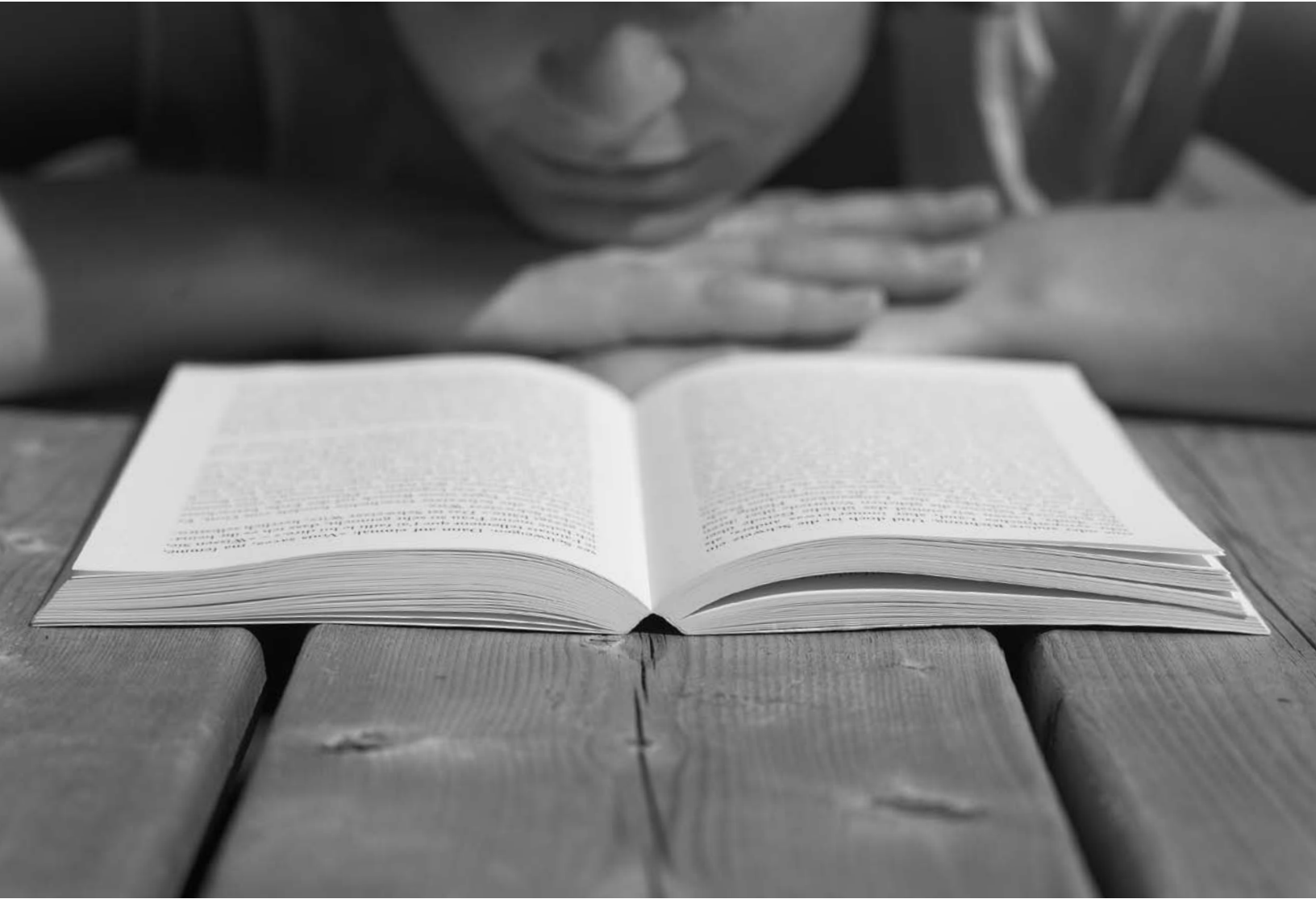


# National Endowment for the Arts



## READING ON THE RISE A NEW CHAPTER IN AMERICAN LITERACY



“Today a reader, tomorrow a leader.”

