

Literacy profile of off-reserve First Nations and Métis people living in urban Manitoba and Saskatchewan: Results from the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey 2003

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Of all the provinces in Canada, Manitoba and Saskatchewan have the largest proportions of their populations that are comprised of Aboriginal people. According to data from the 2001 Census, the Aboriginal population accounted for about 14% of the total population in both of these provinces. In comparison, the province with the next largest share of Aboriginal people in its population was Alberta, at only about 5%.

The Aboriginal population in Manitoba and Saskatchewan is also growing rapidly. In both provinces, from 1996 to 2001, it grew by 17%, compared to less than 1% growth in the total population of Manitoba and a decrease of just over 1% in the total population of Saskatchewan.¹ Two segments of the Aboriginal population in Manitoba and Saskatchewan are projected to increase substantially by 2017: children aged 0 to 14 and young adults aged 20 to 29. Demographic projections indicate that, by 2017, 37 out of 100 children in Saskatchewan (26% in 2001) and 31 out of 100 in Manitoba (24% in 2001) could be Aboriginal. As for the proportion of the Aboriginal young adult population, it may almost double in Saskatchewan, reaching 30% in 2017, from 17% in 2001. In Manitoba, the proportion of young Aboriginal adults is projected to rise from 17% in 2001 to 23% in 2017.²

The implications of the high concentration and high population growth rates of the Aboriginal population in Manitoba and Saskatchewan are manifold. Specifically, education services and the labour market may experience special challenges related to the large numbers of Aboriginal children and young adults in the population over the next 10 years. It is thus important to gain knowledge of the characteristics of the Aboriginal population in Manitoba and Saskatchewan in order to adequately understand and address these challenges.

The Aboriginal population of Canada is not a homogeneous group. The Census of Population gathers information on self-reported Aboriginal identity - North American Indian,³ Métis and Inuit - as well as area of residence - on reserve, urban areas, and rural areas. According to 2001 Census data, the majority of Aboriginal people in Manitoba and Saskatchewan lived off reserve, at 65% and 64% respectively. The majority of the off-reserve Aboriginal population in Manitoba were Métis (57%) and about 40% were First Nations. As for Saskatchewan, just under half of its off-reserve Aboriginal population were Métis (49%) and a similar proportion (48%) were First Nations.⁴ Census data further revealed that in 2001, 54% and 42% of the off-reserve Aboriginal population in Manitoba and Saskatchewan respectively were living in large urban centres with populations of at least 100,000 people.

Data on the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the off-reserve First Nations and Métis populations in Manitoba and Saskatchewan have been examined in previous Statistics Canada reports. Using data from the 2001 Census, the 2001 Aboriginal Peoples Survey and the 2004-2005 Labour Force Survey, O'Donnell and Ballardin provided detailed reports on the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the off-reserve provincial and territorial Aboriginal population, providing information on education, residential school attendance, information technology, employment, mobility and housing, health, and language.⁵ Siggner and Costa provided information on the demographic structure of the Aboriginal population living in eleven large cities - including Winnipeg, Saskatoon and Regina - and on trends in the educational attainment of that population using data from the Census (1981, 1996 and 2001) and the 2001 Aboriginal Peoples Survey.⁶

Box 1: A profile of the off-reserve Aboriginal population living in Manitoba and Saskatchewan

The educational profile of the off-reserve Aboriginal population in Manitoba and Saskatchewan is improving. According to Census data, the proportion of Aboriginal people aged 25 and over with post-secondary qualifications in Manitoba increased from 29% in 1996 to 35% in 2001. In Saskatchewan, the proportion increased from 32% to 37% over the same period.

Many Aboriginal people pursue post-secondary education at the college and trades levels. In Manitoba, among those 25 years and over, 29% of the Métis population and 25% of the off-reserve First Nations population had college or trades certificates and diplomas. In Saskatchewan, these proportions were 30% for the Métis and 23% for the First Nations populations.

Aboriginal people are more likely to return to school at later ages to complete their education. In Manitoba, data from the 2001 Census show that 12% of the off-reserve Aboriginal population over the age of 25 was attending school, twice the percentage of their non-Aboriginal counterparts (6%). A similar pattern was observed in Saskatchewan. Of the Aboriginal groups in

both provinces, 17% of off-reserve First Nations adults were enrolled in a school, compared to 9% of Métis.

