



TARGET CRIME WITH LITERACY

CHAPTER 4 - FACT SHEET 1

Identifying People Who Have Low Literacy

Police are required by law to “accommodate” people who have low literacy. This means that you must do everything you reasonably can to make sure people understand the verbal and written information that you give them.

Before you can make changes for people who have low literacy skills, you must first be able to identify who they are. Keep in mind that people who have trouble reading, writing, and understanding verbal information often try to cover up their problem or aren’t even aware of it. They use a variety of strategies to do this, including avoidance and denial.

Here are some of the signs that may indicate a person has a low level of literacy.

In a verbal interview, a person with low literacy may:

- have difficulty telling a clear story; for example, they may get the order of events confused
- seem to talk in circles – this thinking pattern is common among people with low literacy
- have stiff body language; for example, they may not nod or shake their head to indicate agreement or disagreement
- seem nervous or embarrassed
- seem to lack confidence and be easily intimidated

When asked to read or write something, a person with low literacy may:

- make excuses to avoid the task; for example,
 - “I can’t read this because I forgot my glasses,”
 - “I don’t have time to read this now. Can I take it home?”
 - “I hurt my hand, so I can’t fill out this form.”
- read very slowly
- stare at the page they’re supposed to read, but not move their eyes back and forth
- ask questions about things that are clearly stated in the document
- make a lot of spelling or grammar mistakes in their writing, or fill out a form with incorrect information
- bring a friend or relative with them who helps with reading and writing

People who have difficulty understanding verbal and written information have other tell-tale behaviours. Many people with low literacy:

- give what seem to be indirect, confused, or irrelevant answers to questions
- act confused or ask questions that do not seem to relate to the problem or situation
- not ask any questions at all (rather than reveal they don't understand what's going on)
- nod to indicate they agree or understand something, but then not do what you expect

They may also:

- not show up for meetings or hearings (because they did not understand the instructions on a written notice)
- sign statements or legal documents that they do not understand (rather than admit they have a reading problem)
- look dazed or uncomfortable when someone gives them something to read

They may show their confusion when they:

- give the impression that they don't understand the seriousness of their situation
- become frustrated and angry easily; they may storm out, or become physically confrontational

When you question if a person has low literacy, remember that:

- Low literacy is more than a reading problem. People with low literacy also have difficulties understanding oral and written information. Many tend to have different thinking strategies and problem-solving approaches.
- People with low literacy skills are likely to understand verbal and written information more slowly than others.
- What seems to be a bad attitude may be a literacy problem.