

# **Adult Literacy Fact Sheet**

## **Literacy and Dependency: The Literacy Skills of Welfare Recipients in the United States**

The publication, **Literacy and Dependency: The Literacy Skills of Welfare Recipients in the United States**, used data from the 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey to examine the literacy proficiency of individuals who “received Aid To Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), other public assistance, or food stamps during the 12 months prior to the study” (p. 3). The findings were further examined by race, marital status, mental or physical disability, education, and labor force experience. The authors also review other research to determine how literacy levels can be raised for those who are on welfare, and how raising literacy levels affects a welfare recipient’s subsequent income level and welfare reliance.

The National Adult Literacy Survey scored individual’s responses in each of the following categories:

- ⇒ Prose literacy, defined as “the knowledge and skills needed to understand and use information from texts that include editorials, news stories, poems, and fiction” (p. 9).
- ⇒ Document literacy, defined as “The knowledge and skills required to locate and use information contained in materials that include job applications, payroll forms, transportation schedules, maps, tables, and graphs” (p.9).
- ⇒ Quantitative literacy, defined as “The knowledge and skills required to apply arithmetic operations, either alone or sequentially, using numbers embedded in printed materials” (p. 9-10).

Once tested in the above categories, individual’s scores were ranked within the following levels:

|                   |  |
|-------------------|--|
| Level 1 (0-225)   | The lower the literacy proficiency the lower the score. Less challenging tasks were associated with Level 1, more challenging ones with Level 5. |
| Level 2 (226-275) |  |
| Level 3 (276-325) |  |
| Level 4 (326-375) |  |
| Level 5 (376-500) |  |

### **Some significant findings:**

#### **General**

- ◇ There is a clear positive correlation between literacy level and likelihood of holding a job, the number of weeks an individual works in a year, and average weekly earnings.
- ◇ Approximately 2/3 to 3/4 of adult AFDC, public assistance, or food stamp recipients performed at the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> levels in the three categories. Approximately 1/2 of the general adult population fell into the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> levels.
- ◇ Women had higher representation among those receiving food stamps (2/3 of the adults surveyed), and public assistance or AFDC (71% of the adults surveyed).
- ◇ Patterns found in the general population (men scoring better than women in document and quantitative literacy) were not evident in this sub-population (women scored equally as well as men).
- ◇ Performance levels within the welfare recipient sub-population were highest among Whites, then Blacks, then Hispanics; but the differences were not as acute as those between these groups within the general population.

## **Education and Literacy**

- ◇ High school dropout rates were much higher among food stamp (about one-half) and AFDC or public assistance recipients (45%) than in the general population.
- ◇ Those adults who had studied for high school equivalency or GED scored on average at level 2 in literacy prose; those who had not, scored in level 1.
- ◇ Welfare recipients who were enrolled in school or college scored higher than those who were not enrolled, but not as high as students in the general population.

## **Labor Force Experience and Literacy**

- ◇ Involvement in the labor force correlated with higher literacy scores. Those who were on welfare and not in the labor force had lower scores than individuals in the general population who were also out of the labor force.
- ◇ Within this sub-population, those with higher literacy scores also had higher incomes on average.
- ◇ Compared to the general population, those on welfare were more likely to have jobs in crafts, services, labor or assembly. They were less likely to have been employed in professional or managerial positions.

## **Increasing Literacy Levels Through Basic Education Instruction**

- ◇ Some successful educational programs (such as the Center for Employment and Training in San Jose) have embedded literacy instruction into job skill instruction, rather than focusing on literacy improvement.
- ◇ Some successful educational programs are able to increase participants' earnings, especially when the program has been tailored to welfare recipients.
- ◇ Welfare recipients often need ancillary programs such as child care, transportation, and job development in addition to educational enhancement in order for there to be an increase in earnings.
- ◇ Some successful educational programs increase the number of those on welfare who earn their GED. The Greater Avenues for Independence program in San Diego was especially successful in increasing literacy levels, because they tailored their instruction for welfare recipients.
- ◇ Making literacy training mandatory and providing opportunities for welfare recipients to participate in training, increases program involvement of those recipients.

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*Summarized by Margarete Epstein for the Ohio Literacy Resource Center*

This publication was funded by the National Center for Education Statistics. The Educational Testing Service produced the publication using unpublished data from the 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey.

Copies of this report can be ordered for \$9.50 (prepaid) from:

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