

## Literacy in the USA

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The National Literacy Act's definition of **literacy** is "an individual's ability to *read, write, and speak in English*, and to compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to *function* on the job and in society, and to achieve one's goals and to develop one's knowledge and potential." This definition illustrates the importance of literacy's impact on society.

The National Assessment of Adult Literacy Survey breaks literacy down into four levels. People with **Below Basic Skills** can perform only the most *simple* and *concrete* literacy activities. Adults with **Basic Skills** can perform simple and everyday literacy activities. People with **Intermediate Skills** can perform moderately challenging literacy activities, and adults with **Proficient Skills** can perform complex and challenging literacy activities. The survey estimates that 14% of adults in America are Below Basic in their skills, and an additional 29% perform at the Basic Skills level.

ProLiteracy, a national literacy organization, has summarized major impacts of low literacy. The 14% in the Below Basic category translates to 30 million adults who cannot read, write, or do basic math above a third grade level. In addition, over eight million adults have dropped out of school before the eighth grade. During the past 30 years, more than ten million Americans reached the twelfth grade without learning to read at the basic level.

The link between crime and low literacy skills is well documented. In fact, over one and a half million people with the lowest levels of literacy are incarcerated. Literacy helps individuals to understand the law. Whether documentation is from the police, a court, or an attorney, an illiterate person is often unable to understand his rights.

States that have decreased the high school dropout rate have also decreased the incarceration rates, saving money in reduced crime costs.

Political participation is hampered, since the illiterate person cannot read pertinent literature and must rely on verbal information. Without the ability to read opinions in a newspaper or political goals of the parties involved, the illiterate person may not vote or be an uninformed voter.

If the average literacy rates increased by 1%, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) would realize a 1.5% (\$2.3 billion) permanent increase. Single mothers with a high school diploma are 24% less likely to be on welfare than single mothers who are high school dropouts. American employers spend nearly \$126 billion annually on training that includes remedial reading, writing, and performing basic math. Improved education has the potential of saving \$10 billion in public assistance costs including welfare, food stamps, and public housing expenditures.

In fact, if only half of the dropouts from 2008 had graduated, billions would have been realized in additional earnings, spending, and investing (\$8 billion). This additional spending and investing would have created 30,000 new jobs. The chance for employment is reduced by the inability to read and write. Literacy is necessary to complete job applications, read workplace literature, such as important guidelines, procedures, and written warnings regarding hazards. Interacting socially with literate employees is difficult and may result in a negative work experience. Most jobs require applicants to be literate.

Adults with low {financial} literacy are more likely to have problematic credit card behavior. Adults with low health literacy tend to use the emergency room as their primary health care provider and are less likely to seek preventative care, such as flu shots and mammograms. The annual cost of low literacy to the healthcare system is estimated between \$106 billion to \$238 billion. Illiterate people are potentially more prone to illness and disease because they do not understand written warnings, precautionary instructions, or directions from doctors or pharmacists. Illiteracy prevents accurate understanding of administering prescriptions. Printed public announcements regarding important health matters cannot be acted upon due to the inability to read.

Unfortunately, adult illiteracy affects childhood literacy. Literate parents model good reading habits and are able to teach their children to read and write, while illiterate parents cannot. Children of literate parents are more likely to develop literacy skills.

First Book and ProLiteracy report that children of dropouts score lower in vocabulary than children of high school graduates. On average, at age six, children from professional families have a 20,000-word vocabulary and children from welfare families have only a 3,000-word vocabulary. In addition, children from low-income families on average score 27 points below the mean reading levels. The gap between children from low and high-income families on reading comprehension scores is over 40 points. Parents with a high school diploma or equivalency are more likely to help their children with homework. One of the best ways to improve a child's literacy level is to improve the mother's literacy level.

The cycle of poverty and illiteracy needs to be broken. Education is the best defense against poverty and literacy is the foundation of all education. Literacy is the cornerstone of personal and societal freedom and liberty.

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