



# **Sociolinguistic Profiles of the Deaf Communities in Trinidad, St. Vincent, and Grenada**

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SIL International®  
2012

## Abstract

This report presents the findings from a brief sociolinguistic survey conducted in June 2008 covering deaf communities in Trinidad, St. Vincent, and Grenada. While Grenada and St. Vincent both report roughly 150–200 signing deaf members of their communities, Trinidad’s community is much larger but it is unknown how many people make up its deaf cultural community. Research findings show that deaf communities in each location are at varying degrees of development. The St. Vincent deaf community appears to be decreasing in number and the community is not actively pursuing development or organization. In comparison, the deaf communities in Grenada and Trinidad appear to be growing in number and becoming increasingly organized in their advocacy for deaf rights, the formation of deaf clubs and associations, the promotion of sign language, and the push for increased educational and employment opportunities. Deaf people in Grenada, St. Vincent, and Trinidad all use ASL and/or SEE in many domains of life. Trinidad, alone, has a developed indigenous sign language, Trinidad and Tobago Sign Language (TTSL), and many Trinidadian deaf people are motivated to see TTSL developed and increase in prestige and use in community life.

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# 1 Introduction and island demographics

This report describes a brief sociolinguistic survey of the deaf communities and their sign languages. It presents as much information as can be possibly gathered in a relatively short amount of time in three islands of the Windward chain in the southeastern Caribbean: Trinidad, St. Vincent, and Grenada. This report only covers these three islands and not their entire respective populations. For example, although Trinidad and Tobago is the official name of the southernmost country, this survey only explores areas of Trinidad. Both the country of Grenada and the country of St. Vincent and the Grenadines include multiple islands within their national “borders.” Again, because of the relatively low populations in the surrounding islands and the time limitations of this survey, only the largest island of each country was surveyed—Grenada and St. Vincent. See Map 1 for a map of Trinidad, Grenada, and St. Vincent in their geographical contexts as the southernmost islands in the Caribbean (Lonely Planet 1997).



Table 1 lists some basic demographic information about each country in order for the reader to better understand the position of the deaf communities in their greater social make-up (Fodor’s 2008).

**Table 1. Demographics of Trinidad, St. Vincent, and Grenada**

	<b>Trinidad</b>	<b>St. Vincent</b>	<b>Grenada</b>
Population of Island	1.25 million	110,000	102,000
Population of Country	1.3 million	118,800	112,000
Island Dimensions	50 miles x 37 miles	18 miles x 11 miles	21 miles x 12 miles
Capital City, Island	Port-of-Spain, Trinidad	Kingstown, St. Vincent	St. George’s, Grenada
Official Language	English	English	English

According to Soper's (2008) deaf population estimate, which takes into consideration a country's gross domestic product and how that could influence the health environments of each country and the total number of deaf people who may use a sign language, Trinidad may have had approximately 1,800 deaf people in 2000. In comparison, the countries of Grenada, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines probably have much smaller deaf communities with as few as 200 deaf people each. Exact deaf statistics are unknown, although deaf people report that in both St. Vincent and Grenada, there are between 150 and 200 deaf people who sign in their respective countries.

## 2 Methodology

In this section, we describe the research tools and methods used during this survey, including background research through the Internet, the sociolinguistic questionnaire (SLQ), and the research questions guiding the research project. In this survey, we assessed social factors that influence language use and could ultimately influence language development projects, in addition to exploring the question of language classification.

Before beginning fieldwork, we used the Internet to gather any available information and a list of contacts for individuals, schools, churches, and organizations that currently or have previously worked with the deaf communities in Trinidad, St. Vincent, and Grenada. We then tried to contact these parties to gather introductory information and set up meetings for the survey trip. Over a period of 18 days in June, 2008, (six days in each island) we explored the status of sign languages in Trinidad, St. Vincent, and Grenada by investigating the following research questions (RQ) through participant observation, sociolinguistic questionnaires (SLQs), and wordlist comparisons.

*RQ1: What are the sociolinguistic situations of the deaf communities in Trinidad, St. Vincent, and Grenada?*

*RQ2: Could the deaf communities in Trinidad, St. Vincent, and Grenada partner together in a language project that would meet the linguistic needs of deaf communities in each country?*

We used participant observation at several deaf community sites, such as deaf social gatherings, religious meetings, deaf schools, and deaf association meetings to gather information about deaf life in each country. In addition, the SLQ was designed to gather demographic and sociolinguistic information from individuals related with the local deaf communities. After explaining the project and gaining participant consent, the SLQ gathered basic demographic information about the deaf community early during the visit through an initial set of 11 questions that could be used with hearing or deaf people. It also included a short section collecting metadata (personal background information) for any person who provided language data, followed by a longer section of 35 questions that probed language use and attitudes specifically among deaf individuals. See the appendix for a copy of the sociolinguistic questionnaire. Although wordlists were gathered in each country, analysis is not yet complete and is not covered in this report.

## 3 Trinidad

Please refer to Map 2 for map of Trinidad locations discussed in this report (CIA 2008).

**Map 2. Trinidad.**



### 3.1 Sociolinguistic factors relevant to the Trinidadian deaf community

In this section, we address RQ1 by investigating the following factors that have significant ties to sign language use in the Trinidadian deaf community: education, language use, organized social groups for and by deaf people, religion, and social services. Unless otherwise indicated, this information was gathered through SLQs conducted with three deaf Trinidadians and participant observation at seven deaf community events during six days of survey fieldwork in Trinidad.

#### 3.1.1 Education

Trinidad offers five types of educational options to deaf students: deaf-only schools that use both sign and speech (Total Communication – TC), a special education facility that includes students labeled with various disabilities all integrated into the same classroom (TC), a mainstream program connected with Cascade School for the Deaf that has interpreters and a deaf teacher’s aide, a mainstream program with multiple deaf students sharing one interpreter, and vocational schools. More information about each school may be found below in Table 2.

