



Canadian Centre for Justice
Statistics Profile Series



Canadians with Literacy Problems¹

¹ The literacy profile does not include criminal justice information.

This paper is one in a series of ten profiles funded through the federal Policy Research Initiative. The objective of these profiles is to provide data analysis on the experience of various groups as victims and offenders* in the criminal justice system.

The profiles are based on Statistics Canada sources and include a mix of demographic, economic and justice data as well as information specific to each group.

Other profiles in this series include:

- Aboriginal People in Canada
- Canadians with Disabilities
- Canadians with Low Incomes
- Children and Youth in Canada
- Immigrants in Canada
- Religious Groups in Canada
- Seniors in Canada
- Visible Minorities in Canada
- Women in Canada

* Data on offenders is only available for the following: Aboriginal People, Children and Youth, Seniors, and Women.

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Canadians with Literacy Problems

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Canadians with Literacy Problems²

Over one in five with literacy problems

Being able to read is one of the most important coping skills in modern industrial society. Nonetheless, just over one in five of Canadian adults scored at the lowest level³ of the prose scale on the International Adult Literacy Survey conducted in 1994 (see Figure 1). That year, 22% of the population aged 16 and over was able only to perform simple reading tasks such as locating one piece of information in a text. At the same time, 26% scored at the second level, 33% scored at the third level, and only 20% scored at the two highest levels.

Figure 1

Over one in five Canadians at lowest literacy level¹



¹ Tasks at Level 1 require the reader to perform simple reading skills such as locating and matching a piece of information in a text. Those at Level 2 require the reader to locate one or more pieces of information in a text, but several detractors may be present or low-level inferences may be required. Tasks at Level 3 require the reader to search for information that requires low-level inferences or that meets specified conditions. Tasks at Level 4/5 require the reader to perform multi-feature matching or provide responses where the requested information must be identified through text-based references, or to search for information in dense text that contains a number of plausible detractors.

Source: Statistics Canada, International Adult Literacy Survey, 1994.

² This profile provides descriptive socio-demographic characteristics associated with literacy problems. It does not however, account for the possibility that some additional factors, such as age, sex, disability and low income status may also be correlated with literacy problems. For more information on these additional factors, please refer to the other profiles in this series.

³ Tasks at Level 1 require the reader to perform simple reading skills such as locating a single piece of information in a text. Those at Level 2 require the reader to locate one or more pieces of information in a text, but several detractors may be present or low-level inferences may be required. Tasks at Level 3 require the reader to search for information that requires low-level inferences or that meet specified conditions. Tasks at Level 4/5 require the reader to perform in multi-feature matching or provide responses where the requested information must be identified through text-based references, or to search for information in dense text that contains a number of plausible detractors.

Older population most likely with literacy problems

Seniors account for a relatively large share of the population with literacy problems (see Figure 2). In fact, over half of seniors scored at the lowest level on the 1994 international survey. That year, 53% of the population aged 66 and over were able only to perform simple reading tasks such as locating one piece of information in a text, while the figure was 38% among those aged 56-65 and 21% among those aged 46-55. In contrast, just over one in ten people in age ranges under age 46 scored at the lowest level in the survey. Overall, people aged 56 or over made up more than half (54%) of all those with literacy problems.

Men are somewhat more likely than women to have literacy problems. In 1994, 23% of men aged 16 and over scored at the lowest level of the international survey, compared with 20% of their female counterparts. In contrast, 24% of women, versus 16% of

men, scored at the highest levels on the survey.

Many immigrants with literacy problems

Immigrants account for a relatively large share of the Canadian population with literacy problems, as people born outside Canada are twice as likely as those born in Canada to have literacy problems. In 1994, 36% of all immigrants scored at the lowest level of the

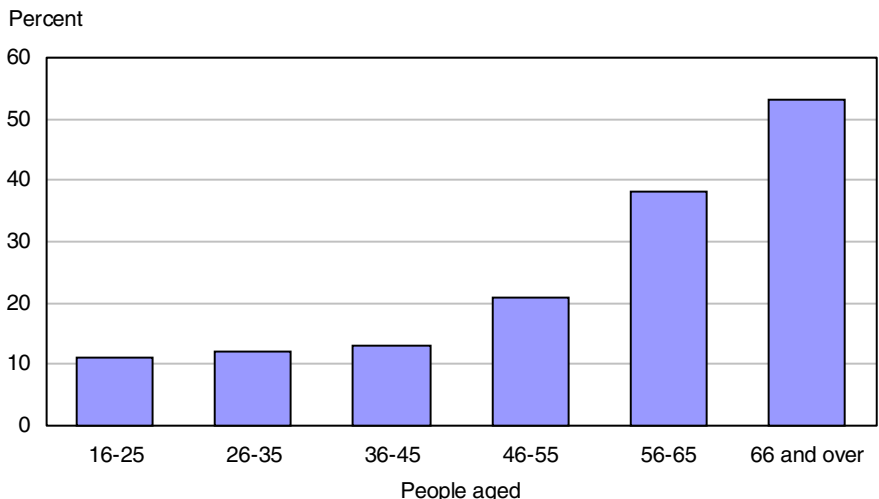
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From the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics: Jodi-Anne Massicotte, David Gullickson, Tina Hotton, Stacie Ogg and Eileen Cook.

