

## The Deaf of St. Vincent



### The Sign Language Community of St. Vincent

There are two main definitions of what it means to be deaf: socio-cultural, where the core elements are sign language use and involvement within deaf culture, and physiological-medical, which focuses on hearing loss. About half (100) of the estimated 200 Vincentians with a significant degree of hearing loss are reported to use a sign language. This profile primarily focuses on these 100 socio-culturally deaf Vincentians.

Deaf people live scattered throughout the country, with the greatest concentration in the capital city, Kingstown. Very few deaf people over the age of 40 use sign language. There was not an active signing deaf community in St. Vincent before a group of mothers contracted Rubella and their children (now ages 20-35) were born deaf. Because of communication barriers and lack of shared experience with hearing people, deaf people tend to socialize within the deaf community.

The primary sign language variety of St. Vincent is American Sign Language (ASL). There are three special needs schools that accept children with multiple disabilities and also deaf students. The schools use a total communication philosophy using both oral and signing methods. There are few, if any, opportunities for education beyond that offered in the special needs schools.

In general, hearing society has a negative view of deaf people (and people with disabilities in general). Families with deaf children are often embarrassed or shamed and may try to hide their deaf children. Marginalized, deaf people have limited access to social services. There are no interpreters available for most social activities.

A few churches have an interpreted worship service and one church has a deaf group that meets once a week. There are no self-sustaining deaf churches. It is difficult for most deaf people to understand written English, so access to the Bible and educational materials is limited. They may be able to use ASL materials, but community testing for acceptability and understanding has not been done.

**Primary Religion:**

Christianity

**Disciples (Matt 28:19):**

15%

**Churches:**

3

**Scripture Status (Matt 28:20):**

Possible Need

**Population (date):**

100 (2008)



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### Have They Heard the Gospel?

Hindrances to Scripture Use

It is difficult for most deaf people to understand written English, so access to the Bible and educational materials is limited. They may be able to use ASL materials, but community testing for acceptability and understanding has not been done.

Response to the Gospel

The church is seems to be fairly stable not reaching some members of the deaf community, but maintaining a fairly active core within at least one denomination.

Bilingualism

Most deaf people do not read English or communicate orally at a high level. Few adults over 40 years age use sign l language.

Are Cross-Cultural  
Missionaries Needed?

There is a significant need for missionaries in the deaf community through education, interpreter training, and pastoral/deaf-leadership training.

Number of Congregations

3

Number Using Local Language .

0

Primary Language of Communication

English (eng), Vincentian Creole English (svc)

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### Group Description

#### Population

Urban Percent

About 25% of the entire country's population resides in or near the capital, Kingstown.

Comments

An estimated 50% of the deaf population use sign language (about 100 people out of 200 that have significant hearing loss). Very few deaf people over the age of 40 use sign language. Most of the deaf population is in the 20-35 age range due to mothers' sicknesses with Rubella during pregnancy in the late 1970's and early 1980's.

#### Geographical/Environmental

Location

Caribbean (West Indies), in the Windward Islands of the Lesser Antilles Chain. The neighboring island nation to the south is Grenada (75 miles), to the north is St. Lucia (24 miles), and to the east is Barbados (100 miles).

Climate

Tropical – rainy season May to November, little temperature variation

Comments

St. Vincent and the Grenadines includes 32 islands and cays

#### Language/Linguistics

Primary Language

American Sign Language (ASL)

Attitude towards mother tongue

Very receptive

Second Languages

English (written)

Other mother tongues of this group

Deaf People of the USA and Canada

Neighbor Languages

English (eng), Vincentian Creole English (svc)

Literacy

Lower than average (average in total population is 85% as of a 2000-2004 study)

Comments

The name that was commonly signed in reference to the sign language they used was "Sign America", there may be some variations of ASL used in St. Vincent (differences were reported among various religious groups)

Corrections to Ethnologue entry

Add St. Vincent to countries listed in the "Also used in" category for American Sign Language.

