

Executive Summary from ADULT LITERACY in New York

Results of the
National Adult Literacy Survey

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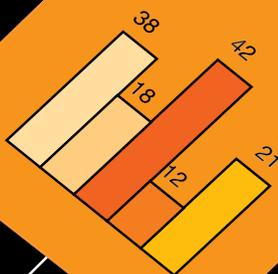


Table B3.14: Reasons for high school noncompletion among states born in the United States and foreignborn

Reason	Percent	Number	Percent	Number
Did not graduate	24	100	22	100
Did not attend	12	50	12	50
Did not finish	12	50	12	50
Did not enroll	12	50	12	50
Did not attend	12	50	12	50
Did not finish	12	50	12	50
Did not enroll	12	50	12	50

Table B3.15: Reasons for high school noncompletion by age of arrival in the United States

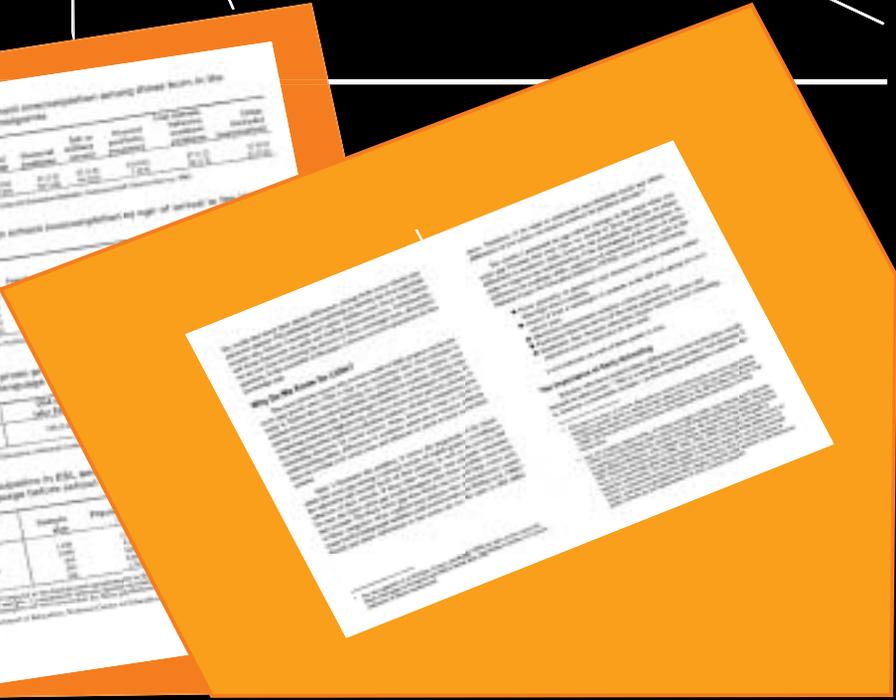
Reason	Percent	Number	Percent	Number
Did not graduate	24	100	22	100
Did not attend	12	50	12	50
Did not finish	12	50	12	50
Did not enroll	12	50	12	50
Did not attend	12	50	12	50
Did not finish	12	50	12	50
Did not enroll	12	50	12	50

Table B3.16: Percentage of high school noncompletion among states born in the United States and foreignborn

Reason	Percent	Number	Percent	Number
Did not graduate	24	100	22	100
Did not attend	12	50	12	50
Did not finish	12	50	12	50
Did not enroll	12	50	12	50
Did not attend	12	50	12	50
Did not finish	12	50	12	50
Did not enroll	12	50	12	50

Table B3.17: Participation in ESL and language training courses

Reason	Percent	Number	Percent	Number
Did not graduate	24	100	22	100
Did not attend	12	50	12	50
Did not finish	12	50	12	50
Did not enroll	12	50	12	50
Did not attend	12	50	12	50
Did not finish	12	50	12	50
Did not enroll	12	50	12	50



 Educational Testing Service

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Adult Literacy in New York

This executive summary presents a portrait of adult literacy in New York based on the results of the State Adult Literacy Survey, an important research project in which 12 states assessed the literacy skills of their adult populations. The project, conducted in 1992, is a component of the National Adult Literacy Survey, a large-scale assessment funded by the U.S. Department of Education and administered by Educational Testing Service.

