

Using the data from the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), this Data Point summarizes the number of U.S. adults with low levels of English literacy and describes how they differ by nativity status¹ and race/ethnicity.

PIAAC is a large-scale international² study of working-age adults (ages 16–65) that assesses adult skills in three domains (literacy, numeracy, and digital problem solving) and collects information on adults' education, work experience, and other background characteristics. In the United States, when the study was conducted in 2011–12 and 2013–14, respondents were first asked questions about their background, with an option to be interviewed in English or Spanish, followed by a skills assessment in English. Because the skills assessment was conducted only in English, all U.S. PIAAC literacy results are for English literacy.

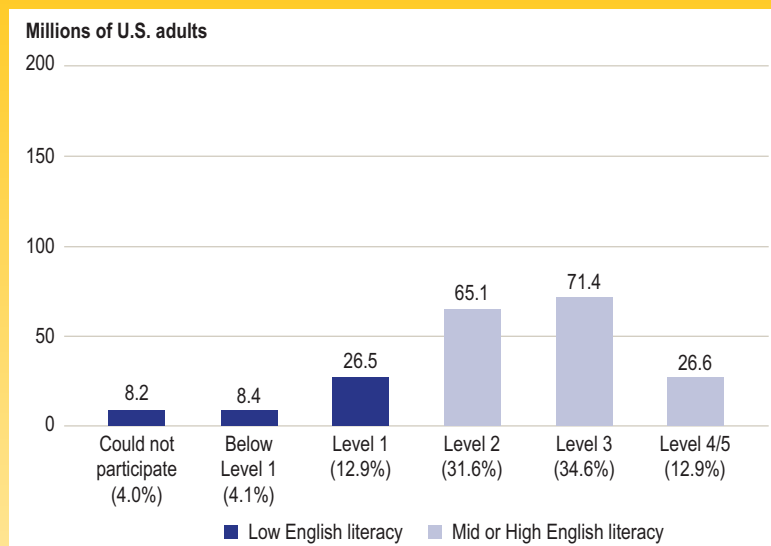
PIAAC defines literacy as “the ability to understand, evaluate, use and engage with written texts to participate in society, to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential” (p. 61, OECD 2013). Results in this Data Point are presented as the number of adults at *literacy proficiency levels* that are described in terms of the types of tasks the adults are likely to complete successfully at a particular level. PIAAC reports out five literacy proficiency levels: from *below level 1* to *level 4/5*.³ Adults with low levels of literacy are defined, consistent with international reports (OECD 2013), as those performing on PIAAC’s literacy assessment at “level 1 or below” or those who could not participate in the survey,⁴ as explained below.

What are the rates of literacy in the United States?

Four in five U.S. adults (79 percent) have English literacy skills sufficient to complete tasks that require comparing and contrasting information, paraphrasing, or making low-level inferences—literacy skills at level 2 or above in PIAAC (OECD 2013). In contrast, one in five U.S. adults (21 percent) has difficulty completing these tasks (**figure 1**). This translates into 43.0 million U.S. adults who possess low literacy skills: 26.5 million at level 1 and 8.4 million below level 1, while 8.2 million could not participate in PIAAC’s background survey either because of a language barrier or a cognitive or physical inability to be interviewed. These adults who were unable to participate are categorized as having low English literacy skills, as is done in international reports (OECD 2013), although no direct assessment of their skills is available.

Adults classified as below level 1 may be considered functionally illiterate in English: i.e., unable to successfully determine the meaning of sentences, read relatively short texts to locate a single piece of information, or complete simple forms (OECD 2013).

FIGURE 1. Number of U.S. adults age 16 to 65 at each level of proficiency on the PIAAC literacy scale and those who could not participate: 2012 and 2014



NOTE: Standard error tables are available at <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2019179>. Percentages of U.S. adults age 16 to 65 at each level of proficiency on PIAAC literacy scale appear in parentheses. Low English literacy is defined as those performing at PIAAC literacy proficiency level 1 or below or who could not participate due to a language barrier or a cognitive or physical inability to be interviewed. The “Mid or High English literacy” label refers to those performing at PIAAC literacy proficiency level 2 or above.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), U.S. PIAAC 2012/2014.

What is the make-up of adults with low English literacy skills by nativity status and race/ethnicity?

U.S.-born adults make up two-thirds of adults with low levels of English literacy skills in the United States.⁵ However, the non-U.S. born are over-represented among such low-skilled adults. Non-U.S.-born adults comprise 34 percent of the population with low literacy skills, compared to 15 percent of the total population (figure 2).

