

Words Count

Why is 'literacy' important?

Literacy influences individual capability in all spheres of life. In terms of economic instability, low literacy makes individuals and communities more vulnerable to inequality, increasing the risk of social exclusion and undermining social mobility. Low literacy in the UK affects both employment and economic outcomes, health levels and health inequalities, and exacerbates factors associated with criminal offending.

A fifth of all children in England, and close to a third of the poorest children, are unable to read well when they leave primary school. This is a crucial contributing factor towards the persistent educational divide in England, which sees thousands of children from low income families significantly underperform at school each year. An inability to read well risks a life of poverty and struggle for too many of today's children.

Literacy, employment and the economy.

- Poor literacy is contributing to skills shortages in the UK. The number of jobs requiring graduate qualifications is far surpassing those requiring none, leading to a productivity gap and skills shortage.
- There is a greater inequality of literacy levels for those at the top and the bottom of pay scales and those in full time employment compared to those unemployed.
- The challenges we face are unique to the UK, where the youngest generation has literacy scores only equivalent to the eldest generation, indicating stagnating literacy levels.
- Low literacy is positively related with better earnings: those with functional literacy skills earn on average 16% more than those with lower literacy skills. This is particularly significant for women. Higher literacy is associated with higher earnings at an increasing rate.

- Low literacy is negatively related with lower employment rates and spells of unemployment. Again, this is particularly significant for women.
- Low literacy is associated with poverty, and may be a driver of broader inequalities in the UK. Those with low literacy are more likely to be in routine work, receive working age benefits, live in disadvantaged housing conditions and more deprived areas and experience homelessness. Women with low literacy are more likely to experience homelessness than men.

There is a strong evidence base that demonstrates the relationship between literacy, wages and employability. Those with better literacy skills are more likely to earn more. Those with low literacy skills are less likely to be employed; more likely to earn less and more likely to live in disadvantaged housing conditions.

Literacy and Crime

- Poor literacy is prevalent amongst young offenders and the prison population.
- 48% of offenders in custody have a reading age at or below the expected level of an 11-year-old. Similarly, in a survey of prisoners' self-perception, 47% of prisoners said they had no qualifications.
- Offenders in their middle teens – the peak period for offending – frequently have poor reading skills: over half have literacy skills below the level of an 11-year-old compared with two-fifths of the wider prison population and one-fifth of the adult population.
- Poor literacy exacerbates risk factors associated with offending behaviour.
- Literacy holds a significant relationship with the number of times a 30-year-old man has been stopped and questioned and with the number of times a 42-year-old man has been arrested.
- Factors associated with crime – low attainment, negative experiences at school, exclusion, truancy and poor employment prospects – all hold a relationship with low literacy.
- Low literacy is also associated with lower employment prospects, a factor linked with offending behaviour. The majority of young adult offenders (aged 18 to 20) are male and out of work and nearly two thirds (63%) are likely to have been unemployed at the time of arrest compared with 46% of those over 25.

- Low educational attainment as a contributing factor to crime is significantly associated with low literacy skills.
- Evidence suggests that young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) are 20 times more likely to be convicted of a crime.

Low literacy exacerbates the risk of becoming involved in criminal behaviour by narrowing employment and attainment opportunities and contributing to a negative experience at school. It is reasonable to assume that increasing literacy levels could be a protective measure against the risk of involvement in crime.

Literacy and Health

- Individuals with poor literacy are less able to obtain, process and understand information about healthy living and self-regulate existing medical conditions.
- Studies show that those with inadequate literacy are up to 18 times less likely to be able to identify their medications compared to those with adequate literacy. They are also less likely to demonstrate how to take their prescription correctly.
- 9 in 10 adults (92%) with adequate literacy skills can recognise a high level blood pressure reading compared to just over half (55%) with the lowest reading level.
- 95% of patients with diabetes and adequate health literacy know the symptoms of hypoglycaemia compared with 50% of those with inadequate literacy.
- Literacy is also associated broadly with poor health and in conjunction with educational levels is linked to negative health behaviours.
- One-third (34%) of those rating their health as very poor had entry level literacy skills compared to 1 in 10 (11%) rating their health as very good.

Further reading:

Literacy Changes Lives 2014: A new perspective on health, employment and crime

www.literacytrust.org.uk