

## The International Adult Literacy Survey

The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) is the world's first international comparative assessment of adult literacy skills. The IALS study has combined household survey methods and educational assessment to provide comparable estimates of literacy skills for 24 countries. The survey tests representative samples of adults (aged 16–65) in their homes, asking them to undertake a range of common tasks using authentic materials from a wide range of social and cultural contexts. The IALS study is jointly sponsored by Statistics Canada, the US Center for Education Statistics and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

While traditional measures of literacy focus primarily on the ability to decode the printed word, the IALS study defines literacy as the ability to understand and use printed information in daily activities at home, at work and in the community. It compiled the cross-country data to ensure that the results are comparable across countries with different languages and cultures and that any known sources of bias are corrected.

The IALS reports on three areas of literacy:

- *Prose literacy*—the knowledge and skills needed to understand and use information from texts, including editorials, news stories, poems and fiction.
- *Document literacy*—the knowledge and skills required to locate and use information in different formats, including maps, graphs, tables, payroll forms, job applications and transportation schedules.

- *Quantitative literacy*—the knowledge and skills required to apply arithmetic operations to numbers in printed materials, such as balancing a cheque book, figuring out a tip, completing an order form or determining the amount of interest on a loan from an advertisement.

Analysis of IALS data reveals several important facts. First, countries differ greatly in the level and social distribution of literacy skills. Second, these differences can be attributed to a handful of underlying factors, including differences among countries in the quantity and quality of initial education. The evidence also suggests, however, that several aspects of adult life, including the use of literacy skills at home and at work, transform skills after formal education. Finally, in many countries literacy skills play an important part in allocating economic opportunity, rewarding the skilled and penalizing the relatively unskilled.

The IALS will begin a new cycle of data collection in 2002 to better understand the role of literacy skills in determining economic outcomes for individuals and, by extension, for nations. A full analysis of the currently available data can be found in OECD and Statistics Canada (2000).

This Report uses the percentage of adults lacking functional literacy skills, defined on the basis of prose literacy, in the human poverty index for selected OECD countries, presented in table 4.