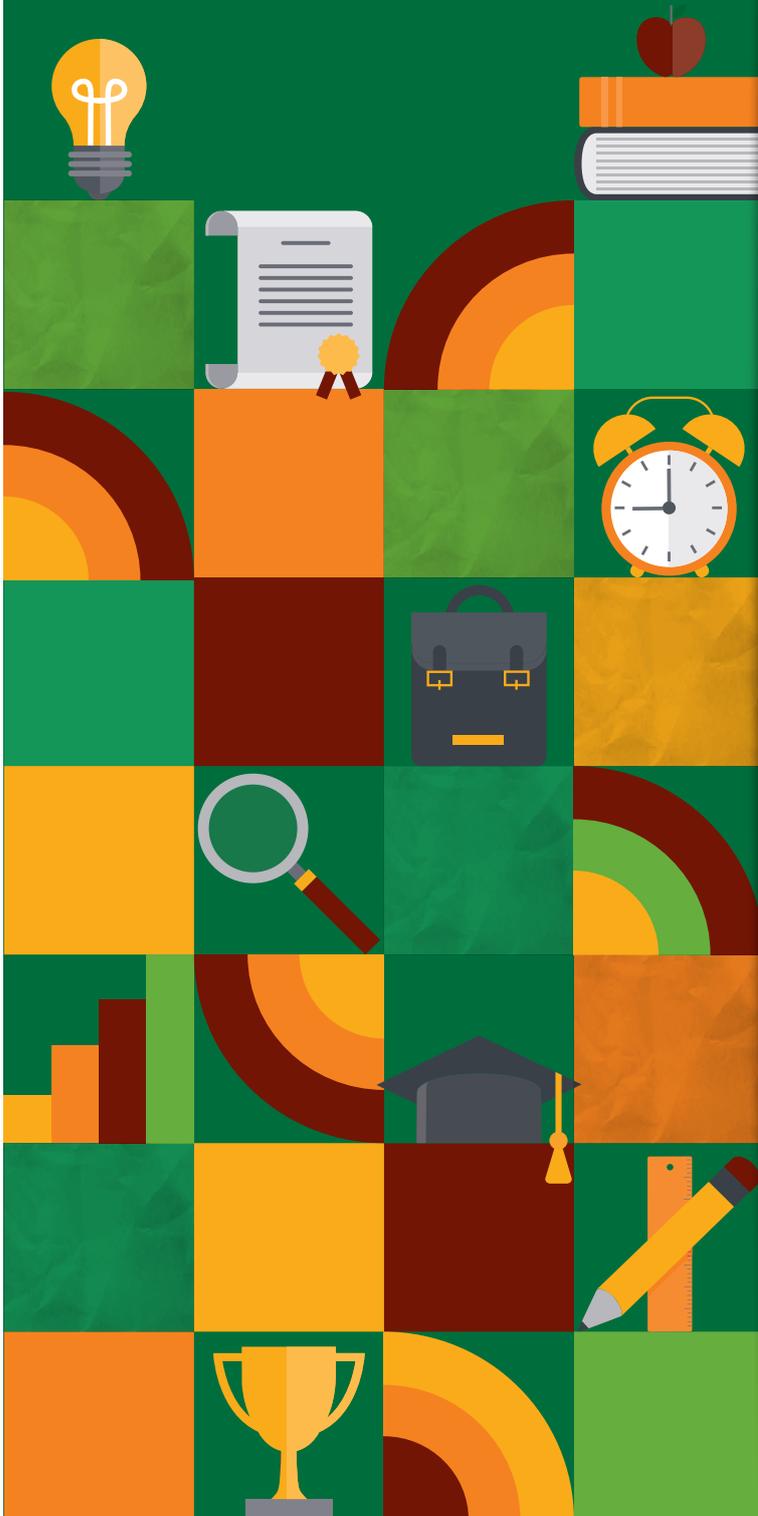


MARCH 2023

FACT SHEET



ADULT ILLITERACY IN SOUTH AFRICA



BACKGROUND

There is growing awareness, both nationally and internationally, of the need to provide education and training to adults who never attended school or who did not complete their schooling. In South Africa, despite remarkable progress in the efforts to eradicate illiteracy, nearly 4 million adults were reported to be functionally illiterate in 2021. Adults who are functionally illiterate have some basic reading and writing skills but cannot function efficiently in a job that requires the ability to read and write fluently.