— Margaret Fuller

# Preface

Photo by Vance Jacobs



*Reading on the Rise*, the National Endowment for the Arts' new report, documents a significant turning point in recent American cultural history. For the first time in over a quarter-century, our survey shows that literary reading has risen among adult Americans. After decades of declining trends, there has been a decisive and unambiguous increase among virtually every group measured in this comprehensive national survey.

Whites, African Americans, and Hispanics have all shown significant growth in their reading rates, as have both adult men and women. There have been similar improvements in adults across most educational levels and age groups. Combined with general population growth, these higher reading rates have expanded literary readership by 16.6 million—creating the largest audience in the history of the survey.

Best of all, the most significant growth has been among young adults, the group that had shown the largest declines in earlier surveys. The youngest group (ages 18-24) has undergone a particularly inspiring transformation from a 20 percent decline in 2002 to a 21 percent increase in 2008—a startling level of change. At the Arts Endowment we have paid particular attention to this crucial cohort. During their high school years, they were the target of the largest literary initiatives in the agency's history, and we note their progress with particular satisfaction.

One might well ask if the new data are too good to be true. We are confident that the new survey is both accurate in measuring current behavior and fully comparable to earlier surveys. Our sample size is enormous—roughly 20 times the size of the average media poll—and carefully balanced by the Census Bureau to reflect the present U.S. population. Our core questionnaire has remained fundamentally consistent for 26 years. There is no other survey with such detailed and reliable data on the subject.

The impressive new survey results raise an obvious question—what happened in the past six years to revitalize American literary reading? There is no statistical answer to this question. The NEA survey does not identify the causes either for adult reading or for changes in reading behavior. But our 26 years of detailed statistical data—augmented by data from the dozens of other substantial studies summarized in the NEA's *To Read or Not to Read* report—do provide some basis to make an intelligent hypothesis.

In building a theory to explain this sudden reversal of long-term trends, it is important to remember that the results measure only adult reading and that the rise has occurred among virtually all adult groups. The results do not reflect the specific impact of the many excellent programs found in elementary or middle schools. The survey, however, does capture reading

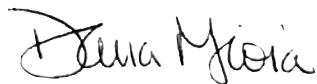
behavior among recent high school graduates (and drop-outs). As the results make clear, the recent rise in reading is not a school-based trend but a broader, community-wide phenomenon.

During the past six years, there has been a growing sense of concern about the nearly universal decline in American literacy. Although these concerns were not new, there was a heightened sense of urgency created by alarming studies like *Reading at Risk* and *To Read or Not to Read* (to cite only the NEA's own contributions to the genre). These surveys demonstrated reading's increasingly precarious position among an unprecedented large variety of electronic entertainment and communication options. A decline in both reading and reading ability was clearly documented in the first generation of teenagers and young adults raised in a society full of videogames, cell phones, iPods, laptops, and other electronic devices.

Faced by a clear and undeniable problem, millions of parents, teachers, librarians, and civic leaders took action (inspired by thousands of journalists and scholars who publicized the issues at stake). Reading became a higher priority in families, schools, and communities. Thousands of programs, large and small, were created or significantly enhanced to address the challenge. The NEA's Big Read program is only one conspicuous example of these myriad efforts. The Big Read did not exist in 2002, but today it is an active presence in every state, reaching almost 500 communities with over 21,000 organizational partners.

When the NEA first published *Reading at Risk* in 2004, the agency was criticized by some for publicizing the alarming national survey results. Our belief, then and now, was that the first step towards solving a problem was to identify and understand it. *Reading on the Rise* has demonstrated that our faith in positive social and cultural change was not misplaced.

Cultural decline is not inevitable. For those of us who have studied the impact of active and engaged literacy on the lives of individuals and communities, *Reading on the Rise* provides inspiring news. I can think of no happier way to end my tenure at the National Endowment for the Arts than by sharing such felicitous data and congratulating the legions of teachers, librarians, writers, parents, public officials, and philanthropists who helped achieve the renaissance. While we cannot be complacent, we can surely pause to celebrate our common success.



