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America's reading problem



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‘It is claimed some US states predict their need for future prison beds simply by looking at school literacy rates’

Earlier this month, I visited a hilly corner of North Carolina to spend time with family friends. As we sat around the kitchen table, a former musician whom I shall call Dave revealed that he had recently started an entrepreneurial sideline to supplement his meagre family income. During part of the week, he works in a local pawnshop but he does not lend out cash. Instead, Dave fills out application forms for people who want to buy firearms — but cannot read or write. He only charges a few dollars for this but the service is so popular that it provides a steady income. “Lots of people round here can’t read and write,” Dave told me with a rueful laugh. “But they all want guns. So they pay me to do that — I use their driving licences to get all the details.”

Welcome to an oft-ignored feature of America in 2015 — and I am not just talking about firearms. These days, there is hand-wringing aplenty, particularly on the political left, about income inequality. As a Financial Times series indicated last week, the gap between rich and poor is yawning ever wider as the middle class shrinks.

But what is often forgotten is that this income inequality reflects and reinforces other pernicious cultural chasms. Today, millions of Americans are enjoying the bonanza of an information boom, with once unimaginable power at their fingertips or, more specifically, on the buttons of their tablets and smartphones. They are “haves”, in the sense of having access to the 21st-century economy. But there is also an underbelly of “have-nots”, who lack access to this economic and information engine, sometimes for the most basic reason of not being able to read or write.

Much of the time this underbelly is concealed; at least from people like me, fortunate to live among information-blessed urban elites who take reading skills for granted. But the issue is surprisingly widespread. And it is not just a problem of rural communities or non-white groups — indeed, many of Dave's North Carolina clients are white.

According to a 2013 survey by the US Department of Education and National Institute of Literacy, 14 per cent of the adult population (or 32 million people) cannot read properly, while 21 per cent read below a level required in the fifth grade. And 19 per cent of high-school graduates cannot read. In the north-east, illiteracy is lower; in some southern states, such as Mississippi, it is higher. North Carolina is in the middle. This rate has been remarkably stable in recent decades, and it puts the US in 12th place among major industrialised countries (the UK fares only slightly better).

But what is truly startling — and tragic — is the degree to which “the link between academic failure and delinquency, violence and crime is welded to reading failure”, as a report from the Department of Justice states. Apparently 85 per cent of juvenile delinquents and 70 per cent of the prison population struggles to read. Indeed, the link is so well established that pro-literacy groups claim that some states can predict their need for future prison beds by looking at the literacy rates in schools. And, unsurprisingly, half of adults with poor literacy live in poverty, shut out of most 21st-century jobs. As Juli Willeman, head of the Pi Beta Phi group, which runs literacy campaigns, observes: “Reading proficiency predicts future success.” Or the lack of it.



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The good news is that these statistics are so shocking that they are provoking some policy response. A host of philanthropic ventures, such as Pi Beta Phi, are waging pro-literacy campaigns for adults and children. Most prisons now feature intensive literacy courses, not least because prisoners who can read are far less likely to reoffend. The public education system is also (somewhat belatedly) getting involved. In North Carolina, for example, a “retention” policy was launched three years ago that keeps any third-grade child who cannot read properly in that class until they have mastered the basics. In October, North Carolina education officials revealed that 14 per cent of pupils were “retained” last year.

But while these initiatives are laudable, they remain piecemeal compared with the scale of the problem. The chance of America changing that dismal ratio anytime soon, in other words, looks low; indeed, almost as low as changing the gun culture. So I would bet that my friend Dave will be peddling his services for a long while yet. Call it, if you like, a paradox of America's modern economy; and a nasty rebuke to anyone who thinks we all live in the innovative, internet age.

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Illustration by Shonagh Rae

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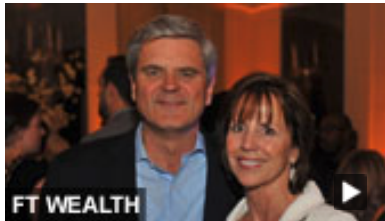
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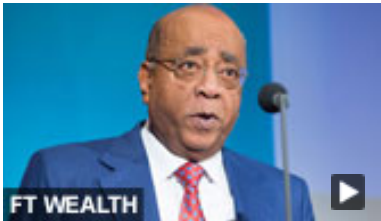
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