



A Sociolinguistic Profile of the Deaf People of Panama

Elizabeth Parks
Holly Williams
Jason Parks

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Abstract

In this study, we investigated the sociolinguistic situation of the deaf people of Panama through a rapid-appraisal survey conducted by three researchers in October 2009. There are an estimated six thousand deaf people in Panama, with as many as two-thirds of that number living in rural areas that have no deaf community or sign language access. The city of David and the Panama City-Colon corridor are two locations reported to have the most developed deaf communities and sign languages where work is underway to improve life for deaf Panamanians. Currently, two sign languages appear to be in use in Panama: Lengua de Señas de Chiriquí (LSCH) in the Chiriquí province and Lengua de Señas Panameñas (LSP) in other urban areas where sign language is used. Deaf Panamanians indicate that they learn sign language from their deaf friends, rather than at home or in school, as the vast majority of deaf students are mainstreamed into hearing schools without interpreters. Although the government has made important moves toward increasing social access for people identified as being disabled, few deaf people are employed or live independently, regardless of their educational level. Although deaf associations are not yet unified in community and language development efforts, recent years have seen a movement toward creation of sign language dictionaries in both Chiriquí and Panama deaf communities. Deaf Panamanians are increasingly discussing how best to collaborate toward improvement of their deaf communities.

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1 Overview of Panama

Panama is located in Central America, bordered by both the Caribbean Sea and the North Pacific Ocean, with Colombia to the south and Costa Rica to the north. Covering approximately 75 thousand square kilometers (a little over 29 thousand square miles), it is the 124th largest country in the world. It is made up of eleven provinces and one territory, with a total population of approximately 3.4 million, 50 percent of which live in the Panama City-Colon corridor (History Central 2009) and 73 percent of which live in Panama's urban areas. The major cities include the capital city of Panama City (population 450 thousand, with over one million people including surrounding suburban areas), Colon (200 thousand), and David (140 thousand) (Encarta 2009). For a map of Panama that specifically highlights cities and provinces discussed in this report, see Figure 1 (modified from the CIA World Factbook 2009, Panama map).

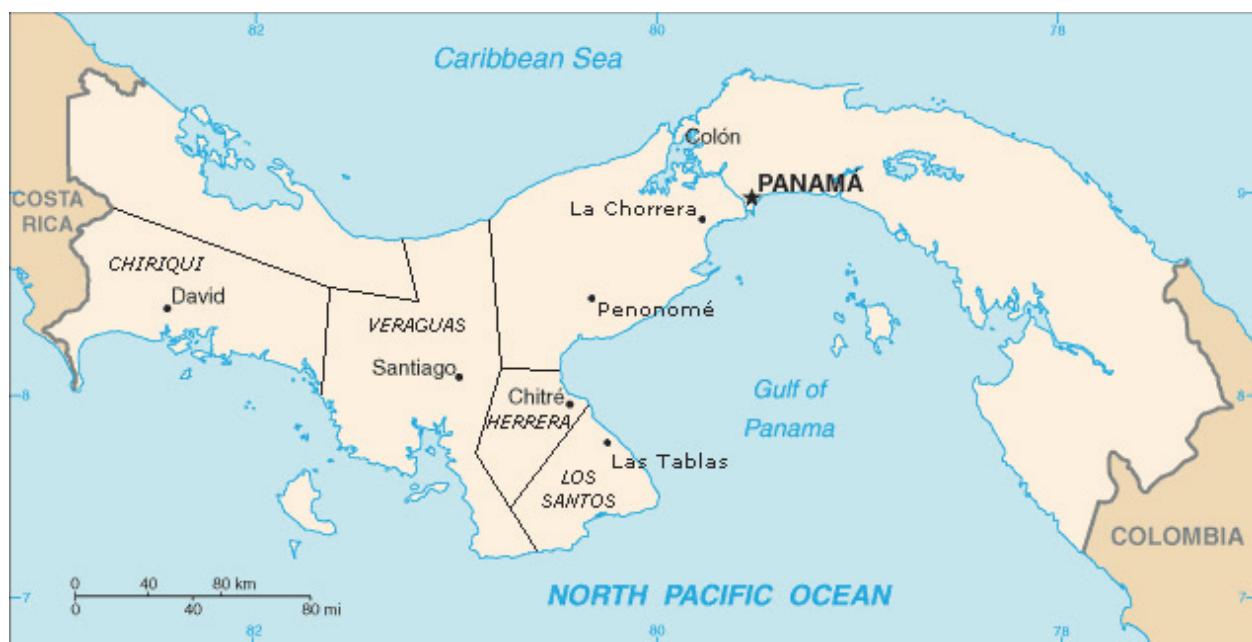


Figure 1. Map of Panama.

