

Literacy and Unemployment

Literacy and employment status

According to the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS), unemployed people have lower average literacy scores than those who are employed¹. People with lower literacy scores are more likely to be unemployed than those with higher literacy scores.

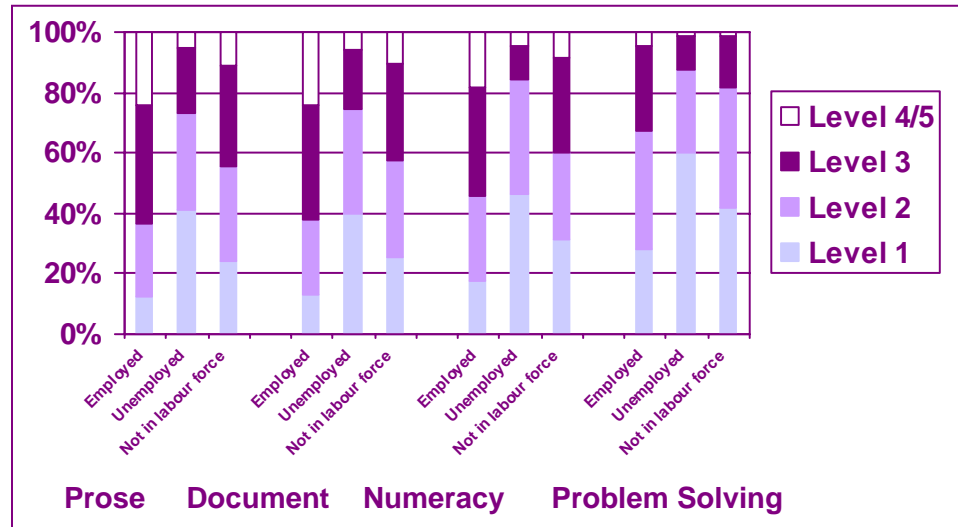
In the NWT, the relationship between unemployment and literacy is more pronounced than in the rest of Canada. In the NWT the proportion of unemployed people scoring below Level 3 in all four skill areas is significantly higher than the national

average. In the NWT, 73% of unemployed people scored below Level 3 in prose literacy (see Figure 1) compared to 53% nationally. The NWT percentage of adults below Level 3 is also higher for document literacy, numeracy and problem solving. This means we have many people in the NWT who lack the skills they need to get a job and who have multiple disadvantages².

IALSS Skill Levels

| | |
|------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Level 1 | People have difficulty dealing with any written material |
| Level 2 | People can deal only with material that is clear and well laid out |
| Level 3 | People can understand and use the information they need for daily life |
| Levels 4/5 | People can understand and use complex written material |

Figure 1: Per cent of labour force in NWT at each level in all four skill areas (aged 16 to 65)



Source: *Literacy in English in the Northwest Territories*³

Low literacy and unemployment^{3/4}

As we have seen, low literacy and unemployment are closely related.

- People with low literacy skills are more likely to leave school early, without the skills they need for today's world.
- Low literacy affects employability. People with low literacy are twice as likely to be unemployed as other adults.
- Low literacy acts as a barrier to opportunity. People with low literacy have fewer choices in jobs.
- People with low literacy are more likely to lose their jobs.
- People with low literacy who are unemployed are less likely to find work again than those with higher literacy skills.

Low literacy and training

Literacy is a foundational skill. People need basic literacy to acquire new skills and knowledge. Often people with the lowest literacy skills do not take part in adult education and training as much as those with higher skills.

Low literacy, unemployment and poverty

Low literacy, unemployment and poverty are all inter-related and tend to have a multiplier effect. Low literacy puts people at a disadvantage. As a result, they are more likely to be unemployed and more likely to be poor as well, creating multiple disadvantages for them.

- People with low literacy are more likely to rely on social transfer payments, like income support.
- If they are working, people with low literacy are more likely to be in low paid, insecure jobs, with no benefits.
- People with a lower income need information on social benefits they may qualify for. But that information is not always accessible to them. Tests have shown that people need a high level of education to understand and complete many of the application forms for benefits⁵.
- Once people get into a cycle of disadvantage, it's very difficult to break out of it. People in this cycle often feel discouraged and lack confidence.
- Parents with low literacy are more likely to have children with low literacy, thus continuing the cycle. Parents are important supports for children's learning.
- Low literacy and poverty affect people's health. People with low literacy and those on low income often experience stress. Violence may also be a part of their lives.
- Adults with low income often face other barriers to upgrading or job training, such as lack of support for child care and transportation.

What can we do to help people get out of the cycle of disadvantage?

Improved literacy has the power to change people's lives, but it will have a limited effect if we don't try to take a more holistic approach.

- Social agencies need to work together to develop a comprehensive approach to working with individuals and families who have multiple disadvantages.
- As a society, we need to make a greater commitment to social and economic justice.

¹ Human Resources and Skills Development Canada & Statistics Canada. (2005). *Building on our competencies: Canadian results of the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey 2003*. Ottawa.

² Government of Canada, Human Resources and Skill Development Canada, Learning Policy Directorate. (2006). *Literacy in English in the Northwest Territories: Implications of findings from IALSS 2003*. Ottawa

³ Movement for Canadian Literacy. *Literacy Facts*. Ottawa.

⁴ Murray, T.S. (2008). *Measuring and monitoring literacy in the NWT: The cost of complacency*. Presentation at Literacy Matters Workshop, Yellowknife, NT, January 29, 2008.

Murray, T.S. (2008). *Measuring and monitoring literacy in the NWT: Sharing the investment, sharing the rewards*. Presentation at Literacy Matters Workshop, Yellowknife, NT, January 29, 2008

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Murray, T.S. (2008). *Measuring and monitoring literacy in the NWT: A profile*. Presentation at Territorial Adult Educators Conference, Yellowknife, NT, March 3, 2008.

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