Overall, off-reserve Aboriginal adults 15 years and over experience much higher unemployment rates than the non-Aboriginal population. According to the 2004/2005 Labour Force Survey, in 2005, 12% of the off-reserve Aboriginal population in Manitoba was unemployed, compared to 5% of the non-Aboriginal population. Saskatchewan's off-reserve Aboriginal population had the highest unemployment rates of all Western provinces. In 2004/2005, 16% of the off-reserve Aboriginal population was unemployed, compared to 5% of the non-Aboriginal population.

Among the off-reserve First Nations and Métis populations, First Nations people had the highest unemployment rate. In 2004-2005, 21% of First Nations in Saskatchewan and 15% in Manitoba were unemployed compared with 13% of Métis in Saskatchewan and 10% in Manitoba.

According to the 2001 Census, the unemployment rate was particularly high among Aboriginal youth aged 15 to 24 living off reserve: 22% compared to 10% among non-Aboriginal youth in Manitoba and 24% compared to 11% among non-Aboriginal youth in Saskatchewan.

Source: O'Donnell, V. and A. Ballardin. 2006. [Aboriginal Peoples Survey 2001 - Provincial and Territorial Reports: Off-reserve Aboriginal Population](#). Statistics Canada Catalogue number 89-618-XIE.

Until very recently, however, reliable data on the literacy of Aboriginal people in Canada have been rather scarce. The [2003 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey](#) (IALSS) collected data from large enough samples of Aboriginal people living in urban areas in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, as well as Aboriginal people living in selected communities in the territories, to answer key questions about the literacy proficiency of these populations. The report on the Canadian results of IALSS, "[Building on Our Competencies](#)"⁷ published in November 2005, presents an analysis of literacy skills in English or French for the Aboriginal and the non-Aboriginal adult populations in these over-sampled regions. While IALSS data are not representative of the total Aboriginal population in Canada, they nevertheless provide a unique opportunity to examine the literacy proficiency of specific segments of the Aboriginal population in Canada.

Since the off-reserve Aboriginal population in Manitoba and Saskatchewan is comprised of significant proportions of individuals who self-identify as First Nations and Métis, it would be appropriate to provide distinct literacy indicators for these two Aboriginal populations. The IALSS background questionnaire allows researchers to make distinctions on the basis of self-reported Aboriginal identity group. The goal of the present report is therefore to describe the level and distribution of adult literacy (as measured through IALSS) among the off-reserve First Nations and Métis populations residing in urban areas of Manitoba and Saskatchewan.⁸

Defining and measuring literacy: The 2003 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey

The 2003 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS) assessed the literacy skills of Canadians aged 16 and over from across the ten provinces and three territories. The survey was designed to measure literacy in one of Canada's two official languages (French or English). Literacy is broadly defined in this survey's framework as "using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential".⁹

Literacy, therefore, is not viewed as a set of isolated skills associated with reading and writing. To the contrary, it is assumed that adults use their reading and writing skills within a particular context and for a particular purpose. Furthermore, according to this framework, literacy skills are seen as essential for individuals to realize their full personal, social, and economic potential, and are the foundation upon which people may acquire additional knowledge and skills throughout adulthood.

This definition of literacy is meant to capture a broad range of situations in which literacy plays a role in the lives of adults, from private to public, from school to work, to lifelong learning and active citizenship. The specific contexts assessed in IALSS thus included the [home and the family](#), [health and safety](#), [community and citizenship](#), [consumer economics](#), [paid work](#), as well as [leisure and recreation](#).

The framework used in IALSS also views literacy as a continuum. In other words, the IALSS is not a survey aimed at distinguishing those who are "literate" from those who are "illiterate," but rather measures literacy along a continuum of proficiency that indicates how well adults are able to use information in today's society. There are four domains of literacy proficiency that are measured in IALSS: [prose](#), [document](#), [numeracy](#) and [problem solving](#). In the prose, document, and numeracy domains, Level 1 contains respondents displaying the lowest level of ability, while Levels 4 and 5 contain those with the highest level of ability.

To understand the meaning of an individual's scores in the literacy domains assessed by IALSS, it is important to define a minimum level of competence that is suitable for people to cope with the increasing skill demands of a knowledge- and information-based society. For the prose, document, and numeracy domains, Level 3 performance is chosen as the benchmark because performance at or above that level is generally associated with a number of positive outcomes, such as increased civic participation, increased economic success and independence, and enhanced opportunities for lifelong learning. In countries like Canada, individuals at literacy proficiency Levels 1 and 2 typically have not yet mastered the minimum foundation of literacy skills needed to perform tasks generally viewed to be important for full participation in social and economic life. For this reason, most of the analyses contained in this report anchor the scales at the cut point between Levels 2 and 3, thereby highlighting the distributions above and below this threshold.