Many past studies of adult literacy have tried to count the number of “illiterates” in this nation, thereby treating literacy as a condition that individuals either do or do not have. We believe that such efforts are inherently arbitrary and misleading. They are also potentially damaging, in that they fail to acknowledge both the complexity of the literacy problem and the range of solutions needed to address it.

The New York State Adult Literacy Survey, like the National Adult Literacy Survey of which it is a part, is based on a different definition of literacy and therefore follows a different approach to measuring it. The aim of this survey is to characterize adults’ literacy skills in English based on their performance on diverse tasks that reflect the types of materials and demands they encounter in their daily lives.

To gather information on the literacy skills of adults in New York, trained staff interviewed selected individuals age 16 and older during the first eight months of 1992. These participants were randomly chosen to represent the adult population in the state as a whole. In total, some 1,688 adults in New York were surveyed, representing approximately 14 million adults statewide.

Each survey participant was asked to spend approximately an hour responding to a series of varied literacy tasks as well as questions about his or her demographic characteristics, educational background, employment, income, reading practices, and other areas related to literacy. Based on their responses to the survey tasks, adults received proficiency scores along three scales, each ranging from 0 to 500. The score points along these scales reflect varying degrees of skill in prose, document, and quantitative literacy. To provide a way to examine the distribution of performance within various subpopulations of interest, five levels of proficiency were defined along each scale: Level 1 (0 to 225), Level 2 (226 to 275), Level 3 (276 to 325), Level 4 (326 to 375), and Level 5 (376 to 500).

The full report offers a comprehensive look at the results of the New York survey. It describes the average literacy proficiencies and the levels of proficiency demonstrated by adults in this state, compared with individuals in the region and nation, and explores connections between literacy and an array of variables. Some of the major findings are highlighted in the pages that follow.

Profiles of Adult Literacy in New York

- Twenty-five to 28 percent of the adults in New York demonstrated skills in the lowest level of prose, document, and quantitative proficiencies (Level 1). Though all adults in this level displayed limited skills, their characteristics are diverse. Many adults in this level were successful in performing simple, routine tasks involving brief and uncomplicated texts and documents. For example, they were able to total the entries on a deposit slip, locate the time or place of a meeting on a form, and identify a piece of specific information in a brief news article. Others did not perform these types of tasks successfully, however, and some had such limited skills or such limited facility in English that they were unable to respond to much of the survey.
- The composition of the Level 1 population differs in some important respects from the state population as a whole. For example, 50 percent of the New York residents who performed in Level 1 on the prose literacy scale were foreign-born. Almost two-thirds (63 percent) had not attained a high school diploma or a General Educational Development (GED) certificate. Twenty-nine percent were age 65 or older, and 17 percent have physical or mental conditions that keep them from participating fully in work, school, housework, or other activities.

