



In January 2009, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) released state-level estimates of the percentage of adults lacking *Basic Prose Literacy Skills (BPLS)* for all states and counties in the United States. Using data from the National Assessment of Adult Literacy Survey (NAALS) in 2003 and 1992, the report demonstrates that an estimated 32 million adults in the United States – about one in seven – are lacking functional literacy skills.

While this report did not have a specific focus on gender, previous National Adult Literacy Survey reports have shown that more than **50% of women in the U.S. have literacy proficiencies lower than an average high school graduate** (Level 3 proficiency). A growing body of research demonstrates that women account for a significant proportion of adults with who are lacking basic literacy skills in the United States and that they face many gender-based obstacles to attaining and increasing their literacy skills.

The most recent NAALS report does show that while women's average scores in quantitative and document literacy have increased slightly from 1992 to 2003, women's prose literacy scores remain unchanged. It also reveals that overall the nation has not made much progress in improving adult literacy levels in recent years. From 1992 to 2003, the United States population grew to include about 23 million more adults; in the same period, **an estimated 3.6 million more joined the ranks of adults who are lacking functional literacy skills.** The need for adult literacy programming remains and, in some places, continues to grow.

### Defining Levels of Literacy

Estimates of Prose, Document, and Quantitative literacy are measured on four performance levels: *Below Basic*, *Basic*, *Intermediate*, and *Proficient*. The measure used to estimate literacy at the state level is the percentage of adults lacking *Basic Prose Literacy Skills (BPLS)*. "The functional literacy of adults who lack *BPLS* can range from being unable to read and understand any written information in English to being able to locate easily identifiable information in short, commonplace prose text, but nothing more advanced." (NAAL)

- **Looking at the low rates of functional literacy state-by-state and over the years, it is evident that some communities are making significant strides toward reducing low literacy, while elsewhere this is becoming a more widespread challenge.** For example, in Mississippi, the percentage of adults with low literacy dropped 9 percentage points, from 25% in 1992 to 16% in 2003. In every county in the state, low-skill rates dropped – in some cases, the change was by 20 percentage points or more. Likewise, in Rhode Island, the percentage of individuals with low literacy skills dropped by ten points, from 18% to just 8%.
- **By contrast, in several large states, such as California, New York, and Florida, there was a significant increase in the number of adults lacking Basic Prose Literacy Skills.** The tables below list the states with the highest and lowest percentages of adults with low literacy, according to the NAALS study. They also show indicators of women's status in each state related to employment, economic, and social autonomy.
- **States that improved their scores from >15% lacking "basic" prose literacy in 1992 to <15% in 2003:** Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, North Carolina, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia. However, in California, Florida,
- **In most states, there was little change in the levels of literacy from 1992 to 2003. In six states, the percentage of adults lacking "Basic" prose literacy remained virtually unchanged from 1992 to 2003:** Oregon, Pennsylvania, Wyoming, Arizona, Iowa, and Montana.
- **In some states, there were significant improvements from 1992 to 2003, with reductions in the percentage of adults lacking "Basic" prose literacy. Thirteen states that saw the most significant change in the percentages of adults lacking "Basic" prose literacy:** Rhode Island (-10), Mississippi (-9), Kentucky (-7), Alabama (-6), Maine (-6), Missouri (-6), Tennessee (-6), Arkansas (-5), Connecticut (-5), Louisiana (-5), New Hampshire (-5), North Dakota (-5), South Carolina (-5).
- **In ten states, the literacy levels worsened, with an increase in the percentages of adults lacking "Basic" prose literacy from 1992 to 2003:** California (+8), New York (+6), Florida (+5), Nevada (+3), Washington (+3), Colorado (+1), Idaho (+1), New Jersey (+1), Texas (+1), and Utah (+1).

### States in which more than 15% of adults lack Basic Prose Literacy Skills, 2003:

State	Population	% lacking Basic prose literacy	Composite Score, Women's Employment and Earnings		Composite Score, Women's Social and Economic Autonomy	
			Grade	Rank	Grade	Rank
California	26,030,000	23%	B	11	C	21
New York	15,060,000	22%	C+	19	C	23
Florida	13,040,000	20%	C-	31	D+	38
District of Columbia	426,000	19%	A-	1	B	2
Texas	15,940,000	19%	C	29	D	44
Georgia	6,366,000	17%	C-	31	C-	31
New Jersey	6,610,000	17%	B	8	B-	11
Hawaii	944,000	16%	C+	16	B-	14
Louisiana	3,310,000	16%	F	50	F	49
Mississippi	2,120,000	16%	D-	47	F	51
Nevada	1,670,000	16%	D	40	D+	33
New Mexico	1,390,000	16%	D-	44	D	42

(Twelve states in 2003 vs. seventeen states in 1992)

Of the twelve states in which the highest percentages of adults have low literacy, half received a composite score of C- or worse on indicators of Women's Employment and Earnings in *The Status of Women in the States 2004*, and more than half of these states received a composite score of C or worse on its indicators of Women's Social and Economic Autonomy.

### States in which less than 10% of adults lack "Basic" prose literacy skills, 2003:

State	Population	% lacking Basic prose literacy	Composite Score, Women's Employment and Earnings		Composite Score, Women's Social and Economic Autonomy	
			Grade	Rank	Grade	Rank
Minnesota	3,900,000	6%	B	9	B	6
New Hampshire	995,000	6%	B-	15	B-	9
North Dakota	489,000	6%	C	27	D+	37
Iowa	2,250,000	7%	C	25	C	21
Maine	1,040,000	7%	C	27	C-	28
Missouri	4,320,000	7%	B-	12	C-	26
Nebraska	1,310,000	7%	D+	35	C	20
South Dakota	572,000	7%	C-	31	D+	35
Vermont	485,000	7%	B	10	B-	8
Wisconsin	4,190,000	7%	C	30	C+	17
Indiana	4,630,000	8%	D+	34	C-	29
Kansas	2,050,000	8%	C+	18	C+	16
Michigan	7,630,000	8%	C-	33	C	25
Rhode Island	832,000	8%	C+	16	C+	18
Alaska	461,000	9%	B	3	B-	10
Connecticut	2,670,000	9%	B	5	B	5
Montana	704,000	9%	D-	45	D+	35
Ohio	8,720,000	9%	C	25	C-	29
Utah	1,640,000	9%	D	37	C	24
Wyoming	382,000	9%	D	42	D+	34

(Twenty states in 2003 vs. nine in 1992)

Of the twenty states in which less than 10% of adults demonstrate low literacy, more than half (twelve) of these states received a composite score of C or better on indicators of Women's Employment and Earnings in *The Status of Women in the States 2004*, as well as on indicators of Women's Social and Economic Autonomy (thirteen states).

Sources:

National Assessment of Adult Literacy. (2009). National Center for Education Statistics. <http://nces.ed.gov/naal/index.asp>

The Status of Women in the States. (2004). Institute for Women's Policy Research. <http://www.iwpr.org/States2004/SWS2004/>



Women Expanding

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