

## **A Study of the Demographics of Attendees at the 1997 Biennial Convention of the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc.**

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### **Abstract**

There is a national crisis in the quality, quantity, and qualifications of sign language interpreters (National Association for the Deaf-Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf [NAD-RID], 1994). However, literature describing the number and demographic profile of the interpreter workforce is limited. Neither of these organizations has current demographic information regarding their membership, and the last major study of all interpreters was reported almost 20 years ago (Cokely, 1981). Responding to this need, this study presents demographic characteristics of a sample of interpreters attending the 1997 Biennial Conference of the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf. Recommendations are proposed to establish an ongoing demographic database of interpreters who are members of RID as well as to conduct a national survey of all interpreters, including those certified by other entities.

### **Introduction**

There is a national crisis in the quality, quantity, and qualifications of sign language interpreters (National Association for

the Deaf-Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf [NAD-RID], 1994). The best estimate of the number of sign language interpreters in the United States is 25,000 based upon affiliation with RID (Burch, 1998). The actual number and demographic characteristics of the interpreting workforce, including these individuals and others, are largely a matter of conjecture. Studies that describe the population of interpreters of American Sign Language and English are conspicuous by their absence in the literature. The singular study thus far reported was conducted almost 20 years ago (Cokely, 1981).

Two organizations certify interpreters at the national level. The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) is the oldest and largest association of interpreters of American Sign Language and English in the United States (Burch, 1996; Caccamise et al., 1980; Frishberg, 1990; Stewart, Schein, & Cartwright, 1998; Quigley & Youngs, 1965). RID reports a certified workforce of over 3,000 individuals (D. Stebbins, personal communication, 1998). The National Association of the Deaf (NAD) is the oldest and largest deafness-related consumer organization in the United States and has recently embarked on a certification process of its own. NAD reports a certified workforce of approximately 1,500 divided across five levels of skill (N. Rarus, personal communication, 1997).

Descriptive information regarding the characteristics of interpreters from either of these organizations is limited. RID does not currently collect or maintain general demographic information in its membership database (C. Nettles, personal communication, 1998). The last available data regarding these interpreters was collected in the early 1990s and never reported. Similarly, NAD does not collect demographic information on its certified interpreters (P. Annarino, personal communication, 1998). Even less is known about the over 20,000 interpreters who are not certified or affiliated with either organization.

This study was initiated in order to help meet this need for descriptive information. Interpreters that were attending the 1997 Biennial Convention of RID were asked to respond to a brief questionnaire regarding their demographic characteristics, training, and qualifications. While not representative of all interpreters in the workforce, the Convention provided cost-effective access to a potential sample of over 1,000 interpreters from across the United States.

## Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study was to collect a snapshot of the characteristics of practitioners of the profession of interpreting American Sign Language and English who are members of RID and who attend national conventions. The study was specifically designed to investigate the following questions:

- What is the gender profile of the interpreting community?
- What is the age profile of the interpreting workforce?
- What is the ethnic profile of the interpreting workforce?
- What certification levels do respondents represent?
- What degrees have been attained by interpreters in what fields of study?
- How did interpreters learn sign language?
- How did interpreters learn to interpret?

Data on similar questions regarding the membership of RID, based upon the information last collected in the early 1990s, is also presented. While not directly comparable, this information does provide a context in which to look at changes in the interpreting profession.

## Method

### Subjects

Subjects were participants at the 1997 Biennial Convention of RID. Held in Long Beach, California, the conference was attended by approximately 1,000 interpreters. A total of 201 interpreters voluntarily completed the research questionnaire that was placed in the registration packet.

### Instrument

A written questionnaire was developed for this study. The survey requested general demographic information (e.g., gender, age, ethnic background, certification, and degree/s attained), and how sign language and interpreting were learned). Ethnic categories were adopted from the National

Multicultural Interpreting Project classifications (M. Mooney, personal correspondence, 1998). Face and content validity of the instrument was documented via review by the RID Board of Directors.

### RID Membership Data

Descriptive information was obtained from RID regarding the last available demographics of the RID membership. This information, collected in 1990-91 and 1991-92, was based upon 3,070 and 2,232 persons, respectively. Data was hand tabulated, but never reported (S. Sullivan, personal communication, 1996).

### Procedures

The study was conducted with the approval of the RID Board of Directors. Questionnaires were placed in the convention registration packets of all attendees. Respondents were asked to voluntarily complete and return the questionnaire to the "Help Hut" (a central information location at each Biennial Convention). The resulting data was entered and analyzed using SPSS/PC+ statistical modules. These analyses were conducted with technical assistance from the University of Arkansas Rehabilitation Research and Training Center for Persons Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing.

### Results and Discussion

Of the total 1,013 individuals registered for the 1997 Biennial Convention, 201 individuals completed the survey inserted into the registration packet. This constitutes a return rate of 19.8%. This return rate was consistent with similar descriptive studies conducted at conventions of other organizations.

Table 1 provides frequency and percentage rates by gender. Respondents were primarily female (79%). As may be seen in the table, this finding is consistent with prior data regarding RID membership collected in the early 1990s. This consistency indicates that the profession remains heavily dominated by females.