The National Development Plan 2030 (NDP 2030), and the White Paper on Post-School Education and Training (PSET), calls on Community Education and Training (CET) colleges to have a clear identity and purpose, and to offer a variety of courses. These range from adult basic education to secondary and second-chance matric programmes for youth and adults who might have failed Grade 12, and for those who wish to improve their results in Grade 12 subjects. The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and CET colleges therefore need to understand the extent to which adults lack the necessary levels of education and training that could make them functionally literate.



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PURPOSE

The purpose of this Fact Sheet is to show the extent to which there is potential demand for programmes that address the challenge of adult illiteracy in South Africa.

This Fact Sheet responds to the following questions:

- A** What is the adult illiteracy rate in South Africa and what are its patterns of distribution?
- B** What are the implications of the findings on adult illiteracy for the PSET system?

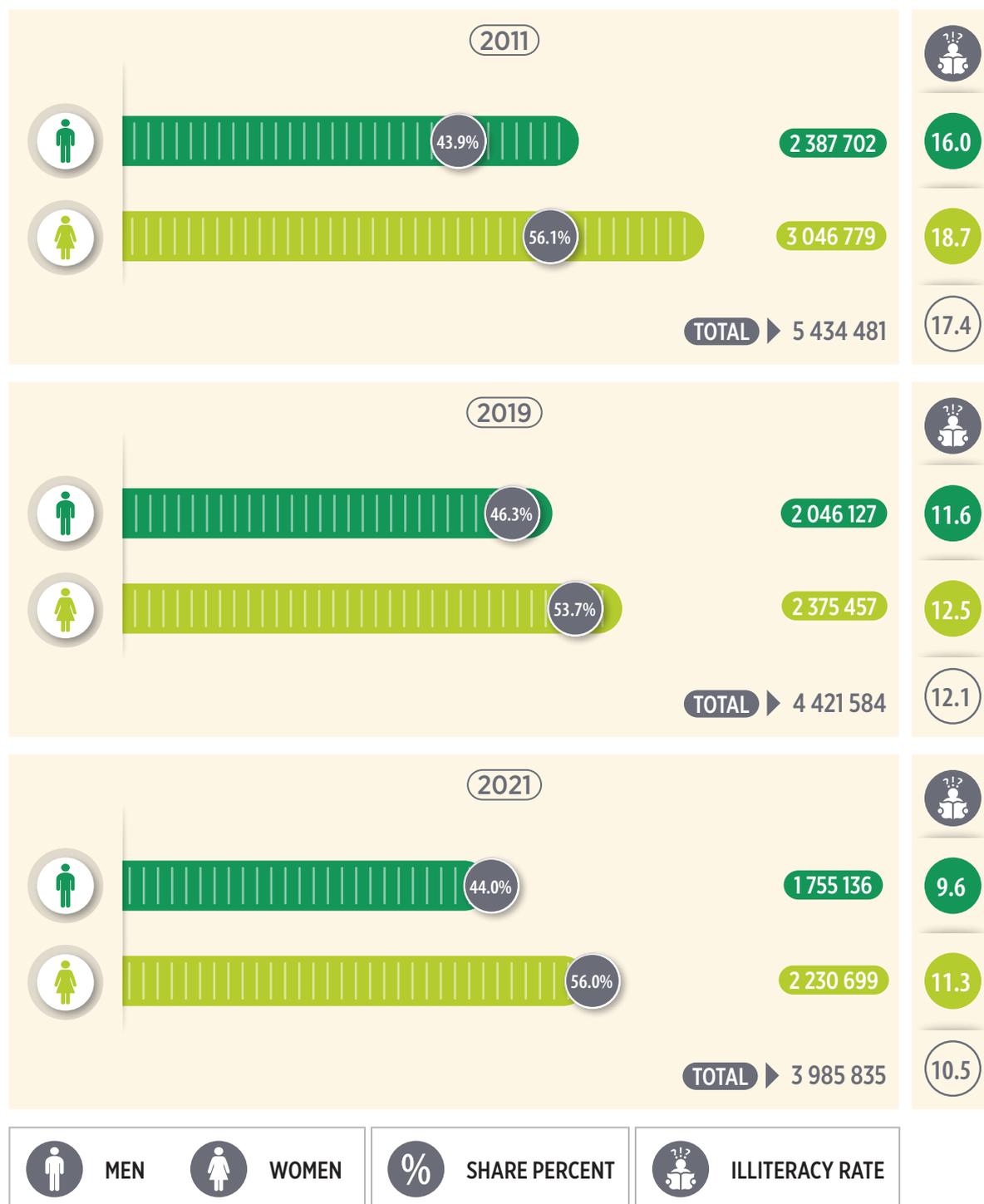


SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The challenges of illiteracy cut across gender, race, age and geographical location.

Figure 1 shows that in 2021, the South African adult illiteracy rate was 10.5%, indicating an improvement of 2 percentage points from 2019 and a significant reduction of 6.9 percentage points over the past decade. Despite remarkable progress in efforts to eradicate illiteracy, it remains concerning that nearly 4 million adults were functionally illiterate in 2021, almost three decades since South Africa gained democracy in 1994. As in many parts of the world, the illiteracy levels in South Africa are higher for women (11.3% in 2021) than for men (9.6% in 2021), meaning that illiteracy greatly inhibits the economic and social progress of women.

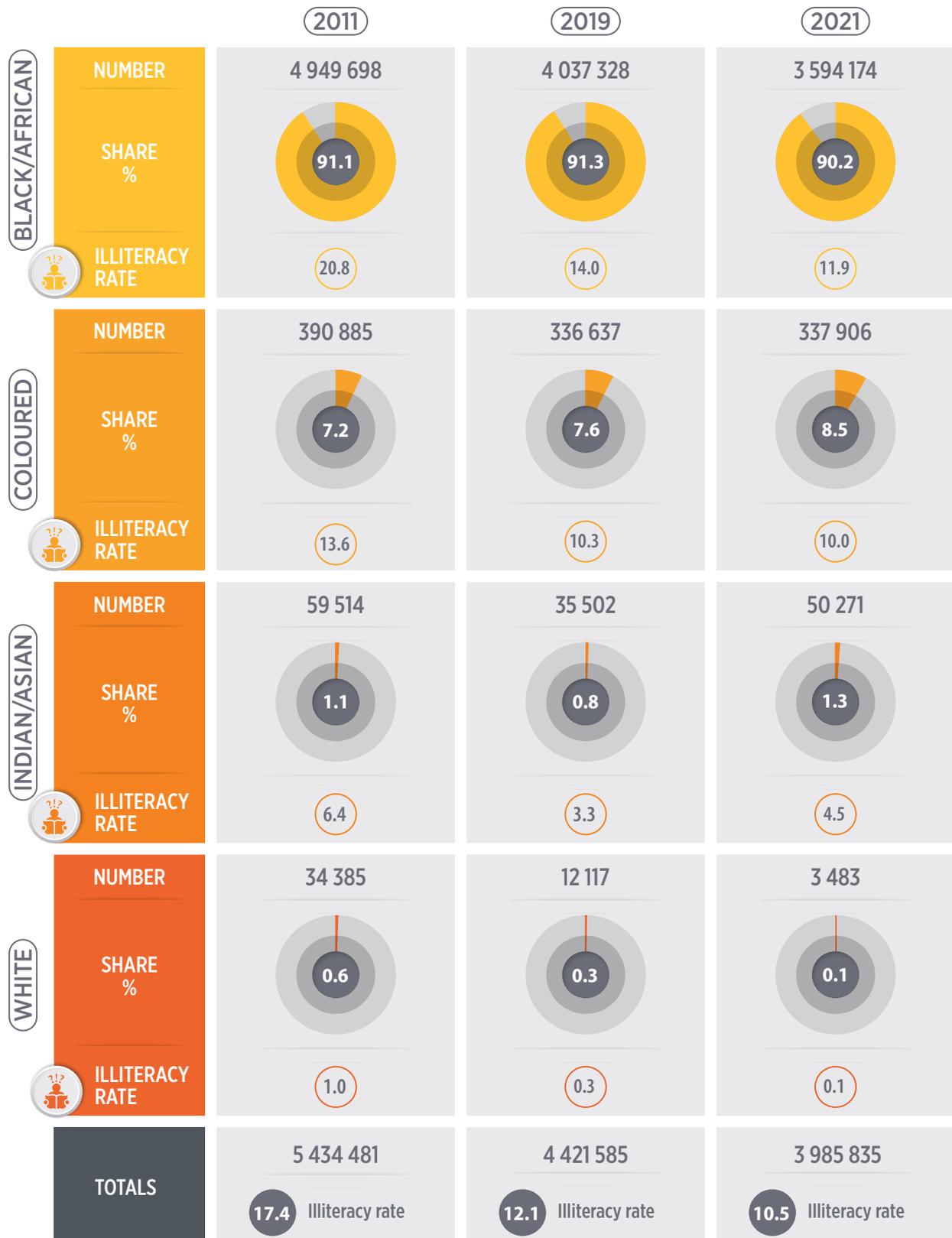
FIGURE 1: Number and percentage of persons in the population aged 20 and older who have not completed Grade 7 and above, by gender, 2011, 2019 and 2021