Dana Gioia  
Chairman, National Endowment for the Arts

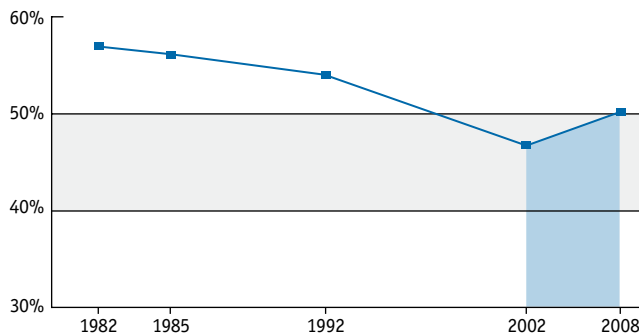
# Key Findings

In this report, “literary” reading refers to the reading of any novels, short stories, poems, or plays in print or online. The source for all charts and tables is the NEA’s Survey of Public Participation in the Arts.

## 1. Literary reading is on the rise for the first time in the 26 years of the NEA’s periodic survey of U.S. adult participation in the arts.

- For the first time in the history of the survey—conducted five times since 1982—the overall adult literary reading rate has risen (from 46.7 percent in 2002 to 50.2 percent in 2008).<sup>1</sup>
- More than half of the U.S. adult population—113 million Americans—did literary reading in the prior 12 months.
- Since 2002, literary reading has increased among most demographic groups of adults examined.

**Percentage of Adults Who Read Literature: 1982-2008**



## 2. The absolute number of literary readers has grown significantly.

- There were 16.6 million new adult readers of literature in 2008.<sup>2</sup>
- The absolute number of literary readers is now the highest in the survey’s history.
- The growth in new readers reflects higher adult reading rates combined with overall population growth.
- In the previous survey, the number of adult literary readers had dropped by 4.1 million, despite a substantial rise in the total U.S. population.

**Total Number and Percentage of Adults Who Read Literature**

	1982	1992	2002	2008
Percentage	56.9%	54.0%	46.7%	50.2%
Number	95.6 million	100.3 million	96.2 million	112.8 million
Change	—	-2.9 pp +4.7 million	-7.3 pp -4.1 million	+3.5 pp +16.6 million

pp = percentage points

## Key Findings

### 3. The new growth in readership reverses two decades of downward trends.

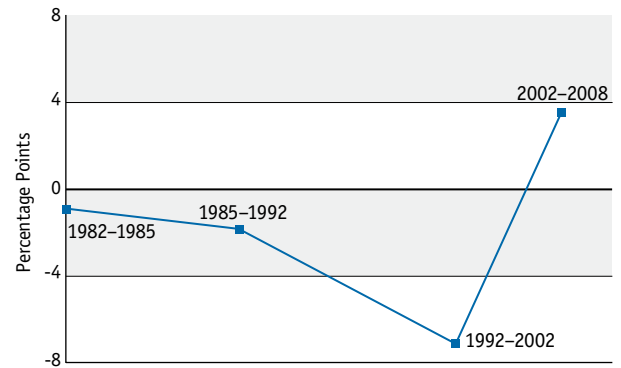
- Literary reading among adults increased at a 7 percent rate between 2002 and 2008.
- This gain followed significant declines in reading rates for the two most recent 10-year survey periods (1982-1992 and 1992-2002).

**Literary Reading Rates for All Adults**

	1982	1992	2002	2008
Percentage	56.9%	54.0%	46.7%	50.2%
Change	—	-2.9 pp	-7.3 pp	+3.5 pp
Rate of Change	—	-5%	-14%	+7%