**Table 2. Deaf education centers**

School Name	Location	Type of School	Communication Philosophy	Grades
Cascade School for the Deaf (CSD)	St. Ann (NW Port of Spain)	Deaf Only	TC	Primary (Pre–8)
Audrey Jefferson School for the Deaf	Marabella (near San Fernando)	Deaf Only	TC	Primary (Pre–8)
Mainstream Program through CSD	Tunapuna	Hearing and Deaf	TC	Primary (Pre–8)
Port of Spain Government Secondary School	SE Port of Spain	Hearing and Deaf	TC and Oral	Secondary (9–15)
Pierre-a-Point Special Education School (PAP)	Pierre-a-Point (SW Trinidad)	Mixed Disabilities	TC	Primary (Pre–8)
Vocational Schools	Various	Mixed Disabilities	Interpreters or teachers who know SL in some locations	Post-Primary

Although many deaf people want to pursue higher education in local universities and secondary schools, the vast majority do not do so due to lack of interpreting services and/or classroom support. Many deaf people do not have any type of education because they are kept home by their parents to help with domestic tasks—what our deaf informants referred to as “slave labor.” Our deaf informants report that these situations primarily arise because parents (1) are afraid that others will find out they have a deaf child if they allow him or her outside of the house, (2) cannot afford to send their child to school, (3) live too far away from an available school to pay for their child’s daily commute, and (4) simply do not want their child to have an independent life because they want to use him or her as extra an work hand.

Deaf children that do go to school are assigned to the various educational options based on three main criteria. First, deaf children are tested by the government at around age two to determine their intelligence levels. Deaf children who have been determined to have higher intelligence are sent to mainstream programs while those who seem slower intellectually are sent to deaf-only schools. Most children begin school around four to five years of age. Toward the end of the primary years, deaf students are tested again to determine whether they can continue into secondary mainstream programs or if they will stop their formal education at the primary school level (around age 12). Those who pass the exam will attend a government school that has one interpreter available to all of the deaf students. Having only one interpreter makes it very difficult for the deaf students to succeed because they must attend many of their classes with minimal language access, primarily relying on speech reading and speaking for communication.

The deaf-only schools report themselves and are reported by others to be using Signing Exact English (SEE) and American Sign Language (ASL) in their classrooms. There is only one deaf teacher and one deaf teacher’s aide at either of the deaf schools. The rest of the teachers are all hearing without much contact with the adult deaf community.

### ***3.1.2 Organized deaf meetings***

According to our deaf questionnaire participants, Trinidad does not currently have any deaf associations, organizations, or clubs. Although they did at one time exist, they have closed due to lack of membership. This membership decline was reportedly caused by difficulty affording the cost of travel to consistently meet in a single location, deaf males deciding they wanted more individual time with deaf females, and deaf people attending religious meetings instead of secular ones.

### ***3.1.3 Religion***

Deaf people may be motivated to attend religious services for a number of factors, but the most commonly mentioned was their eagerness to get out of their homes where they do not have communication access with their families and into social engagements with other deaf people where they can learn new ideas, openly communicate, and feel unified with a community. There are four known deaf religious ministries that are currently active in Trinidad:

1. The Jehovah’s Witnesses in Trinidad were founded by missionaries from the United States. This ministry holds meetings in many different places and has at least two services in ASL each week: one during mid-week in various locations throughout the country and one on Sunday in a central location. It is the largest deaf ministry in Trinidad with reportedly more than 150 deaf people attending on a consistent basis.
2. Touch of Christ is a Catholic ministry with its center in Barataria (southeast Port of Spain). It has a job-training center that employs deaf people, offers religious classes at the two schools for the deaf, offers a number of interpreted and deaf services throughout the island at least one Sunday a month, and partners with the Trinidad and Tobago chapter of the Disabled People’s International. It uses a mix of TTSL and ASL (Touch 2008).
3. Open Bible Deaf Church, Protestant ministry in San Fernando, has two branches—one in San Fernando that meets on Sunday mornings and a daughter church in east Trinidad that meets on

Fridays. Together, they have roughly 40 deaf people attending (30 at the San Fernando location). This deaf-led ministry is led by Deaf Opportunity Outreach graduates using a mix of TTSL and ASL.

### **3.1.4 Social access**

Deaf people in Trinidad are quite mobile nationally and internationally. They tend to text with each other and plan meetings for special occasions and for national holidays, often at popular beaches. Deaf people are reported to primarily travel to locations such as the USA, Canada, England, and various Caribbean countries. However, as most of these travels are carried out with family members, they often do not meet any deaf people during their trips. Some deaf Christians have traveled to Christian deaf camps in St. Lucia, St. Vincent, and Jamaica, but these camps have been attended infrequently.

There is one organization that is the legal umbrella group for deaf people in Trinidad: Trinidad and Tobago Association for the Hearing Impaired (TTAHI). According to its executive officer at the time of our survey, Miss Josephine Emmanuel, the TTAHI works directly with Ms. Angela Edwards, the director of disability issues in the Disability Affairs Unit of the Trinidad government. Together, they are responsible for addressing issues such as deaf equality, employment, educational needs, and other related social services. Located in Port of Spain, this group is the primary link between the government and the deaf community. Remarkably, deaf people we interacted with seemed completely unaware that the TTAHI even existed. When asked about groups that may provide social services to deaf people, they only indicated the “Dretchi Association,” located in Port of Spain, which is involved in the educational testing of deaf students for placement in schools and audiological testing that fit deaf children with hearing aids.

Employment rates for deaf people in Trinidad seem to be very low. Most deaf people indicated that they did not receive enough education to successfully obtain jobs. The types of jobs they have are usually limited to skills they have learned through vocational training: carpentry, cleaning houses, fixing furniture, working as seamstresses, cooking, factory jobs, etc. A very limited number of individuals are currently working in office or educational contexts, but most indicated they could not find any type of steady employment. Deaf questionnaire participants indicated that they saw better education as the primary way to overcome this employment obstacle and make steps toward more independent lifestyles. They also reported that even when deaf people do find employment, they often receive less financial compensation than hearing people doing similar tasks. However, for fear of losing their jobs all together, they rarely complain about the inequity.