With a hot and humid climate from May to January and a short dry season from January to May, Panama's topography includes rugged mountains toward Costa Rica (the highest peak is Volcan Barú at 11,401 feet/3,475 meters), central plains in the central part of the country, and jungle toward Colombia. Panama won its independence from Spain in 1821 AD and from Colombia in 1903 AD. Its primary religion is similar to other nearby countries with a comparable history; roughly 85 percent of the population adhere to Roman Catholicism and the other 15 percent to Protestant Christianity.

Unemployment was 6.3 percent in 2008, with a median salary of USD \$200/month (Northrup 2007) but, compared to the rest of Latin America, Panama has the second most-unequal income distribution among its population. Panama's official language is Spanish; approximately 14 percent of the population speaks English. Literacy rates of the total population reach approximately 92 percent; most people attend school for a total of 13 years, although only six are mandatory (CIA World Factbook 2009).

2 Research methodology

In this study, we assessed social and linguistic issues that influence language use in the Panamanian deaf¹ community as guided by the following research question (RQ):

RQ: *What is the sociolinguistic situation of the deaf community in Panama?*

Because of time constraints, we used a rapid-appraisal method of sociolinguistic survey, which gathers information in a relatively short amount of time and provides an overall view of the language community situation. Before beginning fieldwork, we used the internet and library research to gather available information about the situation of deaf people in Panama. We also formed a list of individuals and organizations that have worked with deaf Panamanians and with whom we could potentially arrange meetings during our two weeks of fieldwork in October 2009. According to local informants and Barish (2009a), deaf people in the eastern jungles are too isolated to have a developed sign language, and David and the Panama City-Colon corridor are the main urban areas with developed deaf communities and sign languages. Based on this information, we focused our research on Panama City and David.

We conducted informal interviews of deaf and hearing people who have significant connections in the Panamanian deaf community.² We also took detailed daily notes from participant observation at deaf community events. We gathered eight sociolinguistic questionnaires (SLQs) (see Table 1 for participant metadata), four each in Panama City and David. We designed the SLQ (see Appendix for SLQ instrument and procedures) to gather demographic and sociolinguistic information from individuals involved with the local deaf communities. Because of time limitations for this survey, information was gathered from any member of the deaf community who was available and willing to participate.

Table 1. SLQ participant metadata

Participant	Gender	Age	Deaf family members	Location
1	Female	49	No	Panama City
2	Male	37	No	Panama City
3	Male	33	No	Panama City
4	Female	33	Yes	Panama City
5	Male	43	No	David
6	Male	40	Yes	David
7	Male	38	No	David
8	Female	38	No	David

3 Sign languages

The 1992 Law No. 1 specifically recognized sign language as the natural language of the profoundly deaf in Panama (ANSPA 2009). Although there are now some sign language classes offered through deaf

¹Some culturally deaf people identify themselves as capital-D “Deaf”, in order to focus on their cultural identity, rather than a lower-case d “deaf”, focusing on audiological status. We recognize the diversity of perspectives and conventions for referring to deaf and hard-of-hearing people around the world. For the purpose of this report, we have chosen to use a lower-case “deaf” to be most inclusive of all deaf and hard of hearing people, regardless of their cultural and linguistic identification, with the goal of providing a broad perspective of Panama’s deaf people groups.

²We greatly appreciate the Panamanian deaf community and all those who gave of their time and knowledge to assist us in this survey.

associations, religious organizations, and some universities, deaf people indicate that these classes are primarily for hearing people and that most of the deaf community acquires sign language from their deaf friends. Panamanians say that there is a great deal of variation in sign language use throughout Panama, most notably between the Chiriquí province and its capital, David, and the Panama City-Colon corridor.

Currently, two sign languages appear to be in use in Panama: Lengua de Señas de Chiriquí (LSCH) in the Chiriquí province and Lengua de Señas Panameñas (LSP) in other urban areas where sign language is used. These sign languages are considered different enough that associations are creating separate dictionaries and two interpreters may be had at national events to ensure communication access by users of both languages. Deaf people in David, however, indicate that many in the Chiriquí deaf community know both LSCH and LSP, while deaf people outside of Chiriquí do not know LSCH. Deaf Panamanians report little variation based on gender or age, although they explain that the older generation may sign less expressively than the younger generation because they were educated solely through oral methods. In most situations, deaf Panamanians feel free to sign in public, although new acquirers of sign may feel some concern that better deaf signers may make fun of them.