pp = percentage points

**Changes in Literary Reading Rates Since 1982: All Adults**



### 4. Literary reading has increased most rapidly among the youngest adults.

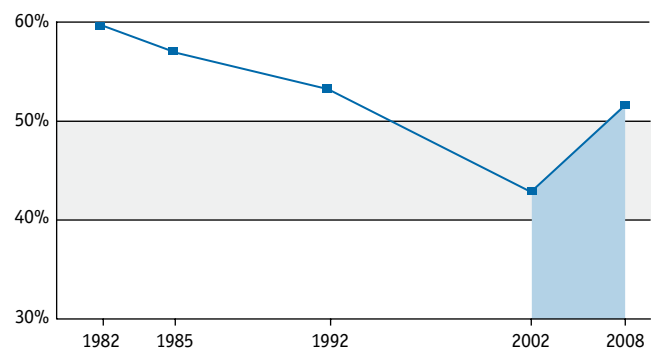
- The percentage of 18-24-year-olds who read literature has grown by nearly 9 points, representing 3.4 million additional readers.<sup>3</sup>
- The rate of their rise as readers (+21 percent since 2002) is greater than for any other age group and three times the growth rate of all adult readers.
- Six years earlier, by contrast, 18-24-year-olds had shown the steepest rate of decline in reading since the NEA survey began.

**Literary Reading Rates for 18-24-Year-Olds**

	1982	1992	2002	2008
Percentage	59.8%	53.3%	42.8%	51.7%
Change	—	-6.5 pp	-10.5 pp	+8.9 pp
Rate of Change	—	-11%	-20%	+21%

pp = percentage points

**Percentage of 18-24-Year-Olds Who Read Literature: 1982-2008**



## 5. Adults in most age groups have shown gains in literary reading.

- Over the past six years, young adults saw unprecedented growth in their reading rates.
- These age groups (18-44 years of age) had shown significant declines in reading in previous surveys. From 1982 to 2002, their literary reading rate had fallen by 24.2 percent.
- In 2008, only one age group (45-54) showed a small decline in its reading rate—though not at a statistically significant level.

### Literary Reading Rates by Age Group

	2002	2008	2002-2008	
			Change	Rate of change
All adults	46.7%	50.2%	+ 3.5 pp	+7%
18-24	42.8%	51.7%	+ 8.9 pp	+21%
25-34	47.7%	50.1%	*+ 2.4 pp	*+5%
35-44	46.6%	50.8%	+ 4.2 pp	+9%
45-54	51.6%	50.3%	*- 1.3 pp	*-3%
55-64	48.9%	53.1%	+ 4.2 pp	+9%
65-74	45.3%	49.1%	*+ 3.8 pp	*+8%
75+	36.7%	42.3%	+ 5.6 pp	+15%

\* not statistically significant  
pp = percentage points

## 6. Literary reading has risen among whites, African Americans, and Hispanics.

- Since 2002, reading has increased at the sharpest rate (+20 percent) among Hispanic Americans, though they still read literature at a lower rate than every other ethnic/racial group.
- Reading among African Americans has grown at a 15 percent rate.

### Literary Reading Rates by Race and Ethnicity

	2002	2008	2002-2008	
			Change	Rate of change
All adults	46.7%	50.2%	+3.5 pp	+7%
Hispanic	26.5%	31.9%	+5.4 pp	+20%
White	51.4%	55.7%	+4.3 pp	+8%
African American	37.1%	42.6%	+5.5 pp	+15%
Other	43.7%	43.9%	*+0.2 pp	0%

\* not statistically significant  
pp = percentage points

## Key Findings

### 7. For the first time in the survey's history, literary reading has increased among both men and women.

- Male reading of literature grew at an 11 percent rate between 2002 and 2008, after declining from 1982 to 2002.
- Women increased their already higher reading rates.

#### Literary Reading Rates by Gender

	2002	2008	2002-2008	
			Change	Rate of change
Men	37.6%	41.9%	+4.3 pp	+11%
Women	55.1%	58.0%	+2.9 pp	+5%

pp = percentage points

### 8. Literary reading rates have grown or held steady for adults of all education levels.

- As expected, the best-educated Americans have the highest reading rate (68.1 percent in 2008).
- Yet rates have climbed significantly for adults who did not complete high school and for those with only some college experience.