There are no interpreter training programs in Trinidad, although there has been some discussion about starting one in recent years. There are approximately five hearing people who have interacted enough with the deaf community that they can function in interpreting roles if they're really needed. These interpreters primarily work in religious settings, but are sometimes called upon to go to government offices as well. The Cascade School for the Deaf serves as a type of interpreting referral agency as hearing people will call to see if it can arrange an interpreter for a specific meeting. However, this is not done in any official capacity and it may or may not be successful in finding an available interpreter, let alone a hearing person who signs well enough to function in that capacity. The more skilled interpreters are reported to live in the northern and western parts of the island while the southern and eastern parts (rural and poorer areas) do not have any type of interpreter services available.

Few deaf people have any computer access in their homes and may check the Internet infrequently in Internet cafes. They tend to communicate more by text messaging over their mobile phones than by email, especially if they consider their messages to be urgent. Trinidadian deaf people do tend to have access to televisions and DVD players in their homes, especially in the more urban and wealthy areas in the northern and western part of the island. According to questionnaire participants, some cable television stations have some closed captioning services, but because of low English literacy levels, many deaf people struggle to understand the captioning. One public channel, Gayelle, offers interpretation into TTSL

during the news hour (with a box in the lower corner of the screen) but deaf people report having a difficult time seeing the signs because they are too small.

## **3.2 Language use in the Trinidadian deaf community**

In this section, we discuss how sign language and English are used in the Trinidadian deaf community regarding language acquisition, domains of language use, language contact, language attitudes, and language standardization and vitality.

### ***3.2.1 Language acquisition and domains of use***

According to deaf questionnaire participants, the majority of deaf people learn sign language in one of three places: schools, churches, and deaf community interaction. Deaf people who learn to sign at school learn a sign language based on Signing Exact English (SEE) and American Sign Language (ASL), resulting in what looks like Signed English with heavy initialization of signs. Deaf people who learn at either the Catholic church or the Open Bible church learn a mixture of Trinidad and Tobago Sign Language (TTSL) and ASL, while those who learn sign language through the Jehovah's Witness church learn ASL. Those who learn through interaction with the deaf community may also learn a mixture of TTSL and ASL, depending on the social group from which they are learning.

Deaf people tend to use a mixture of TTSL and ASL when communicating with each other. With increased pride in indigenous TTSL and the desire to protect and retain these signs, more TTSL is being seen among all age groups and not exclusively in the older generation as may have been the case 5-10 years ago. However, according to one deaf community leader, the younger generation still does not have a good understanding or capability of using TTSL because it is not taught in schools. Thus the older generation may sign differently than the younger generation of deaf Trinidadians. For children who do not have the opportunity to attend school, little TTSL or ASL is used. Some families invent their own "home signs," but deaf people report that these home signs particularly focus on chores around the home: cooking, cleaning, etc. However, because of these home signs, more vocabulary variation related to domestic tasks than to other topics is seen throughout the country. Some deaf people report that they are visiting these isolated deaf people in their homes and are attempting to teach them TTSL or trying to convince parents to allow them to take their children to church. Even with this effort, there still are many a-lingual deaf Trinidadians.

Hearing people tend to learn sign language through classes that are offered to parents through the deaf schools or churches, or from classes offered through the University of West Indies. Most of these classes are taught by deaf people but offer only basic vocabulary training. Thus, unless hearing people get involved with the deaf community, sign language skills often remain on a rudimentary level. The majority of hearing people are reported to only want to learn ASL and deaf teachers told us that they only teach ASL in their classes. Although the deaf participants we interacted with said they were not opposed to teaching TTSL to hearing people, they indicated that hearing people do not seem to be interested in learning it and only deaf people use TTSL.

One deaf questionnaire participant indicated that deaf parents commonly give up their hearing children for adoption to another family member in order for them to learn to speak. Thus, there are very few hearing people who are native users of sign language. When this same participant was asked about the concept of "CODA" (children of deaf adults) in Trinidad, he responded that they do not have that concept and he does not know of a single CODA who learned to sign from their deaf parents. This is impacting the number of available skilled interpreters because there are no hearing people who are native speakers of TTSL or ASL in Trinidad.

### **3.2.2 Language contact**

It is unknown at what point TTSL developed in Trinidad. According to one deaf questionnaire participant, deaf education began with an oral philosophy and the first known contact with a sign language outside Trinidad was with an individual from England who taught some sign language. It is unknown what kind of sign language was used by this person or for what length of time it influenced the sign language use of deaf students. Later, in the 1970s, the principal of CDS went to the United States for some training in deaf education and returned with dictionaries and a belief that the use of SEE was the best communication philosophy. Students of that time report that they were already using TTSL and were rather overwhelmed with the linguistic changes being required of them immediately. Since that time, the school has reportedly moved to using ASL signs in a Signed English format but still continues to use a SEE book as a vocabulary resource. Teachers were observed using a lot of SEE vocabulary in the classroom and students that had attended and/or previously graduated from these programs were also observed to use a lot of SEE and ASL both inside and outside of the classroom.

Both the Ministry of Education and the deaf community accept that there is a TTSL that is distinct from ASL and that is currently being used in the Trinidadian deaf community. Some deaf questionnaire participants also reported that deaf people in Tobago use ASL more than deaf people in Trinidad for two primary reasons: (1) there are graduates from Gallaudet University (Washington D.C.) currently living on that island who have heavily influenced their language use, and 2) all deaf people from Tobago have been educated at the Cascade School for the Deaf, which uses ASL and no TTSL, since there are no deaf schools in Tobago. For this reason, some deaf Trinidadians do not want to refer to the indigenous Trinidadian sign language as Trinidad *and* Tobago Sign Language, preferring instead to refer to it only as TSL, Trinidad Sign Language.

Although there is some regional variation in TTSL signs throughout Trinidad, deaf people indicate that variation in the signing of deaf individuals is more dependent on whether ASL or TTSL is being used. Reportedly, people in the southern part of the island, where fewer deaf people have attended school and CSD has less influence, use more TTSL than ASL. A person's age may also affect the use of ASL or TTSL because the members of the younger generation are using SEE and ASL in schools and do not have a lot of exposure to TTSL until they leave school and become more immersed in the adult deaf community.

