

The Future of Literacy in Canada's Largest Cities

The hidden truth about literacy in Canada

Many people find it difficult to believe that Canada—one of the leaders among the G8 industrialized nations—has a literacy problem. However, statistics show that nearly half of all adults in Canada lack the kind of prose literacy skills that are required to cope in a modern society.

The Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) first drew attention to this situation more than three years ago in the pages of its *State of Learning in Canada: No Time for Complacency* report. That report revealed that more than 48% of all Canadian adults (those over the age of 16) had low prose literacy skills, meaning that they have difficulty reading, understanding and functioning effectively with written material, according to the OECD's International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS).

In 2008 CCL went further, challenging the common belief that adult literacy rates in Canada were improving. Its landmark report, *Reading the Future: Planning to meet Canada's future literacy needs*, explained that as a result of a number of demographic trends (population growth, aging population and immigration rates) Canada will likely witness little to no overall progress in adult literacy rates over the next two decades.

According to the report's projections, by 2031 about 47% of adults will have low prose literacy skills (below IALSS Level 3) meaning that the face of low adult literacy in Canada will remain virtually unchanged for years to come. The report also provided regional literacy projections as part of its interactive PALMM¹ tool, a free online program that gives users the ability to calculate and compare future literacy rates for 10 provinces and three territories.

Why should we care?

CCL projections show that in actual numbers approximately 15 million adult Canadians by 2031 will have low literacy—a 25% increase from 30 years previous (2001). One big factor in that increase will be the growing number of senior citizens who will have low literacy skills over the next generation. By 2031, CCL predicts that this number will reach 6.2 million—an increase of more than double from 3 million in 2001.

Another factor in the increase is the number of immigrants with low literacy. While the total proportion of immigrants with literacy skills below Level 3 will decrease from 67% in 2001 to 61% in 2031, the absolute number of immigrants with low-level literacy skills will actually increase by 61%, to more than 5.7 million by 2031. However, those with higher literacy skills will more than double from 1.8 million to 3.7 million, offsetting the increase somewhat.

Unless some action is taken to reverse this trend, the literacy dilemma we are facing can translate into profound challenges for Canada's social well-being and economic prosperity. Research shows that adults with low literacy experience more health problems, are more likely to experience medication errors, have more workplace accidents, earn less income, live shorter lives, and are more likely to be unemployed.

In order to maintain a healthy population and to stay competitive in a global environment, Canada must address these issues today—not 20 years from now.

The literacy landscape in Canada's largest cities

Until now, CCL was only able to offer literacy projections on a macro (national, provincial and territorial) level. CCL's new report, *The Future of Literacy in Canada's Largest Cities*, rectifies this: it drills down even further and offers adult literacy projections for Canada's largest cities; Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver and Ottawa.²

These new city specific projections have been included in an updated and expanded PALMM tool which now allows users to calculate adult literacy rates in five-year spans from 2001 to 2031 for Canada's four largest cities, based on variables such as age, immigration status and education level.

It is CCL's hope that the new PALMM tool will serve as a useful catalyst to provoke a discussion about possible solutions to Canada's future literacy challenges. To explore the innovative PALMM tool, go to www.ccl-cca.ca/PALMM.

1 PALMM stands for "Projections of Adult Literacy—Measurement Movement."

2 Based on the largest metropolitan areas in Canada by population using data from the 2006 Census.

2001–2031 Literacy Projections

As previously reported CCL's projections of adult literacy rates in Canada as a whole show little change over the coming decades. However, new data reveals that there are considerable differences when it comes to Canada's four largest cities; Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal and Ottawa. (see Figure 1).

Canada (overall average)

Little to no change in proportion of adults with low literacy; small increase in total number of adults with low literacy.

Percentage of adults with low literacy skills in 2031:
47% ↓ (down 3% since 2001)

Total population of adults with low literacy skills in 2031:
15,029,000 ↑ (up 25% since 2001)

Toronto, Ontario

Percentage of adults with low literacy skills (2031):
48% ↓ (down 5% since 2001)

Total population of adults with low literacy skills (2031):
3,157,099 ↑ (up 64% since 2001)

Despite the slight decrease in the proportion of adults with low literacy, the provincial capital will witness a significant increase in the total population of adults with low literacy by 2031.

The city of Toronto is expected to experience a decline (5%) in the proportion of adults with prose literacy skills below Level 3: from 50% in 2001 to 48% in 2031. However this good news is offset somewhat by the city's projected 64% increase in the total population of adults who will have low literacy skills—from 1.9 million in 2001 to nearly 3.2 million by 2031.

What's driving the change?

Based on current immigration trends, the absolute number of immigrants with low-level literacy skills will continue to rise across Canada in the coming decades. Almost 1 in 5 (or 1,033,600) of immigrants with low literacy skills are expected to be living in Toronto by 2031. Toronto will experience a 79% increase in the total number of immigrant adults with low-level literacy skills by 2031.

