

Global Literacy

By Cynthia L. Cates, Executive Director, Kosciusko Literacy Services

The World Literacy Foundation's report, *The Economic & Social Cost of Illiteracy* estimates the cost of illiteracy to be \$1.19 trillion dollars to the annual global economy. Illiteracy limits lives by creating an array of problems including poverty, unemployment, social exclusion, crime, and poor health. Worldwide, one in five adults (796 million) struggle with illiteracy or functional illiteracy. Functional illiteracy means a person may have basic reading and writing skills (an understanding of simple words) and numeracy knowledge, but cannot apply these skills to accomplish common tasks necessary and to make informed choices. These people cannot read medicine labels, read workplace correspondence, balance a checkbook, or complete a job application. Poor literacy limits the adults' involvement in daily activities such as helping their children with homework to major political activities such as not understanding governmental policies.

If employed, low-literacy adults earn 30-42% less than their literate counterparts earn and often lack the skills for vocational training. Employees with poor literacy are prone to work-related accidents because they cannot read written health and safety regulations, placing themselves and co-workers at risk. These risks lead to higher medical service costs, absenteeism, and loss of productivity.

Literate people have better preventive health measures, including proper hygiene, vaccinations, regular check-ups, and better nutrition. In developed countries, illiterate adults rely on emergency room care as their primary health care provider. By not seeking preventative care, these adults tend to have diseases in advanced stages. In developing countries, a child born to a literate mother is 50% more likely to survive past age five.

Illiteracy is unquestionably linked with crime. Nearly 85% of juvenile delinquents are functionally illiterate. Internationally, 60-80% of prisoners have below basic reading skills. Societies are taxed with the cost of maintaining prisons and administering the court and justice systems.

Literate people are less likely to be on welfare. High school dropouts are more than three times as likely to be on welfare than graduates. Illiterate parents tend to have lower educational expectations for themselves and their children. If parents are not involved in their child's education, students are more likely to have behavior problems, poor grades, and greater absenteeism. These children may repeat grades and eventually dropout perpetuating the cycle of poverty and illiteracy.

The effects of illiteracy in developed countries is very similar to the problems in developing countries. Illiterate people are in a cycle of poverty with limited opportunities for employment. Therefore, they are more likely to have poor health, may turn to crime, and may rely on social welfare and charity. Improving literacy skills is a key first step to overcoming the obstacles that lock people in poverty. The World Literacy Foundation recommends a two-pronged approach: first, encouraging families to place a higher value on education and second, enrolling illiterate adults in literacy programs. Adult literacy programs, especially those including job-searching skills, can be successful in reducing or eliminating dependence on welfare.