Deaf people who have access to webcams have some sign language contact with deaf people from other countries, primarily communicating through ASL with deaf people in Canada, the United States, Jamaica, St. Lucia, Grenada, and Barbados. Although deaf people seem open to people teaching foreign sign languages in Trinidad, they are most concerned about the attitudes that people teach and express while doing so. If a person wants to teach ASL in Trinidad they need to emphasize that ASL is not better than TTSL, so as to avoid destroying the desire for deaf or hearing people to learn and use TTSL.

### **3.2.3 Language attitudes**

Deaf people feel confident signing in public. They will even directly approach a hearing person that is behaving negatively towards them (e.g. making faces) and correct him for demeaning attitudes. They also seem to be accepting of deaf people who sign in differing varieties than themselves. Deaf people accept the current situation of schools teaching SEE and ASL and, although they hope this will change, they believe the presence of ASL to be an unavoidable fact of life in Trinidad. Deaf questionnaire participants expressed the desire for deaf people to be able to use ASL when traveling internationally and in school, and also to be fluent in TTSL when interacting with their own local community. In addition, deaf people indicate that although they see the need for knowing and using English through reading and writing and even some speech-reading skills, they see sign language as much more integral to their lives because it allows them to access and interact with their own deaf community.

### ***3.2.4 Language standardization and vitality***

In May of 2007, the Ministry of Education, in association with a committee of hearing and deaf people, published the first dictionary of TTSL. The result of this committee's work was a book that integrated line drawings and English words for each sign, and even included several sign varieties for some of the English words. This book can be purchased through the Ministry of Social Development and Disability Affairs Unit and is referred to as the "First Volume Dictionary of Local Signs."

However, according to some deaf participants of the team that worked on this project, the signs included in this book were not truly representative of TTSL. For example, one TTSL sign is made by two thumbs pointing outwards from the body and the tongue sticking out and to the side. This sign indicates that the person has just had a new good idea they are about to share. However, it was not included in the dictionary because some people (reportedly from Tobago) were convinced that the nonmanual of the tongue sticking out was not "proper signing." Some deaf people also do not like this dictionary because the line drawings representing the signs are not clear.

Thus, a second attempt at a TTSL dictionary was begun in April of 2008. With a mostly deaf committee of 15–20 people, this project is again being underwritten by the Ministry of Social Development and the Disabilities Affairs Unit. This team hopes to create a corpus of 700 words with accompanying sign varieties that are more representative of TTSL. They plan to publish in two formats: a dictionary in book form, illustrated by photographs instead of line drawings, and a DVD with a live person signing TTSL. The primary goal for the use of this book is to teach TTSL to both deaf and hearing people.

Because of its use in the educational system and in church environments, ASL seems to be a strong force in Trinidad. However, since deaf teachers are hoping to use and teach TTSL to hearing people in their sign classes, TTSL seems to be heading towards revitalization and increased use in the community. In addition, deaf people are acquiring TTSL after leaving school when they choose to interact with the deaf community. Isolated deaf people are also being taught TTSL at home through interaction with other deaf people. Many deaf people consider TTSL to be the language of prestige in the Trinidadian deaf community and are working toward its standardization and documentation through the current dictionary project. It is probable that TTSL will remain a language used by a growing number of deaf and even hearing Trinidadians.

## **4 St. Vincent**

Please refer to the map provided in Map 3 for any locations in St. Vincent and the Grenadines discussed in the remainder of this report (CIA 2008).

**Map 3. St. Vincent and the Grenadines.**



## **4.1 Sociolinguistic factors relevant to the St. Vincent deaf community**

In this section, we address the sociolinguistic situation of St. Vincent by investigating the following factors that have significant ties to the use of sign language in the St. Vincent deaf community: education, language use, organized social groups for and by deaf people, religion, and social services. Unless otherwise indicated, this information was gathered through SLQs conducted with three deaf members of the community and participant observation at seven deaf community events and locations, involving deaf and hearing people from St. Vincent during six days of survey fieldwork.

### **4.1.1 Education**

Deaf schools in St. Vincent initially communicated only through the use of speech and lip-reading. It is unknown at what point they switched to incorporating some sign language into their communication philosophies. There are currently three special needs schools accepting deaf students in St. Vincent and the Grenadines: two on the main island of St. Vincent, and one on the second largest island of Bequia. None of these schools are deaf-only institutions; instead, deaf-only classrooms are integrated into general schools for students with special needs. Deaf students begin their education at various ages, some as late as 15 years old, but must leave when they reach 21 years of age.

The two sister special needs schools on the island of St. Vincent are located in the capital city of Kingstown on the southwest coast and in the second largest town, Georgetown, located on the east coast. At the time of this survey, The School for Children with Special Needs in Georgetown had three deaf students out of a total student population of 17, one of whom is six years of age and two who are over 14 years of age. It reports that it uses a TC philosophy and that its hearing teachers know and use ASL in the classroom.

The School for Children with Special Needs in Kingstown reports and was observed to use ASL and a TC philosophy, and employs two teachers for deaf students, one hearing and one deaf teacher. It typically have around a dozen deaf students who are split into two classrooms. The entire school employs as many

as ten teachers for about 25–30 students with multiple disabilities. A hearing teacher from Trinidad learned sign language from the Touch of Christ deaf ministry in Trinidad and uses ASL and SEE with her students. However, she planned to pursue more teacher training in the following year, leaving only one teacher for all deaf students. According to Joanna, teachers at Special Needs schools do not willingly pursue teaching positions at a special school and are not typically trained for teaching students with special needs. Instead, they may be on probation from their own schools or be sent by the government to fill empty positions.

Finally, the Sunshine School located in Bequia is a private school that, in 2008, had one deaf student integrated into classrooms with their 24 students with special needs. It reports using ASL and English in the classroom, within a TC communication philosophy. All of its students are from Bequia.

A few deaf interviewees mentioned that one other school with deaf students exists in Chateaubelair, St. Vincent. However, when we inquired about this school with the other special needs schools and church leaders, none of them had heard of it.

