

The International Adult Literacy & Skills Survey

The International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey, or IALSS, is the Canadian part of the Adult Literacy and Lifeskills (ALL) study. This large international study tells us how well adults understand and use printed information in daily activities at home, at work and in their community. The first study was conducted in 1994, but the three northern territories did not take part in that survey. They **did**, however, take part in this recent survey, conducted in 2003.

The international report was released in May 2005. It reports on adult literacy skills in Canada as a whole, and compares Canada to the other countries in the study. The national (Canadian) report was released in November. It gives us a picture of adult literacy skills in Canada across the provinces and territories.

It's important for people to know about this survey and what it means for us in the Northwest Territories, as well as nationally. The report gives us a snapshot of literacy skills among adults.

This is the first in an information series that will help you to understand more about the current state of literacy in Canada and the NWT. In this pamphlet we look at . . .

- What IALSS is, and what it tells us.
- The general literacy levels of adults in Canada and the NWT.
- The literacy levels of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the three northern territories.
- The people who are likely to take part in adult education and training programs.

Why is the survey important?

The survey is important for several reasons.

- It changes the way we talk about literacy. In the past, people often used the terms “literate” and “illiterate” to describe people’s skills. They believed people either had literacy skills or didn’t have them. Now, the survey defines literacy skills on a continuum.
- In the NWT, we have never had a good way to measure literacy skills, so we use an approximate measure – school grade levels. People say, “She’s at a Grade 9 level.” Although literacy and levels of education are related, they are not the same. For example, people with the same level of education may have different skills. As well, education does not “fix” literacy for life, as the data will show us. The survey gives us a way to talk more precisely about literacy skills.
- The provinces are able to compare their literacy skills between 1994 and 2003. The three northern territories can’t do that. This is a starting point for us that will let us monitor our progress over time.
- The survey creates an international and national standard that we can measure ourselves against.

Who took part in the survey?

The Canadian part of the survey included a representative sample of people 16 and over, whereas the international part included only people aged 16 to 65. In the data you will see these differences. Sometimes it will report on people “16 and over”.

This means it includes people over 65. When it says “16-65” or “working age adults”, it excludes people over 65.

In Canada, more than 23,000 people took part in the survey. They were selected using the Census of Population and Housing database from 2001.

In the Northwest Territories, 1286 people were selected. Of these, 110 were not eligible for a variety of reasons. In total, 818 people responded. This gave the NWT a 69.6% response rate – the fourth highest in Canada. The distribution in the NWT reflected the makeup of the NWT population – approximately 50% non-Aboriginal and 50% Aboriginal.

What can we find out from the survey?

The international report tells us:

- How well Canadian adults understand and use literacy
- How these levels have changed in Canada since 1994
- How Canada compares to other countries
- What the implications of the results are

The national report tells us:

- How well adults in each province and territory understand and use literacy
- How these levels have changed in the provinces since 1994 in specific areas
- How the provinces and territories compare
- How well certain sub-groups performed
 - Young people and the elderly
 - Men and women

- People who are educated
- French and English speaking minorities
- Aboriginal people
- Immigrants

What does the survey measure?

The survey measures literacy proficiency – how well people can understand and use printed information in their daily lives. It also tells us how these skills are distributed across the country. It measures skills in the following four areas:

- **Prose literacy** – the knowledge and skills people need to understand and use information from texts like newspaper stories, brochures and instruction manuals
- **Document literacy** – the knowledge and skills people need to find and use information in different formats like job applications, payroll forms, maps, tables, diagrams and charts
- **Numeracy** – the knowledge and skills people need to work with numbers in different daily situations like balancing an account, figuring out a tip, working out interest on a loan, or filling out an order form
- **Problem-solving** – the knowledge and skills people need to understand and solve problems

The skill areas are related to each other yet distinctive.

As well, the study tries to identify factors that affect how a person gets, keeps and loses skills during their lifetime. It also looks at how these skills affect the social, educational, health, and economic outcomes of individuals, families and communities.

How does the survey define the skills?

The skills are measured and put on a continuous scale from 0 to 500. Zero represents a complete lack of skills, while 500 is the maximum. These “scores” are then grouped into five levels for prose, document and numeracy, and four levels for problem solving. Level 1 is the lowest level and Level 5 the highest.

Prose, document and numeracy scale	
Level 1	0-225 points
Level 2	226-275 points
Level 3	276-325 points
Level 4	326-375 points
Level 5	376-500 points

Problem solving scale	
Level 1	0-250 points
Level 2	251-300 points
Level 3	301-350 points
Level 4	351-500 points

- **Level 1** means a person has difficulty dealing with any printed material.
- **Level 2** means a person can deal with material that is clear and well laid out.
- **Level 3** means a person can understand and use the information that they need for daily life.
- **Levels 4 and 5** mean that a person can understand and use complex written material.