#### Literary Reading Rates by Education Level

	2002	2008	2002-2008	
			Change	Rate of change
All adults	46.7%	50.2%	+3.5 pp	+7%
Grade school	14.0%	18.5%	*+4.5 pp	*+32%
Some high school	23.3%	34.3%	+11.0 pp	+47%
High school graduate	37.7%	39.1%	*+1.4 pp	*+4%
Some college	52.9%	56.2%	+3.3 pp	+6%
Bachelor's degree or higher	66.7%	68.1%	*+1.4 pp	*+2%

\* not statistically significant  
pp = percentage points



## 9. Greater reading of fiction is responsible for the new growth in adult literary readers.

- Nearly half (47.0 percent) of all adults read fiction (a novel or short story) in 2008.<sup>4</sup>
- Reading in poetry and drama continues to decline.
- Most readers of poetry and drama (64.2 percent) also read fiction.
- The lower overall reading rate for poetry is due in part to a steep decline in the percentage of women who read poetry.<sup>5</sup>

### Literary Reading Rates by Genre

	2002	2008	Change	Rate of change
Literature	46.7%	50.2%	+3.5 pp	+7%
Fiction	45.1%	47.0%	+1.9 pp	+4%
Poetry	12.1%	8.3%	-3.8 pp	-31%
Plays	3.6%	2.6%	-1.0 pp	-28%

pp = percentage points

## 10. Book-readers have grown in absolute numbers but declined slightly as a percentage of the U.S. adult population.

- From 2002 to 2008, the absolute number of book-reading adults grew by 3.5 million, driven by population growth.<sup>6</sup>
- “Book-reading” here refers to the reading of any book (not solely “literary”) not required for work or school.
- Young adults (18-24) read books at a slightly lower rate than older adults—although they also do more reading online than older Americans.

### Percentage of Adults Who Read a Book Not Required for Work or School

	2002	2008	2002-2008	
			Change	Rate of change
All adults	56.6%	54.3%	- 2.3 pp	-4%
18-24	52.0%	50.7%	*-1.3 pp	*-3%
25-34	58.9%	54.1%	-4.8 pp	-8%
35-44	59.0%	56.2%	-2.8 pp	-5%
45-54	60.7%	54.2%	-6.5 pp	-11%
55-64	57.5%	58.4%	*+0.9 pp	*+2%
65-74	53.8%	54.5%	*+0.7 pp	*+1%
75+	44.3%	47.4%	*+3.1 pp	*+7%

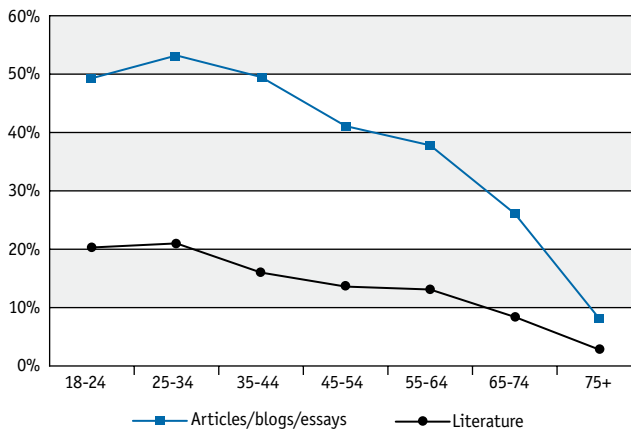
\* not statistically significant  
pp = percentage points

# Key Findings

## 11. Most online readers also report reading books.

- 84 percent of adults who read literature (fiction, poetry, or drama) online or downloaded from the Internet also read books, whether print or online.
- For adults who read online articles, essays, or blogs, the book-reading rate is 77 percent.
- Nearly 15 percent of all U.S. adults read literature online in 2008.<sup>7</sup>
- Online reading rates drop with age.

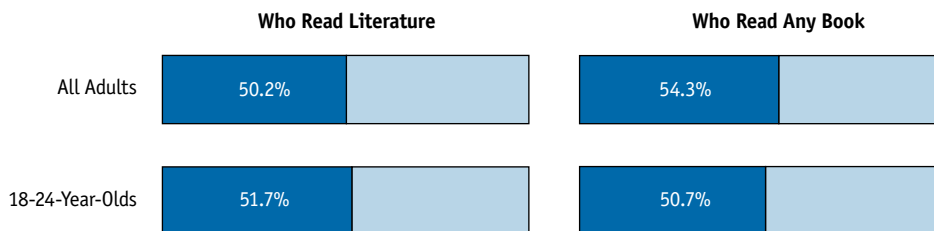
**Percentage of Adults Who Read Online, by Age**