#### ***4.1.2 Organized deaf meetings***

There is only one known deaf person in St. Vincent over the age of 35 and very few younger deaf people have been identified. This could be due to deaf people being hidden in classrooms but also due to better health care decreasing the deaf population. No known genetic deafness or families with multiple deaf members were found or reported. There are no associations, organizations, or clubs for or led by the deaf community in St. Vincent. Deaf people are reported to meet downtown in central Kingstown on Friday nights, Saturday during the day, and sometimes during mid-week in the early evenings, but these interactions are casual in nature, with little organization. The only consistent meeting place for deaf people in St. Vincent appears to be at religious services.

There are three ministries currently working with the deaf community in St. Vincent: Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Kingstown Baptist Church. Little is known about the Seventh Day Adventists except that they provide interpreted services and do not have any deaf-only meetings. The Jehovah's Witnesses and Kingstown Baptist Church both use ASL and offer deaf-only gatherings. The largest deaf ministry in St. Vincent is located at the Kingstown Baptist Church. It is led by a deaf pastor and has 15–20 deaf people (mostly male, aged 20–30) who attend the Thursday evening and Sunday morning meetings. There are also five hearing deaf ministry leaders, all of whom are female, but only one of these attended the Thursday night meeting that we visited. The primary interpreter during hearing services where deaf people are integrated uses SEE.

The Kingstown Baptist Church has also conducted its own deaf camp for the past 15 years, attended by deaf people from Grenada and a few from Trinidad. Last year, it invited a Canadian pastor to lead the camp. This year (2008), however, it has decided that it will combine its annual camp with a larger and more established camp in Jamaica: the Caribbean Christian Deaf Fellowship that is conducting its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of hosting deaf camps. Approximately ten deaf people from the Kingstown Baptist Church plan to attend the camp in July.

#### ***4.1.3 Social access***

When the National Society for Disabled Persons (NSDP), the only known disability organization in St. Vincent (located in Kingstown), was asked about its involvement with the deaf community, the receptionist indicated that there is no involvement since deaf people do not consider themselves to be disabled. However, before leaving the island, we met a deaf person who is employed at the NSDP under the "Helping Hands" department. She indicated that it is not an organization advocating for social change or offering social services but a place where three deaf people are employed to sew and sell their

products. Every known deaf person in the community has a job, although it may not be high-paying due to lack of education, and Special Needs School in Kingstown plays a central role in job placement.

There are no known interpreters in St. Vincent. In 2007, one teacher decided to interpret school meetings for the deaf students at the Kingstown school. Previously, deaf students had simply stood with the larger group with no communication access. According to one questionnaire participant, deaf and disabled people in St. Vincent are considered by general society and most hearing people to be embarrassments to society, and some parents are reportedly so ashamed of their deaf children that they refuse to be seen with them in public.

Deaf people indicated that most of them have access to DVD players in their homes, but very few have access to computers. There is no closed captioning on television and most deaf people do not have access to hearing aids to utilize what hearing they do have and one teacher reported that most deaf people have difficulty learning to speak or lip-read.

## **4.2 Language use in the St. Vincent deaf community**

In this section, we will discuss how sign language and English are used in the St. Vincent deaf community with regard to language acquisition and domains of language use, language contact, language attitudes, and language standardization and vitality.

### ***4.2.1 Language acquisition and domains of use***

According to our informants, no one in St. Vincent over the age of 35 uses sign language because sign language was not introduced until more recently. People who are deaf or hard-of-hearing over this age limit may have lost their hearing late in life or use simple family home signs to communicate. It appears that older deaf people do not interact with the national deaf community but are more isolated in rural areas without having had access to deaf education or a developed sign language. The current national deaf community is composed of a cohort of people whose mothers contracted Rubella, causing them to be born deaf. Currently, this deaf cohort is aged 20–35.

Although deaf people indicated that there may be a few local signs and facial expressions unique to St. Vincent, they all indicated that they have grown up using “Sign America” that they learned at school and that there is no “St. Vincent Sign Language.” When asked about “ASL,” they did not know what the acronym stood for, but when asked about “American Sign Language,” they responded that this is the form of sign language that they use in St. Vincent. Most of what was seen in natural communication and collected in the wordlist videos seemed to be an older version of ASL that did not follow English grammar with very little initialization and fingerspelling. Our deaf Trinidadian coworker indicated that it was not TTSL. One hearing teacher indicated that the Jehovah’s Witness and Seventh Day Adventists use a sign language that may be different than what is used in the schools or at the Baptist church, but that it is only a variation of “Sign America” and not a completely different language.

### ***4.2.2 Language contact***

Deaf people report that they travel throughout St. Vincent, interacting with other deaf individuals in casual settings and during missionary outreaches. However, these trips are infrequent because work and family duties keep them close to their home cities. Some deaf people indicate that a few St. Vincent deaf individuals have traveled to Central and South America. Most travel for deaf people is for attending the Christian deaf camps in the Caribbean. At these camps, they have interacted with other deaf sign language users from Canada and the USA, and other Caribbean islands such as the Bahamas, Jamaica, St. Lucia, Antigua, Grenada, and Trinidad. When one deaf person was asked how easy it was to communicate among people from all of those different places, he indicated there was initial difficulty but that after a few days everyone became used to the shared communication style.

One hearing teacher has commented that Jamaican Sign Language is not the same as the sign language used in St. Vincent. Other hearing people indicate that there may be a Caribbean Sign Language that is being taught at the University of West Indies in Jamaica that is distinct from ASL but that it is not the sign language used in St. Vincent.

### ***4.2.3 Language attitudes***

Most deaf adults willingly sign in public, but one teacher has reported that her students complain about people staring and making rude comments to them when they do so; consequently, some students avoid public signing. Parents do not learn to sign with their children and there is no sign language class offered for hearing people in St. Vincent.