Literacy in context

As much as it is important to understand what is measured in IALSS, it is also important to emphasize what this survey does not measure. The ability to use and understand the type of information assessed in IALSS is far from capturing all the different kinds of literacy practices that may be valued in different cultures or groups. In the context of First Nations and Métis people, significant domains of knowledge, such as the literacies associated with the land or the natural world as well as with Aboriginal world views and traditions¹⁰ are simply not measured by IALSS. It is thus fundamental to recognize that the multiple literacies that are part of First Nations' and Métis' cultures¹¹ are not reflected in the literacy scores derived from IALSS.

Further, the literacy indicators derived from IALSS are by no means representative of First Nations and Métis peoples' effective literacy in an Aboriginal language. In this respect, the IALSS background questionnaire included a question regarding respondents' first language learned at home in childhood and still understood. These data reveal that among off-reserve First Nations respondents, nearly a third (32%) in urban Manitoba and just over a quarter (26%) in urban Saskatchewan reported an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue. The proportions reporting English as a mother tongue among this population were 67% and 73%, respectively. Among Métis respondents, 3% and 4% reported an Aboriginal language as their mother tongue in urban Manitoba and Saskatchewan, respectively. The proportions reporting English as a mother tongue among this population were 79% and 90%, respectively, while another 17% and 6% reported French. It should thus be kept in mind that for some Aboriginal respondents in the present study, the literacy indicators derived from IALSS may consist of a measure of their literacy in a second language, especially for First Nations.¹²

At the same time, however, one also needs to acknowledge the relative importance of people's literacy skills such as those measured by IALSS in order to successfully navigate the demands of life in an urban context. For example, many of the specific contexts assessed are directly related to employment. It could be argued that the tasks included in IALSS are not entirely culturally universal; however, in an urban context, the ability to use and understand the kind of information as assessed through IALSS is generally likely to be tied to a number of positive life outcomes. For example, low levels of literacy skills may limit people's options in terms of access to professional and technical occupations requiring complex literacy skills, and also in terms of access to adult education and training programs. These limitations are, in turn, likely to affect people's overall sense of well-being.

Literacy profile of off-reserve First Nations and Métis populations in urban Manitoba and Saskatchewan

This section describes the level and distribution of literacy proficiency among off-reserve First Nations and Métis people aged 16 and over living in urban parts of Manitoba and Saskatchewan.

The question used to measure Aboriginal identity in IALSS was the following: "Are you an Aboriginal person, that is, North American Indian, Métis or Inuit (Eskimo)?" The present study analyzed the literacy of individuals who self-identified as North American Indian or Métis. Further, the present study only included those individuals residing in urban areas of Manitoba and Saskatchewan. An urban area is defined as having a minimum population concentration of 1,000 persons and a population density of at least 400 persons per square kilometre, based on the 2001 Census population count.

Respondents could choose to have their literacy assessed in either English or French. All non-Aboriginal and First Nations respondents chose English as the language of task administration. Among Métis, all respondents residing in urban Saskatchewan chose English, while a very small proportion (slightly less than 2%) of Métis people residing in urban Manitoba chose French.

