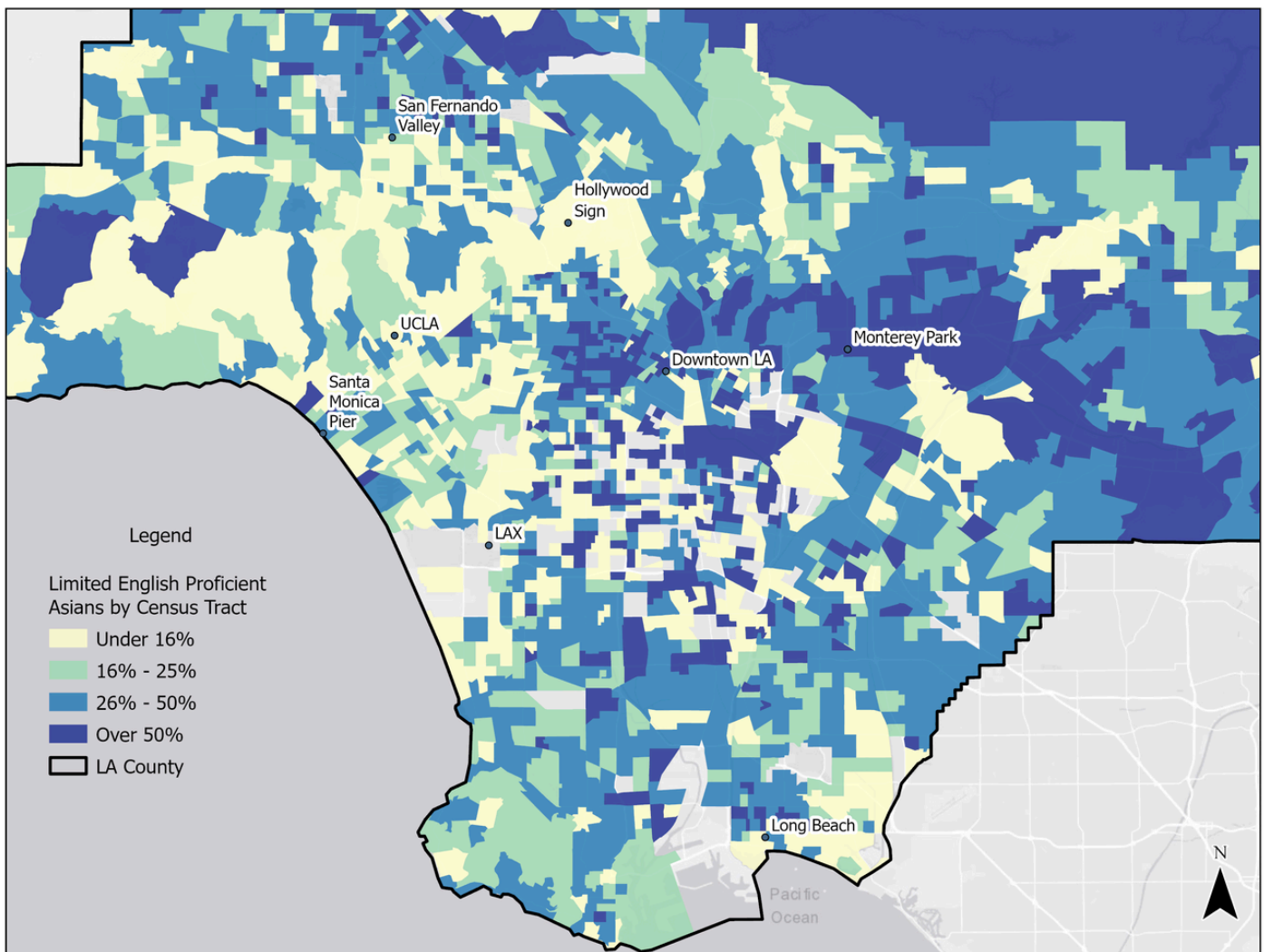
Key findings reveal that nearly **50,000 Asian Americans reside within the evacuation zones**, with **over 12,000 needing language assistance** due to limited English proficiency. These language needs are part of a broader challenge in Los Angeles County, where **over half a million Asian Americans are classified as LEP**. LEP rates vary significantly by ethnicity, age, and geography, further complicating outreach efforts.