#### Economics

Avg. Annual Income

Less than the average GDP (\$9,800 USD)

Unemployment Rate

Estimated between 15-20% for the country as a whole

Occupation

Usually manual labor

Comments

Many deaf people were employed (at least those living in/near the capital, Kingstown)

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### Community Development

Clothing	Modern western style
Transportation	Public transportation (mini-buses)
Infant Mortality Rate	13.6 deaths/1,000 live births for country as whole
Life Expectancy	74 years for country as whole
Comments	Electricity is available, 220/240 volt, 50 cycle, standard plug has 3 rectangular pins, drinking water may need to be treated for outsiders depending on location

### Society

Family Structures	Nuclear family, often live in same house as family
Social Habits/Groupings	Prefer to socialize with other deaf – 100% communication without barriers, there are no known deaf organizations, associations, or clubs, they often informally meet on Friday nights or Saturdays in Kingstown, most deaf people that sign are under 40 years old
Identification with Nat'l Culture	Similar
Self Image	Threatened
Attitude to Outsiders	Somewhat receptive
Attitude to Changes	Indifferent
Cultural Change Pace	Medium
Local Lang Broadcasting	None
Comments	Often separated from hearing society due to communication barriers and attitudes, deaf people are often seen as inferior by hearing society, no interpreters available for general access to hearing society

### Education/Youth

Primary Schools	3
Primary School Enrollment1	10-15
Secondary Schools	0
Teacher to Student Ratio	1:5
Language of Instruction	American Sign Language and English (total communication p philosophy used)
Language of Textbooks	English
Problems/Needs	Discrimination/oppression from hearing society, no interpreters available for general needs/access (one teacher at the school for special needs in Kingstown was interpreting the general assembly school meetings for the deaf students in 2007-08)

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Comments

Students start school at various ages, as late as 15 years old, and must leave by age 21, the 3 primary schools are special needs schools (two on St. Vincent and one on the next largest island called Bequia) where deaf students are mixed with students of multiple disabilities, deaf students may have a separate classroom in the special needs schools.

### **Religion**

Christian

20-25

Primary Religion

Christian

Comments

The sign language is reported to vary slightly among these three main religious groups active in the deaf community of St. Vincent.

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### Status of Christianity

#### Church Growth

Total Believers	Up to 15%
Pastors	0
Lay Leaders	1
Churches	3
Bible Schools	0
Comments	The Baptist church in Kingstown, the capital, has a deaf group of 15-20 members. The service is interpreted, but they have a weekly meeting led by a deaf leader on Thursdays. A Seventh-Day Adventist and Jehovah's Witness church in Kingstown were also said to have interpreted services but very few deaf attendees.

#### History of Christianity in Group

Significant Events	The deaf believers at the Baptist church attend an annual deaf camp with other deaf people from various Caribbean countries, the camp is usually held in Jamaica
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#### Scripture/Literature/Media

Translation Status	Possible need
Available Scripture	Video NT Bible materials in ASL from Deaf Missions, Simplified English Bible
Available Forms	Video, written Simplified English Bible
Translation/Scripture Use	Unknown
Hindrances to Scripture Distribution	It is difficult for most deaf people to understand written English, so access to the Bible and educational materials is limited. They may be able to use ASL materials, but community testing for acceptability and understanding has not been done.
Uncertain Need Explained	It is unknown if the available ASL video materials will be acceptable and understandable by the deaf community in St. Vincent – community testing is needed
Other Literature/Video Materials	An ASL video sermon series was sent to the Baptist church deaf group – accept ability and understandability is also unknown

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### Missions/Churches Working

#### Among Group

Organization #1	Kingstown Baptist Church
Main Ministry	Evangelism, church planting
Adherents	15
Number of Congregations	1
Use of Local Language	They use a variety of ASL – said to be slightly different from other religious denominations
Total expatriate missionaries	0
Total national missionaries	5+ interpreters/hearing people at church involved in deaf ministry
Total local workers	1
Comments	Have connections with Caribbean Christian Centre for the Deaf (CCCD)
Organization #2	Seventh-Day Adventist
Main Ministry	Evangelism, church planting
Adherents	A few deaf people
Number of Congregations	1
Use of Local Language	They use a variety of ASL – said to be slightly different from other religious denominations
Organization #3	Jehovah's Witness
Main Ministry	Evangelism, church planting
Adherents	A few deaf people
Number of Congregations	1
Use of Local Language	They use a variety of ASL – said to be slightly different from other religious denominations

### Responsiveness

Attitude to Christianity	Somewhat receptive
Attitude to Religious Change	Indifferent
Approaches to Reach Group	Work together with deaf group at Kingstown Baptist Church
Current Needs	Deaf leadership training