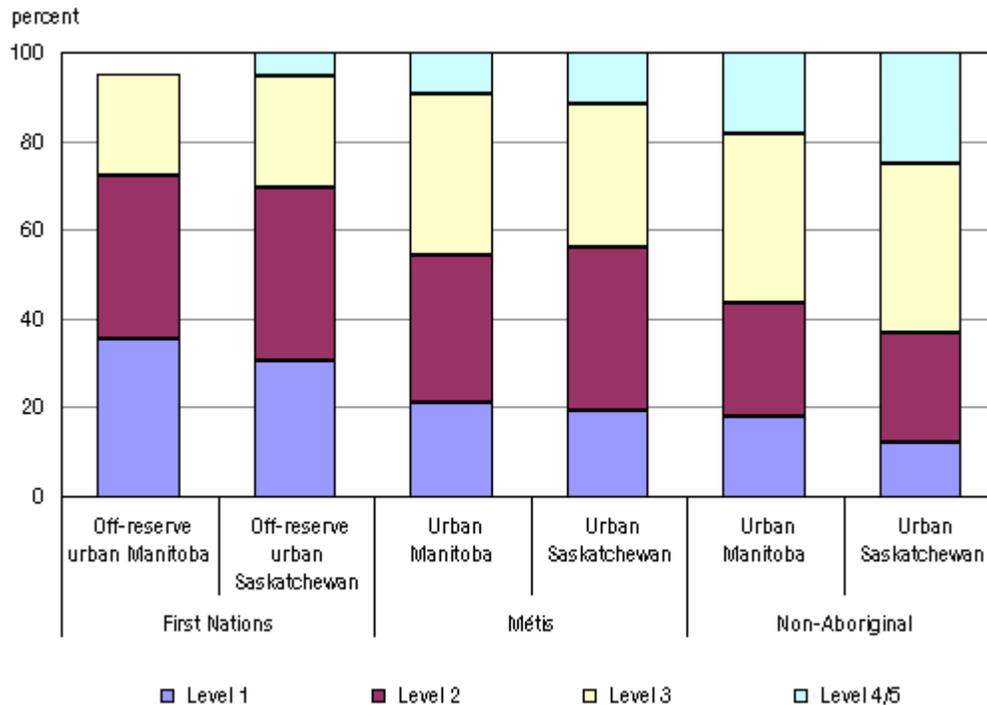
The discussion focuses on the [prose](#) and [document](#) literacy scales of IALSS. It describes the relationship between prose literacy and a number of key socio-demographic characteristics (namely sex, age, and educational attainment), as well as the relationship between document literacy and respondents' labour force status. Indicators are best interpreted when put in the context in which they are observed. For this reason, in addition to First Nations and Métis people's literacy scores, scores for non-Aboriginal respondents living in urban Manitoba and Saskatchewan will be provided.

Prose literacy distribution

Performance at Level 3 is generally agreed to be the benchmark for the minimum level of literacy proficiency that is needed for an individual to successfully cope in a complex knowledge- and information-based society. Among First Nations, the proportion of adults aged 16 and over who scored below Level 3 was about 72% in urban Manitoba and 70% in urban Saskatchewan ([Chart 1](#)). Among the Métis, these proportions were 54% and 56%, respectively. In comparison, 44% of the non-Aboriginal population in urban Manitoba and 37% of the non-Aboriginal population in urban Saskatchewan scored below Level 3.

Chart 1

Distribution of prose proficiency level, by urban First Nations, Métis, and non-Aboriginal populations in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, population aged 16 and over, 2003



Note: Estimates of the size of the off-reserve population of First Nations people in urban Manitoba who are at Level 4/5 on the prose proficiency scale are too unreliable to be published.

Source: [International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey](#), 2003, Statistics Canada.

Individuals who score at Level 1 on the prose proficiency scale have very limited abilities to locate, understand and use information. Among First Nations, the proportion of adults who scored at this level was about 35% in urban Manitoba and 30% in urban Saskatchewan. Among the Métis, these proportions were 21% and 19%, respectively. In comparison, about 18% of the non-Aboriginal population in urban Manitoba and 12% of the non-Aboriginal population in urban Saskatchewan scored at Level 1.

Further comparisons involving First Nations, Métis, and non-Aboriginal individuals in their respective provinces revealed that the proportions of First Nations individuals at Level 1 were significantly higher than both their Métis and non-Aboriginal counterparts, whereas the proportions of Métis and non-Aboriginal individuals at Level 1 did not differ significantly. Thus, relative to the urban non-Aboriginal and Métis populations and in part a reflection of differing levels of formal education and use of a mother tongue other than the language of literacy assessment, off-reserve First Nations people in urban Manitoba and Saskatchewan have significantly higher proportions of their adult population at risk of not being able to fully reach their social and economic potential due to lower literacy skills.

Sex and prose literacy

[Table 1](#) shows the relationship between sex and prose literacy proficiency for the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations in urban Manitoba and Saskatchewan. Generally speaking, and reflecting the higher levels of educational attainment typically observed among women, the proportions of individuals aged 16 and over scoring below the Level 3 threshold were significantly higher among men than among women. Two exceptions to this pattern were observed. The first exception was found among the First Nations population in urban Saskatchewan, where significantly more women than men scored below Level 3 on the prose literacy scale. The second exception was found among the non-Aboriginal population in urban Saskatchewan, where similar proportions of men and women scored below Level 3.

