



160612

General Government Division

B-266194

June 5, 1998

The Honorable Richard C. Shelby
United States Senate

Dear Senator Shelby:

Subject: Federal Documents in Languages Other Than English Published and Distributed in Calendar Years 1995-1997

This letter responds to your request that we update our September 1995 correspondence identifying the number of federal government documents (excluding documents of the Departments of Defense and State) that were published in languages other than English from 1990 through 1994.¹ As agreed with your office, we (1) updated the number of non-English-language documents published during the 3-year period from January 1, 1995, through December 31, 1997, and determined how many of these published documents were distributed; (2) identified which languages federal agencies published these documents in; and (3) identified two examples of agencies' written policies and procedures for determining when to publish agency documents in a language other than English.

To update information on the number of non-English-language documents published, we reviewed the same databases used to develop the information presented in our 1995 correspondence. We counted the number of non-English-language documents listed in two databases that contain information about publicly available documents and publications: the Government Printing Office's (GPO) monthly catalog of publications and the National Technical Information Service's (NTIS) bibliographic database. We did not verify the information contained in the databases. Also, a GPO official told us that not all non-English-language publications and documents may be included in the GPO monthly catalog database because some federal agencies print and distribute documents themselves without going through GPO. Therefore, the 200 non-English-language documents we identified are not a federal governmentwide

¹Federal Foreign Language Documents (GAO/GGD-95-243R, Sept. 20, 1995).

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figure for agencies (excluding the Departments of State and Defense). To determine how many of the documents that we identified had been distributed, we asked GPO and NTIS officials to review their sales and distribution records and provide us this information for the years 1995 through 1997. We also reviewed database entries that identified the languages that these documents were published in.

Finally, to identify examples of agencies' written policies for determining when to publish agency documents in a language other than English, we contacted officials from two of the three agencies that had published comparatively more non-English-language documents than other agencies during our review period and obtained copies of the relevant written policies. Additional information on our scope and methodology is provided at the end of this letter.

RESULTS IN BRIEF

For the years 1995 through 1997, we identified a total of 200 non-English-language documents from the GPO and NTIS databases. This is less than one-half of 1 percent of the approximately 69,000 federal agency documents that were published during this period and listed in these databases. Two of the three agencies that published the most non-English-language documents during this 3-year period were the Social Security Administration (SSA), which published 49 non-English-language documents; and the Department of Education, which published 17. Some of the SSA documents offered explanations of the supplemental security income program and disability insurance. The Department of Education documents addressed topics such as reading improvement, student financial assistance, and child development.

Data GPO and NTIS officials provided on the number of copies of these 200 documents distributed showed that about 11 million copies of these non-English-language documents were distributed during the years 1995 through 1997. This is less than one-half of 1 percent of the approximately 2.9 billion copies of documents printed and distributed by GPO alone during the 3-year period.² SSA's non-English-language documents were the most widely distributed. Of the 11 million non-English-language documents that GPO distributed during this 3-year period, 6.6 million, or 60 percent, were SSA documents.

By far, the most prevalent language used was Spanish, with 143 of the 200 documents we identified being published in Spanish. We also found that 36 of the non-English-language documents were published in multiple languages, and most of these included Spanish as 1 of the languages. Other than Spanish, no other language was used in more than five of the documents.

²Total federal document distribution figures were not available from NTIS because its aggregate sales data were for both public and private sector documents included in its bibliographic database.

We found that both of the agencies we contacted—SSA and the Department of Education—had written policies about publishing documents in a language other than English. SSA's policy established five factors for determining when to produce written communications in a language other than English, including the number of non-English-speaking customers and the cost-effectiveness of issuing the communication. Senior officers at the Department of Education have the authority to determine which of their offices' publications will be issued in a foreign language.

NUMBER OF NON-ENGLISH-LANGUAGE DOCUMENTS PUBLISHED AND DISTRIBUTED

The GPO and NTIS databases contained approximately 69,000 federal agency documents that were published during the years 1995 through 1997. Of these 69,000 documents, only 200 (or less than one-half of 1 percent) were published in languages other than English. GPO and NTIS data showed that about 11 million copies of these 200 non-English-language documents were distributed during this 3-year period. This is less than one-half of 1 percent of the approximately 2.9 billion copies of federal documents printed and distributed by GPO alone during the 3-year period.

Table 1 presents (by federal department or agency) the number and percentage of federal non-English-language documents published and distributed during calendar years 1995 through 1997. As shown in table 1, of the 200 federal agency documents published in a language other than English, SSA published 49 non-English-language documents (about 25 percent of the total).

Table 1: Non-English-Language Documents Published and Distributed During Calendar Years 1995 Through 1997

Federal department/agency	Number of documents published	Percent of documents published	Number of documents distributed	Percent of documents distributed
Social Security Administration	49	24.5%	6,615,072	59.6%
Department of Education	17	8.5	128,967	1.2
Department of Health and Human Services ^a	17	8.5	541,349	4.9
National Institutes of Health	14	7.0	436,997	3.9
Food and Drug Administration	13	6.5	117,586	1.1
Department of Labor	13	6.5	300,669	2.7
U.S. Trade and Development Agency	9	4.5	16	^b
Department of Commerce	8	4.0	29,972	0.3
Environmental Protection Agency	7	3.5	120,065	1.1
Department of Transportation	7	3.5	115,914	1.0
Department of Agriculture	6	3.0	233,270	2.1
Department of Housing and Urban Development	6	3.0	276,051	2.5
Inter-American Foundation	4	2.0	21,764	0.2
Internal Revenue Service	4	2.0	801,950	7.2
Department of the Interior	4	2.0	50,402	0.5
Department of Justice	4	2.0	367,551	3.3
Other ^c	18	9.0	947,446	8.5
Total	200	100.0%	11,105,041	100.0% ^d

Note: Documents were distributed by GPO and NTIS.