Source: General Household Survey (GHS), Statistics South Africa (Stats SA)

Illiteracy levels are more prevalent for black Africans compared with that of other race groups. According to Figure 2, in 2021, the illiteracy rate for white adults was 0.1%, while that of black Africans was 11.9%.

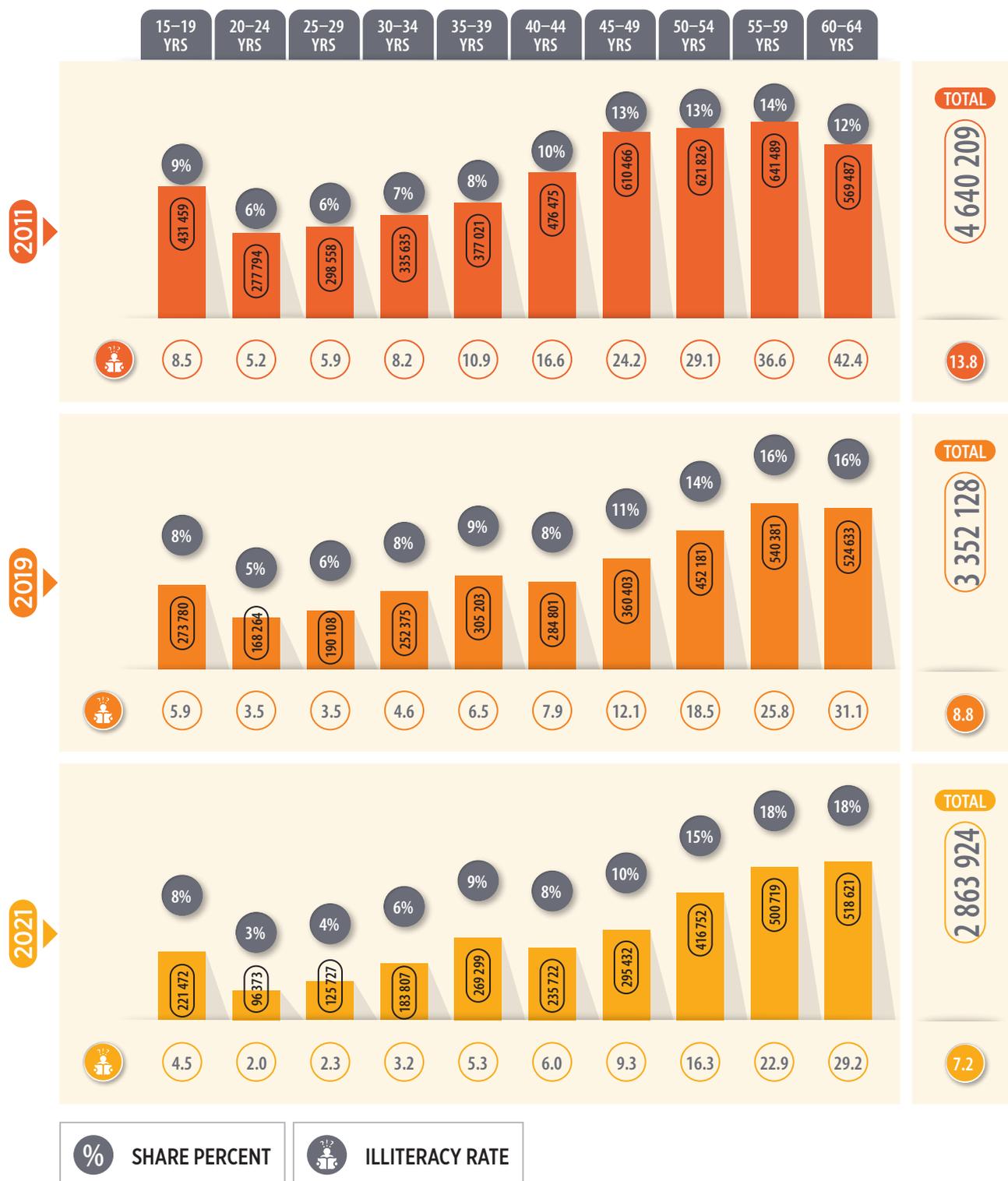
FIGURE 2: Number and percentage of persons in the population aged 20 and above who have not completed Grade 7 and above, by population group, 2011, 2019 and 2021



