

An Examination of PIAAC Data for Unemployed Adults Aged 45 to 74

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Research Questions

This study focused on the following research questions for U.S. adults ages 45 to 74:

1. **Lifelong learning:** Are there any differences in adult education and training (AET) participation among those who are employed, unemployed, and out of the labor force, and what are the reasons for non-participation?
2. **Employment status:** Are there any differences in literacy skills or use of reading and writing skills at home among those who are employed, unemployed, and out of the labor force?
3. **Retirement:** Are there any differences in literacy skills or use of reading and writing skills at home among those who are retired, employed, and unemployed?
4. **Health:** Are there any relationships among health status, literacy skills, use of reading and writing skills at home, education, and employment status?

As the U.S. population ages, middle-aged and older workers represent an increasingly large segment of the labor force, accounting for nearly half of all workers. At the same time, labor force participation rates for males ages 45 – 54 have declined in recent decades. Technological advances in a global knowledge economy requires continuous skill upgrades for people of all ages. Little previous research has used the nationally representative data from the Program for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) data to analyze the relationship between AET, employment status, and literacy skills for this population.

Findings and Discussion

Overall, employed adults ages 45 – 65 participate in AET significantly more than the unemployed and out of the labor force groups. For all employment groups, individuals with higher levels of education were significantly more likely to participate in AET as compared to those with lower levels of education. Employed adults ages 45 – 65 had higher AET participation rates than the 66 – 74 age group. For ages 45 – 65 the unemployed or out of the labor force were more likely to have lower literacy skills than those who were employed. Among the 45 – 65 and 66 – 74 age groups, there was no difference in the use of reading and writing skills at home among the employed, unemployed, and out of the labor force groups. Comparing the employed with those who are retired, for both age groups, employed were more likely to use writing skills at home. For ages 45 – 65, those with greater literacy skills were more likely to report better health. Also, adults with higher educational attainment were more likely than those with lower educational attainment to report good health. Moreover, those who are unemployed and out of the labor force were less likely to report better health than the employed. Among the 65 - 74 age group, greater literacy skills were associated with better self-rated health and employed adults were more likely than those out of the labor force to report good self-rated health. Among both the 45-65 and 66+ age groups, use of reading and writing skills at home was not associated with self-rated health.

Policy/Practice Implications

Results of this study, specifically lower levels of participation in AET by the unemployed, out of the labor force, and by those with lower levels of education, suggest the need for policies and practices that promote participation in lifelong learning activities. This is especially important in light of declines in labor force participation by males ages 45 – 54. In addition, programs that encourage participation in AET for ages 66 – 74 might result in continued employment at older ages. From a practice standpoint, outreach programs by educational providers that inform adults ages 45 – 65 and 66 - 74 about the benefits of lifelong learning activities and facilitate their participation could also increase involvement. These efforts will help promote the physical and economic well-being of the workforce in later life.