While Chinese, Tagalog, Korean, and Vietnamese are the most commonly spoken Asian languages, dozens of other Asian languages are also represented, highlighting **the need for multilingual emergency preparedness and response strategies**. Ensuring that emergency notifications, evacuation orders, and recovery materials are available in multiple languages is **crucial for an inclusive and effective disaster response**.

FINDING 1: OVER 500,000 ASIAN AMERICANS IN LOS ANGELES COUNTY HAVE LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENCY

Over a third (36%) of the more than 1.4 million Asian Americans in Los Angeles County have limited English proficiency, with an overwhelming 93% being foreign-born. While LEP Asian Americans reside throughout Los Angeles County, they are more heavily concentrated in certain geographic areas. The highest concentrations are found in the urban core and the San Gabriel Valley. Figure 1 illustrates the proportion of Asians classified as LEP by census tracts.

Figure 1: Limited English Proficient Asians by Census Tract

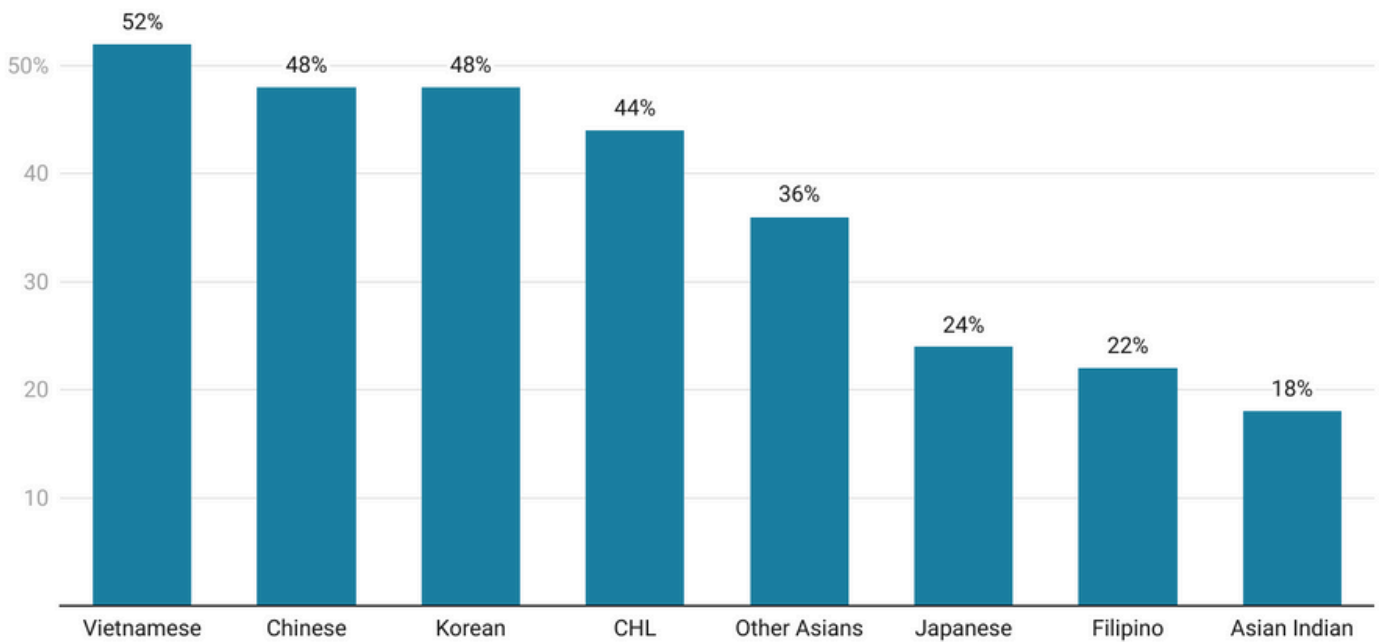


Source: Map created by the authors using 2019-2023 5-year ACS and Census/TIGER/Line GIS shapefile.

FINDING 2: LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENCY RATES VARY SIGNIFICANTLY BY ETHNICITY AMONG ASIAN AMERICANS

As shown in Figure 2, LEP rates vary widely across Asian American ethnic groups, with several groups experiencing rates significantly higher than the countywide average of 36% among all Asians. Vietnamese, Chinese, and Korean Americans have the highest LEP rates, each exceeding 45%— far greater than the county average. These disparities highlight the need for targeted language access strategies to ensure effective communication and equitable access to resources, particularly in emergency preparedness and public service outreach.

