

Table 1a and 1b – Literacy

Technical notes updated on 13 October 2008

Table 1a presents population 15 years of age and over by literacy, sex and urban/rural residence for each population census between 1985 and 2004. Table 1b presents the respective percentages.

Description of variables: Statistics presented in this table are from population censuses. Data obtained from sample surveys are shown for those countries or areas where no census was held during the period. These have been footnoted accordingly. Unless otherwise indicated, data refer to the de facto (present-in-area) population.

Literacy is defined as the ability both to read and to write. A person is illiterate who cannot, with understanding, both read and write a short, simple statement on his everyday life. Hence, a person capable of reading and writing only figures and his own name should be considered illiterate, as should a person who can read but not write and one who can read and write only a ritual phrase which has been memorized.¹ A parallel definition arose with the introduction in 1978 of the notion of functional literacy. A definition approved in the UNESCO General Conference that year stated that a person was considered functionally literate who could engage in all activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his or her group and community and also for enabling him or her to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his or her own and the community's development.

Age is defined as age at last birthday, that is, the difference between the date of birth and the reference date of the age distribution expressed in completed solar years. The common lower age limit of 15 years has been chosen for the table, in order to achieve maximum comparability. This is in accordance with UNESCO recommendations to obtain adult illiteracy rates.

The urban/rural classification is that provided by each country or area; it is presumed to be based on the national definitions of urban population that are described in the technical notes for table 6 of the regular issue of the Demographic Yearbook.

Percentage computation: Percentage literate and illiterate, respectively, for both sexes, male and female separately, is the number of persons 15 and over recorded as literate and illiterate, respectively, per 100 persons 15 years of age and over in the same age-sex group at the same date. These percentages are known as the adult literacy and illiteracy rate, respectively. If data were tabulated for a minimum age other than 15, or with none at all, the percentages were computed on the corresponding age group of the population. Such rates are footnoted.

Reliability of data: No special reliability codes have been used in connection with this table.

Limitations: Statistics on literate, illiterate and total population 15 years of age and over by sex and urban/rural residence are subject to the same qualifications as have been set forth for population statistics in general in the Technical Notes for the regular issue of the Demographic Yearbook.

Errors in national census data can arise at any stage of the collection, processing or presentation process, and such errors may limit the quality and international comparability of census statistics presented in the Demographic Yearbook. Two major types of errors in census data are often distinguished: first, coverage errors, which lead to the over- or under-enumeration of the population in the census, and second, content errors, which affect the accuracy of the recorded information for the covered population.

Because coverage errors may occur more frequently among some population sub-groups than others, coverage errors may affect not only the absolute number of persons in any given category but also their relative distribution. Levels and patterns of coverage and content errors differ widely among countries and even, at times, from census to census for a specific country. In addition, factors limiting international comparability of census statistics are variations among countries in the concepts, definitions and classifications used in censuses.

The principal limitation in connection with data on literacy/illiteracy arises from variations in the definition of literacy/illiteracy and in the different age limits imposed on the tabulations.

¹ Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses Revision 2, para. 2.202.

In this table, illiterate persons are by definition those who were reported as unable to read or to write. Hence, it includes also semi-literate persons able to read and not write, and those who can write but not read. The latter is especially important where ability to write is determined by ability to sign one's name. Conformity to the reading-writing definition is now apparently widespread. When known, exceptions are footnoted.

Another variation in definition which produces marked lack of comparability over time and between countries or areas is the language reference for the question on ability to read and write. The United Nations has recommended that a literate person must be able to read with understanding and to write a short statement on every day life, in any one language.² Some countries or areas may require literacy to be judged by ability to read and write in a specified language. The result may be a higher percentage of illiteracy than would result from application of the United Nations recommendation. The possibility of changes in the language requirement should be kept in mind when comparing the data in this table with earlier data shown in previous issues of the Demographic Yearbook.

During population censuses, the ability to read and write is mostly based on a 'self-declaration' method: respondents are asked whether they and the members of their household are literate, as opposed to being asked a more comprehensive question or to demonstrate the skill. Because of the possible reluctance of some illiterate persons to admit to their illiteracy and the difficulties of applying a test of literacy during a census investigation, the data collected may not be highly accurate. In some countries or areas, persons of unknown literacy may have been considered as literate without additional evidence, while in others, absence of an answer to the question might have been considered to indicate illiteracy. This misreporting, while not evident in the tabulation, must be borne in mind when using the data, especially for countries or areas where many persons are of unknown literacy status.

The criteria used by the numerator in deciding on literacy status and the disposition in the tabulations of persons of unknown literacy are also sources of variation in statistics. In some countries or areas, evidence of school attendance or completion of a certain level of education was considered tantamount to literacy and the person so classified. In some, unknown literacy was considered as literate without additional evidence, while in others, absence of an answer to the question was considered to indicate illiteracy. It was not possible to determine the extent to which objective tests of the ability to read and write a statement on every day life were applied, but it is likely that this was rarely done. These variations, while not evident in the tabulation, must be borne in mind in using the data, especially for countries or areas where many persons are of unknown literacy status.

Wherever the minimum age varies, it is obvious that a percentage illiterate computed in relation to the total population would not be comparable from country to country, because the numerator would include varying age segments of the population. To increase comparability, the minimum age in this table has been placed at 15 years and the illiterate population considered only for ages 15 and over. Countries with a lower minimum age limit can usually provide the 15 and over. Data for countries or areas with no minimum age, however, will not be comparable. This source of variation must be kept in mind in using literacy data for the total population.

It should be noted that data are lacking for a number of countries or areas in the developed regions. This is due to the fact that a question on literacy status is not asked in population censuses. Since the years 1990's the interest in most developed countries is to collect data on functional literacy. For this purpose, literacy assessment surveys are conducted to test the literacy levels of individuals³.

It should be noted that data are lacking for a number of countries or areas in the developed regions. This is due to the fact that a question on literacy status is not a population census feature; also, the focus is on assessing functional literacy through specialized assessment surveys

The comparability of data by urban/rural residence is affected by the national definitions of urban and rural used in tabulating these data.

² Ibid., para. 2.203

³ Examples of literacy assessment surveys conducted in developed countries are: International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALL), National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL). Also, UIS has a programme on functional literacy assessment in developing countries which is LAMP: Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme. More details are available at: http://www.uis.unesco.org/ev_en.php?ID=6409_201&ID2=DO_TOPIC.

Earlier data: Literate, illiterate and total population 15 years of age and over by sex have been shown previously in issues of the Demographic Yearbook featuring population census statistics as the special topic. This series updates information published in previous issues as indicated in the Index. Data have been presented by urban/rural residence beginning with the 1971 issue.