

# Skills of U.S. Unemployed, Young, and Older Adults in Sharper Focus:

Results From the Program for the International Assessment  
of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) 2012/2014

First Look



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## Selected Findings

### Overall summary for adults age 16-65

In literacy, the U.S. average score (272) was not measurably different than the PIAAC international average score (273) (see figure 1-A). Compared with the PIAAC international average distribution of literacy skills, the United States had a larger percentage of adults performing at both the top and the bottom of the distribution (13 versus 12 percent at Level 4/5, and 18 versus 16 percent<sup>6</sup> at Level 1 and below, see figure 2-A).

In numeracy and problem solving in technology-rich environments, the United States performed below the PIAAC international average. In numeracy, the U.S. average score was 12 points lower than the PIAAC international average score (257 versus 269, see figure 1-B), and in problem solving in technology-rich environments, the U.S. average score was 9 points lower than the international average (274 versus 283, see figure 1-C). Compared with the international average distributions for these skills, the United States had

- a smaller percentage at the top (10 versus 12 percent at Level 4/5 in numeracy, and 5 versus 8 percent at Level 3 in problem solving in technology-rich environments, see figures 2-B and 2-C), and
- a larger percentage at the bottom (28 versus 19 percent<sup>6</sup> in numeracy, and 64 versus 55 percent<sup>6</sup> in problem solving in technology-rich environments at Level 1 and below).

### Overall summary for U.S. adults age 16-74 by age<sup>7</sup>

The U.S. distribution of skills in each of the three domains for adults age 16-74, by age, suggested a relationship between age and performance. In literacy, the percentages of adults performing at the top proficiency level (4/5) were larger for adults age 25-34 and 35-44 than for adults at the other 10-year age intervals. In numeracy, the percentages of adults performing at the top proficiency level (4/5) were larger for those age 25-34 and 35-44 than those age 55-65 and 66 and older. For adults in the youngest age interval (16-24), the percentages at the top proficiency levels (4/5 for literacy and numeracy and 3 for problem solving in technology-rich environments) were consistently smaller than for adults age 25-34 (see figures 10-A, 10-B, and 10-C).

### Overall summary for U.S. adults age 16-65 by employment status

In literacy, 15 percent of employed adults age 16-65 performed at the top proficiency level (4/5), while in numeracy 12 percent of employed adults reached this level. In both cases, the percentage of employed adults at the top proficiency level was larger than that of unemployed adults (7 percent in literacy and 4 percent in numeracy) and adults who were out of the labor force (9 percent in literacy and 6 percent in numeracy) (see figures 3-A and 3-B).

Similarly, across all three domains, a larger percentage of adults age 16-65 who were unemployed and out of the labor force performed at or below Level 1 compared with adults who were employed (see figures 3-A, 3-B, and 3-C).

### Overall summary for unemployed adults age 16-65

About 75 percent of unemployed U.S. adults age 16-65 had a high school credential or less education. Roughly a third of these adults performed at Level 1 or below in literacy (26 to 38 percent) and about half performed at Level 1 or below in numeracy (47 to 58 percent) (see figures 4-A and 4-B).

<sup>6</sup> Values for combined categories do not match figure due to rounding.

<sup>7</sup> These findings for the expanded U.S. adult population do not follow the sequence of figures in the report. The figures in the report are ordered to keep data in the same age ranges grouped together for ease of reference, whereas the Selected Findings on this page are ordered logically from the most general to more specific findings.

The relationship between age and performance that was noted above among all U.S. adults differed for unemployed adults. Instead of the percentage of adults at the top proficiency level being smaller at older ages, among unemployed adults there was no measurable difference at the top proficiency level (4/5) in literacy and numeracy between those age 55-65 and age 25-34 (8 versus 6 percent in literacy and 5 versus 4 percent in numeracy) (see figures 5-A and 5-B).

Comparing internationally, among unemployed adults age 16-65, larger percentages of both males and females in the United States performed at the bottom of the proficiency distribution (Level 1 or below) in numeracy and problem solving in technology-rich environments than is the case, on average, across the participating PIAAC countries (see figures 6-B and 6-C).

Among unemployed U.S. adults age 16-65, larger percentages of unemployed White adults performed at the top proficiency level in all three domains (4/5 for literacy and numeracy and 3 for problem solving in technology-rich environments) than Black and Hispanic adults (12 versus 1 and 2 percent in literacy, 7 versus 1 and 2 percent in numeracy, and 5 versus 1 percent each in problem solving in technology-rich environments)(see figures 7-A, 7-B, and 7-C).

## Overall summary for young adults age 16-34

Among young adults age 16-34, the U.S. distribution of skills in each of the three domains by educational attainment suggested a relationship between education and performance. In general, the higher the level of education completed, the larger the percentages of young adults at the top proficiency levels (4/5 for literacy and numeracy and 3 for problem solving in technology-rich environments) and the smaller the percentages at the bottom (Level 1 and below) (see figures 8-A, 8-B, and 8-C).

Comparing internationally, among young adults age 16-34 whose highest level of education was high school or less, larger percentages in the United States performed at the bottom of the proficiency distribution (Level 1 or below) in all three domains than is the case, on average, across the participating PIAAC countries (see figures 8-A, 8-B, and 8-C).

In the United States, smaller percentages of Black and Hispanic young adults age 16-34 performed at the top proficiency level (4/5) in literacy (4 and 5 percent) than their peers who reported their race/ethnicity as White or Other (20 and 17 percent) (see figure 9-A).

## Overall summary for older U.S. adults age 66-74

In literacy and numeracy, there were no measurable differences in the percentage of older U.S. adults age 66-74 who performed at the highest proficiency level (4/5) between those who had a graduate or professional degree and those who had a bachelor's degree as their highest educational attainment (19 versus 19 percent in literacy and 18 versus 15 percent in numeracy) (see figures 11-A and 11-B). This differed from the pattern among young adults described above.

Among older U.S. adults age 66-74, a greater percentage of those employed compared with those out of the labor force performed at the highest proficiency level (4/5) in numeracy (10 versus 4 percent) (see figure 12-B).

Older U.S. adults age 66-74 who reported that their health status was "fair" had a larger percentage at the bottom of the proficiency distribution (Level 1 and below) in literacy and numeracy than their peers who reported that their health status was "good," "very good," or "excellent" (see figures 13-A and 13-B).