

The Southam Literacy Report says:

Poverty and education play major roles in deciding whether illiteracy is transmitted from one generation to the next. The children of the jobless, the working class and the poorly educated are much more liable to be illiterate.⁽³³⁾

The Canadian Business Task Force on Literacy, acknowledging that it is difficult to prove that illiteracy is a cause of other social and economic phenomena, whether it is an effect or a co-factor, estimates that illiteracy costs Canada \$8.8 billion a year in lost earning power. The report estimates the loss to society in lost productivity from current workers as a result of the illiteracy problem at a minimum of \$2.5 billion. Much of the lost opportunity cost associated with illiteracy, however, derives from the unemployed and the unemployable, according to this report.⁽³⁴⁾

Another study prepared for the Department of the Secretary of State of Canada estimates the costs of unemployment associated with illiteracy to be \$172 million. This study discusses some of the difficulties with deriving the costs of illiteracy-related child welfare, social assistance and incarceration costs. The author points out that there are greater illiteracy problems among social assistance recipients than among the population as a whole, quoting a March 1986 survey showing that 68% of social assistance recipients had, at most, "some" secondary education. Similarly, the study notes that a disproportionate number of prison inmates are functionally illiterate when compared to the rest of the population. In addition to the economic costs, this and many other studies indicate that the life skills of illiterates are often very poor.⁽³⁵⁾

The literature suggests that inadequate education is often only one manifestation of a person's deprivation which interacts with many other social problems such as unemployment and poverty. The findings of the 1981 Canada Health Survey tells us that health problems, disability and mental illness are more prevalent among low-income families but low income is also associated with unemployment. The unemployed, the survey says, particularly the blue-collar unemployed, a group strongly associated with low income, have significantly higher levels of mental distress than the employed.⁽³⁶⁾

The National Task Force on Preventative Strategies in Children's Mental Health reported in 1984 that parents in crisis, e.g. unemployed, ill, disabled, experiencing housing problems, may result in further crisis and disequilibrium for everyone in the family. The report of a survey of Canadian prison inmates says that their data suggests that inmates are typically single, unemployed and with below average education.⁽³⁷⁾

Findings from a study by Health and Welfare Canada and Statistics Canada, show that, for certain causes of death (including lung cancer, suicide, mental conditions, metabolic conditions other than diabetes, and other ill-defined conditions) the mortality rate increased between 1971 and 1986 and inequality between rich and poor became more pronounced. Referring to the substantial increase in lung cancer and suicide in the fifth (poorest) income quintile, the researchers say:

⁽³³⁾ Broken Words: Why Five Million Canadians are Illiterate, The Southam Literacy Report, Toronto, 1987.

⁽³⁴⁾ Canadian Task Force on Literacy, Measuring the Costs of Illiteracy in Canada, February 1988.

⁽³⁵⁾ Monica Townson, The Economic Costs of Illiteracy, Prepared for the Department of the Secretary of State of Canada, June 1987.

⁽³⁶⁾ Health and Welfare Canada and Statistics Canada, Supply and Services Canada, The Health of Canadians, Supply and Services Canada, Ottawa, 1981.

⁽³⁷⁾ Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Custodial Remand in Canada — A National Survey, August 1986.