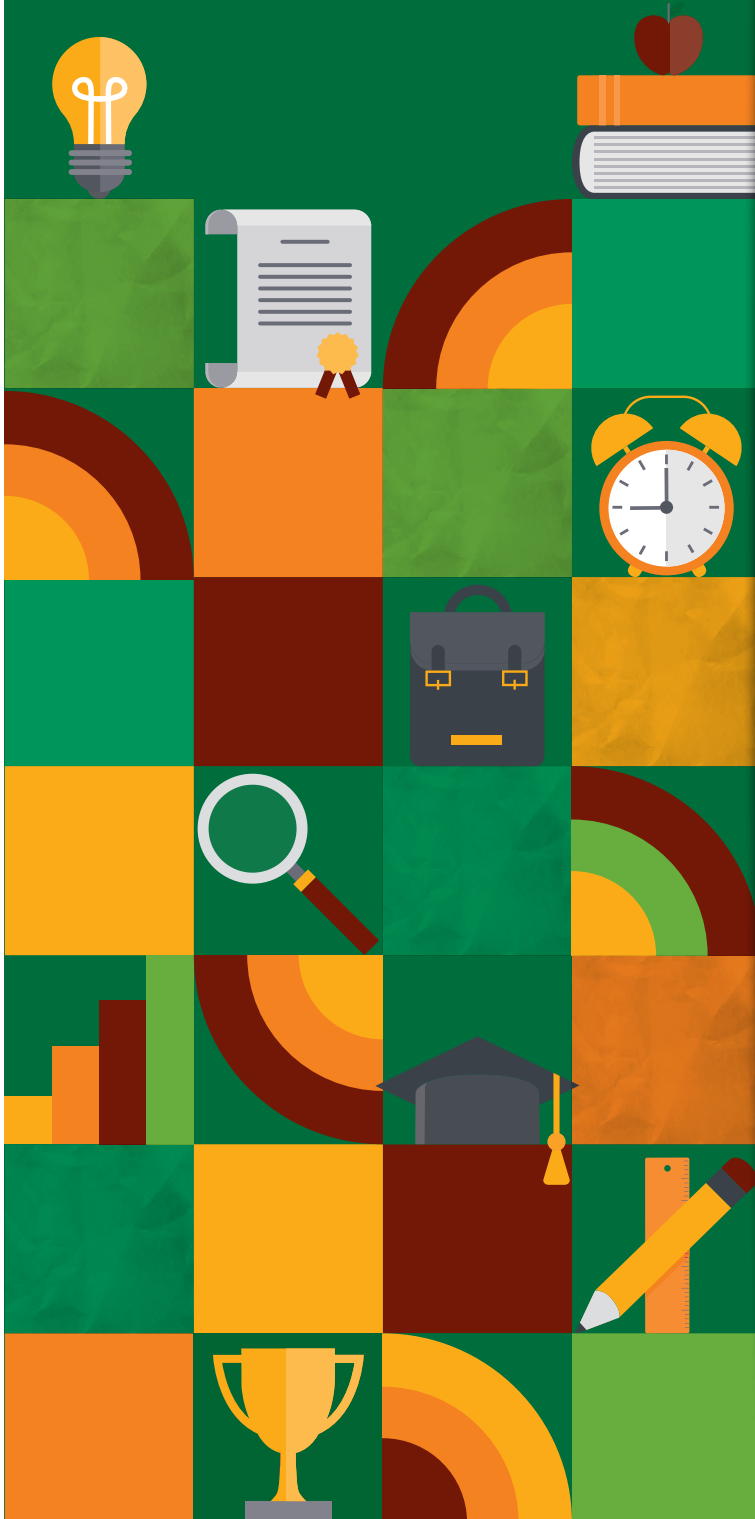


JUNE 2024

# FACT SHEET



## ADULT ILLITERACY IN SOUTH AFRICA



### BACKGROUND

Adult illiteracy continues to pose an obstacle to social, economic and political advancement in South Africa. Although significant strides have been made in improving education outcomes since 1994, a small proportion of adults remains illiterate, especially in marginalised communities. Other factors that limit educational chances are poverty, a lack of funding for education and poor infrastructure. Adults who are illiterate struggle to obtain jobs, get access to healthcare and engage fully in community activities. Insufficient reading comprehension limits their capacity to function in the contemporary environment, impeding both individual development and community progress. Furthermore, illiteracy frequently results in fewer chances for the following generations, keeping families stuck in a cycle of disadvantage.

