

National Endowment for the Arts



READING AT RISK

A SURVEY OF LITERARY READING IN AMERICA



**Executive
Summary**

Preface



Photo by Vance Jacobs

R*eading at Risk* is not a report that the National Endowment for the Arts is happy to issue. This comprehensive survey of American literary reading presents a detailed assessment for the decline of reading's role in the nation's culture. For the first time in modern history, less than half the adult population now reads literature. Anyone who loves literature or values the cultural, intellectual, and political importance of active and engaged literacy in American society will respond to this report with grave concern.

Reading at Risk is not a collection of anecdotes, theories, or opinions. It is a descriptive survey of national trends in adult literary reading covering most major demographic groups—providing statistical measurements by age, gender, education, income, region, race, and ethnicity. The report can be summarized in a single sentence: literary reading in America is not only declining among all groups, but the rate of decline has accelerated, especially among the young.

Reading a book requires a degree of active attention and engagement. Indeed, reading itself is a progressive skill that depends on years of education and practice. By contrast, most electronic media such as television, recordings, and radio make fewer demands on their audiences, and often require no more than passive participation. Even interactive

electronic media, such as video games and the Internet, foster shorter attention spans and accelerated gratification. To lose such intellectual capabilities—and the many sorts of human continuity it allows—would constitute a vast cultural impoverishment.

More than reading is at stake. As this report demonstrates, readers play a more active and involved role in their communities. The decline in reading, therefore, parallels a larger retreat from participation in civic and cultural life.

What is to be done? There is surely no single solution to the present dilemma, just as there is no single cause. Each concerned group—writers, teachers, publishers, journalists, librarians, and legislators—will legitimately view the situation from a different perspective, and each will offer its own recommendations. The important thing now is to understand that America can no longer take active and engaged literacy for granted.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dana Gioia". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dana Gioia, Chairman
National Endowment for the Arts

Reading at Risk presents the results from the literature segment of a large-scale survey, the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, conducted by the Census Bureau in 2002 at the request of the National Endowment for the Arts. This survey investigated the percentage and number of adults, age 18 and over, who attended artistic performances, visited museums, watched broadcasts of arts programs, or read literature. The survey sample numbered more than 17,000 individuals, which makes it one of the most comprehensive polls of art and literature consumption ever conducted.

Reading at Risk extrapolates and interprets data on literary reading and compares them with results from similar surveys carried out in 1982 and 1992. The survey asked respondents if, during the previous twelve months, they had read any novels, short stories, plays, or poetry in their leisure time (not for work or school). The report establishes trends in the number of adults reading, listening to, and writing literature by demographic categories of age, race, region, income, and education. This report also compares participation in literary activities with other leisure activities, such as watching movies and exercising.

Reading at Risk provides an invaluable snapshot of the role of literature in the lives of Americans. It comes at a critical time, when electronic media are becoming the dominant influence in young people's worlds. *Reading at Risk* adds new and distressing information to the discussion. It contains solid evidence of the declining importance of literature to our populace. Literature reading is fading as a meaningful activity, especially among younger people. If one believes that active and engaged readers lead richer intellectual lives than non-readers and that a well-read citizenry is essential to a vibrant democracy, the decline of literary reading calls for serious action.

10 Key Findings

Decline in Literary Reading

	1982	1992	2002
% of U.S. Adult Population Reading Literature	56.9	54.0	46.7
Number of Literary Readers (in millions)	96	100	96

1. The percentage of adult Americans reading literature has dropped dramatically over the past 20 years.

- Less than half of the adult American population now reads literature.
- The 10 percentage point decline in literary reading represents a loss of 20 million potential readers.
- Only the strong growth in overall U.S. population of nearly 40 million adults from 1982 to 2002 allowed the actual number of readers to remain flat at 96 million.

Trends in Book and Literary Reading

	Percentage of U.S. Adult Population		Change, 1982 to 2002	
	1982	2002	Difference	Rate of Decline
Read Any Book	60.8	56.6	-4.2 pp	-7%
Read Literature	54.0	46.7	-7.3 pp	-14%

2. The decline in literary reading parallels a decline in total book reading.

- Total book reading is declining significantly, although not at the rate of literary reading.
- The percentage of the U.S. adult population reading any books has declined by -7 percent over the past decade.

Rates of Decline in Literary Reading

	1982	1992	2002
% of U.S. Adult Population	56.9	54.0	48.7
Percentage Point (pp) Decline	-	-2.9 pp	-7.3 pp
Rate of Decline	-	-5%	-14%

3. The rate of decline in literary reading is accelerating.

- The ten-year rate of decline has accelerated from -5 percent to -14 percent since 1992.

What is literary reading?

The reading of novels, short stories, poetry, or drama in any print format, including the Internet. Any type was admitted, from romance novels to classical poetry.

Literary Reading by Gender

	Percentage by Group			Percentage Point (pp) Change	
	1982	1992	2002	1982-2002	1992-2002
Men	48.1	47.4	37.6	-8.8 pp	-11.5 pp
Women	63.0	60.3	55.1	-5.2 pp	-7.9 pp

4. Women read more literature than men do, but literary reading by both groups is declining at significant rates.

- Only slightly more than one-third of adult American males now read literature.
- Reading among women is also declining significantly, but at a slower rate.