Figure 2: Percentage of Limited English Proficient Asian Americans by Ethnicity in Los Angeles County



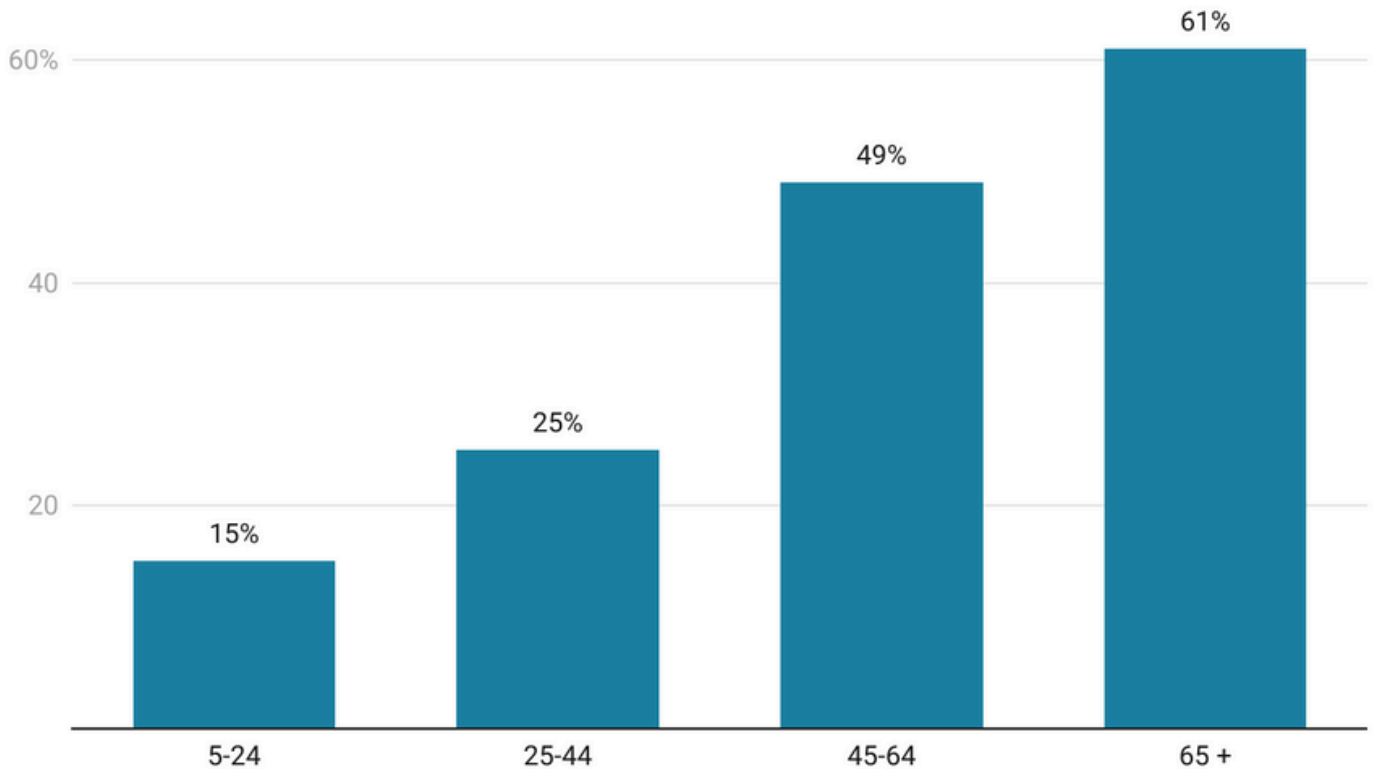
Note: CHL includes Cambodian, Hmong, and Laotian populations.

Source: Author's tabulations based on the 2019-2023 5-year ACS PUMS. • Created with Datawrapper

FINDING 3: OLDER ASIAN AMERICANS FACE SUBSTANTIALLY HIGHER RATES OF LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENCY THAN YOUNGER GENERATIONS

In addition to ethnic differences, LEP rates also vary by age group, as shown in Figure 3. Older Asian Americans experience significantly higher rates of LEP compared to younger generations, with LEP rates ranging from 15% among those aged 5 to 24 to 61% among those 65 and older. This disparity is largely driven by generational differences, as younger Asian Americans are more likely to be U.S.-born and received education in the United States. Given these differences, outreach strategies during emergencies and recovery efforts should be tailored to meet the distinct needs of each age group, ensuring effective communication and support across generations.