In general, the Panamanian deaf community says that they respect the cultural and linguistic differences expressed by different members of their national community, although they do encourage all deaf people to learn sign language. Of five characteristics presented in the SLQ, participants indicated that being able to sign well is the most important quality for leaders in the deaf community, followed closely by the person being deaf and well educated. In comparison, literacy in Spanish and the ability to voice were ranked as the least important of the five specified leadership characteristics.

Deaf people believe that it is important for deaf people, not hearing interpreters, to create new signs in LSP and LSCH and would prefer to create local signs, rather than borrow signs from other languages with which they have contact, such as American Sign Language (ASL) from the United States, Costa Rican Sign Language (LESCO – Lenguaje de Señas Costarricense), Colombian Sign Language (LSC – Lengua de Señas Colombiana), and other sign languages throughout the Americas. Many deaf Panamanians have traveled to the USA and Costa Rica and have brought ASL and LESCO signs back to Panama, there has been ASL contact through the Jehovah’s Witness and Mormon meetings in Panama City and David (respectively), and various training has been offered by people from both Costa Rica and the USA to deaf Panamanians. Deaf community members believe that there is definite similarity between LSP, LSCH, LESCO, and ASL, but are unsure whether the sign languages in Panama City and David are more similar to LESCO or ASL.

We asked our eight participants to rank cities reported to have the highest deaf populations and established deaf associations based on which location they perceived to have the most beautiful sign language, the most intelligible sign language, and offer the most services for deaf people to live well. Of Panama City, David, Colon, Las Tablas, and Chitre, Panama City and David consistently ranked in the top two for having the most beautiful and intelligible sign language and for being the best place for deaf people to live. In comparison, Colon and Chitre consistently ranked at the bottom on all three counts.

4 Deaf environments

Particular environments are specifically relevant to the deaf community and their language use as compared to the hearing world which surrounds them. In this section, we describe the following Panama deaf environments: the disabled community, deaf education, and deaf meeting places.

4.1 Disability

Although many deaf people do not consider themselves to be disabled, various Panamanian disability organizations and legislation include them in the population which they serve. For this reason, the wider situation of the disability community in Panama is discussed here to better understand the position of deaf Panamanians.

Panama conducts a national population census every decade. According to the most recent census in 2000, the total population of Panama was approximately 3 million; 52 thousand of those reported having a disability (1.8 percent of the total population). This estimate is believed by the International Disability Rights Monitor (IDRM) to be low because some people may not identify with the use of the word “handicap” instead of “disabled” on the census, societal stereotypes may lead people to avoid indicating that they or a member of their family have a disability, and geographical regions of the country with higher poverty rates were excluded from the census (IDRM 2004). According to the statistics of the Primera Encuesta Nacional de Discapacidad (PENDIS), the World Health Organization, and the Panamerican World Health organization, there are probably 370 to 400 thousand disabled people in Panama, the majority of who are found in the rural and indigenous areas (PENDIS 2007 and Gatjens 2002).

PENDIS indicates that there were about seventy-eight thousand Panamanians with hearing loss as of 2005–2006, but that number may have increased to as many as 100,000 in 2009 (Integracion 2009). The *Ethnologue* (Lewis 2009) estimates the deaf population at roughly 5 percent of the country’s total population at the time of calculation, arriving at an approximate deaf population of 159,456. Holbrook’s (2007) request for an ISO-code for Panamanian Sign Language indicates a deaf population that is 0.1 percent to 0.5 percent of the general population: in total, some 3,200 to 16,000 deaf people. Soper’s (2008) estimate of a signing deaf population is six thousand, a figure similar to what deaf Panamanians reported during our fieldwork. According to deaf Panamanians, the deaf population of Panama City is approximately one thousand, with five hundred in David, two hundred to three hundred in Colon, one hundred in Herrera, and another three to four thousand deaf people scattered throughout the rest of the country.

Numerous international and regional policies have been proposed by groups concerned with disability rights and the government has shown increased concern with issues related to disabilities. In January 1992, Law 1 “Protection of Hearing-impaired Persons” was enacted, covering any type of hearing loss that restricts effective integration and promoting equal access in areas such as education, work, and technology (ANSPA 2009). Numerous laws that furthered rights were established between 1992 and 2002 (e.g. Law 42 “Equalization of Opportunities for People with Disabilities”, Law 3 Family Code, and Order 46 “Rules for the Care of Persons with Disabilities”) (IDRM 2004, Gatjens 2002, Educared 2000). “In 2004, the government created the National Bureau for the Integration of Persons with Disabilities and, in 2007, the First Disabilities Survey was conducted” (Castillo et al. 2008). In 2007 to 2008, the Sectaria Nacional para la Integracion Social de las Personas con Discapacidad (SENADIS) was established as part of a national strategic plan to address issues of equal access for people with disabilities and their families (The Associated Press 2008). Although SENADIS does not have any legislative power, it does act as a representative for disabled people and their families in different Panamanian states and, as the technical secretary of Conadis, an organization that safeguards human rights in general (Mision Permanente de Panama 2008). Also, in 2007, the Secretaria Tecnica para el Decenio por los Derechos y la Dignidad de las Personas con Discapacidad (SEDISCAP – the Technical Secretariat for Human Rights and Dignity of Persons with Disabilities) was established (IDIE 2008).