Tables 2 and 3 represent the age distribution of 1997 Convention respondents. As may be seen in the Table, the majority of the respondents (nearly 72%) range from their 30s to 40s. This finding is consistent with prior membership data collected in 1991 and 1992. Interestingly, the percentage of

younger individuals responding remains low, with less than 15% under age 29. If this finding continues, the field will experience further major shortages, over and above the current shortage, by the year 2,010 when the youngest of those age ranges begins to reach retirement age.

**Table 1**  
**Gender Distribution**

Gender	1997 Convention		1991-92		1990-91	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Female	158	78.6	2,636	85.9	1,999	86.1
Male	43	21.4	426	13.9	324	13.9
No Response	0	0.0	8	0.3	613	26.4
Totals	201	100.0	3,070	100.0	2,323	100.0

**Table 2**  
**1997 Convention Age Distribution**

Age Range	1997 Convention	
	f	%
18-29	29	14.4
30-39	74	36.8
40-49	70	34.8
50-59	18	9.0
60+	8	4.0
No Response	2	1.0
Totals	201	100.0

**Table 3**  
**Previous Survey Age Distribution**

Age Range	1991-92		1990-91	
	f	%	f	%
< 18	0	0.0	116	3.9
18-25	184	6.0	1,401	47.7
26-39	1,841	60.5	656	22.3
40-55	862	28.3	143	4.9
55+	158	5.2	622	21.2
Totals	3,045	100.0	2,938	100.0

Table 4 indicates the ethnic profile of the respondents and prior membership surveys. As may be seen in the Table, **interpreters are overwhelmingly (80%) European**, a finding that is consistent with prior membership studies. Of note is that the percentage of respondents from diverse racial-ethnic groups has increased from 5% in 1990-91, 7.5% in 1991-92, to 8% in the 1997 Convention. While a promising trend, there appears to be an ongoing need to attract members of diverse groups into the profession.

**Table 4**  
**Ethnic Distribution**

Ethnicity	Convention 1997		1991-92		1990-91	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
African/Black	4	2.0	61	2.2	34	1.2
Asian	2	1.0	22	0.8	18	0.6
European	161	80.1	2,454	89.4	2,123	72.3
Hispanic/Latino	5	2.5	47	1.7	39	1.3
Native American	6	3.0	77	2.8	55	1.9
Other	0	0.0	43	1.6	28	1.0
No Response	23	11.4	40	1.5	641	21.8
Totals	201	100.0	2,744	100.0	2,938	100.0

Table 5 indicates the certificates that 1997 Convention Survey respondents held. Of the interpreters responding, the most common certificate tends to be interpreting (46 individuals attained a Certificate of Interpretation). The second most common certificate tends to be transliterating (36 attained their Certificate of Transliteration, and 21 attained a Transliteration Certificate). Nearly 20% (41 of 201) carried no certification. The vast majority (80%) had at least one certificate, and nearly half (43%) had a second certificate. The numbers greatly diminish at the level of three certificates or more (6.6% had three or more certificates).

Table 6 indicates the level of the degrees attained by respondents and members. Nearly 85% of the 1997 Convention respondents reported having a college degree. When compared to prior membership data, the percentages of interpreters with degrees appears to be increasing: 58% during 1990-91 and 73% during 1991-92. Also of note is the specific degree held. Over 15% of the respondents had degrees in interpreting. This find-

ing represents a substantial increase when compared with earlier membership surveys (3.6% in 1990-91).

**Table 5**  
**Distribution of Certificates**

Certification	f	%
CI	60	18.1
CT	67	20.2
CSC	46	13.9
IC	24	7.3
TC	25	7.6
RSC	7	2.1
CDI-P	1	0.3
OIC:C	6	1.8
OIC:S/V	3	0.9
OIC:V/S	0	0
OTC	1	0.3
SC:L	6	1.8
SC:L Prov	1	0.3
CLIP	3	0.9
Candidate	7	2.1
NAD III	6	1.8
NAD IV	6	1.8
NAD V	4	1.2
State	5	1.5
QA	7	2.1
None	41	12.4
Other	5	1.5
Totals	331	99.9*

\* Total does not equal 100 percent due to rounding error

Table 7 indicates in what major areas degrees were attained. Degree emphasis at the associates level was in interpreting (62%). At the bachelors level, degree emphasis remained with interpreting (15%), but also includes the areas of psychology (10%) and deaf education (8%). At the masters level, deaf education and counseling (each at 15%) were the degree emphases. No clear percentage was evident at the doctoral level, as there were only four respondents with four different degrees.

Table 8 indicates where respondents learned sign language.

Approximately half (50%) of the respondents to the 1997 Convention Survey learned signs through Interpreter Preparation Programs (27%) and workshops/classes (23%). Learning through friends (25%) was also a major source of sign language learning. Although data are not available to support it, interpreters in the past were generally known to have been predominantly children of deaf adults (CODAs) or workers in the churches. These two training grounds appear to have been supplanted by formal courses of study in colleges and universities.

