

POLICY BRIEF

Why Focus on Urban Adult Education?

Great Cities Project Highlights Scale, Relevance of Urban Literacy Systems

Urban systems provide a major share of adult literacy and workforce instruction within their states, as well as the nation. The U.S. Department of Education, recognizing the unique characteristics and complexities of urban systems, in 2010 selected multi-agency teams from five large cities to participate in a series of "Great Cities Summits" for Adult Education. The five initial Great Cities—Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, Miami, and New York—represent diverse regions but share common service challenges and opportunities. This Policy Brief seeks to quantify the unique needs and roles of major cities, laying a foundation for targeted urban strategies to strengthen research and best practices for the field.

Scale: About one in five American adults with below-basic literacy lives in the five Great Cities

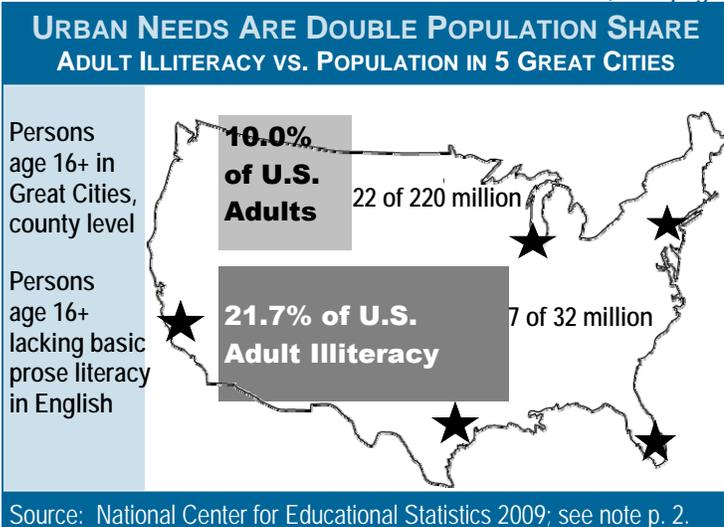
Analysis of available public data indicates that urban areas have a disproportionate share of total U.S. needs. Together, the five Great Cities have about double the U.S. average illiteracy rate and constitute one-fifth of the total U.S. need.

While research on the adult literacy field is limited, a local-level measure was developed in 2009 by the National Center for Education Statistics, using responses to the two National Adult Literacy Surveys in conjunction with county-level Census data. The county-level data, covering an 11-year period from 1992 to 2003, reveals the scale of illiteracy:

- The five Great Cities are home to 10% of the nation's total adult population aged 16 and over;
- By contrast, the five Great Cities are home to about 22% of adults lacking basic prose literacy skills.

The scale of urban illiteracy is larger still when considering the surrounding metropolitan areas, as well as other large urban areas with similar demographic characteristics.

See Note on Estimates, next page



Demographics: Five Mega-States and their Great Cities are bellwethers of national trends

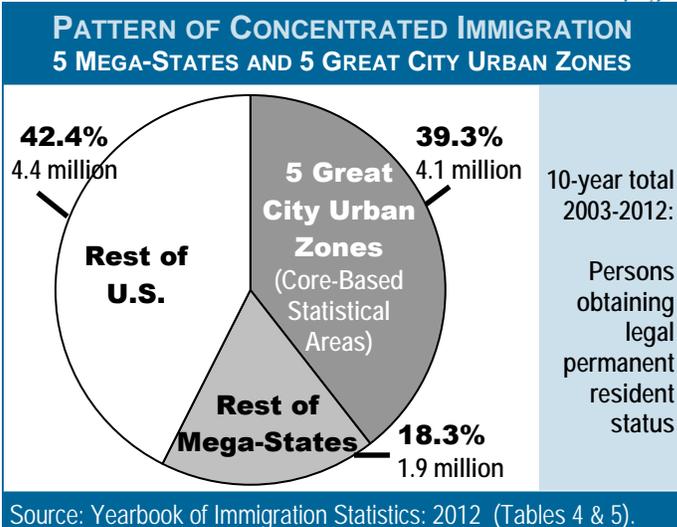
America's literacy and workforce needs are driven by demographic forces ranging from immigration and dropouts to poverty and disabilities. By such measures, the National Center for Education Statistics emphasizes that five "Mega-States"—California, Florida, Illinois, New York, and Texas—warrant focus as national bellwethers.

In the K-12 field, Mega-States are home to about one-third of families in poverty, the majority of English language learners, and one of every three schools. The patterns are still more pronounced in the adult field, where immigrants and dropouts constitute key target populations.