Vancouver, British Columbia

Percentage of adults with low literacy skills in 2031:
48% – (no change since 2001)

Total population of adults with low literacy skills in 2031:
1,309,899 ↑ (up 64% since 2001)

Vancouver's overall proportion of adults with low literacy will remain the same in 2031, but it will see a significant increase in the total number of adults with low literacy.

The city of Vancouver is expected to see no change in the proportion of Canadian adults with literacy skills below Level 3, remaining at 48% by 2031. However, Vancouver is predicted to experience a 64% increase in the total number of adults with low literacy skills—from nearly 800,000 in 2001 to more than 1.3 million in 2031.

What's driving the change?

According to research, senior citizens (those aged 65 or older) tend to experience learning loss as they age, resulting in lower overall literacy rates. By 2031, Vancouver will be home to 268,715 more seniors with low-level literacy than 2001, a marked 144% increase from 2001. It will also see a 93% increase in its total number of immigrants with low literacy (a total of 435,484), adding to the city's overall growth of low literacy.

Montreal, Quebec

Percentage of adults with low literacy skills in 2031:
51% ↓ (down 6% since 2001)

Total population of adults with low literacy skills in 2031:
1,827,882 ↑ (up 20% since 2001)

In terms of proportion and number of adults with low literacy, projections show that Montreal will be the most improved of Canada's four largest cities in 2031. But it will continue to boast the highest overall proportion of adults with low literacy.

The city of Montreal is expected to experience a 6% decline in the proportion of Canadian adults with literacy skills below Level 3; from 54% in 2001 to 51% in 2031. Montreal is predicted to experience the lowest increase (20%) among the four major cities in the total number of adults with low literacy skills, from 1.5 million in 2001 to more than 1.8 million by 2031.

What's driving the change?

Montreal's projected improvement in literacy rates is related to improvements among the immigrant population in the city. By 2031, Montreal is expected to experience a 10% decline in the proportion of immigrant adults with literacy skills below Level 3; from 69% in 2001 to 62%. On the other hand, Montreal is expected to experience an increase of 333,443 more seniors with low-level literacy skills by 2031, representing a 92% increase from 2001.

Ottawa, Ontario

Percentage of adults with low literacy skills in 2031:
43% ↑ (up 3% since 2001)

Total population of adults with low literacy skills in 2031:
494,067 ↑ (up 80% since 2001)

By 2031, Canada's capital will have the lowest proportion of adults with low literacy among Canada's four largest cities, but it will also be the only city to experience an increase in the proportion of adults with low literacy.

At 43%, the capital city will continue to have the lowest proportion of adults with low-level literacy by 2031 compared to Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver. The city of Ottawa is the only city expected to experience an increase (3%) in the proportion of Canadian adults with literacy skills below Level 3; from 42% in 2001 to 43%. Yet Ottawa is also predicted to experience the largest increase (80%) in the total number of adults with low literacy skills, from 275,185 in 2001 to nearly half a million (494,067) adults by 2031.

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(Ottawa, Ontario continued)

What's driving the change?

