

Illiteracy on the rise in America

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According to a recent US government report, *The State of Literacy in America*, released by the National Institute for Literacy (NIL), there has been a significant growth in illiteracy in America. Over 90 million US adults, nearly one out of two, are functionally illiterate or near illiterate, without the minimum skills required in a modern society.

The report is a devastating portrait of the social conditions in capitalist America, the country generally portrayed as the most advanced in the world. Out of 191 million adults in the US, as many as 44 million cannot read a newspaper or fill out a job application. Another 50 million more cannot read or comprehend above the eighth grade level.

According to education experts it requires ninth grade competence to understand the instructions for an antidote on a bottle of corrosive kitchen lye, tenth grade competence to understand the instructions on a federal income tax return, and twelfth grade competence to read a life insurance form.

The NIL report was extrapolated from a massive investigation initiated by the US Congress in 1988 and directed by the US Department of Education. The study, titled the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS), interviewed 26,000 US adults in the late 80s and early 90s. The initial findings of the NALS report were made public in 1993.

The initial report presented total figures for the entire country. The present report breaks down the literacy figures according to state, county, congressional district, and city areas, providing for the first time a detailed picture of where problems of illiteracy are greatest in the US.

NALS divided the participants in the survey into five levels, with the lowest level, Level I, representing those considered completely or functionally illiterate. Level I ranged from adults who literally could not read to those who could at least write their names or locate the expiration date on a driver's license. Level I adults could not, however, fill out an application form for a Social Security card, write a letter, or read the instructions on a bottle of medicine.

Unlike many underdeveloped countries the majority of Americans have had at least four years of primary education. Educational levels for a broad layer of the working class, reflecting a period when manufacturing jobs required minimal abilities, left millions at the level of an eighth grade reading level, or Level II of the NIL survey.

The worst affected areas

The NIL/NALS report confirms once again that Southern US states continue to have the most deplorable social conditions in the country, including the highest rates of adult illiteracy. Mississippi ranked worst among the 50 states, with every third adult in the state, 30 percent of its adult population, placed in Level I. Louisiana has the second highest illiteracy rate with 28 percent of its adult population in Level I, followed by Alabama, Florida and South Carolina, each with 25 percent. In these states the combined Level I and Level II literacy rates would push the level of illiteracy and near-illiteracy to nearly 70 percent of the adult population.

As bad as the above figures are, an even greater catastrophe can be seen in the reports of many cities where over 60 percent of the adult population, more than one out of two people, could not perform above the Level I literacy rate. California recorded six cities in this category. Miami, Florida reported 63 percent of its residents at the Level I literacy level.

In the state of Michigan, 18 percent of adults, nearly one in five, were functionally illiterate. Detroit had the one of the highest illiteracy rates in the country, with 47 percent of its residents, nearly one out of two, scoring at Level I in the NIL survey.

In cautious bureaucratic language, characteristic of government reports, the NIL suggests the devastating social consequences of such pervasive illiteracy. According to the report:

- * 43 percent of people with the lowest literacy skills live below the government's official poverty line.

- * 70 percent of Level I adults have no job or only a part-time job.

- * Workers who lack a high school degree earn an average monthly income of \$452, as compared to those with a bachelor's degree who earn an average \$1,829.

Numerous reports have shown the effects of illiteracy, not only on the economic well being, but on the physical health of those affected. The Journal of the American Medical Association (*JAMA*) reported in its December 1995 issue a study of patient literacy by two urban public hospitals. The study caused alarm when it revealed the high number of patients who could not follow basic medical instructions. Some 75 percent of those participating in the study could not

understand a consent form, raising ethical questions for doctors concerned about the ability of their patients to effectively participate in their own health care.

Those who cannot read and write are severely impeded from participation in a complex society, without access to the information necessary to make an intelligent decision. Of necessity, illiterates must rely on others to provide the information to them. One consequence of this is the mounting prison population, now at 2 million people. According to several studies, the prison population represents the single highest concentration of illiterate US adults.

The historical background

Throughout the post-World War II economic boom the American government denied it had a literacy problem. In 1970 the Census Bureau, under pressure from the military, reinstated the literacy question in the census for the first time since it was removed in 1940. Due to the way it phrased the question, the Census Bureau reported that 99 percent of all US adults could read.

As late as the early 1980s the US reported to the United Nations that 99.5 percent of American adults could read and write. But much earlier reports already indicated there were severe illiteracy problems in America.

The Adult Performance Level study (APL), conducted in 1975 by the University of Texas, found that 20 percent of all US adults were functionally incompetent, some 23 million people. In addition the report stated that 34 percent, or 39 million people, were marginally competent. The English Language Proficiency Study (ELPS) in 1982 found 13 percent of US adults, or 17 million to 21 million people it considered illiterate.

In 1983 the US Department of Education conducted its own study revealing that an estimated 23 million American adults were totally or functionally illiterate. The same report found that an additional 49 million US adults function on a level that was considered marginal.

Volunteers and budget cuts

The publication of Jonathan Kozol's book *Illiterate America* gave some public prominence to the issue in the mid-1980s, but federal government involvement, under Reagan, Bush and Clinton, has never gone beyond rhetoric and encouraging volunteer tutoring and other anti-illiteracy campaigns.

Charles Hunter, spokesperson for the National Institute for Literacy, told the *WSWS* the organization's primary purpose was to let people know there is a significant problem with literacy in America. NIL's approach to the problem of low literacy remains to promote volunteerism. Hunter said, 'Our aim is to work with businesses and industry to give them ideas on what they can do. If a company calls us we will direct them on

what they can do. We try to give them ideas besides giving money. There are many little things they can do like allowing an employee to help tutor by volunteering, helping work peers, etc.'

Concerning the federal government's attempts to alleviate illiteracy, Hunter said, 'As far as I know there is no federal national program to address the issue of low literacy.' Hunter said many companies choose not to move to certain areas because of the low literacy rates.

In 1991 the US government formed the National Institute for Literacy with the stated purpose of achieving 'full literacy' by the year 2000. The massive cuts in education programs by both state and federal governments, however, have prevented any serious attempt to reach that goal. In 1997 the federal government provided \$467 million for adult education, \$5 for every adult in the two lowest literacy levels in America. An additional \$800 million has been contributed by state and local governments, raising the total to \$14 per adult.

The *WSWS* spoke to Ms. Ann Dilly, an administrator at Ferndale, Michigan's Adult Education program, who was all too familiar with the difficulties facing adult literacy programs. Ms. Dilly cited the massive cuts carried out by the state and federal governments on education programs.

'Governor Engler has seriously undercut the funding for adult education,' said Dilly. 'At one time we were getting the funding to almost match what we need. Engler capped the amount we received so that it was frozen at the level attained five years ago. For Ferndale this meant in place of 5,000 full-time students we were able to service five years ago, today we are only able to serve 1,600. He capped the growth based on the dollar amount you received, not on the basis of need.'

Neither state nor federal governments are prepared to make any serious effort to overcome present levels of adult illiteracy, let alone make the resources available which are necessary to insure that the new generation of young people now in school will be fully literate.



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