- Twenty-six to 29 percent of the New York respondents performed in the next higher level of proficiency (Level 2) on each literacy scale. While their skills were more varied than those of individuals in Level 1, their repertoires were still quite limited. They were generally able to locate information in text, to make low-level inferences using printed materials, and to integrate easily identifiable pieces of information. Further, they demonstrated the ability to perform quantitative tasks that involve a single operation where the numbers are either stated or can be easily found in text. For example, adults in this level were able to calculate the total cost of a purchase or determine the difference in price between two items. They could also locate a particular intersection on a street map and enter background information on a simple form.
- Individuals in Levels 1 and 2 were sometimes, but not consistently, able to respond correctly to the more challenging literacy tasks in the assessment—those requiring higher-level reading and problem-solving skills. In particular, they appeared to have considerable difficulty with tasks that required them to integrate or synthesize information from complex or lengthy texts or to perform quantitative tasks that involved two or more sequential operations and in which the individual had to set up the problem.
- Twenty-eight to 30 percent of the survey participants in New York performed in Level 3 on each literacy scale. Respondents with skills in this level on the prose and document scales integrated information from relatively long or dense text or from documents. Those in Level 3 on the quantitative scale demonstrated an ability to determine the appropriate arithmetic operation based on information contained in the directive, and to identify the quantities needed to perform that operation.
- Thirteen to 15 percent of the respondents in New York scored in the fourth level of prose, document, and quantitative literacy, while 3 to 5 percent reached the highest level (Level 5). These adults consistently demonstrated the ability to perform the most challenging tasks in this assessment, many of which involved long and complex documents and text passages.
- The average prose, document, and quantitative proficiencies of adults in New York were significantly lower than those of adults in the Northeast and nationwide. In all three populations — the state, region, and nation—average scores were in the Level 2 range (226 to 275).
- Older adults were more likely than middle-aged and younger adults to demonstrate limited literacy skills. For example, the average proficiencies of New York adults age 65 and older were 48 to 76 points below those of adults age 35 to 44.
- The percentages of White, African American, and Latino adults in New York who were born in the United States were smaller than the percentages in the nation. For example, 76 percent of the African American adults in New York were native-born, compared with 95 percent nationwide. Thirty-eight percent of the Latino adults in New York were born in this country, compared with 52 percent of Latino adults nationwide. Even among White adults, the percentage of native-born individuals is smaller in New York than in the nation (90 percent compared with 96 percent).
- New York residents who were born in the United States performed far better in the assessment, on average, than did foreign-born individuals. Across the literacy scales, approximately half (52 to 54 percent) of the foreign-born residents performed in Level 1, compared with 17 to 20 percent of native-born residents. Foreign-born adults who have lived in this country for more than a decade outperformed individuals who have lived here for fewer years. The literacy skills of immigrants who have lived in the United States for six to 10 years and of those who have lived here for one to five years were similar, however.
- African American and Latino adults were more likely than White adults to perform in the two lowest literacy levels and less likely to attain the two highest levels. Across the three literacy scales, 14 to 17 percent of White New York residents performed in the Level 1, compared with 32 to 41 percent

of African American respondents and 59 to 60 percent of Latino respondents. White and Latino adults who were born in this country had significantly higher proficiencies than their counterparts born abroad. There were no significant differences in performance, however, between native-born and foreign-born African American adults.

- More than three-quarters of the New York residents said they had lived in the state for 16 or more years, and these adults tended to demonstrate better literacy skills than residents who had lived in the state for fewer years.
- New York residents who reported having physical or mental conditions that keep them from participating fully in work or other activities were more likely than adults in the state population as a whole to perform in the lowest levels on each literacy scale and less likely to reach the highest levels.
- Among New York residents, the average prose and document scores of men and women were equivalent (264 and 261, respectively, on the prose scale, and 260 and 253, respectively, on the document scale). On the quantitative scale, however, men had higher average scores (267) than women (249).

Education and Training

- New York residents with relatively few years of education were more likely to perform in the lower literacy levels than those who had completed high school or some postsecondary education. Stated another way, the difference in average prose scores between adults who had completed no more than eight years of education and those who had finished at least some graduate work is 171 points. This translates to a gap of more than three proficiency levels—a very large difference in the difficulty and complexity of skills and strategies.
- Differences in the average years of schooling completed by adults in various subpopulations tend to parallel the observed differences in literacy proficiencies. Older adults in New York had completed less schooling, on average, than younger adults (about 10 years for those age 65 and older, compared with 12 years for those age 55 to 64, and 13 years for those age 19 to 54). White adults had completed more schooling, on average (13.1 years), than African American (11.8 years) and Latino adults (9.7 years). Adults born in the United States had finished more years of schooling (12.9 years, on average) in this country than those born abroad (8.7 years).
- Foreign-born adults in New York who have lived in the United States for a decade or less were more likely than longer-term residents to have completed some education before coming to this country.
- On each literacy scale, the average scores of school dropouts in New York who had studied for a GED or high school equivalency diploma were 61 to 74 points higher than those of dropouts who had not participated in such a program. GED recipients in the state performed as well as their counterparts nationwide, on average. The majority of GED program participants in New York were between the ages of 25 and 54.
- New York residents who were enrolled in school or college at the time of the survey had higher literacy proficiencies, on average, than adults who were not enrolled in an academic program. Across the nation, 38 percent of current enrollees stated that their goal was a four-year college degree.
- Nine percent of the survey respondents in this state said they were currently or previously enrolled in a course to improve their basic skills. The average literacy scores of individuals who said they had enrolled in a basic skills program were not significantly different from those of individuals who had not enrolled in such a program.
- Twenty-four percent of the New York respondents indicated that they needed adult education programs that led to a credential, certificate or license. Slightly smaller percentages indicated that