## 12. The U.S. adult population now breaks into two almost equally sized groups—readers and non-readers.

- A slight majority of American adults now read literature or read books.
- Reading is an important indicator of various positive individual and social behavior patterns.
- The tendency to read or not to read correlates with broader differences in educational, cultural, and civic engagement.<sup>8</sup>
- Previous NEA research has shown that literary readers attend arts and sports events, play sports, do outdoor activities, exercise, and volunteer at higher rates than non-readers.<sup>9</sup>

**Percentage of U.S. Adults**



## NOTES:

- <sup>1</sup> Although one other NEA Survey of Public Participation in the Arts was conducted in 1997, those results are not directly comparable with any of the other surveys, because of fundamental differences in data collection. The 1997 survey involved a random-digit-dial telephone survey independent of the U.S. Census Bureau.
- <sup>2</sup> In keeping with standard NEA/Census tabulations, this calculation is based on the total U.S. adult population count. An alternative approach would be to adjust the population total to reflect the proportion that gave only yes/no responses to the survey questions on reading (thereby eliminating invalid responses such as “I don’t know”). This methodology would yield counts of 95.3 million adult literary readers in 2002 and 110.7 million in 2008—for a difference of 15.4 million adult literary readers.
- <sup>3</sup> In 2008, 14.9 million 18-24-year-olds reported reading a work of literature, compared with 11.5 million in 2002.
- <sup>4</sup> A new question on the 2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts allows reporting of the reading preferences of adults who said they read novels and/or short stories. Presented with the following genres—“mysteries,” “thrillers,” “romance,” “science fiction,” and “other fiction”—53.0 percent of novel and/or short story readers said they enjoy reading mysteries. The next greatest percentage (40.8 percent) went to “other fiction,” while thrillers were the third most popular (32.6 percent), followed by romance (28.5 percent) and science fiction (25.4 percent).
- <sup>5</sup> The proportion of women who read poetry fell at a 39 percent rate—from 16.0 percent in 2002 to 9.8 percent in 2008. Americans 45 to 54 years of age, as well as white Americans in general, also showed particularly sharp declines in poetry reading rates between 2002 and 2008.
- <sup>6</sup> In the 12 months preceding the 2002 survey, approximately 115.5 million U.S. adults read any book not required for work or school. In 2008, that number was 119.0 million. Over the same period, the total adult population grew by roughly 19 million.
- <sup>7</sup> As with novel and/or short story readers, the greatest percentage of online literary readers said they enjoy reading mysteries (46.3 percent), compared with the percentages for thrillers (32.2 percent), romance (23.3 percent), science fiction (29.4 percent) and “other fiction” (40.1 percent)—the second most popular category.
- <sup>8</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, Office of Research & Analysis, *To Read or Not To Read: A Question of National Consequence*, 2007 (<http://www.nea.gov/research/ToRead.pdf>).
- <sup>9</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, Office of Research & Analysis, *The Arts and Civic Engagement: Involved in Arts: Involved in Life*, 2006 (<http://www.nea.gov/pub/CivicEngagement.pdf>).

# Afterword

These findings come from the NEA's 2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, the nation's largest federal survey of arts and cultural participation of U.S. adults. The data were obtained in partnership with the United States Census Bureau. The sample is both large (more than 18,000 adults) and representative of the current U.S. population. Equally important, the survey has been conducted at five intervals since 1982. The core questionnaire has remained consistent, ensuring that reliable comparisons can be made for the purpose of long-term trend analyses.

The survey is designed to give a national overview of adult arts participation in the 12 months preceding the survey date. It does not identify causes for arts participation or for changes in arts participation between each survey period. Yet it can track correlations. The reversal of downward trends for young adult reading suggests at least one hypothesis.

