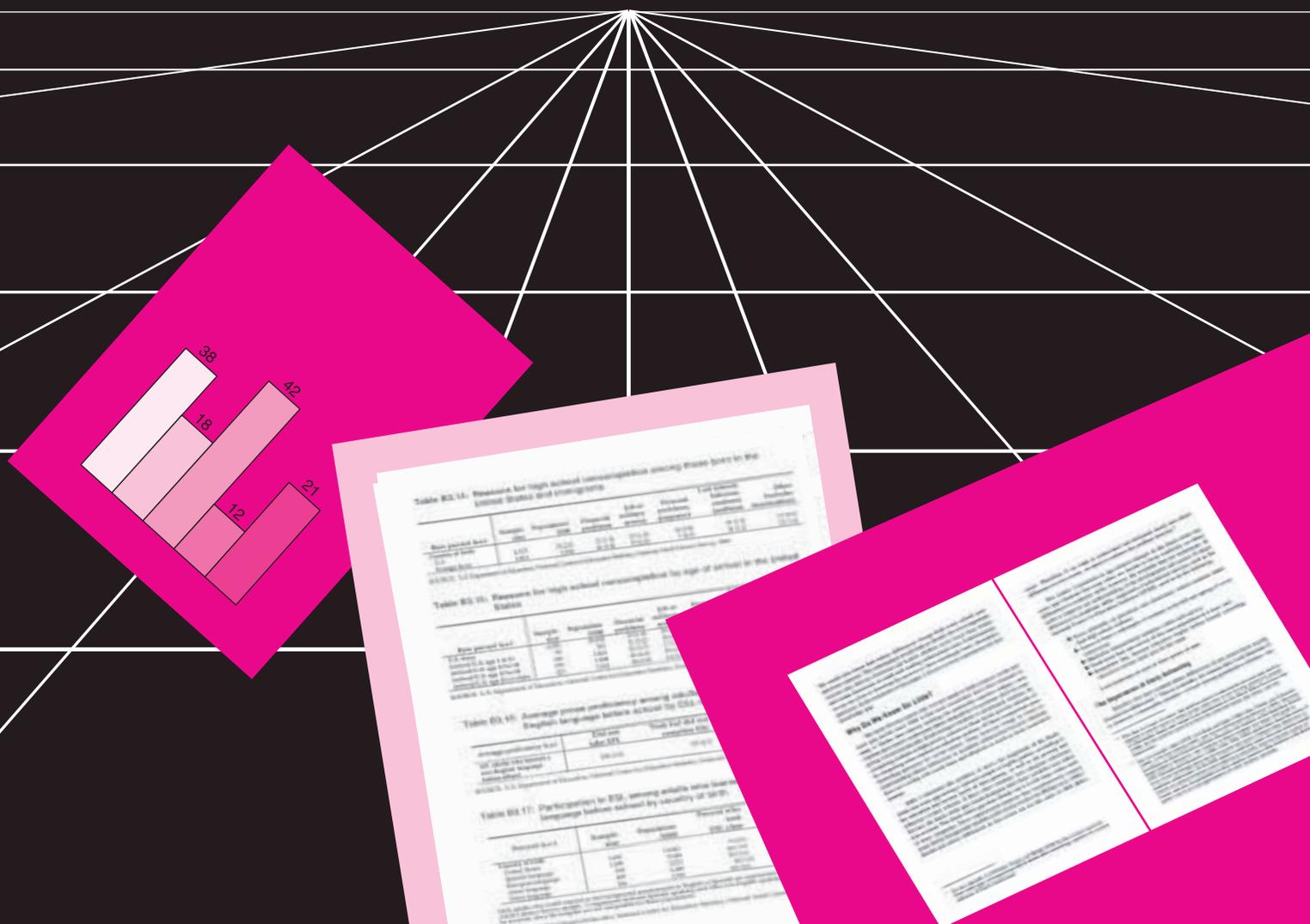


ADULT LITERACY in America

A First Look at the Findings of the
National Adult Literacy Survey



NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS

April 2002

Third Edition

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A First Look at the Findings of the National Adult Literacy Survey

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APRIL 2002

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THIRD EDITION

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adults received proficiency scores along three scales which reflect varying degrees of skill in prose, document, and quantitative literacy. The scales are powerful tools which make it possible to explore the proportions of adults in various subpopulations of interest who demonstrated successive levels of performance.

This report describes the types and levels of literacy skills demonstrated by adults in this country and analyzes the variation in skills across major subgroups in the population. It also explores connections between literacy skills and social and economic variables such as voting, economic status, weeks worked, and earnings. Some of the major findings are highlighted here.

The Literacy Skills of America's Adults

- Twenty-one to 23 percent — or some 40 to 44 million of the 191 million adults in this country — demonstrated skills in the lowest level of prose, document, and quantitative proficiencies (Level 1). Though all adults in this level displayed limited skills, their characteristics are diverse. Many adults in this level performed simple, routine tasks involving brief and uncomplicated texts and documents. For example, they were able to total an entry on a deposit slip, locate the time or place of a meeting on a form, and identify a piece of specific information in a brief news article. Others were unable to perform these types of tasks, and some had such limited skills that they were unable to respond to much of the survey.
- Many factors help to explain why so many adults demonstrated English literacy skills in the lowest proficiency level defined (Level 1). Twenty-five percent of the respondents who performed in this level were immigrants who may have been just learning to speak English. Nearly two-thirds of those in Level 1 (62 percent) had terminated their education before completing high school. A third were age 65 or older, and 26 percent had physical, mental, or health conditions that kept them from participating fully in work, school, housework, or other activities. Nineteen percent of the respondents in Level 1 reported having visual difficulties that affect their ability to read print.
- Some 25 to 28 percent of the respondents, representing about 50 million adults nationwide, demonstrated skills in the next higher level of proficiency (Level 2) on each of the literacy scales. While their skills were more varied than those of individuals performing in Level 1, their repertoire was still quite limited. They were generally able to locate information in text, to make low-level inferences using printed materials, and to integrate easily