programs for self-enrichment or programs that combined basic skill and job training were needed. Adults who said they needed courses for self-enrichment had significantly higher average proficiencies than adults who said they needed other types of courses, and adults who said they needed courses that combined basic skills and job training had substantially lower proficiencies than any other group except those who needed programs that teach parenting skills.

- Adults who reported that a lack of child care had interfered with their participation in an adult literacy or job training program demonstrated significantly lower average proficiencies on the prose, document, and quantitative scales than adults who reported that they were not kept from participating for this reason. Adults who reported that a lack of convenient transportation had been a deterrent to their program participation had lower average proficiencies than adults who reported that this had not been a factor.

Employment, Economic Status, and Civic Responsibility

- Employed adults were less likely than adults who were unemployed or out of the labor force to perform in the lowest level on each literacy scale. Across the scales, 14 to 17 percent of the employed adults in New York performed in Level 1, compared with 29 to 46 percent of those who were unemployed or out of the labor force. Conversely, employed adults were much more likely to reach the highest literacy levels. On the prose scale, for example, 20 percent of the full-time workers in New York attained Level 4, and 4 percent reached Level 5. The percentages of adults who were unemployed or out of the labor force who performed in these levels were far smaller (8 percent for each group).
- New York residents who reported being in professional, technical, or managerial positions in their current or most recent jobs had higher average literacy scores than those in other types of occupations. The average quantitative score of this group was 315, for example, while that of adults in sales or clerical positions was 278, that of adults in craft or service positions was 252, and that of adults in labor, assembly, fishing, or farming positions was 244.
- On each literacy scale, adults who performed in the higher levels had worked more weeks in the past year, on average, than individuals in the lower levels. In New York, the Northeast, and the nation, adults who performed in the three highest literacy levels reported working an average of 33 to 47 weeks in the past year, compared with only 16 to 19 weeks for individuals who scored in Level 1.
- Across the scales, New York adults with proficiencies in Level 1 reported median weekly earnings of \$263 to \$281. In contrast, those in Level 3 earned about \$400, while those in Level 5 earned substantially more; adults who scored in the highest prose level, for example, reported median earnings of \$679. Similarly, the median annual household income of adults in the highest proficiency levels was far higher than that of adults in the lowest levels.
- From 50 to 55 percent of New York residents designated as either poor or near poor demonstrated skills in Level 1 on the literacy scales, compared with 16 to 17 percent of those classified as not poor. As a result, the average proficiencies of poor or near poor adults are considerably lower (68 to 79 points) than the scores of adults who were not poor.
- Among New York residents, voting appears to be related to literacy proficiency. On all three scales, the average literacy scores of state residents who said they had voted in a recent state or national election were significantly higher than those of nonvoters.

Language Use and Literacy Practices

- Almost three-quarters of the New York residents (73 percent) reported speaking only English before beginning school, compared to 85 percent of the respondents nationwide. These individuals displayed higher average proficiencies than adults who reported having spoken a language other than

English. Additionally, adults who learned another language as children but now usually speak English performed far better than those who usually speak that other language.