Figure 3. Percentage of Limited English Proficient Asian Americans by Age Group in Los Angeles County

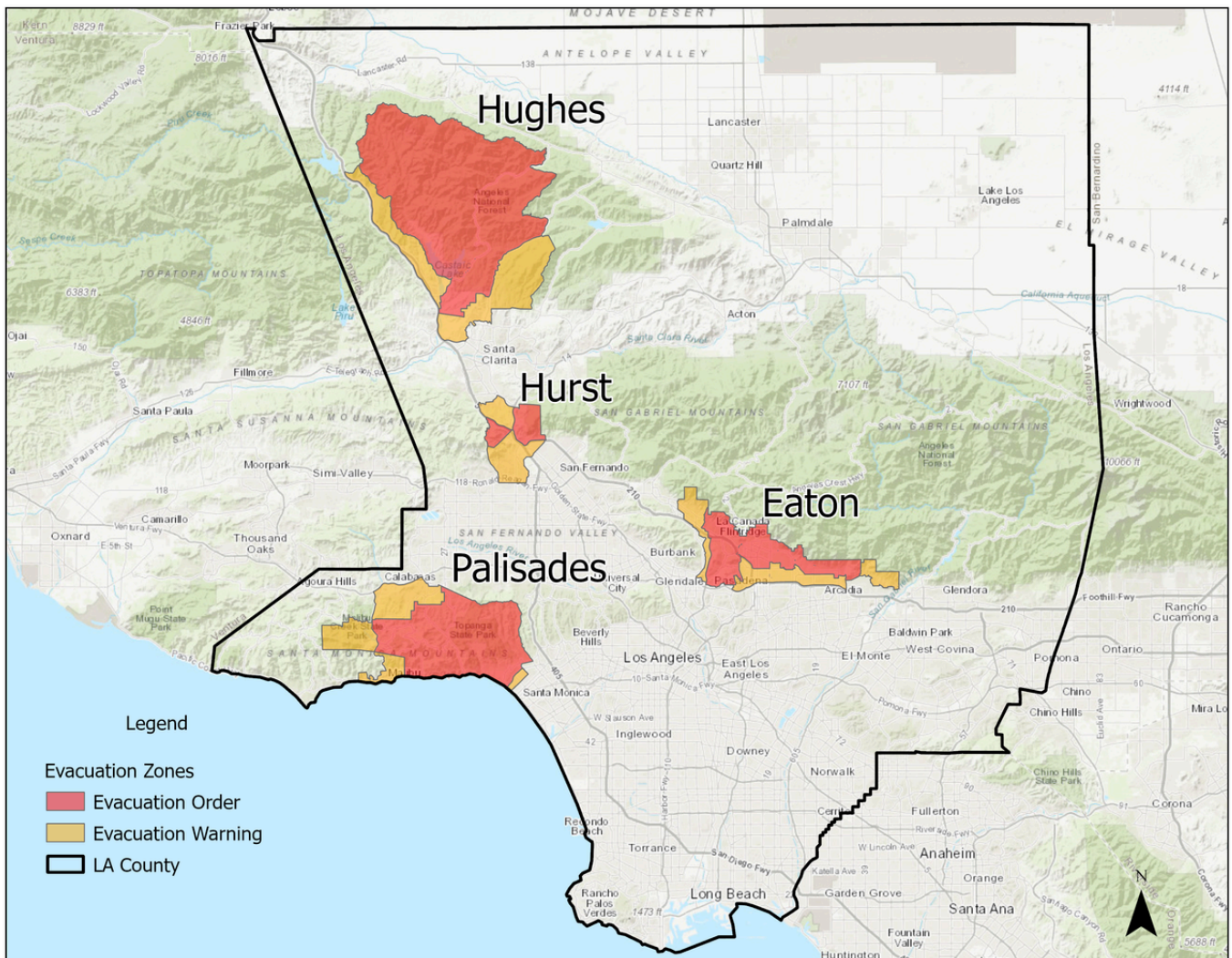


Source: Author's tabulations based on the 2019-2023 5-year ACS PUMS. • Created with Datawrapper

FINDING 4: 50,000 ASIAN AMERICANS WERE AFFECTED BY THE FIRE, WITH THE MAJORITY IN EATON EVACUATION ZONE

Figure 4 highlights the locations of the four major fire evacuation zones in the county. The evacuation zones for the Palisades, Eaton, and Hurst fires are based on data as of January 8, 2025, while those for the Hughes fire are based on data as of January 23, 2025, as it started much later than the other three.