Source: GHS, Stats SA

Figure 3 indicates that, in 2021, the illiteracy rate was highest amongst 60–64-year-olds (29.2%), followed by 55–59-year-olds (22.9%) and 50–54-year-olds (16.3%). Thus, younger adults are more literate than older adults, because of improved access to education since 1994. Even so, it remains a matter of concern that more than 221 000 persons aged 15–19, and over 96 000 persons aged 20–24, have not completed Grade 7 of schooling.

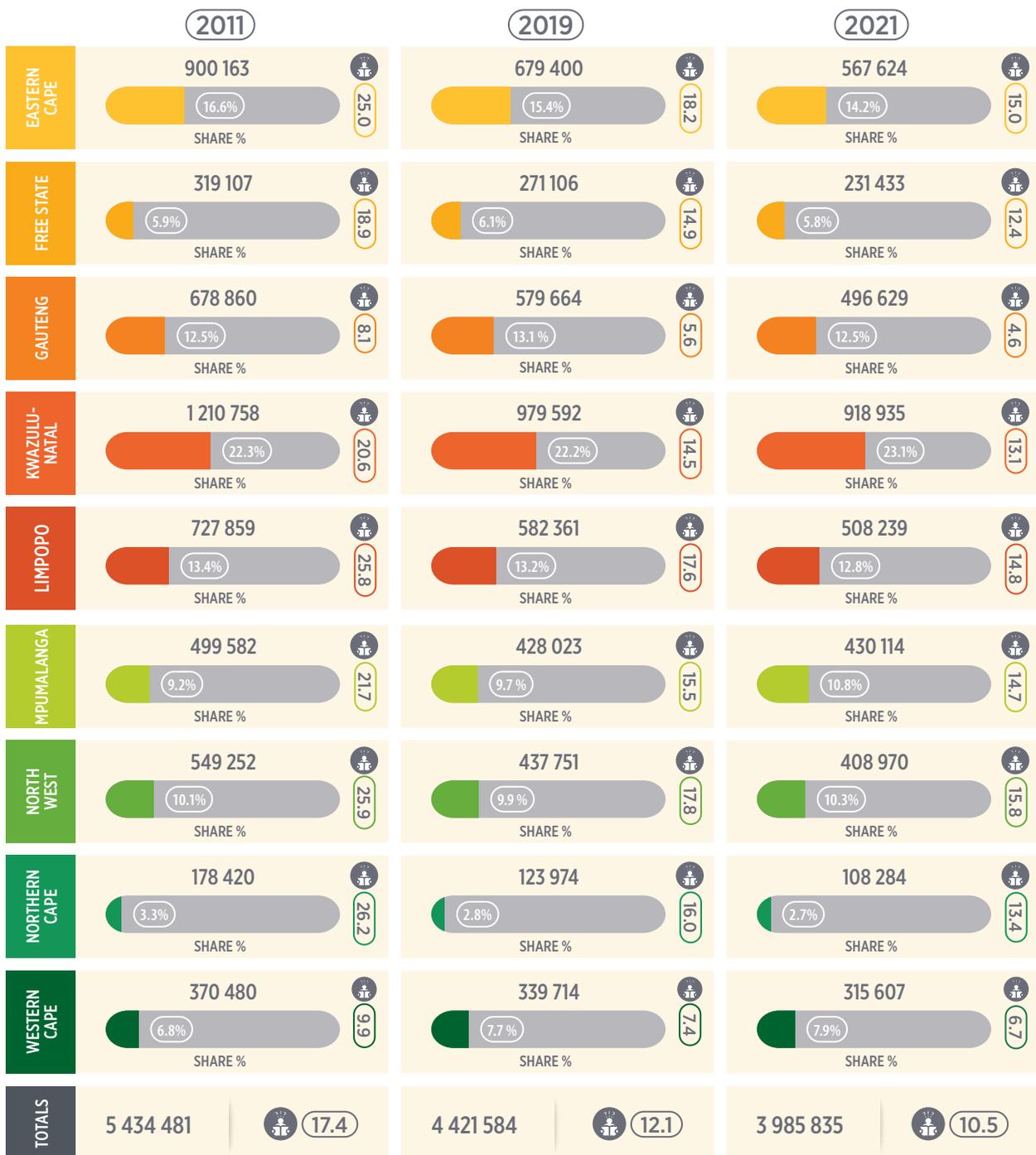
FIGURE 3: Number and percentage of persons in the population who have not completed Grade 7 and above, by age group, 2011, 2019 and 2021