- Most survey respondents in New York said they understand (93 percent) and speak (92 percent) English well or very well; slightly smaller proportions described themselves as reading (89 percent) and writing (88 percent) it well or very well. In each dimension of literacy, these adults had average scores that were considerably higher (124 to 164 points) than the scores of those who said they do not speak, understand, read, or write English well.
- New York residents who said they learned a language other than English before starting school were more likely to describe themselves as understanding (90 percent) and speaking (88 percent) it well or very well than as reading (76 percent) or writing (69 percent) it well or very well. Those who said they do not read or write their other language well had higher average prose proficiencies than respondents who said they do.
- Approximately one-third of the New York residents (35 percent) who said they had learned another language before starting school said they had enrolled in a class to learn to read and write or to speak and understand English as a second language. Adults who had completed these courses had average literacy scores that were 51 to 68 points higher than those of adults who did not complete the courses.
- Only 8 percent of New York respondents said they did not receive early home support for literacy and learning, such as having a variety of books, newspapers, magazines, and other printed materials in the home, being read to, or receiving help with schoolwork. The average literacy scores of these adults were about 80 points lower than those of adults who reported any of these types of early support.
- The vast majority of survey respondents in New York (96 percent) reported getting some or a lot of information about current events, public affairs, or the government from nonprint media—that is, from television or radio. A smaller percentage (85 percent) said they get much of their information from print media, such as newspapers or magazines. Those who get some or a lot of information from print media earned higher average scores in the assessment than those who do not.
- About half the adults in the state (52 percent) said they read a newspaper every day, while another 35 percent said they do so at least once a week. Nine percent reported never reading a newspaper, and their average prose, document, and quantitative proficiencies were far lower than those of regular newspaper readers.
- Twenty-three percent of the New York respondents said they do not read any magazines in English on a regular basis. Their average literacy scores were considerably lower than those of adults who read at least one magazine regularly. Approximately 25 percent of the adults in New York said they had not read any books in English in the past six months, and their scores were considerably lower, on average, than the scores of those who had read at least one.
- Thirty-seven percent of the adults in New York reported that they never use a library, and another 27 percent said they do so only once or twice a year. In general, individuals who reported frequent use of the library outperformed less frequent users.
- Virtually all New York residents (98 percent) said they watch some television every day, although 18 percent said they spend no more than an hour on this activity. Nearly one-third of the state's residents reported watching four or more hours of television each day. Adults who watch the most television demonstrated far lower proficiencies in the assessment, on average, than individuals who watch relatively little television.
- There are very large (70 to 111 point) differences in prose proficiency between New York residents who read and write prose every day, either for their personal use or for their jobs, and those who say

they never read or write these materials. Similarly, the average document proficiencies of individuals who use documents at least a few times a week are far higher than the scores of individuals who do not use these materials often. Finally, in the dimension of quantitative literacy, adults who said they frequently use mathematics outperformed those who rarely or never do so.

Reflections on the Results

In reflecting on the results of this study, many readers will undoubtedly seek an answer to a fundamental question: Are the outcomes satisfactory? That is, are the distributions of prose, document, and quantitative proficiency observed in this survey adequate to ensure individual opportunities for all adults, to increase worker productivity, or to strengthen America's competitiveness around the world?

Because it is impossible to say precisely what literacy skills are essential for individuals to succeed in this or any other society, the results of the State and National Adult Literacy Surveys provide no firm answers to such questions. As the authors examined the survey data and deliberated on the results with members of the advisory committees, however, several observations and concerns emerged.

Perhaps the most salient finding of this study is that such large percentages of adults performed in the lowest levels (Levels 1 and 2) of prose, document, and quantitative literacy. In and of itself, this may not indicate a serious problem. After all, the majority of adults who demonstrated limited skills described themselves as reading or writing English well, and relatively few said they get a lot of assistance from others in performing everyday literacy tasks. Perhaps these individuals are able to meet most of the literacy demands they encounter currently at work, at home, and in their communities.

Yet, some argue that lower literacy skills mean a lower quality of life and more limited employment opportunities. As noted in a recent report from the American Society for Training and Development, "The association between skills and opportunity for individual Americans is powerful and growing.... Individuals with poor skills do not have much to bargain with; they are condemned to low earnings and limited choices."¹

The data from this survey appear to support such views. On each of the literacy scales, adults who were unemployed or out of the labor force and who earned low wages tended to demonstrate far more limited skills than those who were employed and who earned high wages. Adults who rarely or never read displayed lower average proficiencies than those who were at least occasional readers. Moreover, the average literacy scores of individuals who received food stamps and who were poor or near poor were much lower than those of their more affluent peers.

Literacy is not the only factor that contributes to how we live our lives, however. Some adults who were out of work or who earned low wages performed relatively well in the assessment, while some full-time workers or adults who earned high wages did relatively poorly. Thus, having advanced literacy skills is not necessarily associated with individual opportunities.