Figure 2

Seniors account for large share of the population with literacy problems



Figures should be used with caution because of the small size of the sample.
Source: Statistics Canada, International Adult Literacy Survey, 1994.

international survey, compared with 18% of native-born Canadians. At the same time, however, immigrants were only slightly less likely than those born in Canada to score at the highest level on the survey: 19% versus 22%. The high incidence of literacy problems among immigrants may be due, in part, to problems with language as the survey was conducted in either English or French, while many immigrants have a mother tongue other than one of Canada's official languages.

Literacy problems across the country

People in Quebec and Atlantic Canada are somewhat more likely than those in Ontario or the Western provinces to have literacy problems (see Figure 3). In 1994, 28% of Quebec residents aged 16 and over scored at the lowest level of the international survey, while the figure was 25% in the Atlantic provinces. In contrast, 19% or those living in Ontario, and 18% of westerners, were able only to perform simple reading tasks such as locating one piece of information in a text.

Literacy and educational attainment

Not surprisingly, problems with literacy and low levels of educational attainment (see Box 1) are highly correlated. In 1994, 89% of all people aged 16 and over who had less than a Grade 8 education scored at the lowest level of the international survey, while the figure was 59% among those who

had completed primary school and 25% among those who had attended, but had not completed, high school. In contrast, virtually no university graduates scored at the lowest level of the international survey, as did only 7% of community college graduates and 12% of those who had completed high school.

Literacy and employment

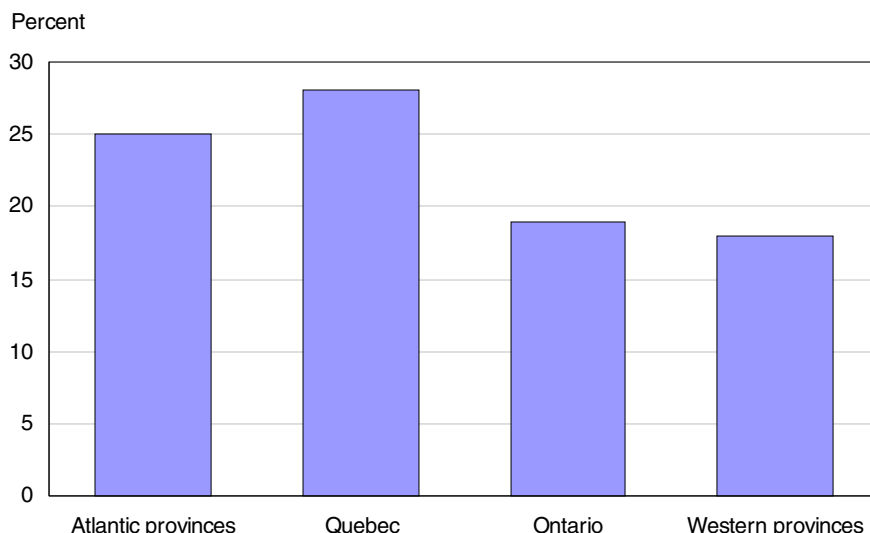
There is a strong relationship between literacy skills and employment opportunities. Of labour force participants aged 16 and over in 1994, those who scored at the lowest level of the international survey had an unemployment rate of 26%, whereas the figure was 10% among both those at the second and third levels and just 4% among those at the highest levels.

Still, over one in ten employed Canadians has serious literacy limitations. In 1994, 12% of all people aged 16 and over with jobs scored at the lowest level of the international survey.

Literacy problems are most prevalent among workers employed in blue-collar jobs. In 1994, 30% of craft workers, 28% of machine operators, and 18% of

Figure 3

People in Quebec and Atlantic Canada more likely to have literacy problems



Source: Statistics Canada, International Adult Literacy Survey, 1994.

**Box 1:
Low educational attainment in Canada**

While the incidence of literacy problems among Canadians is related to the likelihood of having low educational attainment, the proportion of the population with little formal schooling is declining. In 1996, 2.7 million Canadians aged 15 and over, 12% of the total population, had less than a Grade 9 education (see Figure 4). This is down from 21% in 1981 and 44% in 1961. As well, as recently as 1951, over half the Canadian population had less than a Grade 9 education.