Deaf Vincentians consistently indicate that they have a lot of difficulty using and understanding English. Some deaf people at the Kingstown Baptist Church have access to the “simplified” English Bible distributed by Deaf Missions (Council Bluffs, Iowa, USA) but they consistently comment that they have difficulty understanding it. When asked about their English skills most seemed embarrassed to admit that their skills were only average. One participant responded with great pride that she enjoyed reading and writing English and it seemed to be a positive trait among the deaf people with whom we interacted to know and use English well.

### ***4.2.4 Language standardization and vitality***

Deaf people have not recorded any local signs in St. Vincent but have access to some ASL dictionaries that have been brought from the USA (e.g. *The Joy of Signing*, *Random House ASL Dictionary*, and *The Everything Sign Language Book*). Deaf people report, however, that these dictionaries are primarily used by hearing people to learn ASL vocabulary and that deaf people do not use them.

In conclusion, the signing deaf population in St. Vincent is very small—some deaf participants indicated 150–200 total deaf signers with the majority of this group being in the 20–35 age group. Deaf children who are allowed to go to school are learning and using ASL in the classrooms while those who are isolated may use home signs and have little access to a developed language. Churches and casual deaf meetings are reported and have been observed to use ASL. Because of the relatively small size of the island, the use of ASL, and the lack of an indigenous sign language prior to ASL, it is probable that deaf people in St. Vincent will continue to use ASL in all domains of life.

## **5 Grenada**

Please refer to the map provided in Map 4 for any Grenada locations discussed in the remainder of the report (CIA 2008).

**Map 4. Grenada.**



## **5.1 Sociolinguistic factors relevant to the Grenadian deaf community**

This section discusses RQ1 by investigating the following factors that have significant ties to sign language use in the Grenadian deaf community: education, language use, organized social groups for and by deaf people, religion, and social services. Unless otherwise indicated, this information was gathered through SLQs conducted with three deaf Grenadians and participant observation with deaf and hearing people at eight deaf community events in Grenada. There is no reference to deaf people in any of the other islands in the country.

### **5.1.1 Education**

The first Grenadian deaf school was established in 1969 with an oral philosophy. A few years later, a hearing woman from Canada visited and taught some ASL in the classrooms and to deaf adults. After she left, the education system continued in its oral foundations but the deaf people who had been exposed to ASL reportedly began to learn more ASL signs (although it is unknown from what source). In the early 1980s, a group of mothers contracted rubella and gave birth to a generation of deaf children—roughly 40 deaf children were known to be born during this period. It was because of this spike in the number of deaf children that deaf education accelerated and schools became more open to a total communication (TC) philosophy of education instead of remaining solely oral in their approach.

There are now two schools in the country for deaf students. The concentrated group of deaf children who were born because of the rubella outbreak has now graduated. Therefore, there is now a smaller number of deaf children currently in school. The Grenada School for the Deaf (GSD), just east of Saint George's in St. Paul's, had three deaf students that needed special attention in 2008 but two were anticipated to graduate that year. GSD also assists with placing roughly 15 deaf students in a few mainstream schools in the St. George area. While these students do not have interpreters in the classroom, GSD tries to provide helpful resources and professional training for their teachers. There is also a school for special education, located in Grenville on the eastern coast, which has five deaf students out of a total 42 students. There is no attempt to main-stream deaf students in this area. Both of these schools report using ASL and have both deaf and hearing teachers and/or teacher's aides. Students can begin school as early as age three and

stay until age 20. Although it is very rare for a deaf person to pass a high school entrance exam, if successful, he or she is allowed to attend high school for further education.

The principal of the deaf school in St. Paul's and the foremost hearing leader for deaf rights, earned her master's in inclusive education and is an advocate for deaf students to be integrated into their closest regional schools. Previously, a research project in Grenada investigated teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education of children with special needs into "regular" classrooms. The study found that most teachers did not have the training or skills to adequately address the special needs that will challenge them, but that they were willing to pursue training in those areas. When three deaf adults were questioned about what type of education they would prefer for their deaf children, one indicated that she would prefer them to be completely integrated into hearing classrooms with support, one responded that she would like her children to be able to move back and forth between deaf-only schools and integrated classrooms, and the third indicated that deaf-only schools were the most preferable for deaf children. Regardless of these differing attitudes among deaf adults, Grenada's current deaf educational philosophy is placing deaf students in hearing classrooms without interpreters unless the students are identified as unable to cope in these situations. These students who need extra help are placed in the deaf schools.

One Ministry of Education representative reported that the ministry has been seriously considering establishing a "Special Education Unit" to better address the educational needs of the deaf community and provide support for them in the classroom. This representative indicated that neither he, nor the Ministry of Education, was opposed to the use of sign language in the classroom. Even so, it is yet to be seen how sign language will be incorporated into this wave of main-streamed education without interpreters. In addition, although there are only a few deaf students currently in school, there is a reported 15 more deaf and hard-of-hearing children aged six months to three years that will soon be starting their education. It is unclear at this point where they will be placed.

Deaf people indicate that they do not get a good education in deaf schools because the schools are designed more as playgrounds than educational facilities. They report that they are not challenged to excel without the competition of hearing students in the classroom, and that their primary focus in deaf schools is simply social interaction with other deaf students. This, coupled with parents who are reported to avoid involvement in the education of their children, is perceived to have led to low academic achievement levels in the deaf community.

Deaf Grenadians consistently indicate that better education is their primary need for better lives. In the entire community, only one deaf woman has had any college education—earning her associate's degree in California a few years ago. Since returning to Grenada, this deaf woman has become a strong leader and advocate in the deaf community, encouraging them to work together toward social change, to be proactive in growing individually, and to work with hearing educators at the St. Paul's school where she works. In 2008, she started teaching a class for deaf adults to help them with their English vocabularies on Tuesday and Thursday evenings. Approximately ten adults attended these classes at the time of our survey and indicated that they were very glad for the opportunity to obtain higher education. Asked about where they would like to gain higher education, deaf people said that there are no university opportunities in Grenada and that most of all, they would most like to attend Gallaudet University or another university in the United States.