	Levels 1-2	Levels 3+	Total
	Percent		
First Nations, urban Manitoba			
Men	76.7	F	100.00
Women	68.9	31.1	100.00
First Nations, urban Saskatchewan			
Men	67.0	33.0	100.00
Women	71.7	28.3	100.00
Métis, urban Manitoba			
Men	58.0	42.0	100.00
Women	51.7	48.3	100.00
Métis, urban Saskatchewan			
Men	61.4	38.6	100.00
Women	52.4 E	47.6 E	100.00
Non-Aboriginal, urban Manitoba			
Men	45.9	54.1	100.00
Women	41.2	58.8	100.00
Non-Aboriginal, urban Saskatchewan			
Men	37.8	62.2	100.00
Women	35.6	64.4	100.00

E use with caution
 F too unreliable to be published

Source: [International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey](#), 2003, Statistics Canada.

The largest gap between men and women in the proportions scoring below Level 3 in prose literacy proficiency was found among Métis respondents in urban Saskatchewan, where 61% of men and 52% of women scored below the Level 3 benchmark.

Age and prose literacy

The relationship between age and literacy proficiency is a complex one, given that literacy skills can be acquired, developed, maintained, or even lost during a lifetime. Research suggests that several mechanisms may be at play. On the one hand, cognitive performance may diminish as people age. On the other hand, performance may be enhanced as people age and accumulate experience, knowledge and skills. These two phenomena do not necessarily occur concurrently and the latter is more likely to occur earlier in life than the former.

As can be observed in [Table 2](#), individuals aged 56 and over were significantly more likely than those aged 36 to 55 and those aged 16 to 35 to score below the Level 3 benchmark and this, among all the First Nations, Métis, and non-Aboriginal populations under focus.¹³ In turn, individuals aged 36 to 55 were significantly more likely to score below Level 3 than those aged 16 to 35. The exceptions were the Métis population in urban Manitoba, where similar proportions of 16 to 35 and 36 to 55 year-olds scored below Level 3, and the non-Aboriginal population in urban Saskatchewan, where more 16 to 35 than 36 to 55 year-olds scored below Level 3.

Table 2: Literacy levels for prose proficiency by age group, First Nations, Métis, and non-Aboriginal populations aged 16 and over in urban Manitoba and urban Saskatchewan, 2003			
	Levels 1-2	Levels 3+	Total
	Percent		
First Nations, urban Manitoba			
16 to 35	69.5	F	100.00
36 to 55	74.2	25.8	100.00
56 and over	85.2	F	100.00
First Nations, urban Saskatchewan			
16 to 35	67.5	32.5	100.00

36 to 55	70.2		29.8		100.00
56 and over	86.6		F		100.00
Métis, urban Manitoba					
16 to 35	51.7		48.3		100.00
36 to 55	50.2		49.8		100.00
56 and over	78.5		F		100.00
Métis, urban Saskatchewan					
16 to 35	51.9	E	48.1	E	100.00
36 to 55	57.3		42.7		100.00
56 and over	76.4		F		100.00
Non-Aboriginal, urban Manitoba					
16 to 35	33.2		66.8		100.00
36 to 55	37.3		62.7		100.00
56 and over	66.2		33.8		100.00
Non-Aboriginal, urban Saskatchewan					
16 to 35	30.4		69.6		100.00
36 to 55	25.2		74.8		100.00
56 and over	61.0		39.0		100.00

E use with caution

F too unreliable to be published

Source: [International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey](#), 2003, Statistics Canada.

The literacy proficiency of Aboriginal people aged 16 to 35 is important when considering the fact that this group has potentially more time than older populations to contribute their knowledge and skills to their communities, their families, and to the labour market, but also because the Aboriginal youth population in the regions under focus is projected to undergo significant growth in the coming decade. We note here that 70% and 68% of First Nations people aged 16 to 35 in urban Manitoba and Saskatchewan respectively have prose proficiency scores below Level 3. In comparison, 52% of the Métis population aged 16 to 35 in both urban Manitoba and urban Saskatchewan scored below Level 3. Among the non-Aboriginal population, these proportions were 33% and 30%, respectively.

Comparisons involving First Nations, Métis, and non-Aboriginal individuals in their respective provinces further revealed that the proportions of 16 to 35 year-old First Nations individuals scoring below Level 3 were significantly higher than both their Métis and non-Aboriginal counterparts. In turn, the proportions of non-Aboriginal individuals aged 16 to 35 who scored below Level 3 were significantly lower than for both of their Aboriginal counterparts.