"The importance of these 'Mega-States' goes beyond the sheer size of their population.... [They] are at the forefront of the demographic shifts in our nation."
National Center for Education Statistics (2013)

These demographic forces are concentrated most intensively in urban areas, including the five Great Cities.

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An independent initiative building upon the national Adult Education Great Cities Summit

Report: Lack of Research is “Striking”; Implications for an Urban Approach

In a major assessment of the field, the National Research Council (2012) concludes that adult literacy is critical to national economic prosperity, yet practices vary widely and lack alignment. The report cites a “striking” absence of relevant research and recommends a “strategic and sustained” approach to program evaluation and improvement.

Reviewing adult and 12-grade skill levels in light of available research, the multi-disciplinary report underscores the importance of strengthening adult literacy programs for out-of-school youth, immigrants, and various adult sub-groups:

For U.S. society to continue to function and sustain its standard of living, higher literacy levels are required of the U.S. population in the 21st century for economic security and all other aspects of daily life: education, health, parenting, social interaction, personal growth, and civic participation....

*To inform local, state, and federal decisions aimed at optimizing the progress of adult learners, **the committee strongly recommends strategic and sustained investments in a coordinated and systemic approach to program improvement, evaluation, and research** about adult literacy learners. [Emphasis added.]*

The evidence cited in this brief suggests that urban literacy systems, with their diversity and major share of national needs, warrant a high degree of focus as laboratories to identify, measure, evaluate, and improve effective practices.

National Research Council, 2012. *Improving Adult Literacy Instruction: Options for Practice and Research* (Committee on Learning Sciences: Foundations and Applications to Adolescent and Adult Literacy; A. Lesgold and M. Welch-Ross, Editors) (pages 5, 9, 237).

Demographic Forces, *continued from page one*

Using citizenship as a proxy for English language needs, the Mega-States are home to 6 million of America’s 10.4 million legal immigrants in the last ten years. Yet within the Mega-States most reside in the broad urban zones surrounding the five Great Cities, which together have as many immigrants as the other 45 states combined.

The impact of such trends on urban adult literacy can be quantified by comparing the two National Adult Literacy Surveys, in 1992 and 2003. During this 11-year period, 99% of American counties showed no statistical change in literacy needs. Yet the nation gained 3.5 million adults who lack basic literacy skills, and over two thirds of them

(71.2%) were concentrated in the five Great Cities. Outside of the Mega-States, there was actually a net decline.

The burden on the five cities is substantial: the estimated 2.5 million adults gained in 11 years is equivalent to a new city composed entirely of below-proficient adults, who by themselves would rank as America’s 4th-largest urban area. Notwithstanding the survey’s margin of error, the effect is magnified when counting their children, for whom parent literacy is a key influence on K-12 achievement.

In the years between national literacy surveys, over 70% of the adult illiteracy growth was concentrated in the five Great Cities—equivalent to a new major city composed entirely of illiterate adults.

Note on literacy estimates used in this brief

Local illiteracy rates were calculated in 2009 by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), based on statistically significant demographic indicators in two national surveys and imputed at the county level using Census data. See L. Mohadjer, G. Kalton, T. Krenzke, B. Liu, W. Van de Kerckhove, L. Li, D. Sherman, J. Dillman, J. Rao & S. White (2009), *National Assessment of Adult Literacy: Indirect County and State Estimates of the Percentage of Adults at the Lowest Level of Literacy for 1992 and 2003* (NCES 2009-482). NCES, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Dept. of Education, Washington, D.C.

Despite a high margin of error, estimates of illiteracy at the urban level are disproportionate at both the low and high ends of the NCES range. The 2003 U.S. illiteracy rate (15%) reflects a high probability of actual needs between 12% and 18%. In the Great Cities, the illiteracy count

(32%) reflects a probable range of 25% to 41%. Comparing low and high extremes, the Great Cities could thus be as low as 1.4 times the U.S. illiteracy rate—or as much as 3.5 times higher. (Data used: U.S.; Cook Co., IL; Harris Co., TX; Los Angeles Co., CA; Miami-Dade Co., FL; and Bronx, Kings, New York, Queens, and Richmond Counties, NY.)

Moreover, Census data likely underestimate urban literacy needs. Post-enumeration surveys (e.g., Census Coverage Measurement, May 2012) show undercounts of transient and high-need populations that NCES found associated with higher illiteracy, including blacks and Hispanics.

For Mega-State K-12 analysis, see NCES (2013). *The Nation’s Report Card: Mega-States: An Analysis of Student Performance in the Five Most Heavily Populated States in the Nation* (NCES 2013-450). Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Dept. of Education, Washington, D.C.