

Executive Summary from ADULT LITERACY in New Jersey

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	104	22	104
Did not attend	14	59	14	68
Did not finish	12	51	12	58
Did not enroll	10	42	10	48
Other	38	156	42	202
Total	100	432	100	432

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

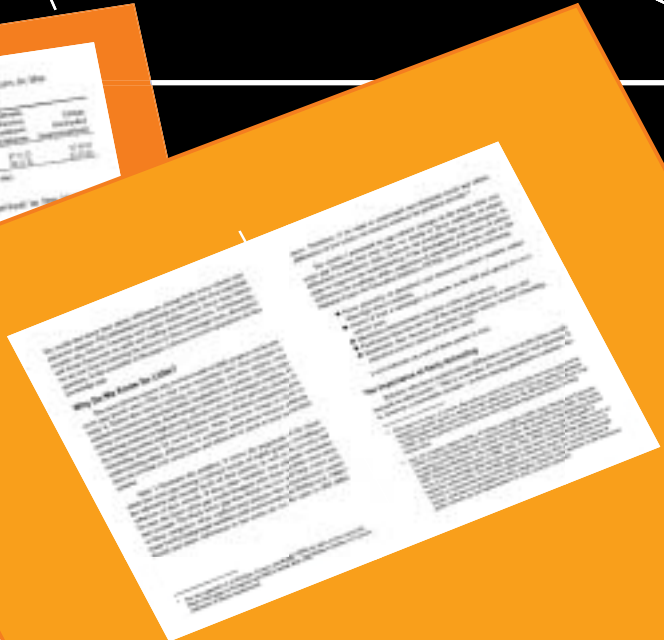
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Table B3.16: Percentage of high school noncompletion by language spoken at home

Language	Percent	Number
English	24	104
Spanish	14	59
Other	12	51
Total	100	432

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

Participant	Percent	Number
Did not participate	76	328
Participated	24	104
Total	100	432



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Adult Literacy in New Jersey

This executive summary presents a portrait of adult literacy in New Jersey 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 Jersey 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 Jersey, 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 1,300 adults in New Jersey were surveyed, representing approximately 6.1 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 Jersey 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 Jersey

- Twenty to 23 percent of the adults in New Jersey 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 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, 34 percent of the New Jersey residents who performed in Level 1 on the prose literacy scale were foreign-born. More than half (52 percent) had not attained a high school diploma or GED. Twenty to 28 percent were age 65 or older, and 19 to 21 percent have physical or mental conditions that keep them from participating fully in work, school, housework, or other activities.

- Twenty-three to 28 percent of the New Jersey 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 in which the individual had to set up the problem and then perform two or more sequential operations.
- Thirty to 32 percent of the survey participants in New Jersey 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.
- Nineteen to 23 percent of the respondents in New Jersey scored in the two highest levels of prose, document, and quantitative literacy (Levels 4 and 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 Jersey were approximately the same as those of adults in the Northeast and nationwide. Although adults living in New Jersey appear to score higher, on average, than adults living in the Northeast (3 to 6 points), the only statistically significant difference was on the quantitative scale. In all three populations—the state, region, and nation—average scores (264 to 273) were in the high end of the Level 2 range.
- Older adults were more likely than middle-aged and younger adults to demonstrate limited literacy skills. For example, New Jersey adults age 55 to 64 and those age 65 and older were more likely than younger individuals to perform in the two lowest literacy levels. Older adults (those age 65 and older) in New Jersey outperformed their same-age counterparts in the region and nation.
- New Jersey 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, about half (50 to 54 percent) of the foreign-born residents performed in Level 1, compared with 15 to 19 percent of the native-born adults.
- African American and Latino adults were more likely than White adults to perform in the lowest two literacy levels and less likely to attain the two highest levels. Across the three literacy scales, 10 to 13 percent of White New Jersey residents performed in the lowest literacy level, compared with 50 to 59 percent of African American respondents and 54 to 59 percent of Latino respondents. In New Jersey, Latino adults born in this country had significantly higher proficiencies than those born in another country.

- New Jersey residents who reported having physical or mental conditions that keep them from participating fully in work or other activities were more likely than adults without such conditions to perform in the lowest levels on each literacy scale and were less likely to reach the highest levels.
- Among New Jersey residents, men had significantly higher average proficiencies than women on each of the three literacy scales. The gap in average scores between the two groups increases from 11 points on the prose scale to 15 points on the document scale and 27 points on the quantitative scale.

