

The Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade of 1980

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Background

- Illiteracy is an important social determinant of health.
- Illiteracy is related to poor health outcomes among people, and low productivity on a national scale.
- Triumph of the Sandinista Revolution in July 1979 ends a civil war; infrastructure and economy heavily damaged by the conflict. Over 60,000 people dead and more than \$1.8 billion in debt.
- Sandinista government designs a program to reduce illiteracy as quickly as possible.
- Program:** *Cruzada Nacional de Alfabetización Héroes y Mártires por la Liberación de Nicaragua*.
- Brief period of peace between July 1979 and 1980. Program designed during this period.
- Program implemented in March 1980. Civil War breaks out that year. Rightist guerrillas "Contras" fight against government soldiers.
- War lasts over a decade, claiming 50,000 lives and affecting the quality of the program.

Methods

Program design:

A census was conducted nationally in order to determine illiteracy rates.

- Census sample:** 1,434,738 \geq 10 years old
- Illiteracy:** 722,431 people or 50.35% of the population sampled.
- Eligible for intervention:** 592,059 people.
- Phase duration:** Two weeks in October 1979

Middle stage:

High school and middle school students were trained in order to teach illiterate people how to read and write.

- Students trained:** 52,180
- Once the students were trained they became known as *brigadistas*.

Implementation phase:

Each *brigadista* was assigned to an illiterate family. Throughout the day the brigadista would work with the family, and at 5:00 pm he would start teaching them.

- Material taught:** reading, pronunciation of words, writing.
- Schedule:**
 - First half:** 2 hours of class from Monday-Friday.
 - Second half:** +2 hours of class from Sunday-Friday.
- Duration:** 105 days, from March 24th to August 23rd 1980
- Cost:** US\$20,000,000
- Result:** 406,056 people became literate
- Partnerships:** None



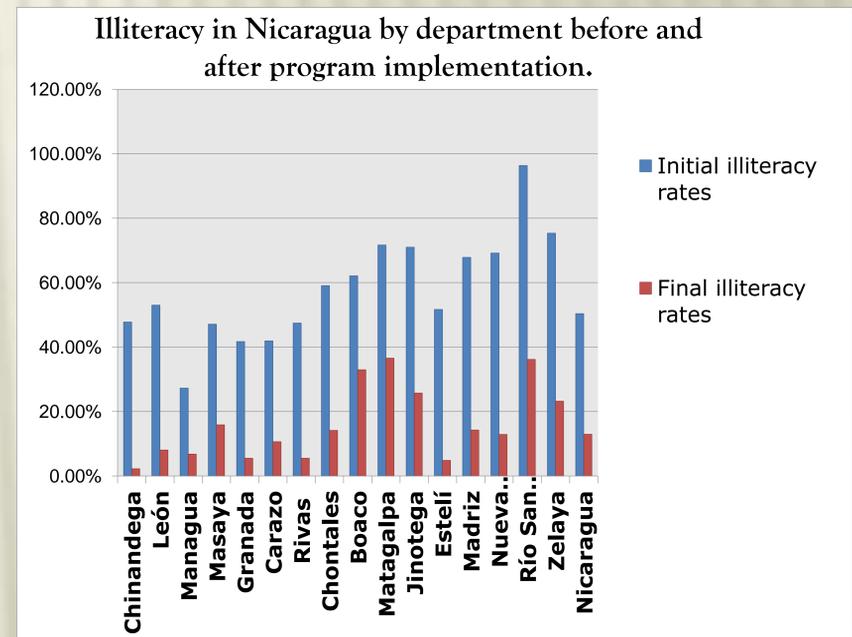
Members of a family benefited from the program, learning how to read and write

Results

The program ended on August 23rd, 1980. That day the government declared that illiteracy had been reduced to 12.96%; among the lowest in Latin America at that time.

Impact on health outcomes:

- Literate mothers had fewer and healthier children.
- Nicaragua as a nation experienced a larger decline in birth rates between 1980-1985 than any of its neighbors.
- Malaria eradication campaigns and vaccination initiatives took place at many households involved in the program.



Conclusions

- The program did reduce illiteracy, but it failed to achieve long term sustainability.
- Economic sanctions and warfare limited the government's ability to design follow up programs.
- Program done at national scale; people in the most remote areas were not reached due to warfare.

Limitations:

- program did not achieve long term reduction.
- Illiteracy in Nicaragua has grown to 30.3% in 2010.
- Results manipulated by government.
- Low quality literacy: some people declared literate were not able to read a sentence.

Additional studies/recommendations:

- carrying out longitudinal studies that address the quality of literacy.
- Partner up with external organizations in order to build schools; this would ensure that illiteracy does not increase.