Despite this work toward increased support of disabled people, “according to research conducted by the National Disability Office, unemployment among the disability population hovers near 40 percent”

(IDRM 2004, p. 25) as compared to 29 percent of the general population (CIA 2009). The federal government offers placement programs for people with disabilities but they are only located in Panama City and have a limited impact on outlying areas of Panama, leading some people to move to the capital to take advantage of better employment opportunities.

Deaf people report that there is still discrimination in hiring procedures and that hearing loss may prevent a deaf person from gaining employment, even if a hearing person competing for the same position is less academically and/or professionally qualified. According to local deaf leaders, finding employment is dependent on one's ability to speak Spanish because of hearing supervisors' concern of not being able to adequately communicate with their employees. Some of the deaf community believes that hearing people are afraid that deaf people are incapable of working or that they might have a behavioral problem in the work place and base their hesitancy to hire a deaf worker on these concerns.

One unique employment track that deaf Panamanians have is exclusive rights to official Panama flag making. The Instituto Panameno de Habilitacion Especial (IPHE) has employed deaf Panamanians to make the official Panama flag for the last few decades (Barish 2009b). IPHE is the Panamanian Institute for Special Integration and was founded in 1951 with the purpose of developing an educational plan and other developmental services for disabled children. When Law No. 1 was established in 1992, IPHE was mandated to coordinate with the Association of the Deaf in Panama and other like-minded associations and individuals to conduct training programs for people in sign language and other deaf education methods. IPHE's flag production is the only government-approved flag to be sold wholesale to private businesses; some deaf employees have been working making flags for over three decades. IPHE has other deaf employees making piñatas, and working in carpentry and offices (IDRM 2004). Outside of IPHE, deaf people may be self-employed in private businesses, such as carpentry, dentistry, or work for various factories.

In July 2009, Diego Lombana became the first deaf Panamanian to take public office as a deputy Member of Parliament, an assistant to the "El Diputado" (an assignment that is similar to being an assistant to a USA Senator). Profoundly deaf, Lombana speaks Spanish, French, English, and sign language and is working toward rights for all disabled Panamanians (WFD 2009, Barish 2009b). Some deaf Panamanians have hope for their future with Lombana in office because he has a strong connection to deaf issues.

4.2 Deaf education

From 1995 to 2000, various legislation (including Law 34 in 1995, Law 42 in 1999, and the Executive Order 1 of 2000) began the implementation of inclusive education for people with disabilities. According to IDRM (2004), 60 percent of school-aged children with disabilities were undergoing the integration process at the beginning of this century. Even in more urbanized areas, however, less than 20 percent of schools actually offer special-education programs in their mainstream environments. In 2006, 10,692 students with disabilities were integrated into the 175 out of 2,910 public elementary schools, 767 of which were hard-of-hearing. Because students may be promoted to the next grade level based on their age instead of academic merit, Castillo et al. (2008) reports that deaf and hard-of-hearing students have low literacy levels and academic performance, regardless of the grade which they attend.

Special education programs tend to be located in the major cities of Panama because more rural areas lack the financial resources to support specialized programs. However, financial efforts to support integration and inclusive education have been supported by Fernandez de Torrijos, the 2005–2009 president's wife, (Rutsch and Moris 2005). The Universidad Tecnologica de Panama has been particularly involved in supporting inclusive education sites in the Coclé province where schools are small and reported numbers of deaf students at each school do not exceed two (Tristán n.d.). The Universidad Especializada de las

Américas Panama (UDELAS), the Advanced Training Institute of the State University of Panama, and the Santa María La Antigua University offer special-education degrees (ANSPA 2009 and IDRM 2004).