Figure 4. Fire Evacuation Zones: Eaton, Palisades, Hurst, and Hughes



Source: Map created by the authors using GIS shapefiles from Cal Fire for the Palisades, Eaton, and Hurst evacuation zones (as of January 8, 2025), the County of Los Angeles Emergency Map for the Hughes evacuation zone (as of January 23, 2025), and Census/TIGER/Line.

PART 2: ASIAN RESIDENTS & LANGUAGE NEEDS IN EVACUATION ZONES

Nearly 50,000 Asian Americans live within the four major evacuation zones, making up 15% of the total population in these areas. The majority—close to 39,000 individuals—reside in the Eaton evacuation zone, where they account for nearly one-fifth (18%) of all residents. The proportion of Asian Americans varies across the other zones, as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Estimated Number of Asian Americans in Fire Evacuation Zones

	Asian Residents	Asians as a Percentage of All Residents in Evacuation Zones
Eaton	38,691	18%
Hughes	1,602	11%
Hurst	4,613	13%
Palisades	5,058	7%
All Four	49,964	15%

Source: Author's tabulations based on the 2020 Decennial Census data and geospatial shapefiles from Cal Fire and the County of Los Angeles Emergency Map. • Created with Datawrapper

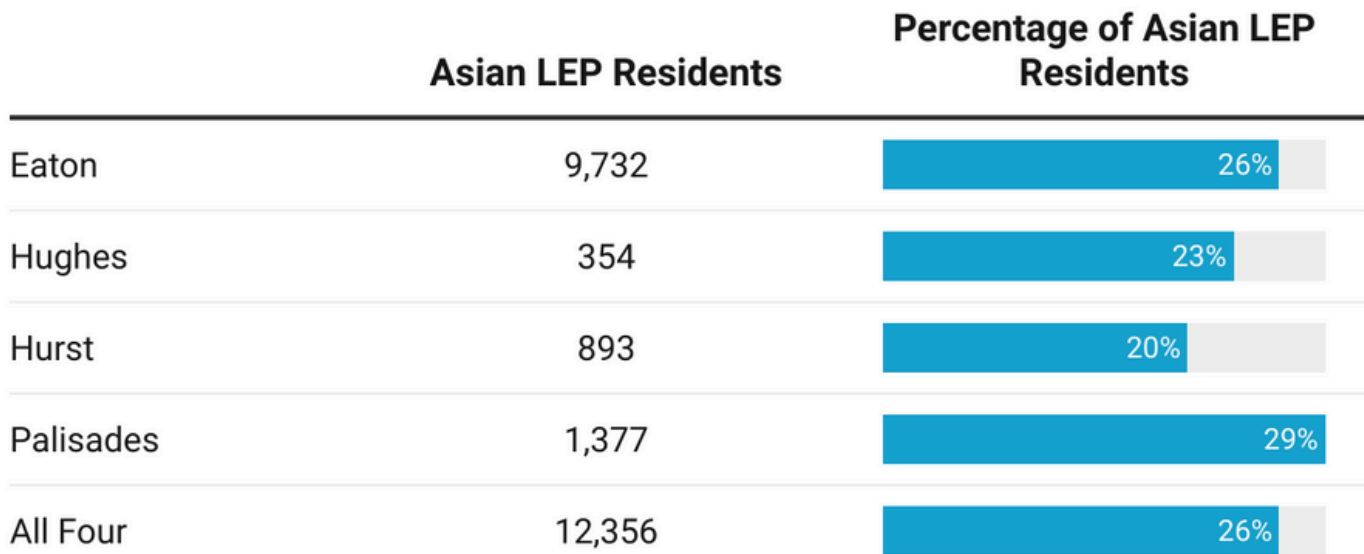


Photo from Mayra Beltran / Los Angeles County
LA County residents attend the Local Assistance Centers & Disaster Recovery Centers open to the public at the Community Education Center Pasadena City College on Tuesday, January 14, 2025.

