

# Literacy in British Columbia

## Literacy profile of BC's working-age adults

400,000 (14%) are at Level 1, the lowest proficiency level.

600,000 (21%) are at Level 2 - still inadequate for full participation and success in modern society.

The number of people below Level 3 increased by 100,000 in the decade to 2003 (although the proportion with low literacy did not increase).

Over 44% have low numeracy.

60% of those with low literacy are of prime working age 26-55.

45% of those at Level 1 and 28% of those at Level 2 have less than high school education.

15% of those at Level 1 and 11% of those at Level 2 are unemployed.

BC's literacy profile is stronger than the Canadian average, but scores among the youngest adults, aged 16 to 25, are lower than the Canadian average. 12% of this cohort have difficulty with even the most basic written materials.

While roughly equal proportions of men and women are at Level 1, men are over-represented (60-40) at Level 2.

Over 70% of seniors have low literacy.

## Literacy promotes economic well-being

- 47% of BC adults with the weakest literacy skills, but over 80% of those with the strongest, are employed.
- For the employed, weaker skills are associated with the least secure jobs.
- For the unemployed, higher skills greatly improve the likelihood and speed of return to employment.
- The difference in average household income of working age Canadians between those at the lowest and those at the highest literacy levels exceeds \$30,000 annually.
- 47% of individuals at Level 1 live in low income households, compared to just 8% of those at Levels 4 and 5.
- 43% of working-age Canadians at the lowest literacy level derive income from Employment Insurance or Social Assistance, compared to 14% of those at the highest level.
- An increase of just 1% in literacy scores relative to the international average is associated with an estimated boost to national productivity of 2.5% – worth \$32 billion per annum to Canadian GDP.

## LITERACY MATTERS FOR HEALTH

75% of those with high literacy rate themselves as being in excellent or very good health, compared to only 30% of those with low literacy.

### ... FOR CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Those with high literacy are more likely to vote, and more than twice as likely as those with low literacy to participate in community groups.

### ... FOR CRIMINAL OFFENDING

Participation in basic education in correctional facilities is associated with a 30% decrease in recidivism.

### ... FOR THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Canadians with stronger literacy skills are significantly more likely to use computers regularly.

## Occupational sectors

Two-thirds of working-age British Columbians with low literacy are concentrated in 5 labour market sectors:

- Trade, finance, insurance, real estate
- Manufacturing
- Accommodation & food services
- Construction
- Public health care & social assistance

## The training gap

- Only 20% of BC adults with low literacy participate in adult education or training in a given year, compared to 75% of those at the highest levels.
- Only about 1 in 10 BC adults without a high school diploma ever participate in programs to improve their basic skills.
- A quarter of working Canadians report that there has been job-related training they wanted or needed to take, but did not.

## Immigrants

- Immigrants with a first language other than English have significantly lower literacy than other Canadians, with 60% below Level 3.
- This proportion does not improve with time in Canada – those here for 10 years or more have the same literacy profile as new arrivals.
- Two-thirds of BC's working-age people at Level 1 are immigrants.
- Over a quarter of BC's population was born outside Canada.

## Aboriginal people

- About 60% of urban Aboriginal people have low literacy.
- Non-Aboriginals in BC have higher average literacy than other non-Aboriginal Canadians, but BC's Aboriginals have lower scores than Aboriginals elsewhere.
- About 5% of working-age people in BC are Aboriginal, and the proportion is growing.

# Literacy matters for BC

Literacy matters enormously for the economic and social well-being of individuals and for a prosperous, inclusive province.

Better literacy skills improve employment prospects and income, reduce dependence on social assistance, promote health, and reduce criminal offending. They help integrate immigrants into the workforce, and society at large. They raise productivity, and are crucial for capturing and sustaining the knowledge advantage as the economy and labour market evolve.

But around **40% of adults in BC** – and over 35% of working-age people – do not have the literacy skills they need to achieve their goals, to function and thrive in the modern economy, and to develop their knowledge and potential.

That represents over one million people who are under-equipped to cope with society's increasing informational demands – and for whom opportunity will increasingly be out of reach, as new jobs emerge in knowledge-intensive occupations. The literacy shortfall has a profound impact on the socio-economic fabric of our province, and threatens our ability to compete globally.

**Literacy is the essential skill.** It is the cornerstone of human capital development – the foundational competence upon which the acquisition of other essential skills depends. It is difficult for those with low literacy to train or retrain, and to make it stick.

**Literacy is deeply implicated in poverty and exclusion.** People from poor families, the long-term unemployed, seniors, Aboriginal people, inmates, people with disabilities, and ethnic minorities all have lower rates of literacy and higher rates of poverty. They have fewer choices in jobs, education, housing and other things we need to have full lives. Poverty and low literacy form a cycle that is difficult to break.

**Early literacy is a crucial foundation,** but the acquisition of skills is a lifelong process – and skills erode if not exercised regularly.

It is vital to ensure that all children get a strong start, but also critical to sustain the opportunities for adults to acquire, and continue to hone, the literacy skills they need – not least because literate parents are the most important influence on the literacy of future generations.

**Literacy is everyone's responsibility.** Almost every branch of government, social services, community groups, educators, employers, and unions, as well as individuals and families, have a role to play.

**Literacy BC** is responding by supporting adult learners and their families, promoting innovation in practice, building capacity, raising awareness, and partnering in policy development.

Call us to find out how you can help.

## The International Adult Literacy & Skills Survey (IALSS)

Most of the information in this leaflet is derived from IALSS (2003), which measured Canadians' *ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities, at home, at work and in the community*. Literacy is not about whether or not one can read, but how well one reads.

IALSS assessed skills in four domains:

- **prose literacy** – understanding and using information from texts, including news, brochures and instruction manuals.
- **document literacy** – locating and using information contained in formats such as job applications, payroll forms, schedules, maps and charts.
- **numeracy** – applying arithmetic operations to numbers embedded in printed materials, in tasks such as balancing accounts, figuring out tips, and completing order forms.
- **problem-solving** – goal-directed understanding of problem situations and their step-by-step transformation, based on planning and reasoning.

Scores were grouped into five levels:

- People at **Level 1** have difficulty reading and have few basic skills or strategies for decoding and working with text. Generally, they are aware that they have a literacy problem.
- People at **Level 2** have limited skills and can deal well only with material that is simple and clearly laid-out. They often do not recognise their limitations.
- People at **Level 3** can read well, though they may have problems with more complex tasks.
- People at **Levels 4 & 5** have strong literacy skills and many strategies for dealing with complex materials.

Level 3 has been validated as the proficiency level needed to fully participate and succeed in the modern, knowledge-based society.

## Sources and resources

Visit [www.literacybc.ca](http://www.literacybc.ca) to locate sources for the information presented here. You will also find more details about the state of literacy in BC and its many implications, as well as a range of resources to support literacy-building in our province.



1-888-732-3234  
[www.literacybc.ca](http://www.literacybc.ca)