IPHE coordinates schools for people with severe disabilities, most of whom have mental disabilities. Before IPHE, there was no special education available for deaf students in Panama. IPHE has a number of educational extension sites throughout Panama City—at least fourteen as of December 2005. Also in Panama City, the Escuela Vocacional Especial (vocational school) had 57 deaf students. As of 2005, there were roughly 500 deaf students enrolled in IPHE schools in Panama City and its metropolitan areas. In addition, there were between nine and 113 deaf students at each IPHE extension site, with the largest sites outside of the Panama City being Chiriquí (113 deaf students), Colón (70 deaf students), Veraguas (45 deaf students), Herrera (34 deaf students), and Penonomé (31 deaf students). In 2005, there were a total of 790 deaf students ranging from six through 20 years of age attending the IPHE schools, approximately 7.9 percent of the total IPHE disabled student population (IPHE 2005).

In addition to IPHE, there is one known deaf-blind school in Panama City: the Hellen Keller School of IPHE. At this school, teachers specialized in deaf-blind education provide alternative means of communication for students with multiple disabilities.

The Centro Especializado de Estimulación Temprana in Ancón (on the west side of Panama City) offers early language intervention to deaf students from birth through age four. Using multisensory stimuli, a total communication method is embraced to help kick-start a child's education. From there, students can begin kindergarten in mainstreamed situations or IPHE (IDRM 2004).

The CASS program, as supported by the U.S. Federal Government and coordinated through Georgetown University, has had participants from Panama. According to the CASS report, over 90 percent of CASS alumni are now employed (Disability World 2002). Deaf Panamanians indicated that eight deaf Panamanians were involved in the CASS program. The former president of the Chiriquí deaf association, Juan Santiago, studied with the CASS program at Mount Aloysius in 1997 and now lives in David (Santiago 2009). Although IPHE is working toward encouraging higher education institutions in Panama to accept deaf and hard-of-hearing students so that they can gain advanced education, many deaf Panamanians who have a desire to study in a university are unable to because of a lack of interpreters and funds. People who have completed university are typically hard-of-hearing and able to voice.

As of 1992, the government encouraged education of people labeled as "hearing impaired" (including any person with any kind of hearing loss) to use a total communication philosophy which incorporates all forms of communication to aid in effective communication in the deaf and hard-of-hearing community, including oral and signed languages. This was a change as compared to the strict oral methods used in schools (Haualand and Allen 2009). It appears that, after the 1992 legislature, Panama began to simultaneously incorporate both sign language and oral methods in their school systems, moving toward a total communication approach to education. Castillo, et al. (2008), indicates that, in their case study of one profoundly deaf student in the educational system who was taught through total communication, the deaf student was not proficient in either signed or spoken language. The current IPHE director relates that, although educational programs want to implement bilingual education in Spanish and sign language, in reality, most programs are oral because of the low level of sign language use among educators. Deaf students stated that only basic signs are used in the schools with which they are familiar, with the exception of one school in Pueblo Nuevo, where there is a sign language interpreter present.

4.3 Deaf meeting places

Deaf people tend to choose to socialize with deaf instead of hearing people because of the ease of communication. Some deaf people indicate distrust of the hearing community because of discrimination

and felt lack of respect, therefore, they may avoid hearing people altogether. However, other deaf Panamanians do choose to interact with hearing people, as motivated by work opportunities or a desire to improve their Spanish, in order to improve their access to the hearing world.

The main social hubs for deaf Panamanians are Panama City and David; deaf people congregate most weekends at the central park in David or Albrook mall in Panama City. At the time of our visit in David, as many as thirty deaf people were gathered at the central park on weekend evenings. In Panama City, a large number of deaf people (often more than one hundred, dividing into separate young and old social groups) gather at the Albrook mall on Friday evenings. It is an easy and cheap location to get to since all buses end at this terminal. Although not an association, this group has eight leaders who also lead the deaf sports association, Asociación de Desportes para Sordos de Panama (ASDESCORPAN). ASDESCORPAN was founded by Carlos Villarreal in 2008. It is still small, but they have hopes to grow and compete on an international level; they are receiving some funding from the government. Currently, there are two soccer teams in Panama City: one in David and one in Colon.

According to questionnaire participants, a few deaf Panamanians are known to attend religious meetings of diverse affiliations, including Baptist, Apostolic, Seventh Day Adventist, Catholic, Jehovah's Witness, Mormon, and Buddhist meetings. The only deaf-led religious service is located in Colon. In David, Agua Viva offers the only interpreted services on Sunday mornings and a Bible study on Saturday evenings. In Panama City, there used to be an interpreted Catholic Mass, probably at Iglesia Don Bosco, but our deaf contacts indicated that deaf people no longer attend. The Jehovah's Witnesses are known in the Panamanian deaf community for training hearing people in sign language and to be the most commonly attended religious service in Panama, with as many as one hundred deaf people attending the Jehovah's Witness meeting in David.