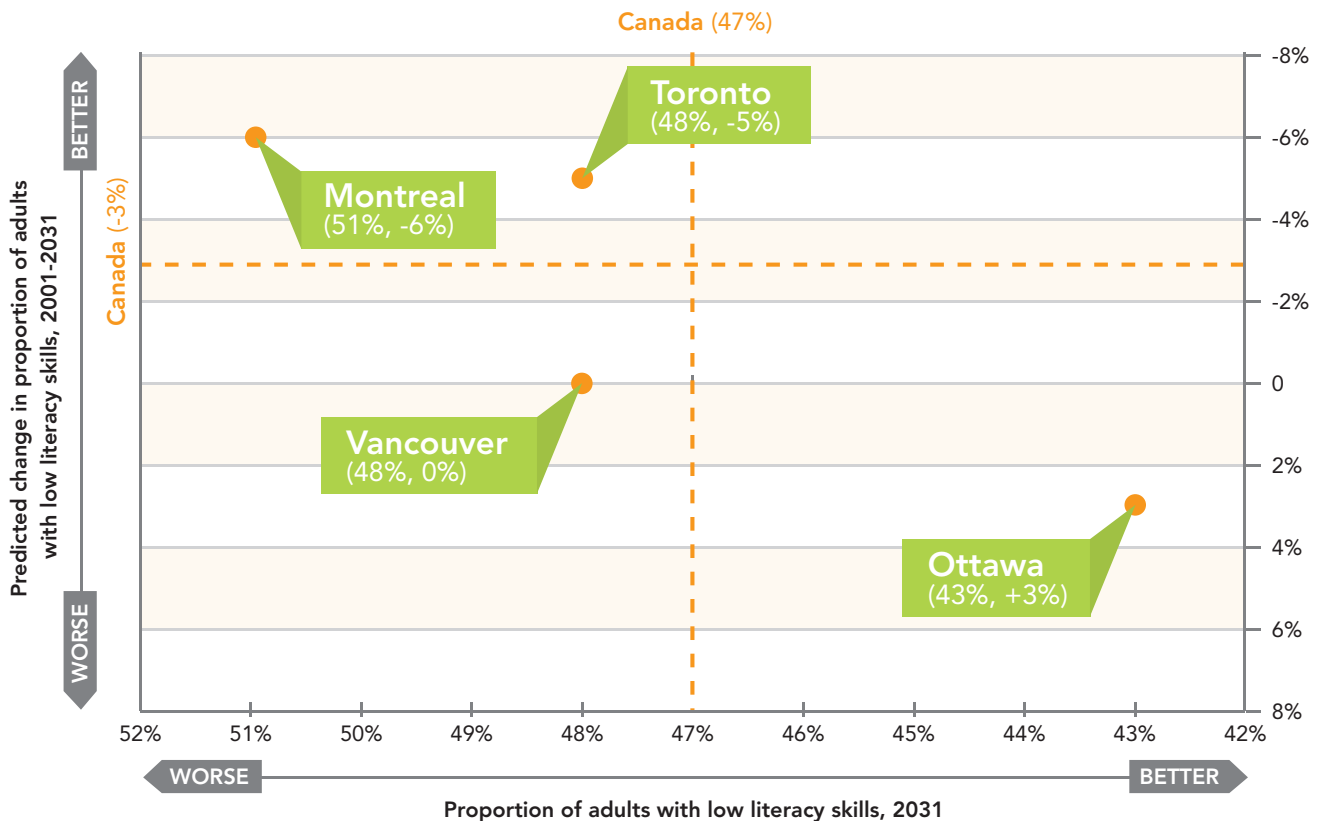
According to research, senior citizens (those aged 65 or older) tend to experience learning loss as they age, resulting in lower overall literacy rates. Ottawa is expected to experience a 167% increase (or 107,350) in its population of senior citizens with low-level literacy skills by 2031.

As well, Ottawa's projected increases in the total number of immigrant adults with low literacy levels is the highest of all four cities, more than doubling (138% or 134,760 more) its total number of immigrants with low-literacy levels from 2001.

Did you know?

Low literacy is not limited to just large metropolitan centres. In addition to Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver and Ottawa CCL is able to provide PALMM analysis about the future of adult literacy in 18 other cities and towns across Canada. For more information contact info@ccl-cca.ca.

Figure 1: Proportion of adults with low prose literacy skills* 2031 status compared to change in literacy levels between 2001-2031



* Low prose literacy is defined as those who scored below Level 3 on the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS)

Conclusions

Low literacy has social and economic impacts for both the individual and for Canada as a whole. In cities across Canada and the world, individuals are limited in their ability to access and understand information critical to their well-being.

Now with a better understanding of the future of literacy in Canada and in its largest cities, policy-makers and planners will hopefully feel better equipped to effectively address the literacy problem. Not only do almost half of all Canadian adults

experience some degree of difficulty in their ability to read, write and understand effectively in English or French, these latest projections reveal that Canada and its many cities will see more than 15 million adults with low literacy levels by 2031.

While Canada's literacy future is far from rosy, CCL firmly believes that we have the right tools and knowledge to help our society and economy avoid a grim literacy fate.

IALSS and literacy

It is important to note that adults who rank as having low literacy skills on the International Adult Literacy Skills Survey (IALSS) survey are not illiterate. In fact, the number of Canadians who qualify as being illiterate is actually very small.

Low literacy, as defined by IALSS, is more about having difficulty in reading, understanding and functioning effectively with written material. In order to succeed socially and economically, Canadians need to be able to analyze information, understand abstract ideas and acquire many other complex life skills. Adults who score under Level 3, are only able to comprehend "simple, clear material involving uncomplicated tasks."³ (See text below.)

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines the following five levels of literacy as part of IALSS:

Level 1—Very poor literacy skills

An individual at this level may, for example, be unable to determine from a package label the correct amount of medicine to give a child.

Level 2—A capacity to deal only with simple, clear material involving uncomplicated tasks

People at this level may develop everyday coping skills, but their poor literacy skills make it hard to conquer challenges such as learning new job skills.

Level 3—Adequate for coping with the demands of everyday life and work in an advanced society

This roughly denotes the skill level required for successful high school completion and college entry.

Levels 4 and 5—Strong skills

Individuals at these levels can process information of a complex and demanding nature.

³ Statistics Canada and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Literacy in the Information Age: Final Report of the International Adult Literacy Survey* (Ottawa and Paris: 2000).