

Are adults forgetting how to read?

A survey by the OECD suggests so

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Are you smarter than a ten-year-old? New data suggest that a shockingly large portion of adults in the rich world might not be. Roughly one-fifth of people aged 16 to 65 perform no better in tests of maths and reading than would be expected of a pupil coming to the end of their time at primary school, according to a study released on December 10th by the OECD, a club of mostly rich countries. Worse still, adults in many places have grown less literate over the past ten years.

The OECD's "Survey of Adult Skills" is carried out only once a decade. The researchers arranged for 160,000 adults in 31 countries and regions to sit short tests in numeracy, literacy and problem-solving. These aim to gauge if they have the skills to hold down a job, participate in civic life and generally thrive in the real world. At their most basic, they find out how well people can make sense of the warnings on the back of an aspirin packet, or work out how much wallpaper is needed to cover a room. At more advanced levels, they explore how well people can draw sound conclusions from analysis and charts of the sort one might stumble across in, say, a popular current-affairs magazine.

Finland will rejoice at the results: it posts the highest average score in all three fields. People in the Netherlands, Norway and Japan, who performed better than average across the disciplines, will also be pleased. England has risen up the league table in the ten years since the tests were last run, owing to better performances among young adults. By contrast, America's results are heading south. Similarly, Chile, Italy, Poland and Portugal all boast a high share of people who score below the norm. Almost half of Chileans score badly enough to place in the bottom two categories in both maths and reading, compared with just 8% of Japanese people.

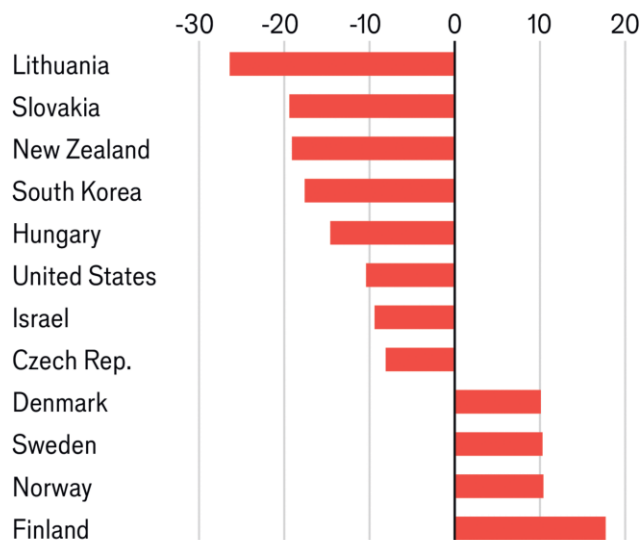
Zoom out, and the picture is one of worsening basic skills. For almost every country that has seen its score in numeracy rise significantly over the past ten years, there is another that has seen its score fall. When it comes to literacy, countries with falling scores outnumber those making significant progress. This is the case even though more people are completing secondary school, and many more are getting degrees. The declines are concentrated among the least proficient, who seem to be scoring even lower than they did before. In many countries, the gap between the most- and least-skilled people is widening.

Increased migration offers some explanation. Non-native speakers tend to do worse in tests that involve juggling words. Ageing populations do not help: the data suggest that numeracy and literacy peak at 30 or so. But even when these changes are accounted for, literacy scores in lots of countries are falling. Andreas Schleicher, head of education and skills at the OECD, speculates that adults are now getting less practice than they used to at reading long and complex texts. Blame TikTok.

Schoolboy errors

Literacy proficiency among 16- to 65-year-olds, average score-point change from previous test results to 2023*

Selected OECD countries



*Previous tests done in 2012, 2014 and 2017.

Adjusted for demographic change

Source: OECD

Chart: The Economist

The OECD's study is not the only one to suggest that improvements in cognitive skills might now be stalling. Throughout the 20th century, psychometrists observed that IQ scores were rising reliably, as part of a phenomenon named the "Flynn effect". More recently, the trend in some countries has been that of stagnation or decline. The cause of this is hotly debated. What no one much doubts is that people with nimble brains find it rather easier to swerve life's worst misfortunes, and are more likely to enjoy the best outcomes.

Surveys carried out alongside the OECD's tests appear to confirm as much. People who perform best in the tests boast wages that are 75% higher than those with the worst scores. And returns to good numeracy and literacy seem to be more than just financial. High scorers report that they are happier and in better health. Low scorers seem to be more suspicious of others, and more likely to report feeling alienated from politics. You do not need a first-rate mind to sense trouble ahead. ■