Similarly, the method of learning to interpret has also shifted from informal methods to more formal training programs. Table 9 shows that respondents to the 1997 Convention Survey indicated the predominant method of learning to interpret was formal training (65%) in Interpreter Preparation Programs (39%) and workshops/classes (26%). Learning to interpret from friends was also indicated as a major way of learning to interpret (16%). As with learning to sign, learning to interpret has apparently moved from the community into formal preparation programs.

**Table 6**  
**Distribution of Degrees**

Degree	Convention 1997		1991-92		1990-91	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
HS	4	2.0	237	7.8	181	6.2
Some College/ IPP Cert.	29	14.4		0.0		0.0
AA/AS	40	19.9	492	16.1	371	12.6
BA/BS	72	35.8	914	30.0	710	24.2
MA/MS	36	17.9	739	24.2	570	19.4
MA+ 30	17	8.5		0.0		0.0
PhD/EdD	3	1.5	82	2.7	70	2.4
No Response	0	0.0	584	19.2	1,036	35.3
Totals	201	100.0	3,048	100.0	2,938	100.0

**Table 7**  
**Distribution of Degree Majors**

	Associate		Bachelor		Master		Doctorate	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
ASL/Deaf Studies								
Business	4	8.9	5	6.8		0.0		0.0
Communications/Media	2	4.4	2	2.7	1	1.8		0.0
Counseling		0.0	5	6.8	3	5.5		0.0
Education	3	6.7	2	2.7	8	14.5		0.0
Education of the Deaf		0.0	6	8.2	5	9.1		0.0
Educational Interpreting	2	4.4	1	1.4	8	14.5		0.0
English		0.0	4	5.5		0.0		0.0
Interpreting	28	62.2	11	15.1	2	3.6		0.0
Law	1	2.2	1	1.4	1	1.8		0.0
Liberal Arts	4	8.9	3	4.1	2	3.6	1	25.0
Linguistics		0.0	1	1.4		0.0		0.0
Medical	1	2.2		0.0		0.0		0.0
Philosophy		0.0	1	1.4		0.0		0.0
Political Science		0.0	1	1.4		0.0		0.0
Psychology		0.0	7	9.6	5	9.1	1	25.0
Religion		0.0	2	2.7		0.0		0.0
Science		0.0	4	5.5		0.0		0.0
Social Work		0.0	2	2.7		0.0		0.0
Sociology		0.0	4	5.5	4	7.3		0.0
Special Education		0.0	4	5.5	3	5.5	1	25.0
Speech Pathology		0.0	4	5.5	2	3.6		0.0
Teaching Interpreting		0.0	4	5.5	4	7.3		0.0
Theater		0.0	4	5.5	2	3.6		0.0
Other		0.0	3	4.1	3	5.5	1	25.0
Totals	45	100.0	73	100.0	55	100.0	4	100.0



**Table 8**  
**Sign Language Training Distribution**

Learned Signs*	f	%
Parents	32	8.4
Children	2	0.5
Church	17	4.5
ITP	102	26.9
Siblings	7	1.8
Friends	94	24.8
Workshops/Classes	86	22.7
Work	4	1.1
Self	6	1.6
Other	29	7.7
Totals	379	100.0

\* Multiple Responses

**Table 9**  
**Interpreter Training Distribution**

Learned Interpreting*	f	%
Parents	23	6.8
Children	2	0.6
Church	20	5.9
ITP	131	38.9
Siblings	4	1.2
Friends	54	16.0
Workshops/Classes	89	26.4
Work	11	3.3
Self	3	0.9
Totals	337	100.0

\* Multiple Responses

## Conclusions, Limitations, and Recommendations

### Conclusions

This study has presented a timely snapshot of the demographic characteristics of interpreters who attended and responded to a survey at the 1997 Convention. Much of this snapshot is highly consistent with previous data that was col-

lected in the early 90s. Several trends were noted when comparing this sample with prior data. However, it is necessary to view these trends with caution given differences in the questionnaire used, sampling techniques (attendees versus membership), and the number of individuals who responded. These findings may not be representative of the total membership of RID, let alone the total workforce of interpreters.

A number of positive trends were found. The sample was slightly more diverse and included a slight increase in the number of male respondents. Aging of the respondents, similar to the general population of workers, points to the need to attract more persons into the field. Interestingly, it appears that the sample had benefitted from more formal training in sign language and interpreting. Survey data indicate that convention attendees tend to be certified and had degrees. This finding is in contrast to the general view that the profession is predominantly non-degreed (Professional Development Committee, personal communication, 1998).

### Recommendations

There are obvious benefits to be gained from collecting demographic data to validate these findings and to clarify some of the trends. This information would be useful in documenting shortages of interpreters and their training needs. Toward this goal, it is recommended that RID re-institute the practice of collecting demographic data as part of its membership renewal campaign. Data collected should be comprehensive, including demographic characteristics, credentials, and training. By collecting this information on an annual basis, a true longitudinal study could be designed to validate trends alluded to in this study.

Finally, it is recommended that a national survey be conducted to address similar issues with all interpreters, not just those who choose to affiliate with and are certified by RID. Given the obvious benefits of having a complete picture of the workforce, it is recommended that RID advocate to public and private funding agencies to obtain support for this study.

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