In 1979, the Asociación Nacional de Sordos de Panama (ANSPA) (formerly the “Asociación de Sordos de Panama”) began with a group of deaf Panamanians at IPHE. That same year, a deaf Panamanian leader went to Gallaudet University to receive some training on how to manage a deaf association. Currently, ANSPA is involved in adult education (e.g. computer training for adults and sign language training for children) on a national level. ANSPA meetings are held on Friday evenings and Saturday afternoons with anywhere between thirty and one hundred deaf people attending. ANSPA membership has decreased in recent years, partially due to the location of the association building being unreachable by public transportation and deaf people's lack of financial resources. Most members are now over the age of 40 and fairly financially well-off as compared to the rest of the deaf community. ANSPA has five branches outside of Panama City: David, Colon, La Chorrera, Chitré, and Penonomé, with a possible additional branch being established in Santiago (ANSPA 2009).

Chiriquí has its own deaf association that is separate from ANSPA and located in David. There has historically been some tension over ANSPA's use of the word “national” in its name as the David association does not believe that they serve all of Panama in any official capacity (Reyes 2001). According to local deaf people in David, the association was started by two Church of Christ hearing missionaries in 1988 but separated from the church in 1994, with new leadership established. The deaf association in Chiriquí is funded in part by the government, membership dues, and rental income of association buildings to other groups. They also have a strong connection with SENADIS and the Central American Deaf Federation (CADF) (Deaf Nation 2009). The Chiriquí association meetings are held Friday evening with approximately thirty people attending. Additional leadership meetings are held on Tuesday evenings where they discuss issues that affect the local deaf community, such as the current development of a LSCH dictionary. Ana Alvarado, a deaf Panamanian who made great strides for deaf awareness and rights with the Panamanian government, had a lot of influence at the association before her recent death.

5 Communication access

For deaf Panamanians who want to utilize their hearing through spoken language or access to environmental sounds, hearing tests, hearing aids, cochlear implants, and other technology related to deafness affect their access to their sound and communication surroundings. In addition, the amount of time that interpreters are available and trained affect their access to the hearing community through sign language.

5.1 Technology

Panama is one of the few countries in Latin America that provides at least some hearing-screening programs. However, according to Madriz (2001), although there is professional training in Panama for physicians in audiology, speech-language pathologists, and deaf education, there were still only twenty hearing medical specialist and thirty-five deaf education teachers at the time of his research. There is no standard program in place to detect disabilities in school-aged children in all geographical regions of Panama, being noticeably absent in the more rural and indigenous areas where poverty rates can be as high as 90 percent (Rutsch and Moris 2005, IDRM 2004, Madriz 2001). A new group of professionals, FUNDESHA, is working toward more advanced and widespread early hearing-loss detection (FUNDESHA 2009).

There are three main organizations serving people with hearing loss in Panama. The Centro Especializado de Aprendizaje, Voz, Audicion y Lenguaje (CEPAVAL) was established in 1977; they serve “families and children through special education services, auditory verbal therapy, and rehabilitation for children and adults with or without cochlear implants. Staff members are alumni from Institute Mexicano de Audicion y Lenguaje” and are comprised of “four speech therapists, three psychologists, two teachers, one occupational therapist, a clinical director, and an administrative director”. They have been affiliated with the Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing since 2004 (Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing 2005). Panama also has a national professional association serving persons with communication disorders, the Colegio Nacional de Fonoaudiólogos de Panama (Comdisinternational 2006). In Las Tablas, there is a Cooperativo de Trabajos de Sordos.

Hearing tests have been offered in Chitre and the four surrounding provinces every year since the founding of Centro de Audición, Lenguaje y Aprendizaje S.A (CALASA) in 1992. CALASA also helped organize the Fundación Pro Rehabilitación Auditiva y Oral del Niño (FRHAON) which specifically focuses on addressing hearing loss in children. As of 2006, CALASA offered hearing aid services in Chitre, David, and Panama City (Calasa 2008). The Clínica de Audición in Chitré offers free ongoing care to those who have been fitted with hearing aids, including remaking ear molds for children as they grow (Northrup 2007). In addition, the Starkey Hearing Foundation, a nonprofit organization founded in 1983 that annually distributes over twenty thousand hearing aids to children and adults who cannot afford them, distributed 1,400 hearing aids in Panama City in 2006 (Starkey Hearing Foundation 2007, Pepperdine University 2006).