Education and Training

- Average literacy proficiencies rise steadily across the entire range of educational levels. While the average scores of New Jersey residents who did not complete high school are in the Level 1 to Level 2 range, the average scores of those who received a diploma are in the high end of the Level 2 range, and of those who earned a college degree, in the Level 3 range.
- Differences in the average years of schooling completed by adults in various subpopulations tend to parallel the observed differences in literacy proficiencies. Years of schooling generally increase from the youngest age group to the middle age groups, and then to decline among older adults. White adults had completed more schooling, on average (13.2 years), than African American (11.5 years) and Latino adults (11.1 years). Adults born in the United States had finished more years of schooling (13 years, on average) than those born abroad (11.1 years).
- Sixty-four percent of the foreign-born adults in New Jersey reported having lived in the United States for more than a decade. Twenty-nine percent of these adults said they had received a high school education before coming to this country, and 12 percent reported having completed a college degree.
- In the state, region, and nation alike, school dropouts who had not studied for a GED or high school equivalency scored in the Level 1 range. Those who had participated in such a program scored approximately 50 points higher, in the Level 2 range. The average proficiencies of school dropouts in New Jersey who had studied for a GED or high school equivalency diploma were significantly higher than those of dropouts who had participated in such a program but had not completed it. Approximately three-quarters of the GED program participants in New Jersey were age 25 or older.
- New Jersey 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. Nationwide, 38 percent of the enrollees stated that their goal was a four-year college degree.
- Less than 10 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 proficiencies of individuals who had enrolled in such a course were comparable to those of adults who had not.
- When respondents were asked to indicate the best location for taking a course or training program, the sites most often selected were a local community college (30 percent) and a local public school (31 percent). More than one-third (36 percent) of the adults in New Jersey said that the type of program needed would lead to a credential, certification, or license. Thirty-eight percent said that a lack of time or interest would be the reason most likely to keep them from enrolling.

- Half the employed adults in New Jersey reported needing training in the use of computers in order to be more productive in their jobs. Smaller percentages reported needing training in reading (11 percent), arithmetic (9 percent), and other areas. In each dimension of literacy assessed, individuals who said they needed training in reading and arithmetic demonstrated far lower proficiencies, on average, than those who said they needed training in other areas.

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 levels on each literacy scale and more likely to attain the highest levels. On the document scale, for example, 27 percent of the full-time workers in New Jersey attained Levels 4 and 5, compared with 12 percent of the unemployed adults and 8 percent of those out of the labor force.
- New Jersey residents who reported being in professional, technical, or managerial positions in their current or most recent jobs tended to perform far better in the assessment than adults in other types of occupations. On the quantitative scale, for example, their average score was 324, compared with 285 for individuals in sales or clerical jobs, 256 for adults in craft or service jobs, and 236 for those in labor, assembly, fishing, or farming positions.
- Seven percent of the adults in New Jersey reported having been passed over for a job or promotion for reasons related to their literacy skills. Compared with adults who had not been denied job opportunities for literacy-related reasons, these individuals were much more likely to perform in the lowest literacy level on each scale and were much less likely to reach the two highest levels.
- 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. Among New Jersey residents, those in the three highest literacy levels reported working an average of 33 to 45 weeks in the past year, compared with only 22 to 24 weeks for individuals performing in Level 1.
- Across the scales, New Jersey adults with proficiencies in Level 1 reported median weekly earnings of \$288 to \$307. In contrast, those in Level 3 earned about \$449 to \$468, while those in Level 5 earned between \$745 and \$836. Similarly, the median annual household income reported by adults in the highest proficiency levels was far higher than that of adults in the lowest levels.
- Nine percent of the adults in New Jersey were classified as poor or near poor, based on their income and household size. Across the literacy scales, 50 to 58 percent of these individuals performed in Level 1, compared with 13 to 15 percent of those classified as not poor. As a result, the average literacy scores of poor and near poor adults are considerably lower than those of adults who were not poor.
- Among New Jersey 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 election were significantly higher than those of nonvoters.

Language Use and Literacy Practices

- Eighty percent of New Jersey residents and 85 percent of adults nationwide reported learning only English before beginning school. In the national population, these individuals displayed significantly higher average proficiencies than adults who reported having learned another language either in addition to or instead of English.

- Virtually all survey respondents in New Jersey said they understand (96 percent), speak (95 percent), and read (94 percent) English well or very well; a slightly smaller proportion described themselves as writing English well or very well (91 percent). In each dimension of literacy, the average scores of these adults were considerably (104 to 139 points) higher than those of adults who said they do not speak, understand, read, or write English well.
- New Jersey residents who said they learned a language other than English before starting school were more likely to describe themselves as understanding (91 percent) and speaking (81 percent) that language well or very well than as reading (70 percent) or writing (65 percent) it well or very well. Those who said they do not read or write their other language well tended to demonstrate higher proficiencies in English than did respondents who said they do.
- Approximately one-third of the New Jersey residents who had learned another language as children said they had at some time enrolled in a class to learn to read and write or to speak and understand English as a second language. Individuals who had enrolled in a reading or writing course had lower average prose proficiencies than those who said they had not enrolled in such a course.
- Virtually all survey respondents in New Jersey (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 (86 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 get little or no information from newspapers or magazines.
- About half of the adults in the state (53 percent) said they read a newspaper every day, while another 34 percent said they do so at least once a week. Six percent reported never reading a newspaper, and their average prose, document, and quantitative proficiencies were far lower than those of newspaper readers.
- Eighteen percent of the New Jersey 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 18 percent of the adults in New Jersey 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.
- One-third of the adults in New Jersey reported that they never use a library, and another 32 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 Jersey residents (99 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. Individuals who watch the most television had lower average proficiencies, than those who watch the least.
- There are very large (53 to 90 point) differences in prose proficiency between New Jersey residents who read and write prose frequently, either for their personal use or for their jobs, and those who 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 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

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

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's 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.