



National Coalition For Literacy

Adult Literacy Fact Sheet 2009

What do we know about the state of adult literacy in the United States in 2009? How can communities prioritize resources and create partnerships to address the need? This fact sheet, prepared by the National Coalition for Literacy, provides statistics and resources.

What is adult literacy?

Adult literacy is defined as:

Using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential.ⁱ

What is the rate of literacy in the United States?

The U.S. Department of Education issued an estimate of the literacy skills of adults in the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy. Performance is rated on the following scale: Below Basic, Basic, Intermediate and Proficient. Overall, it is estimated that 93 million U.S. adults have Basic and Below Basic literacy skillsⁱⁱ. This study and others found:

- Adults living in poverty were more likely to have lower average literacy scores than adults with higher incomes.
- Half of the adults who did not have a high school diploma performed in the Below Basic levels.
- Seniors and the elderly over age 65 had the lowest average literacy scores of any age range, with 64 percent performing in the Basic and Below Basic levels.
- The more than one million incarcerated adults in the nation had lower average literacy scores than adults in households on nearly every comparable scale (age, gender, educational attainment level, ethnicity)ⁱⁱⁱ.
- Foreign-born adults who came to the United States at age 19 or older are more likely to have lower English literacy skills than those who came at age 11 or younger. In 2003, 11 million adults in the United States were non-literate in English^{iv} and 22 million adults spoke English less than "very well"^v.

Why is adult literacy important?

Literacy skills impact every aspect of adult life. Adults who are more literate are more likely to:

- Read to their children and discuss school topics;
- Be employed full time and receive a higher income;
- Use the Internet and email;
- Vote, volunteer, and access information about current local and national events.

Unfortunately, only a fraction of low literate adults seek literacy services from community providers^{vi}. Many people with low literacy do not perceive their skills as a problem until a crisis such as the loss of a job, a child's need for school help with school, or a health care emergency makes them aware of their literacy needs.

Make every day Literacy Day! Promote the value and benefits of a more literate population in your community every day and advocate for increased investment in adult and family literacy programs in your area to improve adult literacy.

ⁱ Kutner, M., Greenberg, E., Jin, Y., Boyle, B., Hsu, Y., and Dunleavy, E. (2007). *Literacy in Everyday Life: Results From the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy* (NCES 2007-480). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

ⁱⁱ See fact sheet at http://nces.ed.gov/naal/kf_demographics.asp

ⁱⁱⁱ Greenberg, E., Dunleavy, E., and Kutner, M. (2007). *Literacy Behind Bars: Results From the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy Prison Survey* (NCES 2007-473). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

^{iv} Kutner, M., Greenberg, E., Jin, Y., Boyle, B., Hsu, Y., and Dunleavy, E. (2007). *Literacy in Everyday Life: Results From the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy* (NCES 2007-480). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

^v Highlights of GAO-09-575, a report to the Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Children and Families, Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions, U.S. Senate

^{vi} Kim, K., Hagedorn, M., Williamson, J., & 29. Chapman, C. (2004). *Participation in adult education and lifelong learning: 2000-01*. National Household Education Surveys of 2001. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 483093).