Thus, even though individuals in the youngest age group generally had higher literacy proficiency than the older age groups among First Nations and Métis populations, the higher proportions of 16 to 35 year-old First Nations and Métis individuals who fail to reach Level 3 relative to their non-Aboriginal counterparts is cause for concern. Even though many may still be attending school and acquiring literacy skills, this could nevertheless have a negative impact on their success at school and/or in the labour market, as well as limit their participation in further formal and informal education and training activities.

Educational attainment and prose literacy

A strong foundation in literacy is closely linked to educational success. The link between the two is also complex. For instance, while some adults manage to reach a relatively high level of literacy proficiency despite low levels of formal education, others show low levels of literacy proficiency despite a fairly high education level. But generally speaking, higher levels of formal education should be expected to be associated with higher levels of literacy proficiency.

As can be observed in [Table 3](#), among each of the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations under focus, higher levels of formal education were consistently associated with higher levels of literacy proficiency. Indeed, individuals with postsecondary education were significantly more likely than those with less than high school education to score at or above the Level 3 benchmark.

Table 3:
Literacy levels for prose proficiency by educational attainment, First Nations, Métis, and non-Aboriginal populations aged 16 and over in urban Manitoba and urban Saskatchewan, 2003

	Levels 1-2	Levels 3+	Total
	Percent		
First Nations, urban Manitoba			
Less than high school ¹	88.2	F	100.00
High school or equivalent	57.0	43.0	100.00
Postsecondary ²	F	53.5 E	100.00
First Nations, urban Saskatchewan			
Less than high school ¹	85.7	14.3 E	100.00
High school or equivalent	64.2	35.8	100.00
Postsecondary ²	40.7	59.3	100.00
Métis, urban Manitoba			
Less than high school ¹	80.9	19.1 E	100.00
High school or equivalent	43.6	56.4	100.00

Postsecondary ²	F	74.6		100.00
Métis, urban Saskatchewan				
Less than high school ¹	84.3	15.7		100.00
High school or equivalent	F	F		100.00
Postsecondary ²	35.3	64.7		100.00
Non-Aboriginal, urban Manitoba				
Less than high school ¹	74.7	25.3		100.00
High school or equivalent	40.2	59.8		100.00
Postsecondary ²	27.1	72.9		100.00
Non-Aboriginal, urban Saskatchewan				
Less than high school ¹	74.4	25.6	E	100.00
High school or equivalent	32.4	67.6		100.00
Postsecondary ²	22.8	77.2		100.00

¹Includes people with some high school (not completed) and people with less than Grade 7 education (including no formal education).

²Includes people with some postsecondary education (such as apprenticeship certificate or technical institute) and people with a university diploma.

E use with caution

F too unreliable to be published

Source: [International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey](#), 2003, Statistics Canada.

For instance, among First Nations in urban Saskatchewan, 59% of the population aged 16 and over with postsecondary education scored at or above Level 3 on the prose literacy scale. In comparison, only about 14% of those with less than high school education reached the Level 3 benchmark. A similar pattern was observed among First Nations in urban Manitoba. Among Métis in urban Manitoba, 75% of individuals with postsecondary education reached the Level 3 benchmark, as compared with only 19% of those with less than high school education. A similar pattern was observed among Métis in urban Saskatchewan.

Interestingly, Métis individuals in urban Manitoba who pursued postsecondary education presented the smallest gap with their non-Aboriginal counterparts in literacy proficiency: 75% reached the Level 3 benchmark, compared with 73% among the non-Aboriginal population. There thus appears to be little difference in the literacy proficiency of urban Métis and non-Aboriginal persons in Manitoba once education is taken into account. In comparison, among the three other Aboriginal populations, the gaps with their non-Aboriginal counterparts in the proportions of individuals with postsecondary education who scored at or above Level 3 ranged from 13 to 19 percentage points.

Labour force status and document literacy

Differences between the proportions of individuals at the low and high ends of the literacy distribution among the Aboriginal and the non-Aboriginal populations would not be important if not for the fact that literacy proficiency seems to be associated with significant life outcomes. One such outcome is [labour force](#) status.

First, we note that the percentage of the population aged 16 to 65 who were not participating in the labour force was particularly high (between 40 and 45%) among individuals scoring at Levels 1 or 2 on the document literacy scale for the First Nations population in urban Manitoba and for both First Nations and Métis populations in urban Saskatchewan.

