

## LEVEL ONE PIAAC 2023 United States

### Adults with low literacy skills in the United States

In the United States, the percentage of adults who are at low levels of English literacy (PIAAC Level 1 or below) has increased to 27 percent in 2023 (18% in 2012). About a quarter of adults with low literacy skills (25%) in 2023 are 55-65-year-olds, a similar proportion as in 2012. Older adults (ages 55-65) are the largest age group in the analysis. With gender parity in 2012, the proportion of males among adults with low skills is in 2023 higher than that of females. The change in the proportion of males is not statistically significant (50% in 2012 and 53% in 2023).

Proportions in either nativity or language status of adults with low literacy skills remain stable. Among this group, about a third of adults were not born in the United States (33%) or their parents were also not born in the United States (32%). Similarly, about a third of adults with low literacy skills had a native language other than English (31%).

Among adults with low skills, the proportion of those with less than secondary qualifications decreased to 27 percent (36% in 2012), and the proportion of those with more than secondary qualifications increased to 21 percent (9% in 2012). The change in proportions of those whose parents achieved certain educational qualifications follows a similar pattern between the two time points.

Among adults with low skills, while the proportion of employed adults remained stable (59% in 2023), there was a decrease in the proportion of unemployed adults (9% in 2012 and 5% in 2023) and an increase in the proportion of adults out of the labor force (29% in 2012 and 36% in 2023). Among currently or recently employed adults with low literacy skills, a lower proportion was

employed in elementary occupations (21% in 2012 and 16% in 2023), and a larger proportion was working in skilled occupations (19% in 2012 and 28% in 2023).

The proportion of low-skilled adults participating in non-formal education remains at a similar level (36% in 2023). However, these results should be interpreted with caution because the formulation of the question in 2012 may have led to overreporting in non-formal education for that time point. The proportion of adults with low skills acquiring formal degrees remained stable (19% in 2023).

The share of adults with low skills reporting excellent or good health has also remained stable (70% in 2023).

As a result of a change in the formulation of the questions between 2012 and 2023, measuring changes in percentages in social trust and political efficacy between the two time points is not recommended. In 2023, about a quarter of adults with low literacy (25%) says that most people could be trusted (social trust). While those with higher levels of literacy (Level 2 or above) have higher levels of social trust (45%), political efficacy is at about the same level between those with higher and low levels of literacy. Twenty-seven percent (27%) of adults with low literacy skills and 26 percent of adults with high literacy skills report having a say in what the government does.

Suggested Citation: Grotlüschen, Anke; Essert (Mamedova), Saida; Dutz, Gregor; Buddeberg, Klaus; Skowranek, Kristin. (2025). LEVEL ONE PIAAC 2023 United States: Adults with low literacy skills in the United States. Country Story. In *LEO PIAAC 2023 – Level One im deutschsprachigen Raum*. Brochure. Available online: <https://leo.blogs.uni-hamburg.de/> and <https://www.fdr.uni-hamburg.de/record/17831>.

USA Table A-5. Percentage distribution of adults in the **United States** ages 16 to 65 overall and with proficiency level 1 or below (adults with low skills) and level 2 or above (adults with middle or high skills), by demographic and personal characteristics: 2012 and 2023