The White Paper on Post-School Education and Training (WPPSET) (DHET, 2013) calls on Community Education and Training (CET) colleges to target adults who, for a variety of reasons, never went to school or did not finish their education (DHET, 2013). According to Talbot (1916), 'literacy is the first requisite for democracy' and, unless ways are provided to reach the illiterate and near-illiterate, illiteracy unnecessarily complicates every social problem and makes them difficult to solve, because social and representative administration is based on the implicit assumption of universal capacity to read and write (Talbot, 1916).



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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?



## TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

### LITERACY

Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts (OECD, n.d.). Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society. It measures adults' proficiency in key information-processing skills such as literacy, numeracy and problem-solving in technology-rich environments (Montoya, 2018).

### FUNCTIONAL LITERACY

A functionally literate person is one who can engage in any activity in which literacy is required for effective functioning of their group and community, and for enabling them to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for their own and the community's development (OECD.Stat, n.d.).

### ADULT ILLITERACY RATE

The adult illiteracy rate is calculated by dividing the number of persons of a given age range who are not literate 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 Adult Basic Education and Training qualification (ABET 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 Department of Higher Education and Training (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.

### ADULT

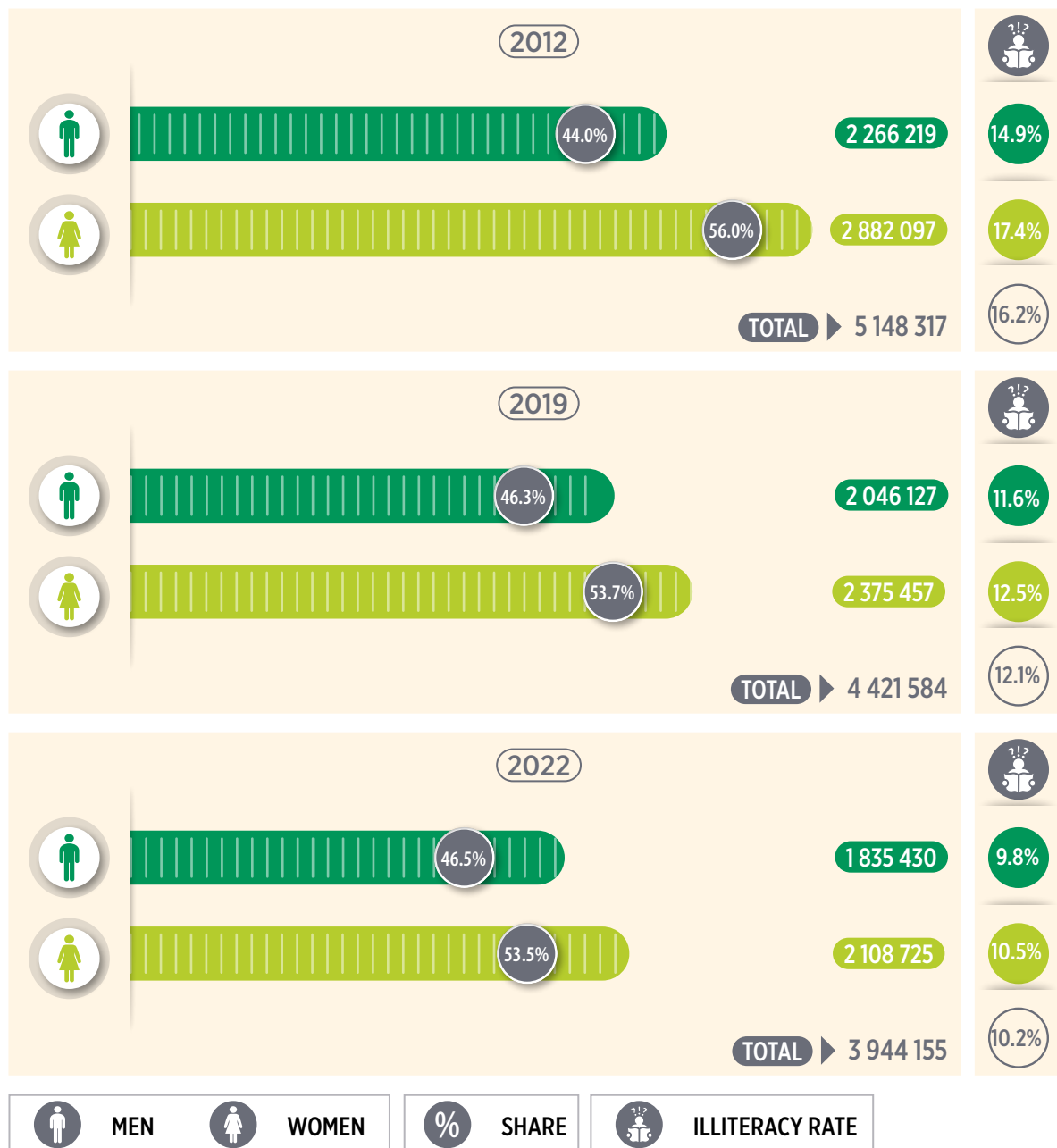
'Adult' refers to persons aged 20 years and older in the South African population.