Second, among the Aboriginal population aged 16 to 65 who were active in the labour market, the percentage of individuals who was employed was significantly higher among those who scored at or above Level 3 than among those who scored below this benchmark ([Table 4](#)). For instance, among First Nations in urban Saskatchewan, about 77% of those at or above Level 3 on the document proficiency scale were employed, compared to 55% of those who scored below this benchmark. The pattern was similar among First Nations in urban Manitoba. Among Métis in urban Manitoba, 92% of those at or above Level 3 on the document proficiency scale were employed, compared to 78% of those who scored below this benchmark.. Métis in urban Saskatchewan presented a similar pattern.

Table 4:
Literacy levels for document proficiency by labour force status¹, First Nations, Métis, and non-Aboriginal populations aged 16 to 65 in urban Manitoba and urban Saskatchewan, 2003

	Levels 1-2	Levels 3+	
	Percent		
First Nations, urban Manitoba			
In the labour force	59.6	69.4	
Unemployed	37.8	F	
Employed	62.2	78.6	
Not in the labour force	40.4	30.6	E
Total	100.0	100.0	
First Nations, urban Saskatchewan			
In the labour force	55.4	84.0	
Unemployed	44.6	23.2	E
Employed	55.4	76.8	
Not in the labour force	44.6	F	

Total	100.0		100.0	
Métis, urban Manitoba				
In the labour force	77.0		81.8	
Unemployed	F		F	
Employed	78.3		92.4	
Not in the labour force	23.0		F	
Total	100.0		100.0	
Métis, urban Saskatchewan				
In the labour force	59.0		79.3	
Unemployed	22.3	E	F	
Employed	77.7		90.7	E
Not in the labour force	41.0	E	F	
Total	100.0		100.0	
Non-Aboriginal, urban Manitoba				
In the labour force	81.5		85.1	
Unemployed	F		3.5	E
Employed	93.6		96.5	
Not in the labour force	18.5		14.9	
Total	100.0		100.0	
Non-Aboriginal, urban Saskatchewan				
In the labour force	80.7		82.5	
Unemployed	F		F	
Employed	93.7		94.6	
Not in the labour force	19.3	E	17.5	
Total	100.0		100.0	

¹According to the standard definition employed by Statistics Canada, the employed are persons having a job or business, whereas the unemployed are without work, available for work, and actively seeking work. Together the unemployed and the employed constitute the labour force. Persons not in the labour force are those who, during the reference week, were unwilling or unable to offer or supply labour services (this includes persons who were full-time students currently attending school). The reference period for the IALSS employment status was the date of the interview. Respondents were asked the question: "What is your current work situation?"

E use with caution

F too unreliable to be published

Source: [International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey](#), 2003, Statistics Canada.

The gap in employment when individuals at or above Level 3 were compared to those below Level 3 was highest among First Nations people in urban Saskatchewan, at 21 percentage points. In contrast, there was essentially no difference in employment rates by literacy level among the non-Aboriginal populations in urban Manitoba and Saskatchewan (2.9 and 0.9 percentage points, respectively).

Conclusion

This article presented a broad portrait of the literacy proficiency of two very specific segments of the Aboriginal population in Canada, namely the off-reserve First Nations and Métis adult populations living in urban parts of Manitoba and Saskatchewan. We again emphasize that the literacy indicators derived from IALSS are by no means representative of the different kinds of literacy practices that are valued in First Nations and Métis cultures, nor are they representative of First Nations and Métis peoples' effective literacy in an Aboriginal language. However, in an urban context, the ability to use and understand the kind of information as assessed through IALSS is likely to be generally tied to a number of positive life outcomes, and thus warrants attention.

The finding that off-reserve First Nations and Métis peoples in urban Manitoba and Saskatchewan performed at lower literacy proficiency levels than their non-Aboriginal counterparts is worthy of note. Indeed, unequal distributions of literacy proficiencies may lead to inequalities in social and economic outcomes between societal groups, which in turn may make the maintenance and acquisition of new competencies even more difficult. In this respect, it is equally worthy of note that off-reserve First Nations people in urban Manitoba and Saskatchewan have the highest proportions of their population at the lowest level of literacy proficiency.

The analysis confirms the importance of education for the literacy of off-reserve First Nations and Métis peoples living in urban parts of Manitoba and Saskatchewan: as is the case among the non-Aboriginal population, higher levels of formal education were shown to be consistently associated with higher levels of literacy proficiency. There further appears to be little difference in the literacy proficiency of urban Métis and non-Aboriginal individuals in Manitoba once education is taken into account.