Over the past six years there has been a greater sense of urgency in the U.S. about serious declines in reading and low levels of reading proficiency, especially among students and young adults. Numerous organizations and millions of parents, teachers, and librarians have increased their efforts to arrest these trends. The NEA has been only one of these many agents of change, but it has played a catalytic role in raising public awareness of the issue, introducing national model programs to address the problem, and creating large national partnerships to foster new readers.

Following is a list of recent NEA reports and national initiatives created by the agency and its many partners in response to the reading crisis. All participant numbers are current estimates, extending beyond the period of the May 2008 survey.

## Reports

***Reading at Risk (2004)***: NEA report of the 2002 survey results drew national attention to the serious declines in literary reading rates.

***To Read or Not To Read (2007)***: A follow-up to *Reading at Risk*, this widely cited report identified national declines in reading of all types among teenagers and young adults, and warned of academic, social, civic, cultural, and economic implications.

## Programs

***Shakespeare in American Communities (2003 to present)***: NEA created the largest Shakespeare program combining theatrical touring with classroom materials. More than **21 million students** have been reached.

***Poetry Out Loud (2005 to present)***: With the Poetry Foundation, the NEA launched a national poetry recitation contest. Approximately **400,000 high school students** in every state have participated.

***The Big Read (2006 to present)***: NEA and the Institute of Museum and Library Services introduced the largest government-sponsored literary program in recent history. To date, the program has involved nearly 500 communities through 21,000 partner organizations, drawing **millions of participants** nationwide.

# Data and Methodology

The findings in this brochure are based on early results from the 2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA). Detailed results from the survey will be analyzed and reported later in 2009. Researchers at the National Endowment for the Arts developed the SPPA with a team of statisticians, sociologists, and economists, and it has been conducted five times in partnership with the U.S. Census Bureau: 1982, 1985, 1992, 2002, and 2008. The last two surveys were administered as supplements to the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS).

Although the general contents of the SPPA questionnaires have remained similar, the 2008 survey instrument differed from the 2002 version in some ways. The 2008 SPPA was conducted as a supplement to the May CPS, whereas the 2002 survey was conducted with the August CPS. Second, some sections of the 2008 questionnaire were separated into modules, with each respondent answering two of the four modules (in addition to the survey's "core" questions, such as those about literary reading, which were asked of all respondents). And, finally, rather than attempt to interview all adults in the household (as in 2002), for some questions the 2008 SPPA sought proxy responses for spouses or partners from the initial adult interviewed in each household.

The 2008 SPPA's literary reading questions—which form the focus of this research brochure—were the same as in previous years: "During the last 12 months, did you read any a) novels or short stories; b) poetry; or c) plays?" For the purpose of reporting results, a positive answer to a), b), or c) qualified as "literary" reading. In 2002, the genres were listed in a different order—a) "plays"; b) "poetry"; and c) "novels or short stories." The change in order was made to improve the flow of the questions and thus reduce time for the interviewee.

Since 1992, the survey also has asked about book-reading. That question is: "With the exception of books required for work or school, did you read any books during the last 12 months?" In 2008, new reading-related questions were added to the SPPA. They include questions about reading preferences and reading on the Internet. Where possible, those data have been featured in this publication; additional results will be published later in 2009.

Both the sample size and the response rate for the 2008 SPPA increased from that of the 2002 survey—from a 70 percent response rate in 2002, and just over 17,000 adults, to 82 percent in 2008, and more than 18,000 adults. Unless otherwise noted, all estimates in this report are statistically significant at 95 percent or higher levels of confidence. These calculations used preliminary data from the Census Bureau on the variances associated with the estimates of the reading rates. More testing for statistical significance will be conducted in 2009.

Photo courtesy of IMLS



“This new report will gladden the hearts of librarians, teachers, and readers across the country. It opens a bright new chapter in the story of American reading.”

—Anne-Imelda M. Radice, Ph.D., Director, Institute of Museum and Library Services

Photo courtesy of ALA



“Libraries, librarians, and the communities they serve are indispensable to the promotion of reading widely and reading well. The American Library Association is encouraged by these important findings, and eager to help make sure that we don’t lose the powerful momentum we are seeing in young adults and in Americans of diverse social backgrounds.”

—Jim Rettig, President, American Library Association



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