## FACTS AND FIGURES

In 2022, the South African adult illiteracy rate was 10.2%, indicating an improvement of 1.9 percentage points from 2019 and a significant reduction of 6 percentage points over the past decade. However, it remains a source of concern that about 3.9 million adults are considered illiterate many years after democracy. Figure 1 below also shows that women continued to fare worse than men. Female illiteracy was higher (10.5%) than male illiteracy (9.8%) in 2022, implying that women continued to miss out on opportunities to fully engage in society and the labour force. The traditional structure of the family might have been a contributor to higher illiteracy among females, as women tend to be caregivers and stay home to raise children.

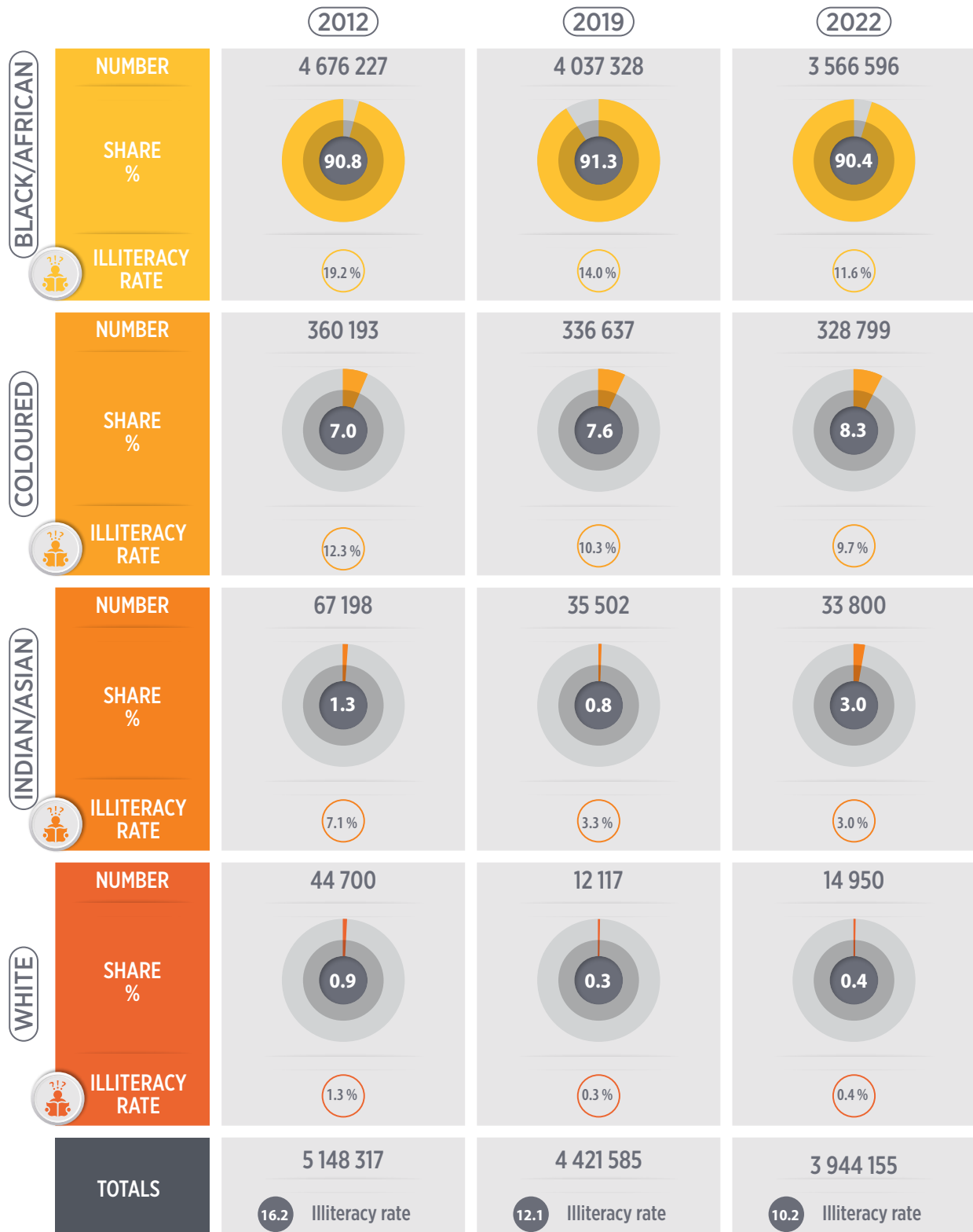
**FIGURE 1:** Number and percentage of persons in the population aged 20 and older who have not completed grade 7 and above by gender, 2012, 2019 and 2022



Source: General Household Survey (GHS) (Statistics South Africa [Stats SA], 2022)

Figure 2 illustrates that, despite significant improvements over the past decade, in 2022 Black Africans still had the highest rate of illiteracy compared with other racial groups. Coloureds followed closely with an illiteracy rate of 9.7%. The White population generally had the lowest rate (0.4%), 11.2 percentage points lower than the Black African community (11.6%).