Level 3 is the level that experts believe people need to get a job in today’s knowledge-based world. As a result, the data often uses Level 3 as the cut off point – “below level 3”. Ideally, the average literacy score should be level 3 and above.

What does the survey tell us about literacy in Canada and the NWT?

1. Millions of Canadians struggle with serious literacy challenges.

Internationally, Canada ranks fourth. That puts us “in the middle of the pack”. That may sound fairly good. However, a closer look shows us . . .

- 42% of Canadians (four out of ten people) aged 16-65 were at Levels 1 and 2 in prose literacy – below the level of skills they need in the modern world.
- If you add in people aged 66 and over, that figure rises to 48%, or almost one-half of the Canadian population. This equals roughly 12 million people in Canada who are below level 3.
- The percentage of people at these lower levels has not changed since the last survey in 1994.
- The average prose literacy score for Canadians aged 16 to 65 has not changed since 1994. The average is 280 points, which is at the low end of level 3.

In today’s information-based society, literacy is more important than ever. IALSS is a wakeup call for Canadian decision makers. Literacy barriers are sidelining many Canadians. This inequality and loss of potential has serious consequences for them, their families, their communities and the country as a whole.

2. Low literacy is a serious challenge in every province and territory, including the NWT.

- The survey shows a pattern from west to east
 - Western provinces and the Yukon score above the Canadian average
 - Central Canada provinces and **the NWT** score at the average.
 - Nunavut and Eastern provinces, except PEI and Nova Scotia, score below the average.

- **In the NWT**, the average score in all skill areas is about the same as the Canadian national average.

16-65 age	Prose literacy	Document literacy	Numeracy	Problem solving
Canadian average	272	271	263	266
Better than Canadian average	Yukon (296), Saskatchewan (294), Alberta (289), B.C. (288)	Saskatchewan (294), Yukon (293), Alberta (290), B. C. (290)	Saskatchewan (284), Yukon (283), Alberta (281), B.C. (279)	Yukon (285), Saskatchewan (284), Alberta (281), B.C. (281),
Same as Canadian average	Nova Scotia (286), Manitoba (283), PEI (282), NWT (280), Ontario (279)	Nova Scotia (284), Manitoba (283), PEI (281), NWT (280), Ontario (279)	Nova Scotia (272), Manitoba (271), Ontario (270), PEI (269), Quebec (269), NWT (269)	Nova Scotia (276), Manitoba (275), Ontario (271), PEI (271), Quebec (271), NWT (269)
Lower than Canadian average	Quebec (275), New Brunswick (263), Newfoundland and Labrador (271), Nunavut (232)	Quebec (273), New Brunswick (270), Newfoundland and Labrador (269), Nunavut (234)	New Brunswick (262), Newfoundland and Labrador (257), Nunavut (220)	New Brunswick (265), Newfoundland and Labrador (262), Nunavut (227)

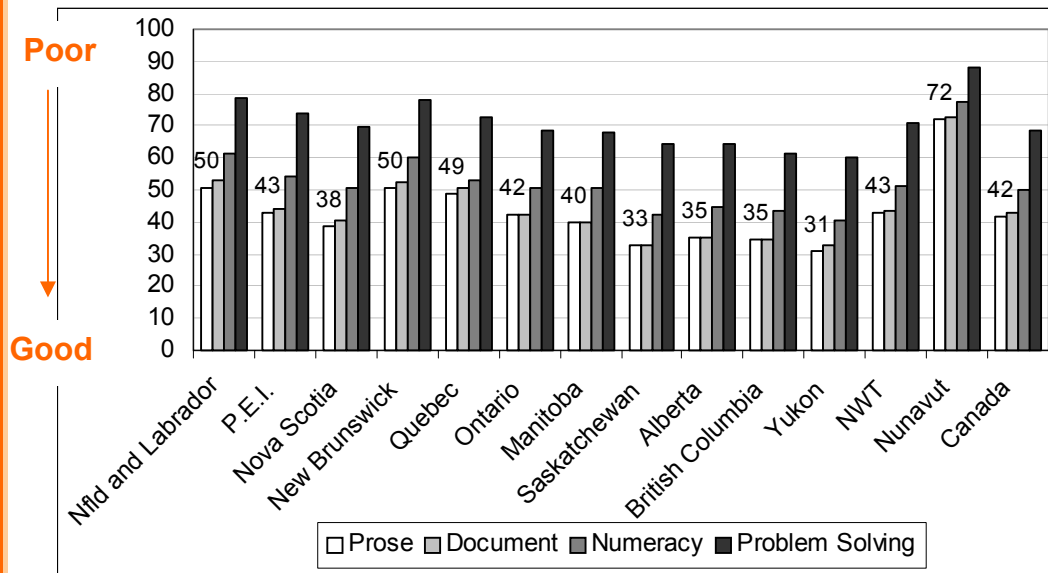
National comparison of average scores in each skill area (16-65)

Source: Learning Policy Directorate, HRSDC

Even in the highest performing provinces and territories, 3 out of 10 Canadians struggle with literacy.