The Instituto de Implantes Cocleares, SA (IICSA) was founded in 2006 by Dr. Cynthia Guy as the first registered cochlear implant provider in Panama. They performed three cochlear implant operations in 2007 and planned eighteen more in 2008, with sixty patients still on a waiting list. The IICSA performs the surgeries in cooperation with “Medel” (an Austrian cochlear implant company); they also partner with the University of South Florida, in researching hearing loss, and with the City of Knowledge, “an international complex for education, research, and innovation based in Panama City” (Idisc 2009). The IICSA also offers training and rehabilitation to people who have had implants to decipher new sounds with the help of a team of physicians, audiologists and speech therapists, psychologists, and social

workers (Idisc 2009, Integracion 2009, IICSA 2009). Many deaf Panamanian adults indicated disapproval of cochlear implants because the surgeries are believed to be dangerous, expensive, and do not take into consideration the rights of children to make their own choices about language and hearing.

According to the IDRM (2004), “No method or strategy is in place for people with hearing or speech impediments to contact authorities in the event of a natural disaster, civil emergency, or criminal assault. In January 2000, the Technical Advisory Commission for Municipal Agreement 19 held two meetings with top executives of the Telephone Company Cable & Wireless to put in place the TTY system for persons who are hearing-impaired. To date, however, the TTY system is not yet operating” (p. 19). This movement toward providing call centers for deaf and hard-of-hearing people was not new in 2000—Article 7 and 8 of the “Protection of Hearing-impaired Persons” Law No.1 that was passed in 1992 also indicated TDD/TTY systems should be established throughout Panama and that television media should provide some way for deaf and hard-of-hearing people to access their programming. As of 2009, channel 5 (at 7 am and 9 pm) offers a one-hour program about disabilities that is interpreted into sign language (ANSPA 2009).

5.2 Interpreter training

According to deaf leaders, there are only ten interpreters available in all of Panama. Adding to the challenge of getting an interpreter for a needed event, most deaf people cannot afford to pay interpreter fees and may call on hard-of-hearing friends to interpret instead. There is no established interpreting profession or code of ethics that sign language interpreters in Panama are expected to adhere to, and some deaf people are wary of trusting interpreters for fear that they will inaccurately represent them. Many deaf people also report that most interpreters sign in Spanish word order, instead of following the grammar of LSP or LSCH, making them difficult to understand.

ANSPA and the deaf association in Chiriquí have been involved in some interpreter training in Panama. In 2005, a three-day seminar on the principles of interpreting was held with a professional interpreter, Eric Chinchilla Araya, coming from Costa Rica to help train Panamanian interpreters from Panama City, Chiriquí, and Los Santos. In addition, people from many different organizations, including evangelical churches, Catholic churches, Jehovah’s Witness congregations, the Tourism institute, a television program, and a national interpreter organization were involved (ANSPA 2009).

There are a few materials that have been printed about LSP and LSCH that can help hearing people to learn sign language. In the early 1980s, ANSPA published the first book related to LSP: “Programa de Comunicacion Total: Lenguaje de Señas y Deletreo”. It contains information about learning a sign language and provides a list of vocabulary in Spanish to learn but provides no illustrations of them. In 1990, “Lengua de Señas Panameñas” was published by ANSPA in Panama City with 207 pages of line-drawings representing LSP signs. Many of the signs in this dictionary were reportedly copied from a LESCO dictionary. The vice president of the ASDESCORPAN has been asked by hearing teachers to revamp this dictionary and he is in the process of deleting old signs and creating line drawings for new signs. In 2004, Garay created a CD of LSP (labeled as Spanish Sign Language) entitled: “Understanding the Panama Deaf Community and Sign Language: Lengua de Señas Panameñas”. It is an instructional CD designed to teach the difference between LSP and ASL, published by ANSPA (Garay 2004). Also in 2004, Ana Malena Alvarado (a leader in the Chiriquí deaf community) wrote a book for children, “¡Mis manos hablan!”, which included a picture and LSCH sign for every letter of the alphabet. The Chiriquí deaf association is also currently in the process of creating a LSCH dictionary.

6 Conclusion

In this report, we have described the sociolinguistic situation of Panamanian deaf people. There are an estimated six thousand deaf people in Panama, with as many as two-thirds of that number living in rural areas that have no deaf community or sign-language access. The city of David and the Panama City-Colon corridor are two locations reported to have the most-developed deaf communities and sign languages where work is underway to improve life for deaf Panamanians. Two sign languages appear to be in use in Panama: Lengua de Señas de Chiriquí (LSCH) in the Chiriquí province and Lengua de Señas Panameñas (LSP) in other urban areas where sign language is used. Deaf Panamanians indicate that they learn sign language from their deaf friends, rather than at home or in school, as the vast majority of deaf students are mainstreamed into hearing schools without interpreters (interpreter training programs being nonexistent). Although the government has made important moves toward increasing social access for people identified as being disabled, few deaf people are employed or able to live independently, regardless of their educational level.