Source: GHS, Stats SA

In 2021, KwaZulu-Natal was home to the largest number of illiterate adults in South Africa (918 935), followed by the Eastern Cape (567 624) and Limpopo (508 239) as is illustrated in Figure 4. Furthermore, the illiteracy levels in Gauteng (4.6%) and the Western Cape (6.7%) were below the national average (10.5%) in 2021, while other provinces recorded illiteracy rates that were above the national average. The highest illiteracy rate was observed in the North West (15.8%), followed by the Eastern Cape (15.0%).

FIGURE 4: Number and percentage of persons in the population aged 20 and above who have not completed Grade 7 and above, by province, 2011, 2019 and 2021



Source: GHS, StatsSA



CONCLUSION

Illiteracy has no room in modern society, since we live in the age of technology and information. Furthermore, the higher the number of people who have gone to school, the better the community and global competitiveness of the country. The analysis in this Fact Sheet shows that even with the significant reduction in the adult illiteracy rates in South Africa, nearly 4 million adults were still illiterate in 2021. There is therefore a need for CET colleges to be fully resourced to increase opportunities for Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET), particularly with regards to digital literacy and digital platforms, to take care of the challenge of the shortage of education facilities. The CET college sector needs to set a target for reducing illiteracy rates, and ensure the provisioning of quality ABET programmes that address illiteracy.



APPENDIX

TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

ADULT: Adult refers to persons aged 20 years and older in the South African population.

ADULT ILLITERACY RATE: The adult illiteracy rate is calculated by dividing the number of persons of a given age range who are illiterate by the corresponding age group population, and multiplying the result by 100. For the purposes of this Fact Sheet, the number of persons who are illiterate is deemed to be those who have not completed Grade 7 of schooling, or its equivalent ABET qualification (Level 3). The highest level of educational attainment for an individual is used as a proxy measure for literacy/illiteracy, since it is very expensive and resource-intensive to assess literacy among adults on a sustainable basis. Internationally, the achievement of Grade 5 is often accepted as the benchmark for literacy; however, the DHET has adopted Grade 7 as its own standard for literacy, because of South Africa's poor performance in international assessments of literacy among Grade 4 learners.

ILLITERACY: The inability to read or write, or lack of sufficient education.

FUNCTIONAL ILLITERACY: Describes writing and reading skills that are considered inadequate to perform employment duties that demand these skills beyond the basic level.



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