### ***5.1.2 Organized deaf meetings***

One deaf questionnaire participant indicated that there are probably as many as 500 deaf individuals throughout Grenada, but she has personally traveled throughout the island and met less than 200 who sign. The other 300 individuals are older and have not had any education or place to learn a sign language and there are many children and youth that are hidden in their homes by their parents.

There are no organized deaf associations in Grenada, but in the past few months a deaf club was established that meets on Friday evenings, with the locale alternating between St. George's and Grenville. Some deaf people reported that there is a lot of passiveness in the deaf community, particularly in the older generation in Grenville, and these need to be taught how to be more proactive and independent. There does appear to be some genetic deafness in Grenada and this group of related deaf cousins seems to be the most proactive in working together for unity.

Grenada, as a whole, appears to be very open about its Christian religious ties. The school and government events that we attended began and ended in prayer and all of the hearing people we asked said that they attend some type of church service. Many deaf people attend church services as well, even though there are no interpreters available. They are primarily motivated by their parents who "force" them to attend rather than by any intrinsic desire since they do not have communication access to the service themselves.

According to one deaf questionnaire participant, a Catholic church in St. George's offered some type of deaf ministry three or more years ago, but that has since closed and there is no interpreter or ministry remaining. There is only one deaf ministry currently available in Grenada: a Jehovah's Witness church that has three or four deaf individuals attending. It is reported to use ASL. When 30 deaf adults were asked about how well they understood English, many indicated that they found it difficult even though they would like to understand it better. Some deaf people have access to the simplified English Bible published by Deaf Missions, but even that is reportedly difficult to understand.

### **5.1.3 Social access**

According to deaf respondents in St. George's, there is little societal support for the St. George's deaf community. While some deaf people are employed, they are generally working in factories, technological jobs, painting, sewing, cleaning, or in family businesses. Deaf people state that the pay is not the same as for hearing people, and that they also do not have the education needed to be placed in better paying jobs. In contrast, in Grenville most deaf people do not have jobs, but it is reported that there is some kind of government-supported social welfare available for them.

June 2008 marked the first "Deaf Awareness Month" to be held in Grenada that actually had planned activities and events with the theme "It's Deaf, Not Dummy." During this month, various meetings were held for, with, and about deaf people and issues related to their community. Deaf people took part in activities such as standing in shopping centers and handing out bookmarks to passers-by, explaining how best to communicate with deaf individuals. A plenary was held on inclusive education that was open to the public. On another day, 30 deaf adults attended a special workshop designed for them about how to maintain an ethical life at the workplace. This workshop was sponsored by Cable and Wireless (the local communication company) and the Ministry of Education.

Deaf people indicate that there are no interpreters available in Grenada, and no formal training is offered for hearing people to learn ASL and become good interpreters. There are one or two "helpers" that are sometimes willing to interpret for particular meetings or activities but some deaf interview respondents indicate that they do not understand these "helpers" well because they sign too "English." One deaf questionnaire participant indicated that she hoped this would change with a possible interpreter training workshop being offered in the fall of 2008.

## **5.2 Language use in the Grenadian deaf community**

In this section, we will discuss how sign language and English are used in the Grenadian deaf community with regard to language acquisition and domains of language use, language contact, language attitudes, and language standardization and vitality.

### ***5.2.1 Language acquisition and domains of use***

Deaf people over the age of 40 are reported to use only home signs and gestures. Those under 40 know and use ASL because of ASL's introduction by a hearing Canadian woman around the mid-1970s. According to deaf and hearing interviewees, when Bell came back knowing and using ASL from her six years in California in college, deaf people were hungry to learn from her all the new signs that she knew. Bell commented that it was a combination of the Canadian's initial influence and her continued influence in the community that has led to ASL being the dominant sign language of the community. However, because there were no indigenous Grenadian signs prior to the introduction to ASL it has been seen as a very positive thing by both deaf people and hearing educators in the deaf community that the Grenadian deaf community now knows and uses a sign language.

Deaf people now learn sign language at school, through interaction with other deaf people at deaf club events and meetings, and through Tuesday and Thursday night vocabulary classes that Bell teaches in St. George's. A few hearing people have expressed interest in learning sign languages, and one class has been offered by a hearing teacher from the deaf school. She commented that she uses a mix of ASL and local Grenadian signs.

### ***5.2.2 Language contact***

Deaf people in Grenada do not travel much, but if they do, it is usually to surrounding Caribbean islands. Some have gone to a Christian deaf camp in St. Vincent, sponsored by the Kingstown Baptist Church. Others have gone to a deaf camp in Jamaica or to Trinidad. One deaf person commented that she had seen an interpreter for a Trinidad news broadcast in Grenada, but that she did not understand the sign language that was being used. To this, our Trinidadian coworker responded that the interpreter uses TTSL which was why she did not understand him/her.

All deaf people with whom we interacted indicated that they really struggle with English. There was some presence of SEE signs (e.g. initialization "finish" with the "F" handshape) which showed some language contact either between their sign language and English or between their sign and SEE. It is probable that there has been some use of SEE in the education system because of the presence of a SEE textbook at the St. George's deaf school

### ***5.2.3 Language attitudes***

Various language attitudes were exhibited in Grenada. While deaf people did not hide their signs at all in public (and one person indicated that they disliked anyone who tried to hide their signs), some seemed to believe that ASL as used in the USA or Canada may be better than the signs they used in Grenada. One deaf person commented that he would really like to have their own Grenadian Sign Language, while others indicated that they like ASL and there really is no need for GSL. The principal of the deaf school commented that she needs to encourage the deaf individuals she interacts with to take pride in their local Grenadian signs (i.e. the local signs for fruits and locations) while another hearing teacher commented that some people believe that ASL is better than Grenadian signs.

Deaf participants indicated that it is important for deaf people to know both English and ASL. They need to know ASL to communicate within their own deaf community, but they also need to know how to read and write English, and even lip-read English, when interacting with hearing people in doctor offices and other places in hearing society.

### ***5.2.4 Language standardization and vitality***

Deaf people indicated that they all sign the same kind of ASL in Grenada except for three deaf groups: the older uneducated generation who did not learn sign language and only communicate through gestures,

deaf people who were educated orally and have never tried to learn sign language, and isolated deaf individuals who only use some home signs.