There is evidence of a relationship between literacy proficiency and labour market outcomes among the Aboriginal populations under focus. Data show that the percentage of employed First Nations and Métis individuals was consistently higher among those who had literacy proficiency at or above Level 3 than among those who scored below this benchmark. In contrast, this difference was almost nil among the non-Aboriginal populations. The relationship between

literacy and employability appears to be especially strong for off-reserve First Nations in urban Saskatchewan.

Age is an important factor to consider when drawing conclusions about the distribution of skills in a population, and especially when it comes to develop strategies to improve these skills. In this respect, the lower literacy proficiency levels of off-reserve First Nations and Métis peoples aged 16 to 35 relative to their non-Aboriginal counterparts warrants attention. A recent report¹⁴ has shown that literacy skills tend to decline with age, especially if individuals are not attaining high levels of literacy proficiency early on within a formal school setting. So, not only are these First Nations and Métis youth and young adults at a relatively greater risk of experiencing challenges at school and/or in the labour market, but their current literacy levels may also prevent them from entering portions of the job market aimed at highly skilled individuals, which could have the potential to help them acquire or at least maintain their literacy skills.

Many other important factors likely to be associated with literacy were not explored in this article and as such, these results should be considered exploratory, since many questions remain unanswered. For instance, beyond formal schooling, it is very clear that labour market experiences, habits related to the written word both at home and at work, as well as engagement in various forms of adult education and lifelong learning, all play an important role in skills acquisition and retention. Furthermore, this study did not explore the impact of having an Aboriginal mother tongue on the literacy proficiency of First Nations and Métis individuals. Literacy skills should be understood in relation to the linguistic, cultural, economic and social contexts in which people live. Given the high proportion and important projected growth of the Aboriginal population in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, these factors and how they are associated with First Nations and Métis peoples' literacy proficiency should be explored in future research.

References and notes

1. O'Donnell, V. and A. Ballardin. 2006. [Aboriginal Peoples Survey 2001 - Provincial and Territorial Reports: Off-reserve Aboriginal Population](#). Statistics Canada Catalogue number 89-618-XIE.
2. [Projections of the Aboriginal Populations, Canada, Provinces and Territories, 2001 to 2017](#). Statistics Canada Catalogue number 91-547-XIE.
3. Respondents self-identified as "North American Indian"; however, the term "First Nations" is used throughout this report.
4. The Inuit represent less than 1% of both Manitoba's and Saskatchewan's Aboriginal populations.
5. O'Donnell, V. and A. Ballardin. 2006. [Aboriginal Peoples Survey 2001 - Provincial and Territorial Reports: Off-reserve Aboriginal Population](#). Statistics Canada Catalogue number 89-618-XIE.
6. Siggner, A.J. and R. Costa. 2005. [Aboriginal Conditions in Census Metropolitan Areas, 1981-2001](#). Statistics Canada Catalogue number 89-613-MIE, number 008.

7. Human Resources and Skills Development Canada and Statistics Canada. 2003. [Building on Our Competencies: Canadian Results of the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey](#). Statistics Canada Catalogue number 89-617-XWE.
8. Because the Inuit represent less than 1% of both Manitoba's and Saskatchewan's off-reserve Aboriginal population, the sample size for this population is too small to produce reliable literacy indicators. A future report in Education Matters using IALSS data will focus specifically on the Inuit population in Nunavut, which was also over-sampled.
9. Murray, T.S., Y. Clermont, and M. Binkley. 2005. [Measuring Adult Literacy and Life Skills: New Frameworks for Assessment](#). Statistics Canada Catalogue number 89-552-MIE, number 13, page 94.
10. Canadian Council on Learning (CCL). <http://www.ccl-cca.ca/CCL/Reports/RedefiningSuccessInAboriginalLearning/RedefiningSuccessModels.htm>
11. Battiste, M. 2005. State of Aboriginal Learning in Canada. Canadian Council on Learning (CCL).
12. For a general discussion of issues surrounding literacy and language, see Corbeil, J.-P. 2006. [The Canadian Component of the 2003 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey \(IALSS\): The Situation of Official Language Minorities](#). Statistics Canada Catalogue number 89-552-MIE - number 015.
13. Sample size restrictions precluded the use of very fine age groupings for this analysis. For this reason, the focus is on three age groups: individuals aged 16 to 35, 36 to 55, and 56 and over.
14. Willms, J.D., and T.S. Murray. 2007. [International Adult Literacy Survey: Gaining and Losing Literacy Skills Over the Lifecourse](#). Statistics Canada Catalogue number 89-552-MIE, number 16.