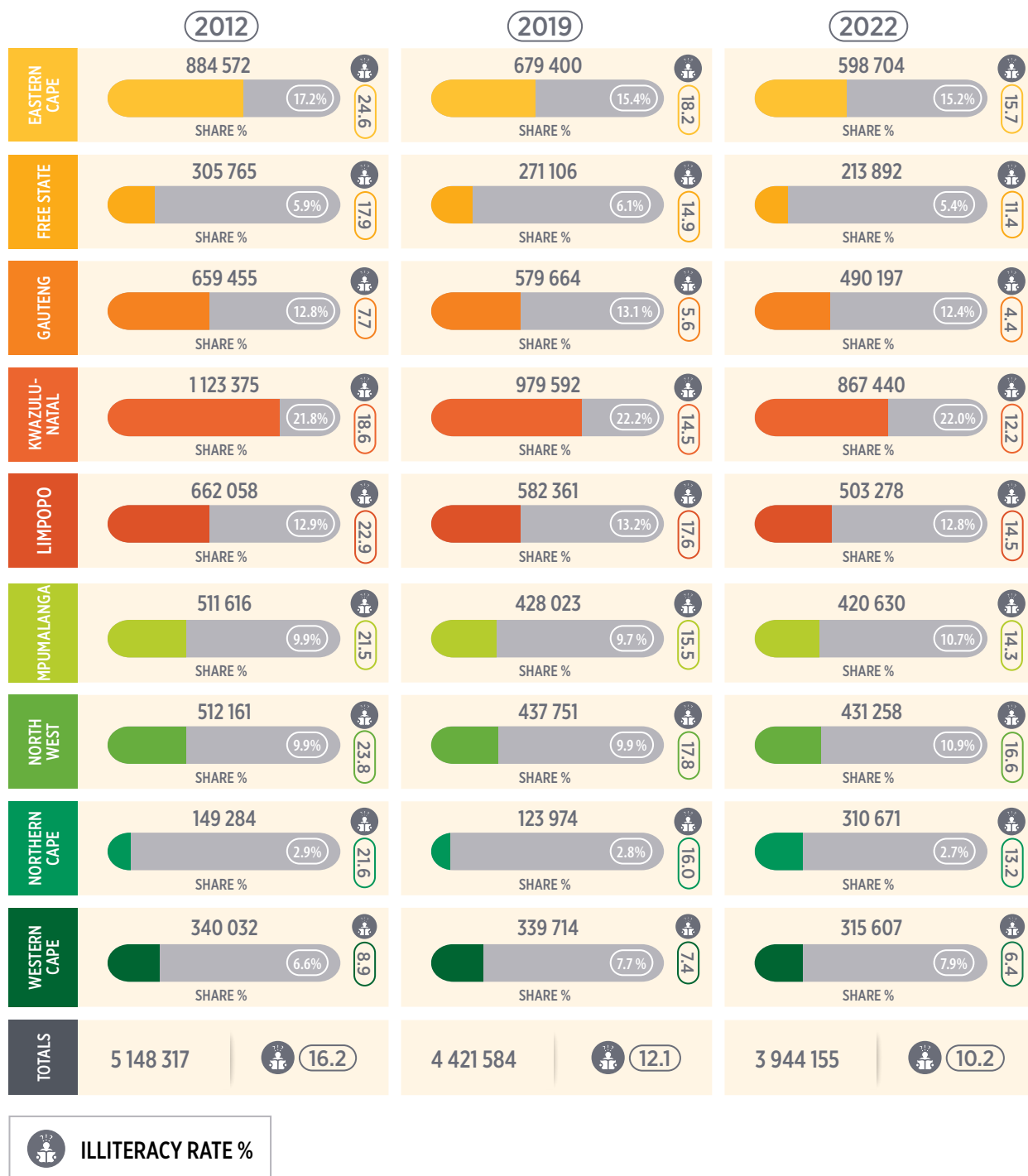
**FIGURE 2:** Number and percentage of persons in the population aged 20 and above who have not completed grade 7 and above by population group, 2012, 2019 and 2022.



Source: GHS (Stats SA, 2022)

According to Figure 3, in 2022, KwaZulu-Natal had the highest number of illiterate adults in South Africa (867 440), followed by Eastern Cape (598 704) and Limpopo (503 278). The province with the highest illiteracy rate was North West, followed by Eastern Cape. Gauteng and Western Cape were the only provinces with an illiteracy rate lower than the national average. It is also important to note that over the past decade, most provinces showed a decrease in the number of illiterate adults, with the exception of KwaZulu-Natal, Eastern Cape and Limpopo, which had the highest numbers in 2022.

