



Factsheet #9

Literacy and Poverty

Canada's high rate of illiteracy/undereducation is not simply an education problem. It is a symptom of deep and widespread social inequality created, in large part, by poverty.

-  **Low literacy, poverty and exclusion are all part of the same problem.** People from poor families as well as the long-term unemployed, seniors, native people, prisoners, people with disabilities, and racial and cultural minorities all have higher rates of both illiteracy and poverty. They have fewer choices in jobs, education, housing and other things we need to have full lives. Poverty and low literacy are a vicious cycle that is difficult to break.
-  **Children from poor and disadvantaged families are at risk of illiteracy.** Even in the year 2000, one in five children in Canada still lived in poverty, an increase of 39% since 1989. They are often not well served by the school system where they are likely to be labelled and placed in classes where less is expected of them and less may be offered. Their parents may not have the information, confidence, or skills to confront the school system to help them. Many poor children either drop out of high school or graduate without being fully literate.
-  **People with literacy problems have only 2/3 of the income of other adults.** Inequalities in literacy contribute to inequalities in income, occupational status and access to certain labour markets. Individuals with level 1 (the lowest) literacy skills make \$28,000 less than those with level 4/5 (the highest) literacy level. People with lower literacy are twice as likely to be unemployed as other adults. They are also many times more likely to receive social assistance. If they do have jobs, they are likely to be the lowest-paid, most insecure and least attractive jobs. The better paying, secure jobs that used to exist for undereducated people are rapidly disappearing.
-  **Many barriers keep low-income adults out of literacy and job training programs.** Only a small fraction (estimated at 5 - 10%) of eligible adults have ever enrolled in a literacy or upgrading program and among those who do enroll, drop out rates are high. The main barriers cited are socioeconomic-circumstantial factors such as lack of support for child care, transportation, and attendant care for disabled persons, long working hours, family needs, poor health, discouragement and lack of

confidence – not to mention programs that just don't fit their needs. Also poorer adults often don't have the literacy skills they need to get into job training programs.

📖 Information most needed by lower income people is often not accessible to them.

Important information about income assistance, health, safety, rights, resources and opportunities is often written in ways that do not reach the people who need it most. Tests have shown that a high level of education is needed to understand pamphlets and forms for social insurance cards, family benefits and other programs.

📖 Literacy is, itself, a defining characteristic of social class. Literacy is an instrument of social power. People become part of a culture by learning to interpret and use its particular signs and symbols. They use language in social relations that increase their knowledge and develop their potential. Poor literacy skills can exclude people from the dominant social groups and opportunities in a society. (from: *Literacy Skills of Canadian Youth*, 1997, Statistics Canada)

📖 What can be done?

Policies designed to improve literacy will have very limited effect unless they are linked to a serious attack on poverty. Moreover, because of the systematic inequality, the acquisition of literacy skills alone does not automatically lead to a better standard of living. Teaching people to read and write won't create jobs that don't exist or make it easier to get by on minimum wage or get rid of discrimination.

Poverty is not just about not having enough money. Poverty is about lack of dignity, respect, choice and opportunity. Literacy is about more than just reading and writing, which are only tools for participation. Literacy develops naturally when people participate fully and equally in their society. If we want a more literate society, we must make a commitment not just to more literacy training but to social and economic justice as well.

📖 Suggested Literacy and Poverty Resources

- ✓ **Canadian Council for Social Development (CCSD)** produces research and publications on many social issues including poverty. In 2001, they released *Defining and Re-defining Poverty: a CCSD perspective*. Contact CCSD at tel: 613-236-8977 or online at www.ccsd.ca
- ✓ **Family Service Association in Toronto** prepares the annual National Report Card on Child Poverty in Canada and was involved in the Campaign 2000 to end child poverty. They aim to increase public awareness of the levels and consequences of child/family poverty by publishing research on the indicators of child poverty and developing public education resources. Visit them online at www.campaign2000.ca
- ✓ **National Anti-Poverty Organization (NAPO)** researched and prepared *Literacy and Poverty: A View from the Inside*. NAPO has affiliates in many areas across the country. Contact them to find out about your local contacts as well as current

national initiatives at tel: 789-0096 or 1-800-810-1076 or find out more online at www.napo-onap.ca

- ✓ **Statistics Canada** monitors and researches a number of different indicators of poverty, education, literacy, income, and other social indicators. There are reports such as *The Value of Words: Literacy and Economic Security in Canada (1998)* and *Literacy Skills of Canadian Youth (1997)* and many others. For these and more check the website at www.statcan.ca