^aIncludes Department of Health and Human Services components except the Food and Drug Administration and the National Institutes of Health, which are listed separately.

^bPercent of documents distributed was less than one-tenth of 1 percent.

^cEleven federal departments and agencies are included in this category, each of which published 3 or fewer non-English-language documents.

^dColumn does not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: GAO analysis of GPO and NTIS data.

As expected, the federal departments and agencies published non-English-language documents that addressed topics pertaining to their missions and related activities. For example, SSA's non-English-language documents were on topics such as Medicare, the supplemental security income program, disability insurance, workers' compensation, and various tax-related issues. The Department of Education's documents addressed topics such as reading improvement, educational financial assistance, and child development.

MOST NON-ENGLISH-LANGUAGE DOCUMENTS WERE IN SPANISH

As shown in table 2, our database search indicated that almost three-fourths (about 72 percent) of the 200 non-English-language documents we identified were published in Spanish. Although the next most commonly used language was Chinese, only five of the documents were written in Chinese. Also, we identified 36 documents (18 percent of the 200 documents) that were published in more than 1 language. Thirty of these 36 documents included Spanish as 1 of the multiple languages.

Table 2: Foreign Languages Used in Federal Documents Published During 1995-1997

Foreign language	Number of documents	Percent of non-English-language documents
Spanish	143	71.5%
Chinese	5	2.5
French	4	2.0
Russian	4	2.0
German	2	1.0
Portuguese	2	1.0
Italian	1	0.5
Korean	1	0.5
Tagalog	1	0.5
Vietnamese	1	0.5
Multiple languages ^a	36	18.0
Total	200	100.0 %

^aDocuments in this category included text printed in more than one language--e.g., Spanish and English.

Source: GAO's analysis of the GPO and NTIS document databases.

According to data from the 1990 decennial census, 31.8 million persons aged 5 years or older spoke a language other than English at home (14 percent of the total U.S. population aged 5 years or older). Of these 31.8 million persons, over half (17.3 million) spoke Spanish. The comparatively large number of documents that federal agencies published in Spanish may reflect the size of the Spanish-speaking population who required services or information from these agencies during the 3-year period we reviewed.

SSA AND THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION HAVE POLICIES ON WHEN TO PUBLISH NON-ENGLISH-LANGUAGE DOCUMENTS

We found that both SSA and the Department of Education had written policies about publishing agency documents in a language other than English.

SSA established its policy in September 1995, wherein it states that it recognizes the value of public information to educate, improve access to its services, address customer concerns, promote program integrity, and build public confidence in the programs it administers. SSA's policy is to produce public information materials, notices, posters, and form letters in languages other than English to provide this information to the non-English-speaking public. To assist agency decisionmakers in determining when it is appropriate to produce such non-English-language materials, SSA's policy identifies the following five factors for their consideration:

- (1) number of non-English-speaking customers,
- (2) number of SSA field offices affected by the communication,
- (3) literacy level in the non-English language,
- (4) anticipated demographic growth, and
- (5) cost-effectiveness associated with issuing the communication nationally versus locally.

The Department of Education established its policy in November 1995 to cover the translation of the Department's publications and correspondence into languages other than English. This policy is decentralized in that it is addressed to all of the Department's senior officials. It calls for the officials to ensure that publications developed in carrying out the duties of their principal offices are available, as appropriate, in the languages of the customers who will use them and that correspondence is translated, as needed.

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

We searched GPO's and NTIS' databases to determine the number of non-English-language documents published by federal agencies and to identify which languages these documents were written in. The GPO database search identified 170 federal non-English-language documents. GPO's monthly catalog of publications database contains regulatory materials, business reports, studies, fact sheets, maps, handbooks,

and conference proceedings. The NTIS database search identified another 30 non-English-language documents. NTIS' database includes research and business reports, engineering studies, and technical publications.

Once we had identified the documents published in a language other than English, we asked officials from GPO and NTIS to provide information on the number of these documents that their organizations distributed. A GPO official indicated that GPO distributes federal publications to federal agencies, through retail sales, and through its network of nearly 1,400 depository libraries throughout the country. For the list of 170 non-English-language documents we identified from GPO's database, GPO reported to us that 11,104,922 copies were distributed over the 3-year period. According to an NTIS official, distribution of documents contained in its bibliographic database could be identified only by researching sales records. From the listing of 30 non-English-language documents we identified from searching NTIS' bibliographic database, NTIS determined that 119 copies were distributed through its sales program for the period May 1995 through March 1998. We did not verify any of the distribution data provided us by the GPO and NTIS officials.

Lastly, as agreed with your office, we contacted officials from SSA and the Department of Education and identified and summarized their written policies for determining when to publish agency documents in a language other than English.

We conducted our review during February and March 1998 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. We provided draft copies of this letter to officials from GPO, SSA, NTIS, and the Department of Education for their review and comment. Other than some technical observations from GPO and the Department of Education, which we have incorporated into the text, the agencies agreed with the information presented in this report and had no comments.

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The major contributors to this letter were William Trancucci, Evaluator-in-Charge, and Susan Ragland, Assistant Director. Please contact me or Ms. Ragland on (202) 512-8676 if you have any questions on the material in this letter.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Christopher Mihm". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

J. Christopher Mihm
Associate Director
Federal Management and Workforce Issues

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