Literary Reading by Race/Ethnicity

	Percentage by Group			Percentage Point (pp) Change	
	1982	1992	2002	1982-2002	1992-2002
White	58.8	58.0	51.4	-8.6 pp	-8.4 pp
African American	42.3	45.6	37.1	-8.5 pp	-5.2 pp
Hispanic	36.4	34.0	26.5	-7.5 pp	-8.9 pp
Other	50.2	42.7	43.7	+1.0 pp	-6.5 pp

5. Literary reading is declining among whites, African Americans, and Hispanics.

Literary Reading by Education

	Percentage by Group			Percentage Point (pp) Change	
	1982	1992	2002	1982-2002	1982-2002
Grade School	21.2	17.3	14.0	-3.3 pp	-7.2 pp
Some High School	38.8	34.5	23.3	-11.1 pp	-15.4 pp
High School Graduates	54.2	48.0	37.7	-11.3 pp	-16.5 pp
Some College	72.9	65.0	52.9	-12.1 pp	-20.0 pp
College Graduates/ Graduate School	82.1	74.6	66.7	-7.9 pp	-15.4 pp

Why not make distinctions for quality of literature, and why not include literary nonfiction such as memoirs?

Because a large population survey such as Reading at Risk can't distinguish too many subgenres or levels of quality and still keep the responses reliable and distinct.

6. Literary reading is declining among all education levels.

- The higher the education level, the higher the reading rate, but reading among every group has declined over the past 20 years.

Literary Reading by Age

	Percentage by Group			Percentage Point (pp) Change	
	1982	1992	2002	1982-2002	1982-2002
18-24	59.8	53.3	42.8	-10.5 pp	-17.0 pp
25-34	62.1	54.6	47.7	-6.9 pp	-14.4 pp
35-44	59.7	58.9	46.6	-12.3 pp	-13.1 pp
45-54	54.9	56.9	51.6	-5.3 pp	-3.3 pp
55-64	52.8	52.9	49.9	-4.0 pp	-3.5 pp
65-74	47.2	50.8	45.3	-5.5 pp	-1.9 pp
75 & Older	40.9	40.4	36.7	-3.7 pp	-4.2 pp

7. Literary reading is declining among all age groups.

Literary Reading by Young Adults

Age Group	Percentage of Group			Rate of Decline
	1982	1992	2002	1982-2002
18-24	59.8	53.3	42.8	-28%
25-34	62.1	54.6	47.7	-23%
All Ages	56.9	54.0	46.7	-18%

8. The steepest decline in literary reading is in the youngest age groups.

- Over the past 20 years, young adults (18-34) have declined from being those most likely to read literature to those least likely (with the exception of those age 65 and above).
- The rate of decline for the youngest adults (18-24) is 55 percent greater than that of the total adult population (-28 percent vs. -18 percent).

Participation in Cultural and Social Activities

	Percentage of U.S. Adult Population	
	Literary Readers	Non-Literary Readers
Perform Volunteer and Charity Work	43.0	17.0
Visit Art Museums	44.0	12.0
Attend Performing Arts Events	49.0	17.0
Attend Sporting Events	46.0	27.0

9. The decline in literary reading foreshadows an erosion in cultural and civic participation.

- Literary reading strongly correlates to other forms of active civic participation.
- Literary readers are more likely than non-literary readers to perform volunteer and charity work, visit art museums, attend performing arts events, and attend sporting events.

10. The decline in reading correlates with increased participation in a variety of electronic media, including the Internet, video games, and portable digital devices.

- Literature now competes with an enormous array of electronic media. While no single activity is responsible for the decline of reading, the cumulative presence and availability of these alternatives have increasingly drawn Americans away from reading.
- Non-readers watch more television than do readers.
- In 1990, book buying constituted 5.7 percent of total recreation spending, while spending on audio, video, computers, and software was 6 percent. By 2002, electronic spending had soared to 24 percent, while spending on books declined slightly to 5.6 percent.
- A 1999 study showed that the average American child lives in a household with 2.9 televisions, 1.8 VCRs, 3.1 radios, 2.1 CD players, 1.4 video game players, and 1 computer.

Reading at Risk presents a distressing but objective overview of national trends. The accelerating declines in literary reading among all demographic groups of American adults indicate an imminent cultural crisis.

The trends among younger adults warrant special concern, suggesting that—unless some effective solution is found—literary culture, and literacy in general, will continue to worsen. Indeed, at the current rate of loss, literary reading as a leisure activity will virtually disappear in half a century.

Reading at Risk is testimony that a cultural legacy is disappearing, especially among younger people. Twenty years ago, just after the NEA 1982 survey, the landmark study *A Nation at Risk* warned that “a rising tide of mediocrity” had overtaken the school system and threatened a generation of students. The report sparked a massive reform effort whose consequences are still evolving today. *Reading at Risk* reveals an equally dire situation, a culture at risk.

The National Endowment for the Arts calls upon public agencies, cultural organizations, the press, and educators to take stock of the sliding literary condition of our country. It is time to inspire a nationwide renaissance of literary reading and bring the transformative power of literature into the lives of all citizens.

A Great Nation Deserves Great Art.



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