FINDING 5: OVER 12,000 LEP ASIAN AMERICANS RESIDE IN THE FOUR MAJOR EVACUATION ZONES

Over 12,000 Asian individuals aged 5 and older in the combined evacuation zones have limited English proficiency, representing over a quarter (26%) of the Asian population in these areas. However, LEP individuals are not evenly distributed across the evacuation zones. As illustrated in Figure 6, variations by location are evident: the Palisades zone has the highest proportion of LEP Asians, approaching 30%, while the Eaton zone also has a significant LEP population, with over a quarter of its Asian residents classified as LEP.

Figure 6. Percentage of Limited English Proficient Asian Americans in Fire Evacuation Zones



Source: Author's tabulations based on the 2020 Decennial Census data and geospatial shapefiles from Cal Fire and the County of Los Angeles Emergency Map • Created with Datawrapper

FINDING 6: DOZENS OF ASIAN LANGUAGES ARE SPOKEN IN THE EVACUATION ZONES, VARYING BY LOCATION

Census data indicate that the most commonly spoken Asian languages in the combined evacuation zones are Chinese, Korean, Tagalog, and Vietnamese, as shown in Table 1. However, dozens of other Asian languages are also represented and vary by evacuation zone. Unfortunately, census-tract data on language are limited, as they only report on languages spoken by these four major Asian ethnic groups, consequently underreporting the linguistic diversity for all Asians. The available statistics fail to count the relatively smaller language groups, which are nonetheless still collectively sizeable.

Table 1. Language Spoken at Home for the Population Aged 5 and Older in Fire Evacuation Zones

	Eaton	Hughes	Hurst	Palisades	All Four
Chinese	9,265	132	202	1,199	10,799
Korean	7,098	212	509	791	8,609
Tagalog	3,690	168	1,657	292	5,807
Vietnamese	347	10	112	273	741
Other Asian Language	2,815	271	335	596	4,018

Source: Author’s tabulations based on the 2019-2023 5-year ACS and geospatial shapefiles from Cal Fire and the County of Los Angeles Emergency Map. • Created with Datawrapper

PART 2: ASIAN RESIDENTS & LANGUAGE NEEDS IN EVACUATION ZONES

School records on Asian English learners in elementary schools serving the evacuation zones provide additional insight into the broader range of language needs in these communities, identifying over a dozen different Asian languages spoken by students. Table 2 details the specific languages represented in these areas, including those reported with at least five elementary school students.

Table 2. Asian Languages Spoken by Limited English Proficient Elementary Students in Fire Evacuation Zones

Eaton	Hughes	Palisades	All Sites Including Hurst	
Korean	Korean	Mandarin	Korean	Hindi
Mandarin	Tamil	Japanese	Mandarin	Tamil
Japanese	Hindi	Korean	Japanese	Bengali
Cantonese	Philippine Languages	-	Cantonese	Panjabi/Punjabi
Philippine Languages	Telugu	-	Philippine Languages	Telugu
Vietnamese	-	-	Vietnamese	Thai

Note: The table reports languages spoken by at least five elementary school students in the listed evacuation zones. Hurst did not meet this criterion; however, our earlier analysis using Census ACS data identified Tagalog, Korean, and Chinese as the top three Asian languages spoken at home in this evacuation area.

Source: Author's tabulations based on California Department of Education data and geospatial shapefiles from Cal Fire and the County of Los Angeles Emergency Map. • Created with Datawrapper

PART 3: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this brief underscore the significant language barriers facing Asian American communities in Los Angeles County, particularly those residing in fire evacuation zones. With nearly 50,000 Asian Americans in these areas and over 12,000 needing language assistance, effective communication during disasters remains a critical challenge. The diversity of languages spoken—more than a dozen across these communities—demands targeted strategies beyond a one-size-fits-all approach.

Ensuring equitable emergency preparedness, response, and recovery requires intentional action from government agencies, emergency responders, and community organizations. The following recommendations outline key steps to enhance multilingual communication, improve accessibility, and ensure all residents receive life-saving information when it matters most.



RECOMMENDATIONS

1

Identify and Address Language Needs Proactively

- * Conduct regular assessments to determine language assistance needs in fire evacuation zones.
- * Use census, school data and community survey data to anticipate language barriers before disasters occur.
- * Collaborate with researchers who have the necessary technical skills, expertise, and experience specific to Asian Americans communities to conduct detailed analyses.

