New York City – the number of Americans speaking a language other than English at home has more than doubled since 1980, and the nation’s Spanish-speakers increased by 23 million during that same time with implications for child wellbeing say researchers at the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP), part of the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University.

More than 55 million Americans speak a language other than English at home and 21 percent of children aged 5 through 17 speak a non-English language at home, according to researchers who examined a number of recent government reports. They note that limited English language skills are associated with poor educational outcomes in children and limited access to health and mental health care and other social services where there are inadequate culturally- and linguistically-competent services.

“Increasing English language proficiency for children and adults leads to better civic integration, higher productivity and ultimately a stronger tax base, as well as to a healthier society overall,” says Curtis Skinner, PhD, lead author of the NCCP report. “That’s a pretty strong argument for why adequate public investment in English-language skills is so important. Unfortunately, government support for English language instruction has not kept pace with the clear and growing need.” Funding for English-language instruction, explains Skinner, has remained largely unchanged since 2000, and in some cases, has been actually reduced, in spite of the documented growing need.

The U.S. Department of Education administers the Bilingual Education Act and the federal education program is specially designed for children with limited English language proficiency. NCCP’s research points to the failure of efforts to ensure English language access and supports to keep pace with the need for English language proficiency.

“We strongly support a national commitment to providing affordable and effective English language learning opportunities,” says Skinner. “And that extends to making sure our health-care settings are culturally- and linguistically competent. Having bilingual clinicians and trained health care interpreters contributes to improved adherence to medical regimes, and reduces emergency room visits, which lessens the financial burden on the country’s healthcare system.”