Characteristic	Total, all adults				Level 1 or below				Level 2 or above			
	2012		2023		2012		2023		2012		2023	
<b>All adults</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>†</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>†</b>	<b>17,6</b>	<b>(0,61)</b>	<b>27,0</b>	<b>(1,14)</b>	<b>82,4</b>	<b>(0,61)</b>	<b>73,0</b>	<b>(1,14)</b>
Age												
16-24	18,5	(0,27)	18,6	(0,26)	14,9	(1,02)	16,9	(1,25)	19,3	(0,36)	19,3	(0,60)
25-34	20,3	(0,25)	20,5	(0,42)	15,0	(1,19)	18,5	(1,21)	21,4	(0,38)	21,3	(0,65)
35-44	19,6	(0,30)	20,8	(0,38)	18,0	(1,48)	19,6	(1,60)	19,9	(0,38)	21,2	(0,69)
45-54	21,4	(0,34)	18,9	(0,34)	25,6	(1,68)	20,0	(1,38)	20,5	(0,49)	18,5	(0,53)
55-65	20,3	(0,23)	21,1	(0,30)	26,5	(1,49)	25,0	(1,49)	18,9	(0,38)	19,7	(0,60)
Gender												
Male	48,9	(0,19)	50,0	(0,14)	50,1	(1,85)	53,0	(1,90)	48,7	(0,40)	48,8	(0,73)
Female	51,1	(0,19)	50,0	(0,14)	49,9	(1,85)	47,0	(1,90)	51,3	(0,40)	51,2	(0,73)
Language: English												
Non-native	14,9	(0,67)	16,9	(0,81)	33,4	(2,34)	31,4	(2,37)	11,0	(0,62)	11,6	(0,86)
Native	85,1	(0,67)	83,1	(0,81)	66,6	(2,34)	68,6	(2,37)	89,0	(0,62)	88,4	(0,86)
Nativity status												
Born in USA	85,5	(0,41)	82,0	(0,43)	66,5	(1,95)	67,0	(1,81)	89,5	(0,44)	87,5	(0,63)
Born outside of USA	14,5	(0,41)	18,0	(0,43)	33,5	(1,95)	33,0	(1,81)	10,5	(0,44)	12,5	(0,63)
Immigrant status												
Foreign-born of foreign-born parents	13,0	(0,44)	16,6	(0,51)	31,1	(1,84)	31,9	(1,90)	9,2	(0,47)	10,9	(0,75)
Foreign-born of mixed heritage	0,9	(0,14)	0,8	(0,20)	1,8	(0,47)	!!	!!	0,7	(0,14)	0,9	(0,23)
Foreign-born of native-born parents	0,6	(0,11)	0,7	(0,15)	!!	!!	!!	!!	0,6	(0,10)	0,7	(0,19)
Native-born of foreign-born parents	4,9	(0,36)	6,1	(0,54)	3,5	(0,70)	7,6	(1,20)	5,2	(0,40)	5,6	(0,60)
Native-born of mixed heritage	4,5	(0,39)	5,2	(0,45)	3,6	(0,70)	3,0	(0,67)	4,7	(0,43)	6,0	(0,53)
Native-born of native-born parents	76,0	(0,61)	70,6	(0,83)	59,3	(2,35)	56,4	(2,29)	79,6	(0,65)	75,9	(1,08)
Educational attainment												
Less than secondary	14,0	(0,22)	13,0	(0,19)	36,3	(1,38)	26,7	(1,49)	9,2	(0,30)	7,9	(0,41)
Secondary degree	49,6	(0,44)	44,0	(0,72)	54,5	(1,53)	52,5	(1,74)	48,6	(0,54)	40,9	(1,06)
Above secondary degree	36,4	(0,42)	43,0	(0,68)	9,3	(1,13)	20,8	(1,82)	42,2	(0,54)	51,2	(1,00)

## Parental highest educational attainment

Less than secondary	17,4	(0,69)	13,6	(0,77)	42,7	(2,07)	29,6	(2,28)	12,4	(0,73)	8,4	(0,75)
Secondary degree	43,7	(1,00)	37,5	(1,21)	39,7	(1,81)	39,1	(2,27)	44,5	(1,05)	36,9	(1,38)
Above secondary degree	38,9	(0,95)	48,9	(1,42)	17,6	(2,05)	31,2	(2,23)	43,1	(1,13)	54,7	(1,55)

## Employment Status

Employed	73,8	(0,64)	71,7	(0,98)	61,5	(2,21)	58,9	(2,39)	76,4	(0,70)	76,4	(0,92)
Unemployed	6,9	(0,14)	4,9	(0,40)	9,4	(0,81)	4,6	(0,80)	6,3	(0,18)	5,1	(0,50)
Out of the labor force	19,4	(0,65)	23,2	(0,94)	29,1	(2,07)	36,3	(2,34)	17,3	(0,66)	18,4	(0,83)

## Occupation

Skilled occupations	44,9	(0,74)	51,3	(0,97)	18,6	(1,67)	28,1	(2,38)	49,8	(0,86)	58,5	(1,14)
Semi-skilled white-collar occupations	30,1	(0,57)	26,0	(0,87)	34,9	(1,94)	31,9	(2,05)	29,2	(0,67)	24,2	(1,00)
Semi-skilled blue-collar occupations	15,8	(0,55)	15,0	(0,69)	25,3	(2,01)	23,9	(2,08)	14,1	(0,70)	12,2	(0,88)
Elementary occupations	9,1	(0,36)	7,7	(0,53)	21,2	(1,86)	16,1	(1,58)	6,9	(0,40)	5,1	(0,51)

