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SAT SCORES AND INCOME INEQUALITY: HOW WEALTHIER KIDS RANK HIGHER

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SAT originally stood for Scholastic Aptitude Test. But parsing the results by income suggests it's also a Student Affluence Test.

On average, students in 2014 in every income bracket outscored students in a lower bracket on every section of the test, according to calculations from the National Center for Fair & Open Testing (also known as FairTest), using data provided by the College Board, which administers the test.

Students from the wealthiest families outscored those from the poorest by just shy of 400 points. Given the widespread use of the SAT in college admissions, the implications are obvious: Not only are the wealthiest families best equipped to pay for college, their kids on average are more likely to post the sort of scores that make admissions easy.

Thus the SAT is just another area in American life where economic inequality results in much more than just disparate incomes. And making matters worse, some employers continue to ask for test scores years after graduation.

The gap is not new to this year's results and the College Board is not oblivious to the gap. Earlier this year the College Board announced plans to revise the test to help reduce the economic gaps in the test. They also announced plans to provide free online tutoring.

It's tempting to believe the disparity in results arises because wealthy parents can easily afford SAT prep courses to help students game the test by learning its tricks. But some research suggests test prep has a fairly limited effect on scores. One study found that testing boosts math scores by 14-15 points and reading scores by 6-8 points.

Yet the gaps between rich and poor students are far larger than what could be produced by test prep alone. If the disparity were merely caused by test prep, that would perhaps be comforting, because an obvious solution would be: Provide everyone with test prep.

But if the phenomenon arises from a confluence of factors, that makes it all the harder to remove income gaps from standardized tests. Family wealth allows parents to locate in neighborhoods with better schools (or spring for private schools). Parents who are themselves college educated tend to make more money, and since today's high school seniors were born in the mid-1990s, many of the wealthiest and best-educated parents themselves came of age when the tests were of crucial importance. When the SAT is crucial to college, college is crucial to income, and income is crucial to SAT scores, a mutually reinforcing cycle develops.

In the spring of 2016, the College Board plans to make the essay section of the test optional, reverting to the old system in which 1600 is a perfect score. Students with the wealthiest parents score 78 points higher than average on the writing section, compared to 75 points

higher for math and 72 points higher for reading. (The test will also dump some of the more arcane vocabulary words and the trim the range of math topics.)

An infamous example of how vocabulary words can be unfair was an old analogy question that hinged on the word "regatta." The critique is that a fairly stupid but privileged New Englander would be more likely to be familiar with the term than all but the smartest of hardscrabble Midwesterners. Yet those examples arose more than a decade ago when the University of California system successfully lobbied for changes that would remove cultural biases from the test.

Yet despite the changes in recent decades, and even with the writing test scores dropped, the gap between rich and poor remains pronounced across the math and verbal sections.

When a new test comes out in 2016, these figures can serve as a benchmark to see if better test design can even the field. But as long as the quality of primary schools is uneven, and as long as wealthy parents can more easily access good schools, it's hard to imagine that any test design could ever remove this gap entirely.

A final caveat: Within each income category, of course, is a tremendous amount of variation. There are students from wealthy families who do very badly and students from poor families who do very well. Having wealthy parents gives a leg up. But parental income is not destiny.