Deaf schools do have some access to ASL materials, although exclusively in dictionary form and not through video. Several years ago, a book of Grenadian signs with line drawings was published through the deaf school. However, there are only a few paper copies still in existence and no digital copies available. Because of the lack of any developed sign language other than ASL in Grenada, it is a fairly stable sign language situation in the Grenadian deaf community.

## **6 Conclusion**

Deaf communities in each location are at varying degrees of development. The St. Vincent deaf community appears to be very small, decreasing in number without many young deaf people on the island, and without much of an organized presence. In comparison, the deaf communities in Grenada and Trinidad appear to be growing in number and becoming increasingly organized in their advocacy for deaf rights, the formation of deaf clubs and associations, and the promotion of sign language, and the push for increased educational and employment opportunities. While Grenada seems to be more connected socially to the United States than to surrounding islands, St. Vincent seems most connected with other Caribbean countries, and Trinidad, probably due to its much larger size, views itself as a very unique community in the deaf Caribbean.

Deaf people in Grenada, St. Vincent, and Trinidad all use ASL and/or SEE in many domains of life. Trinidad, alone, has a developed indigenous sign language, TTSL. Even though ASL is used in Trinidad schools, the Trinidadian deaf community is most interested in developing TTSL. TTSL is not understood in either Grenada or St. Vincent. While deaf communities in Grenada and St. Vincent could possibly partner together in language development projects, there appears to be little need as they are currently using and have positive attitudes toward ASL materials from the United States.

# Appendix: Sociolinguistic Questionnaire

## Volunteer Consent Form - "Survey of Signed Languages in <country>"

You are invited to participate on a voluntary basis in a research project by SIL International. The goal of the study is to compare the sign language varieties used within <country>, gather sociolinguistic information about deaf people, and inform decisions about future language projects in which SIL can contribute. It is hoped that this study will be of benefit to the <country> deaf community by encouraging national and international recognition of its sign language(s) and culture. The results of this study may also help in guiding local organizations, schools, and future language projects to best serve your needs.

Your participation in the study will involve filling out this questionnaire document and may take about one hour. Your participation in this project is voluntary, and you will not receive any compensation. You may end your participation in this study at any time, for any reason.

The information you provide will be compiled and analyzed in order to understand sign languages in <country> and then shared through presentations or publications. Your personal identity will remain confidential. The collected language data will be saved and archived by the investigators at the completion of the survey.

Your questions about any part of this study are welcome and may be addressed to either:  
 Jason Parks: [jason\\_parks@sil.org](mailto:jason_parks@sil.org) or Elizabeth Parks: [liz\\_parks@sil.org](mailto:liz_parks@sil.org)

"I understand all that is stated above. All of my questions have been answered and I am encouraged to ask any questions that I may have concerning this study in the future. I understand that I can withdraw from this study at any time without penalty or prejudice. I understand that I will not receive payment or reimbursement for my participation. I willingly agree to participate as a consultant in the 'Survey of Signed Languages in <country>' study as explained to me by the investigators."

I want my questionnaire data to be: -accessibility of data-  
 I want my recorded language data to be: -accessibility of data-

**Signature of Participant (indicates consent)**

**Gender** -gender-

**Deaf Status** -status-

**Email**

**Telephone/Text Number**

**Current Date**                      **Location**                      **Researchers Present**

*Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability. If you do not know the answer to any of the questions, please indicate this. Whenever possible please indicate names, locations, and contact information for individuals, associations, organizations, schools, etc., related to the deaf community.*

## Deaf Services and Meeting Places

1. List associations and organizations serving deaf people in your area, indicating their role.

Associations:

Organizations:

Other:

2. Do deaf people attend religious services? -yes/no/depends-

If no, explain why not:

If yes, please answer the following:

What services do they attend?



22. Do you sign, speak, or use both when communicating with other people? -SL usage-
<b>Language Use and Attitudes</b>
23. Where do deaf people learn sign language in your community?
24. When choosing a president in your deaf association/organization, how important are the following? S/he must be deaf (not hearing): - importance - S/he must sign well: - importance - S/he must be able to speak: - importance - S/he must be able to read and write well: - importance - S/he must be well educated: - importance -
25. How many deaf people sign in your community? How well do they sign? -level of deaf signers-
26. How many hearing people use sign language in your community? How well do they sign? -level of hearing signers- Where do they learn to sign? Is it good for hearing people to learn to sign? -yes/no-
27. Do deaf people sign the same with hearing people as they do with each other? -yes/no- If no, how do deaf people sign differently?
28. Do you interact more with deaf or hearing people? -deaf/hearing/equal- Why?
29. Do deaf parents sign with their hearing children? -yes/no/depends-
30. Do hearing parents sign with their deaf children? -yes/no/depends-
31. How do deaf people feel when signing in public?
32. Do you think most hearing people look positively on the deaf community? -yes/no- Explain your answer.
33. Do all deaf people in <country> sign the same? -yes/no- If no, what factors lead to different signing?
34. Do you want everyone in <country> to sign the same? -yes/no- Explain your answer:
35. Is your sign language like the sign language of any other country? -yes/no- If yes, which one(s)?
36. Do you want to learn a sign language from another country? -yes/no- If so, which one(s)?
37. How do you feel about people teaching a foreign sign language (e.g. ASL) in your country?
38. Do you think that it is better for deaf people to use sign language or spoken language? -SL/Spoken- Explain your answer.
39. How well do you read and write the <LWC>? -Spoken Level-
40. If language materials (e.g. Bible) were available in your local sign language, would you use them? -yes/no/sometimes- If not, why not?

If yes or sometimes, when and where?
41. What does your deaf community need most to succeed in life?
<b>Comparisons: Please rank from top to bottom the following:</b>
42. City/Country with the most deaf people.
43. City/Country best for deaf people to live in (most services, education, support, etc.).
44. City's/Country's sign language most similar to yours.
45. City's/Country's sign language that is the easiest to understand.
46. City/Country with the most beautiful sign language.
<b>Additional Notes:</b>

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