## Job satisfaction

Satisfied	78,6	(0,66)	80,7	(0,88)	81,5	(1,84)	80,8	(2,13)	78,2	(0,76)	80,7	(0,98)
Not Satisfied	21,4	(0,66)	19,3	(0,88)	18,5	(1,84)	19,2	(2,13)	21,8	(0,76)	19,3	(0,98)

## Life satisfaction

Satisfied	--	--	84,2	(0,78)	--	--	79,7	(1,62)	--	--	85,8	(0,88)
Not Satisfied	--	--	15,8	(0,78)	--	--	20,3	(1,62)	--	--	14,2	(0,88)

## Health

Excellent to good	84,9	(0,59)	79,2	(0,75)	69,1	(1,42)	70,2	(1,97)	88,3	(0,61)	82,5	(0,80)
Fair or poor	15,1	(0,59)	20,8	(0,75)	30,9	(1,42)	29,8	(1,97)	11,7	(0,61)	17,5	(0,80)

## Most people could be trusted

Agree	x	x	39,8	(0,91)	x	x	25,3	(1,87)	x	x	45,1	(1,19)
Disagree	x	x	60,2	(0,91)	x	x	74,7	(1,87)	x	x	54,9	(1,19)

## People like me have a say in the government

Agree	x	x	26,0	(0,91)	x	x	26,8	(1,72)	x	x	25,8	(1,16)
Disagree	x	x	74,0	(0,91)	x	x	73,2	(1,72)	x	x	74,2	(1,16)

## Formal education in the last 12 months

Not participated	74,6	(0,49)	76,4	(0,73)	83,2	(1,16)	81,0	(1,89)	72,8	(0,58)	74,6	(0,91)
Participated	25,4	(0,49)	23,6	(0,73)	16,8	(1,16)	19,0	(1,89)	27,2	(0,58)	25,4	(0,91)

## Non-formal education in the last 12 months

Not participated	43,0	(0,93)	39,4	(1,15)	65,8	(2,06)	63,6	(2,39)	38,1	(0,98)	30,4	(1,13)
Participated	57,0	(0,93)	60,6	(1,15)	34,2	(2,06)	36,4	(2,39)	61,9	(0,98)	69,6	(1,13)

## Formal or Non-formal education in the last 12 months

Not participated	34,6	(0,77)	33,2	(1,09)	57,2	(1,92)	55,9	(2,50)	29,7	(0,80)	24,7	(1,00)
Participated	65,4	(0,77)	66,8	(1,09)	42,8	(1,92)	44,1	(2,50)	70,3	(0,80)	75,3	(1,00)

† Not applicable.

! Interpret data with caution. The coefficient of variation (CV) for this estimate is between 30 and 50 percent.

!! Not reportable. The coefficient of variation (CV) for this estimate is 50 percent or above.

-- Data not collected

x Data not comparable

NOTE: Standard errors are in parentheses. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Educational attainment is based on the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) 2011, grouped into below upper secondary (ISCED 1, 2 and 3 short), upper secondary (ISCED 3 and 4) and tertiary (ISCED 5, 6, 7 and 8). Occupation skill-level is based on an OECD measure that classifies occupations into four broad skill-levels: (1) skilled occupations (e.g. legislators, senior officials and managers, professionals, technicians and associate professionals); (2) semi-skilled white-collar occupations (e.g. clerks, service workers, and shop and market sales workers); (3) semi-skilled blue-collar occupations (e.g. skilled agricultural and fishery workers, craft and related trades workers, plant and machine operators and assemblers); and (4) elementary occupations (e.g. cleaners, kitchen assistants) (OECD 2013). Social Trust was asked in a question: Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people? Please answer using this card, where 0 means 'you can't be too careful' and 10 mean 'Most people can be trusted'. The estimation here divides the scale into 0-5 as Disagree and 6-10 as Agree. Political efficacy was asked in a question: How much would you say the political system in #CountryName allows people like you to have a say in what the government does? Please answer using this card, where 0 means 'not at all' and 10 means 'completely'. The estimation here divides the scale into 0-5 as Disagree and 6-10 as Agree. The way non-formal education participation was asked in 2012 may have facilitated over-reporting, therefore caution is requested when interpreting the trend results.

SOURCE: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), 2012/2014 and 2023.