2

Ensure Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Communication

- * Provide in-language emergency materials tailored to the linguistic needs of each affected community.
- * Move beyond a one-size-fits-all approach by recognizing the distinct languages spoken in different neighborhoods.

3

Strengthen Partnerships with Community Organizations

- * Collaborate with trusted, community-based organizations that serve limited-English proficient populations.
- * Leverage these organizations' existing relationships and expertise to improve outreach and emergency response.

4

Establish Community Oversight and Engagement Mechanisms

- * Create citizen oversight groups in the most affected communities, including community leaders who can advocate for LEP residents.
- * Organize and facilitate local discussions with residents, using Asian language translators, to identify barriers in disaster recovery, rebuilding, and resettlement.

5

Institutionalize Long-Term Improvements in Disaster Preparedness

- * Implement multilingual alert systems and culturally relevant public service campaigns.
- * Integrate language access planning into broader emergency response frameworks to ensure sustainability.

BUILDING A MORE INCLUSIVE DISASTER RESPONSE FRAMEWORK

The Los Angeles Wildfires crisis presents an opportunity for advocates and decision-makers to rethink and strengthen emergency response strategies. Government agencies should not only focus on reaching the largest populations affected by the wildfires but also prioritize supporting the most vulnerable and hard-to-reach communities. To address this gap, agencies must work closely with coalitions like the AAPI Equity Alliance, a network of over 40 community-based organizations that specialize in culturally and linguistically appropriate services for low- and moderate- income AAPIs (Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders). By partnering with organizations like the AAPI Equity Alliance, Los Angeles can improve access for AAPIs, make their experiences more visible, and ensure that all residents—regardless of language ability—are fully included in disaster recovery and rebuilding efforts.



A Thai-speaking senior home had lost power and access to essentials during the LA wildfires. AAPI Equity Alliance members and community leaders jumped into action to provide 300 meals and 20 emergency kits.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This data brief was made possible through the generous support of the Helen and Morgan Chu Endowed Chair of the Asian American Studies Center. The authors are grateful for the editorial support from Natalie Masuoka, Norbert Tan, Manjusha Kulkarni, Karen Umemoto, and Kiran Bhalla. The authors also appreciate the contributions of Tina Pham, Kari Okubo, Barbra Ramos, and Tom Nguyen for their work on the data brief's layout and dissemination.

The UCLA Asian American Studies Center, the UCLA Center for Neighborhood Knowledge, and the UCLA Latino Policy and Politics Institute acknowledge the Gabrielino Tongva peoples as the traditional land caretakers of Tovaangar (the Los Angeles basin and So. Channel Islands). As a land grant institution, we pay our respects to the Honuukvetam (Ancestors), 'Ahihirom (Elders), and 'Eyoohiinkem (our relatives nations) past, present, and emerging.

ABOUT OUR ORGANIZATIONS

UCLA Asian American Studies Center

The UCLA Asian American Studies Center is dedicated to advancing research, programs, and publications that enrich the understanding of the history, cultural heritage and experiences of Asian Americans, in order to promote greater equity and a more just society.

UCLA Center for Neighborhood Knowledge

The UCLA Center for Neighborhood Knowledge specializes in empirical spatial analysis to inform policy and planning action and explicitly emphasizes the study of immigrant enclaves, low-income neighborhoods, and ethnic minority communities.

UCLA Latino Policy & Politics Institute

The UCLA Latino Policy and Politics Institute addresses the most critical domestic policy challenges facing Latinos and other communities of color through research, advocacy, mobilization, and leadership development to expand genuine opportunities for all Americans.



AAPI EQUITY ALLIANCE

AAPI Equity Alliance (AAPI Equity) is dedicated to improving the lives of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders through civic engagement, capacity building, and policy advocacy.

DISCLAIMER

The views expressed herein are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the University of California, Los Angeles, as a whole. The authors alone are responsible for the content of this report.

APPENDIX



[bit.ly/wildfires
appendix](https://bit.ly/wildfires_appendix)

FOOTNOTES

¹ Vincent, R. (2025, January 24). [*Estimated cost of fire damage balloons to more than \\$250 billion*](#). *Los Angeles Times*.

² The U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) defines limited English proficiency (LEP) as the ability to speak, read, write, or understand English less than "very well".
<https://www.census.gov/topics/population/language-use/about.html>

³ See, for example, [Wildfires and Latino Communities](#) and [LA Wildfires: Impacts on Altadena's Black Community](#).