In the NWT . . .

- Roughly 42.5% of working age adults (16–65) had an average prose literacy score below level 3. That’s more than 4 out of 10 people.
- About half of working age adults (16–65) had an average numeracy score below level 3.
- Just over 70% of working age adults had an average problem solving score below level 3.



Comparison of Canadians aged 16-65 performing at levels 1 and 2 in each skill area

Source: Learning Policy Directorate, HRSDC

Note: The shorter the bar, the better the performance.

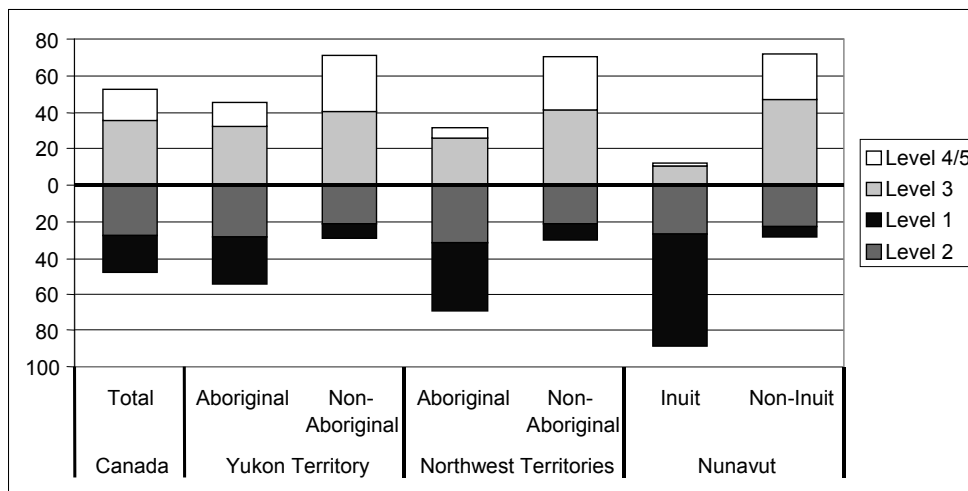
Even though the NWT’s score was around the Canadian average, our results show that 4 out of 10 people have low literacy skills. This means we have serious literacy challenges. We must make sure that literacy programs and services are meeting the needs of those with the lowest skills.

3. In the NWT, there is a huge gap between the scores of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

In all three territories, non-Aboriginal people performed significantly better than Aboriginal people.

In the NWT . . .

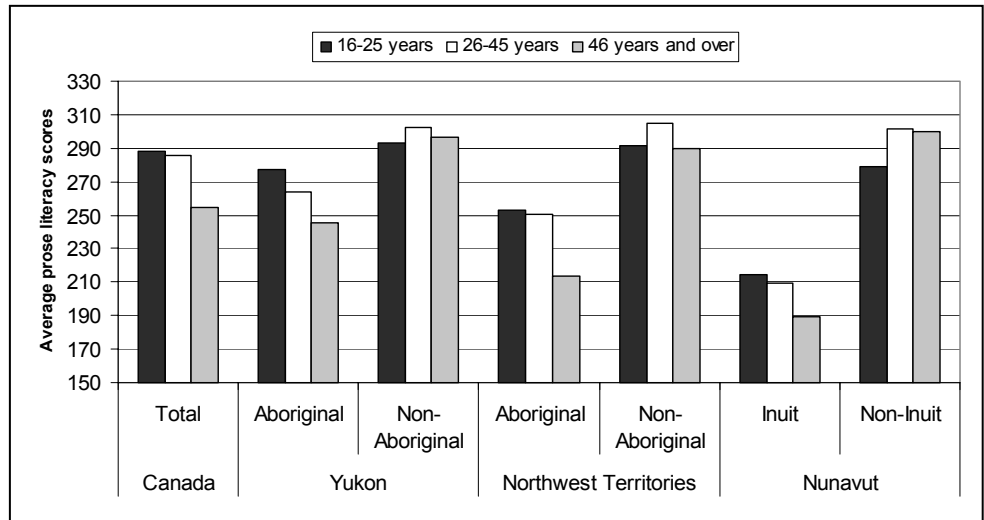
- About 70% of non-Aboriginal people scored at level 3 and above. About 30% were at levels 1 & 2.
- The exact opposite is true for Aboriginal people. 69% scored below level 3. 31% scored at level 3 or above.
- Non-Aboriginal people (16-65) in the NWT had an average prose score of 297 (mid level 3) – roughly 55 points above that of Aboriginal people (242, mid level 2).