Still, literacy can be thought of as a currency in this society. Just as adults with little money have difficulty meeting their basic needs, those with limited literacy skills are likely to find it more challenging to pursue their goals—whether these involve job advancement, consumer decision making, citizenship, or other aspects of their lives. Even if adults who performed in the lowest literacy levels are not experiencing difficulties at present, they may be at risk as the nation's economy and social fabric continue to change.

Beyond these personal consequences, what implications are there for society when so many individuals display limited skills? The answer to this question is elusive. Still, it seems apparent that a nation in which large numbers of citizens display limited literacy skills has fewer resources with which to meet its goals and objectives, whether these are social, political, civic, or economic.

If large percentages of adults had to do little more than be able to sign their name on a form or locate a single fact in a newspaper or table, then the levels of literacy seen in this survey might not warrant concern. We live in a nation, however, where both the volume and variety of written information are

¹A.J. Carnevale and L.J. Gainer. (1989). *The Learning Enterprise*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration.

growing and where increasing numbers of citizens are expected to be able to read, understand, and use these materials.

Historians remind us that during the last 200 years, our nation's literacy skills have increased dramatically in response to new requirements and expanded opportunities for social and economic growth. Today we are a better educated and more literate society than at any time in our history.² Yet, there have also been periods of imbalance—times when demands seemed to surpass levels of attainment.

In recent years, our society has grown more technologically advanced and the roles of formal institutions have expanded. As this has occurred, many have argued that there is a greater need for all individuals to become more literate and for a larger proportion to develop advanced skills.³ Growing numbers of individuals are expected to be able to attend to multiple features of information in lengthy and sometimes complex displays, to compare and contrast information, to integrate information from various parts of a text or document, to generate ideas and information based on what they read, and to apply arithmetic operations sequentially to solve a problem.

The results from this and other surveys, however, indicate that many adults do not demonstrate these levels of proficiency. Further, the continuing process of demographic, social, and economic change within this country could lead to a more divided society along both racial and socioeconomic lines.

Already there is evidence of a widening division. According to the report *America's Choice: High Skills or Low Wages!* over the past 15 years the gap in earnings between professionals and clerical workers has grown from 47 to 86 percent while the gap between white collar workers and skilled tradespeople has risen from 2 to 37 percent. At the same time, earnings for college educated males 24 to 34 years of age have increased by 10 percent while earnings for those with high school diplomas have declined by 9 percent. Moreover, the poverty rate for African American families is nearly three times that for White families.⁴ One child in five is born into poverty, and for minority populations, this rate approaches one in two.

In 1990, President Bush and the nation's governors, including Governor Clinton, adopted the goal that all of America's adults be literate by the year 2000. The responsibility for meeting this objective must, in the end, be shared among individuals, groups, and organizations throughout our society. Programs that serve adult learners cannot be expected to solve the literacy problem alone, and neither can the schools. Other institutions—ranging from the largest and most complex government agency, to large and small businesses, to the family—all have a role to play in ensuring that adults who need or wish to improve their literacy skills have the opportunity to do so. It is also important that individuals themselves come to realize the value of literacy in their lives and to recognize the benefits associated with having better skills. Only then will more adults in this nation develop the literacy resources they need to function in society, to achieve their goals, and to develop their knowledge and potential.

²L.C. Stedman and C.F. Kaestle. (1991). "Literacy and Reading Performance in the United States from 1880 to the Present," in C.F. Kaestle et al., *Literacy in the United States: Readers and Reading Since 1880*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. T. Snyder (ed.). (1993). *120 Years of American Education: A Statistical Portrait*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

³U.S. Department of Labor. (1992, April). *Learning a Living: A Blueprint for High Performance*. Washington, DC: The Secretary A Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS). R.L. Venezky, C.F. Kaestle, and A. Sum. (1987, January). *The Subtle Danger: Reflections on the Literacy Abilities of America's Young Adults*. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service.

⁴National Center on Education and the Economy. (1990, June). *America's Choice: High Skills or Low Wages! The Report of The Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce*. p. 20.