

Reading at Risk

Amy M. Azzam

Each month, Special Report summarizes a recent research study (or several studies related to the same topic) containing findings of importance to Educational Leadership readers. The purpose of this column is not to endorse or refute the conclusions of the study or studies summarized, but rather to keep readers informed about timely research that may significantly influence education policy and practice.

For all the splash of Amazon.com and the ubiquity of huge chain bookstores, are people in the United States reading more than they used to? A recent report by the National Endowment for the Arts on literary reading in the United States answers with a gloomy *no*. *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America* reports on data collected from more than 17,000 adults through the Census Bureau's Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, conducted in 2002. According to the literary segment of the survey, literary reading in the United States is declining at a clip. The report's definition of "literary reading" encompasses any novel, short story, play, or collection of poetry, regardless of its literary quality.

Key findings in the report document an across-the-board decline in literary reading among U.S. adults ages 18 and older:

- Between 1982 and 2002, literary reading among adult readers in the United States declined 10 percent, which represents a loss of 20 million potential readers.
- The rate of decline in literary reading is accelerating.
- Between 1992 and 2002, reading declined 10 percent among men and 5 percent among women. In 2002, 55 percent of women read literature, compared with only 37 percent of men.
- Literary reading is declining among whites, African Americans, and Hispanics.
- Literary reading is declining among people of all education levels. Only 67 percent of college graduates engaged in literary reading in 2002, compared with 73 percent in 1982.
- Adult literary reading is declining in all age groups, espe-

cially in the youngest age groups. In 1982, adults ages 18–34 were the most likely group to read literature. In 2002, this group was the least likely to read literature (with the exception of those age 65 or older).

The decline in reading correlates with increased use of a variety of electronic media, which may, in part, account for the steep decline in reading in the youngest age groups. The report also found that literary readers were more likely than non-literary readers to attend cultural events and volunteer in their communities.

Consequently, an erosion in literary readership may signal an erosion in cultural and civic participation.

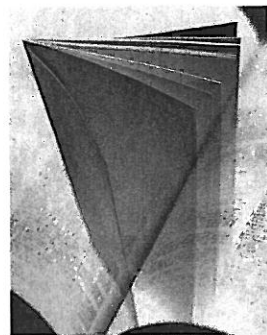
The report contains some intriguing statistics. Approximately 16 percent of the U.S. population reads 12 or more literary books each year. African Americans are more likely to listen to poetry readings than white Americans are. The

highest reading rate is among white females (61 percent), whereas the lowest is among Hispanic males (18 percent). The dramatic increase in the Hispanic population in the United States may in part account for the lower literary reading rates documented in this survey, given data that show that the literary reading rate for U.S. Hispanics is approximately half that of non-Hispanic whites.

The report concludes with a sobering thought: If the decline in reading continues at this rate, "literary reading as a leisure activity will virtually disappear in half a century." ■

Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America was published by the National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, DC, 2004. The full report is available at www.arts.gov/pub/ReadingAtRisk.pdf.

Amy M. Azzam is Senior Associate Editor, *Educational Leadership*; aazzam@ascd.org.



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