Illiteracy In America Essay, Research Paper

The Problem of Illiteracy in the United States

The United States government is not doing enough to make sure everyone can read. E.D. Hirsch, Jr. states in his widely read book Cultural Literacy: AThe standard of literacy required by modern society has been rising throughout the developed world, but the American literacy rates have not risen to meet this standard@ (E.D. Hirsch, Jr. 1).

Illiteracy is a big problem in the United States. More than 4% of the adult population in the United States cannot read. That is about eight million people over the age of 16 (National Center for… 1). Illiteracy leads to unemployment and sometimes even homelessness. More than 40% of the Americans who are illiterate live in poverty (The Washington Literacy… 1).

When people think of illiteracy they usually think only of people who can neither read nor write. However, there are two other types of illiteracy: functional illiteracy and marginal illiteracy. The Department of Education defines a functional illiterate person as someone Awho can read between the fourth and eighth grade level, is able to perform routine uncomplicated tasks, but lacks the basic skills needed to cope well in society@(APL 1). This means that most functionally illiterate people cannot read a daily newspaper or a classic book with much comprehension. A marginally illiterate person is defined as someone Awho can read between the eighth and twelfth grade level, but lacks the twelfth grade equivalence needed in a complex and technological society@ (APL 1). In addition to Americans that are completely illiterate, 45 million more are considered functionally or marginally illiterate (AIlliteracy@ 1). This inability to read is a big problem and prevents many of these Americans from getting good jobs, or at least better jobs than they otherwise would have.

The lack of literacy in America is a burden on the government and the economy. Illiterate people are affected in different ways. People who cannot get jobs, or lose them, go on welfare or receive unemployment benefits. Unemployment benefits alone

are estimated to cost $6 billion a year in taxes to support illiterate people (Literacy Volunteers of… 1). Functionally or marginally illiterate people are much more likely to be receiving food stamps. People who cannot read are not fully productive and contribute less to the nation=s economy.

Some people who cannot read and do not have jobs may turn to crime and end up in jail. A survey done by a Satellite Based Corrections Training Network on prisons stated: AOne adult based education instructor was responsible for the literacy training programs for a prison of 5000 inmates; based on an estimated 60 percent illiteracy rate, he was responsible for 3000 students.@ There are programs being developed for prison inmates that will cost millions of dollars each year to address illiteracy (Kozal 1).

Reading and writing is a basic skill required for a good life. Being literate allows people to understand and have the ability to achieve almost any goal. Literacy allows a poor kid from New York to become a wealthy doctor or a farmer boy could become the next Bill Gates. Being able to read and write is one of the most important skills a person needs. Reading helps people get good jobs, a good job allows that person to make money, and making money allows that person to buy the basic necesities of life.

The government does not appear to be doing enough to solve the nationwide problem of illiteracy. There are still, many people who could read if more government help was available. If a fraction of the money that was put into programs like space exploration, was put into literacy programs, then nearly everyone in America would be able to read and write well.

Even though the government is not doing enough to help illiterates, one bright spot is the number of private volunteer programs, such as the Literacy Volunteers of America, which are trying to reduce illiteracy in America. Volunteers of this organization give their time to help the unfortunate who cannot read (LVA Coventry 1). Other programs help people read, such as AHooked on Phonics.@ However, people must pay money to take courses like this. Programs such as these need to be implemented in public schools. Offering such programs at a young age will provide a virtually illiterate free society.

The government needs to make sure that everyone can read. Hopefully one day almost everyone will be able to read, but that day is still a long way off. Addressing this problem could be the starting point of the new century and it could lead America into the next millennium as a fully literate society.