Deaf Panamanians believe that better communication access will provide them with means to a better life. Because of this, deaf people desire for schools to use LSP or LSCH in the classrooms or for the provision of trained educational interpreters to strengthen the deaf community's future generations. Deaf Panamanian adults also believe the responsibility first lies with the parents of the deaf child to provide deaf people with early language input. When asked what types of sign language materials would be most helpful to their communities, deaf questionnaire participants almost unanimously indicated that their greatest need is for sign-language literature that explains things such as health care and HIV/AIDS so that deaf adults can be better educated about life and be empowered to make wiser choices for themselves and their community.

Appendix: SLQ

This section describes the components of the SLQ, as well as the administration procedure used in Panama. It has been adapted from SLQs used in previous surveys by the Americas Area Sign Language survey team. English and Spanish questionnaire templates were created in Microsoft Word containing open fields for descriptive answers and fields for closed questions, with answers such as "yes/no" or level of importance. Table 2 lists the SLQ questions used with both hearing and deaf people in Panama. The questions focused on gathering a wide variety of information about the social situation of the deaf communities and sign language use and attitudes of the participants.

Questions 1–7 collected metadata (personal background information) from any person who was providing language data. Questions 8–16 could be used with hearing or deaf people and gathered basic demographics of the deaf community. The final section (questions 17–35) probed language use and attitudes specifically among deaf individuals. The SLQ also included a brief description of the research project, opportunity for the participant to indicate consent to be involved in the project, and allowed the participant to indicate what level of access others could have in the future to the language data they provided.

After explaining the purpose of the questionnaire, obtaining volunteer consent, and identifying the participants' desired accessibility of the data, the questionnaire was administered. Participant responses were recorded by the researchers on paper or typed into their laptop. Upon completion of the survey fieldwork, the questionnaire forms were imported into Microsoft Excel for easier analysis of participant responses.

Table 2. Sociolinguistic Questionnaire

<p>Participant information:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Approximately how old are you now?2. Do you have any deaf family members? If so, who?3. Where do you currently live?4. Where do you interact with deaf people?5. How many years of education have you completed?6. Please name the school(s) you have attended.7. At what age did you first start signing? Where and instructed by whom?	<p>Deaf services and meeting places:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">8. List associations and organizations serving deaf people in your area, indicating their role.9. Do deaf people attend religious services? If no, explain why not. If yes, please answer the following: What services do they attend? Why do deaf people attend services? What language(s) does the service use?10. Please list the deaf schools in your area. How many years of education do these schools offer students? Please identify the communication philosophy of each school (oral, bilingual, TC, etc.)11. Please list any published materials about the sign language in your area.12. Do deaf people in your community interact with deaf people from other regions of Panama? If so, please answer the following: Which other communities? Where and why do they meet?13. Have deaf people here interacted with deaf people from other countries? If so, which countries?14. What type of jobs do most deaf people have in Panama?15. Do most deaf people in your area have a DVD player and/or computer in their house?16. Please list the leaders, hearing or deaf, of your local deaf community.
<p>Language use and attitudes:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">17. Where do deaf people learn sign language in your community?18. How many deaf people sign in your community? How well do they sign?19. Do you interact more with deaf or hearing people? Why?20. Do deaf parents sign with their hearing children?21. Do hearing parents sign with their deaf children?22. How do deaf people feel when signing in public?23. Are hearing people supportive of the deaf community? Explain your answer.24. Do all deaf people in Panama sign the same? If no, what factors lead to different signing?25. Do you want everyone in Panama to sign the same? Explain your answer.26. What is the name of the sign language in your area?27. Is your sign language like the sign language of any other country? If yes, which one(s)?28. Do you think that it is better for deaf people to use sign language or spoken language? Explain your answer.29. How well do you read and write Spanish?30. What does your deaf community need most to succeed in life?31. Perceived need of language materials and why: Sign Language dictionary, interpreter training materials, and Bible and Sign literature (stories, poetry, health/sex education (HIV-AIDS, etc.)).32. When choosing a president in your deaf association/organization, how would you rate the following five characteristics (deaf, sign well, able to speak, able to read/write, well educated)?33. Best city in Panama for deaf people to live in (most services, education, support, etc.).34. City with sign language that is the easiest to understand.35. City with the most beautiful sign language.	

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