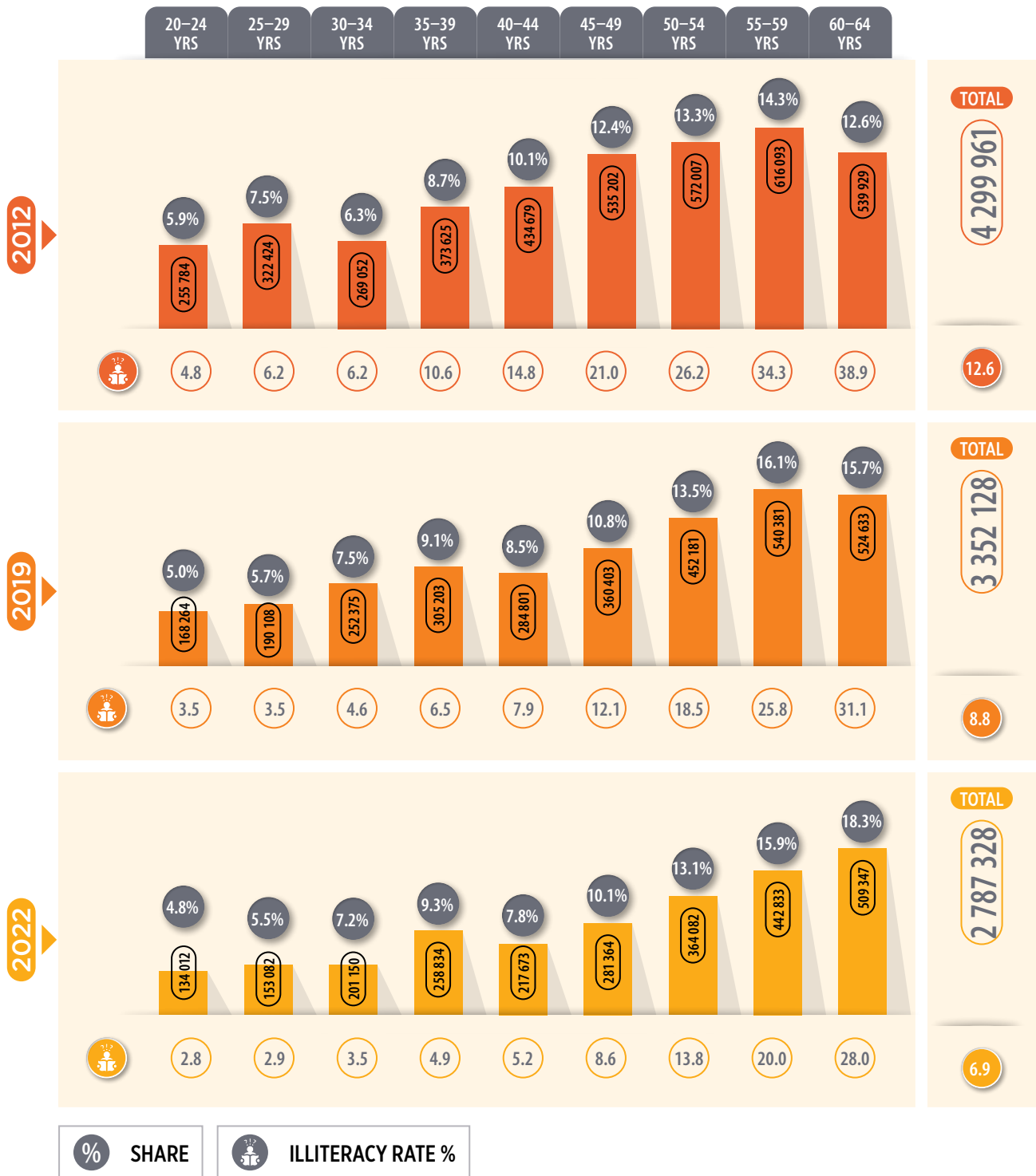
**FIGURE 3: Number and percentage of persons in the population aged 20 and above who did not complete Grade 7 and above by province, 2012, 2019 and 2022**



Source: GHS (Stats SA, 2022)

Figure 4 shows that illiteracy levels were more prevalent among older adults. In 2022, the illiteracy rate was highest among those aged 60–64 years old (28.0%), followed by 55–59 years old (20.0%) and 50–54 years old (13.8%). Improved access to education, particularly after 1994, is likely to have contributed to the lower illiteracy rates in younger adults compared with older adults. Furthermore, a significant improvement in literacy levels can be observed across all age groups over the past decade.

**FIGURE 4:** Number and percentage of persons in the population who did not complete Grade 7 and above by age group, 2012 and 2022



Source: GHS (Stats SA, 2022)



## CONCLUSION

This Fact Sheet reveals a significant and consistent reduction in the adult illiteracy rate in South Africa over the past decade. This finding is indeed celebratory. However, it is concerning that almost 4 million adults, particularly in the North West, Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal were still illiterate in 2022. It is therefore evident that CET colleges need to continue providing ABET programmes to further reduce illiteracy in South Africa, especially in the provinces with the highest number of illiterate adults.

