

What Does PIAAC Tell Us About the Skills and Competencies of Immigrant Adults in the United States?

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Highlights

The ability to understand, evaluate, and use written information (literacy), to process and communicate mathematical information (numeracy), and to access and use digital technology (problem solving in technology-rich environments) are foundational to full participation in today's knowledge-based societies. This paper employs data from the 2012 Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) to describe the English literacy and numeracy of U.S. immigrant adults and explore how these skills are related to key immigrant integration outcomes such as labor market participation, income, and health status. Our analysis finds that:

- Immigrants lagged U.S.-born adults in terms of literacy and numeracy in English, with both groups scoring below international averages. More than 35 million U.S. adults demonstrated low English literacy proficiency and 58 million had low numeracy skills. U.S. average scores overall were only marginally affected by immigrants' low scores.
- Immigrants were overrepresented among low-skilled adults: While immigrants made up 15 percent of the total U.S. adult 16-65 population, they accounted for 33 percent of adults with low literacy skills and 24 percent of those with low numeracy skills.
- Younger immigrants had stronger skills than older immigrants, while younger natives only barely outperformed their older counterparts.
- Gaps in literacy varied by race and ethnicity: 90 percent of Hispanic immigrants were not proficient in English literacy compared to 39 percent of white immigrants.
- English literacy and numeracy skills of U.S.-born adults from immigrant families (i.e., the second generation) were similar to those of adults from native families, suggesting an intergenerational progress.
- Immigrants arriving in the United States between 2007 and 2011 appear to have similar English literacy and numeracy skills to those who entered earlier, suggesting some rise in newcomers' human capital during the recession.
- Immigrants with U.S.-earned education had English literacy and numeracy scores similar to their U.S.-born counterparts.
- For U.S.-born adults, learning a foreign language as a child does not appear to be an obstacle to English language literacy and numeracy.
- Self-reported data on how well respondents *speak* English correlated closely with PIAAC's directly tested literacy and numeracy skills.
- There was wide variation in the tested proficiency levels of respondents who have been classified as limited English proficient.
- While immigrants were able to find a job regardless of their English literacy and numeracy skills, they needed higher levels of English competencies to be paid well—and on par with natives.
- Both immigrants and natives with low literacy scores were more likely to report poor health.