White and Hispanic adults make up the largest percentage of U.S. adults with low levels of English literacy, 35 percent and 34 percent respectively (figure 3).

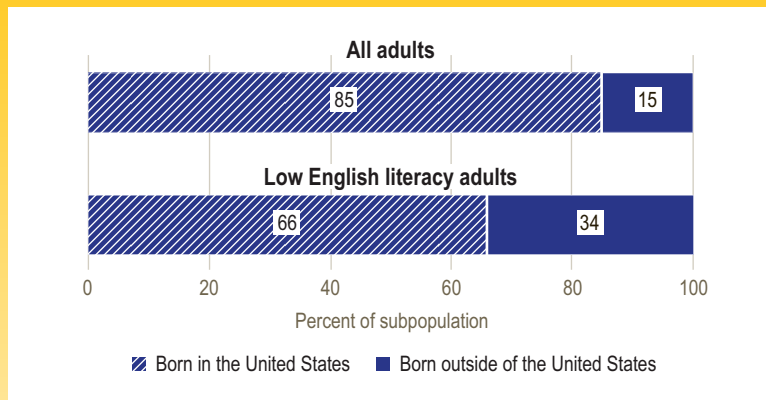
By race/ethnicity and nativity status, the largest percentage of those with low literacy skills are White U.S.-born adults, who represent one third of such low-skilled population. Hispanic adults born outside the United States make up about a quarter of such low-skilled adults in the United States (figure 3).

References

Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2013). *OECD Skills Outlook 2013: First Results From the Survey of Adult Skills*. Paris: OECD Publishing. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264204256-en>.

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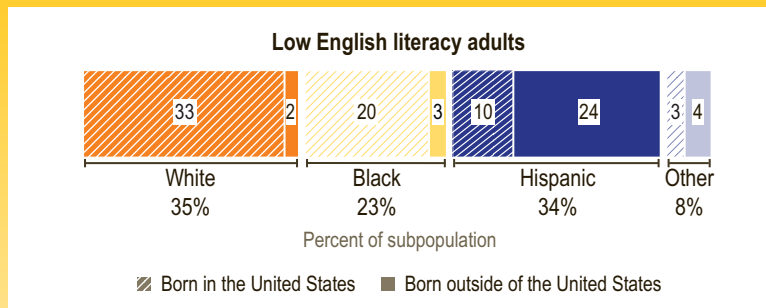
FIGURE 2. Percentage of all and low-skilled adults age 16 to 65, by nativity status: 2012 and 2014



NOTE: Standard error tables are available at <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2019179>. Low English literacy adults are defined as those performing at PIAAC literacy proficiency level 1 or below. Adults who could not participate are excluded.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), U.S. PIAAC 2012/2014.

FIGURE 3. Percentage of low-skilled adults age 16 to 65, by nativity status and race/ethnicity: 2012 and 2014



NOTE: Standard error tables are available at <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2019179>. Low English literacy adults are defined as those performing at PIAAC literacy proficiency level 1 or below. Adults who could not participate are excluded. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), U.S. PIAAC 2012/2014.

Endnotes

¹ Nativity status refers to whether the respondent was born in the United States or born outside the United States.

² This international study is coordinated by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and developed by participating countries with the support of the OECD.

³ This analysis combines the top two proficiency levels (Levels 4 and 5), following the OECD's reporting convention (OECD 2013), because across all participating countries, no more than 2 percent of adults reached Level 5.

⁴ Unlike in the U.S. PIAAC 2012/2014 First Look (Rampey et al. 2016), those who could not participate are included in the literacy proficiency distribution shown here. Referred to as "literacy-related nonresponse cases," these adults who could not participate are typically not shown because virtually all information about them is missing.

⁵ Adults who could not participate in PIAAC because of a language barrier or a cognitive or physical inability to be interviewed are excluded from analyses of nativity status and race/ethnicity as this information is unavailable for nonparticipants.

This NCES Data Point presents information of education topics of current interest. It was authored by Saida Mamedova and Emily Pawlowski of American Institutes for Research. Estimates based on samples are subject to sampling variability, and apparent differences may not be statistically significant. All stated differences are statistically significant

at the .05 level. In the design, conduct, and data processing of National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) surveys, efforts are made to minimize effects of nonsampling errors, such as item response, measurement error, data processing error, or other systematic error.