The CET sector needs to set a target for reducing illiteracy rates and ensure the provisioning of quality ABET programmes that address illiteracy. Through investment in education, community-based initiatives and the promotion of a lifelong learning culture, South Africa can equip its adult population with the information and skills required for both personal fulfilment and significant societal contribution, thus breaking the cycle of illiteracy.



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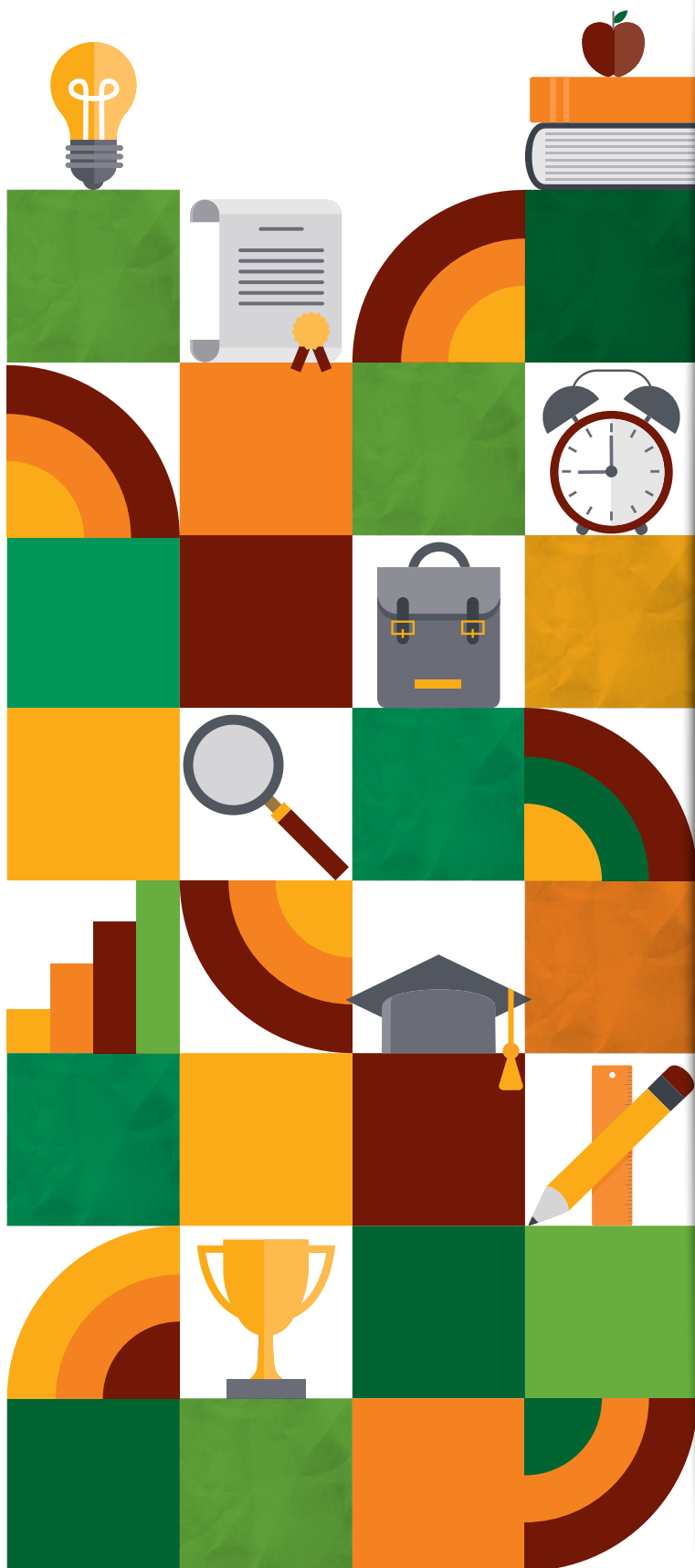
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