Source: Learning Policy Directorate, HRSDC

Prose literacy levels of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people aged 16 and over in the three northern territories

- The non-Aboriginal population in all three territories performs about the same in all three age groups.
- Among the Aboriginal population, there is a significant decline in the oldest age group. This is not surprising, since many of the people in that age group lived on the land and still speak their Aboriginal language as their mother tongue.



Average prose literacy levels by age groups of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people aged 16 and over in the three territories

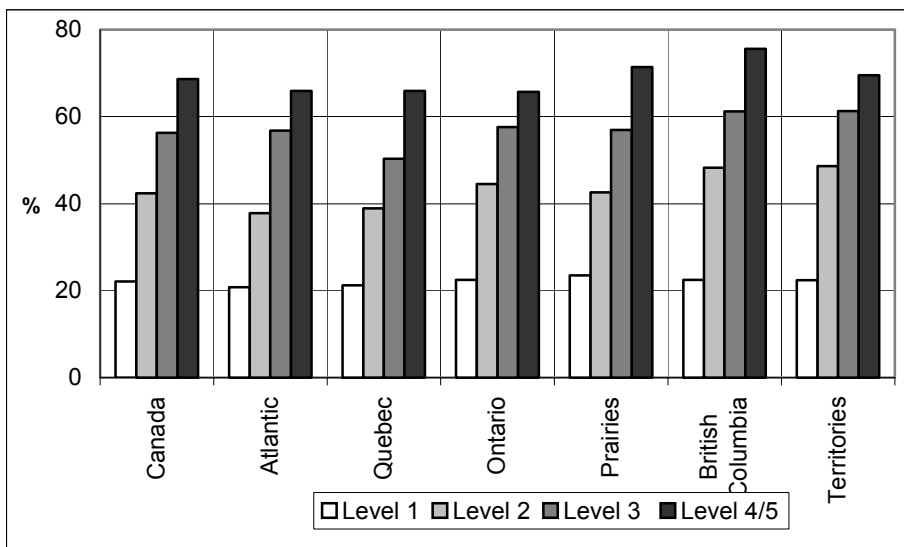
Source: Learning Policy Directorate, HRSDC

These numbers may reflect, at least in part, different levels of formal education and use of a first language other than English. Nevertheless, the figures are similar to other data, such as graduation rates, and confirm what many literacy providers have known for a long time.

This gap is of critical concern, particularly at a time of significant resource development in the NWT. Low literacy is closely tied to other social issues such as equity, poverty, health, justice, children’s learning and more. It affects people’s potential. It’s time to re-examine the programs and services offered to the Aboriginal community.

4. In all provinces and territories, those with the lowest literacy levels do not take part in adult education and training as much as those with the highest literacy levels.

In fact, there is a substantial difference in participation rates. In other words, the people who need training the most are the least likely to attend adult education and training programs.



Per cent of population aged 16-65 participating in learning in the year preceding the interview, by literacy levels

Source: Learning Policy Directorate, HRSDC

People with lower literacy levels face many barriers to training, such as childcare or poverty – only a small percentage are getting the training and supports they need. Yet these are the people who need the most training and support. Governments need to look seriously at how to improve access to training for people with low literacy.

Conclusion

There's a lot at stake for individuals, families, communities, provinces and territories, and the country.

Millions of people across Canada, and thousands **in the NWT**, face serious literacy challenges. We urgently need to begin to address these challenges. If we don't, another generation of people will be unable to achieve their potential.

Canada is one of the few industrialized countries with no national literacy action plan. These figures are a call for action! The federal and territorial governments need to work together to develop a comprehensive vision and strategy for adult education and training with long-term and adequate funding.

For more information on this or other literacy matters, contact:

The NWT Literacy Council

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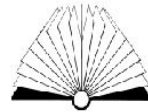
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Funded by the Government of the Northwest Territories
Department of Education, Culture and Employment and the
Government of Canada National Literacy Secretariat, HRSDC



Northwest Territories Education, Culture and Employment



Human Resources and
Skills Development Canada

National Literacy Secretariat

Ressources humaines et
Développement des compétences Canada

Secrétariat national à l'alphabétisation

The information in this pamphlet is adapted from:

Movement for Canadian Literacy. November 9, 2005. *Response to the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey*. Ottawa.

Government of Canada, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, Learning Policy Directorate. November 9, 2005. *LALSS 2003: Key Policy Research Findings*. Ottawa.

Statistics Canada. November 2005. *Building on our Competencies: Canadian Results of the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey*. Catalogue no. 89-617-X1E. Ottawa.