

Literacy & Poverty

Fact Sheet



What is the poverty rate in BC?

Based on the latest figures from Statistics Canada (2010), BC had an overall poverty rate of 15.5%, the worst rate of any province, based on before-tax low income cut-offs. (First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition).⁽²⁾

The demographic groups more likely to experience poverty than the general population are single mothers with young children, people of Aboriginal ancestry, recent immigrants and refugees, and people with disabilities, mental illness or addictions.⁽⁶⁾

In 2010, BC had the second highest rate of child poverty of any province (119,000 children living in poverty). The previous 8 years, it had the highest child poverty rate of any province.⁽²⁾

In 2010, 43 percent of the poor children in BC lived in families with at least one adult working full-time.⁽²⁾

How does literacy influence income?

Literacy impacts participation in the labour market. Individuals with low levels of literacy are much less likely to be employed than their more skilled peers.⁽⁷⁾

As of 2011, employment levels for individuals with less than a high school diploma were 14.5% lower than in 2008, and their labour market outcomes were limited.⁽¹⁴⁾

“Individuals with low levels of literacy skill work fewer weeks on average, are more likely to experience periods of unemployment and remain unemployed for much longer periods.”^(7, p. 12)

Adult wage rates are highly related to literacy skill. Adults with Level 5 skills earn roughly 68% more than their Level 1 peers.⁽⁷⁾

While average earnings increase as educational attainment increases, at each level of education those with higher levels of literacy have higher earnings.⁽⁷⁾

“Differences in literacy skill account for 33% of the explained variance in earnings, more than any other factor.”^(8, p. 13)

In all provinces, higher education increases financial security by reducing the risk of experiencing low income and unemployment.⁽⁴⁾

Low skilled adults are much more likely than their peers to be classified as poor.⁽⁷⁾

Those Canadians at prose literacy level 1 are twice as likely to receive social assistance benefits as the other literacy levels.⁽⁸⁾

Does poverty influence literacy?

Research often shows that there are many negative impacts for children living in poverty, including disadvantage when it comes to cognitive skills and success in school.⁽¹¹⁾

American research indicates that 48% of poor children are ready for school at age 5 compared to 75% of children from middle and higher income families. Poverty is one of the key influences on school readiness.⁽⁵⁾

“[T]here is a connection between economic well-being and potential literacy development as adults who earn less participate less in activities that support the development of literacy abilities, and have fewer opportunities to participate in job training and education.”^(1, p.4)

Literacy, poverty reduction, and poverty prevention

“Adults who improve their literacy proficiency eventually obtain improved earnings, but these gains may take time to materialize.”^(1, p. 14)

Analysis estimates that moving adults with Level 1 and 2 prose literacy skills to Level 3 would improve both the average length of employment and the wage rates for those individuals. It would simultaneously decrease the number of Social Assistance recipients and Employment Insurance recipients.⁽⁷⁾

Education and skills upgrading have been identified as important elements in a poverty reduction plan. (10) For example, the Canadian federal Poverty Reduction Plan includes a recommendation to increase adult literacy levels, particularly by increasing funding for literacy and life skills programs, and measures to encourage newcomers to learn English or French. (3)

Several large scale studies have shown that family literacy programs can enhance parents' employment status. (13)

Longitudinal American studies of preschool education for children from disadvantaged backgrounds showed that children attending group programs emphasizing parent involvement and the development of literacy skills had a greater rate of on-time secondary school graduation, higher college attendance, and increased earning and more prosocial conduct as adults. (9)

Many socio-economically disadvantaged students succeed at school and one of the key indicators is a positive approach to learning. (12)

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