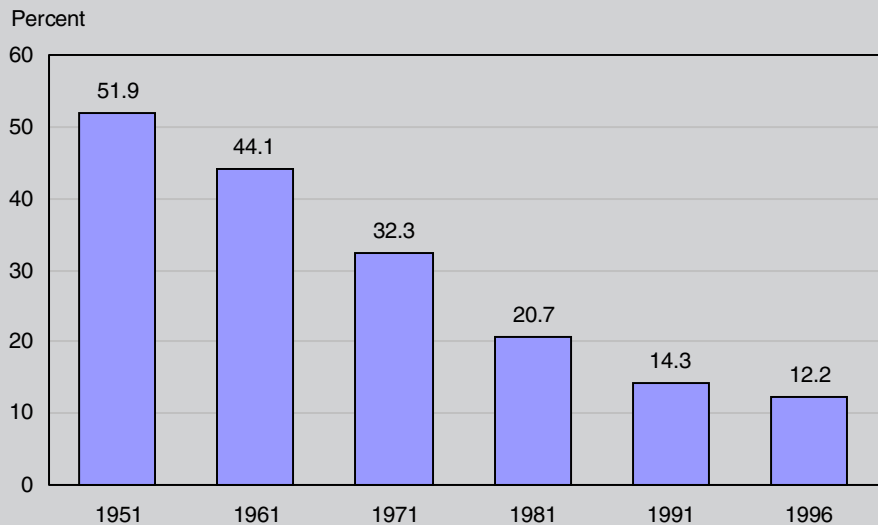
The share of the population with very low levels of education should continue to fall in the future, as people in older age ranges account for a particularly large share of this population. In 1996, 37% of all seniors in Canada had less than a Grade 9 education, compared with just 4% of those aged 25-44 and only 2% of 20-24-year-olds.

The share of the population with very low levels of education varies considerably across the country. In 1996, Quebec, where 18% of the population aged 15 and over had less than a Grade 9 education, along with Newfoundland and New Brunswick, where the figures were 17% and 16%, respectively, had particularly high rates of low educational attainment (see Figure 5). On the other hand, less than 8% of people in both British Columbia and Alberta had less than a Grade 9 education, while the figure was 10% in Ontario.

The territories are characterized by a relatively large population with low levels of educational attainment. In 1996, 15% of all residents of the Yukon, Nunavut and the Northwest Territories had not gone beyond Grade 8.

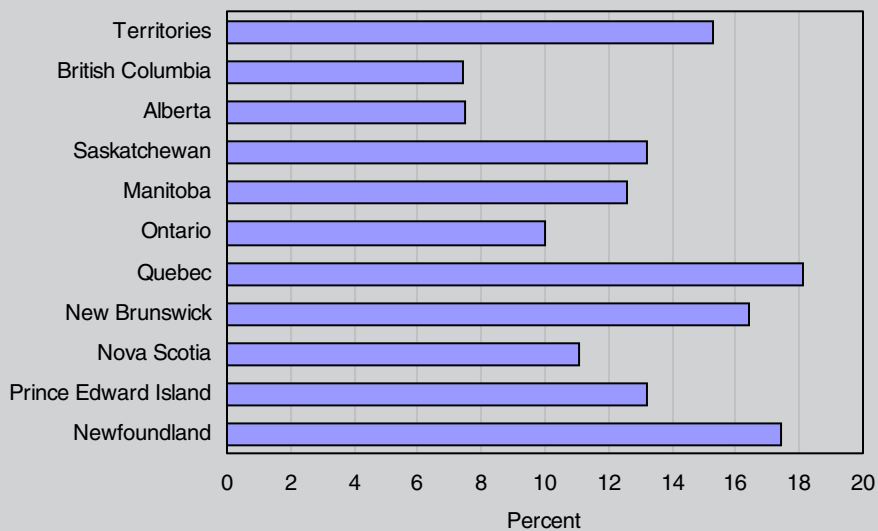
The immigrant and Aboriginal populations are also characterized by relatively large populations with low levels of educational attainment. In 1996, 18% of all immigrants to Canada had less than a Grade 9 education, compared with 12% of those born in Canada. At the same time, almost one in four Aboriginal people aged 15 and over had not attended high school.

Figure 4
Proportion of population with less than a Grade 9 education declining



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Canada.

Figure 5
Population with less than grade 9 education varies across the country, 1996



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Canada.

agriculture workers scored at the lowest level of the international survey, while the figure was 11% among the sales and service workforce. In contrast, much smaller percentages of those employed as professionals, technicians, managers or administrators, or clerical staff had similar literacy difficulties.

There is also a relationship between literacy levels and income. In 1994, 26% of the population aged 16 and over who

scored at the lowest level of the international survey had an income of under \$8,000, compared with 23% of those at both the second and third levels and 18% of those at the highest levels.

Persons at the lowest literacy level are much less likely than their counterparts with greater literacy skills to have high incomes. In 1994, almost half of those who scored at the highest levels of the international survey had incomes over \$27,000, compared with less

than 20% of those who scored at the lowest level on the literacy survey.

Those with the lowest literacy skills also tend to be more dependent on government transfer payments. In 1994, 37% of social assistance recipients aged 16-65 and 19% of unemployment insurance beneficiaries scored at the lowest level of the international survey, whereas this was the case for 14% of non-recipients of either program.