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Public Policy

CARSEY RESEARCH

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Gaps in Youth Opportunity by State

Iowa

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About This Project

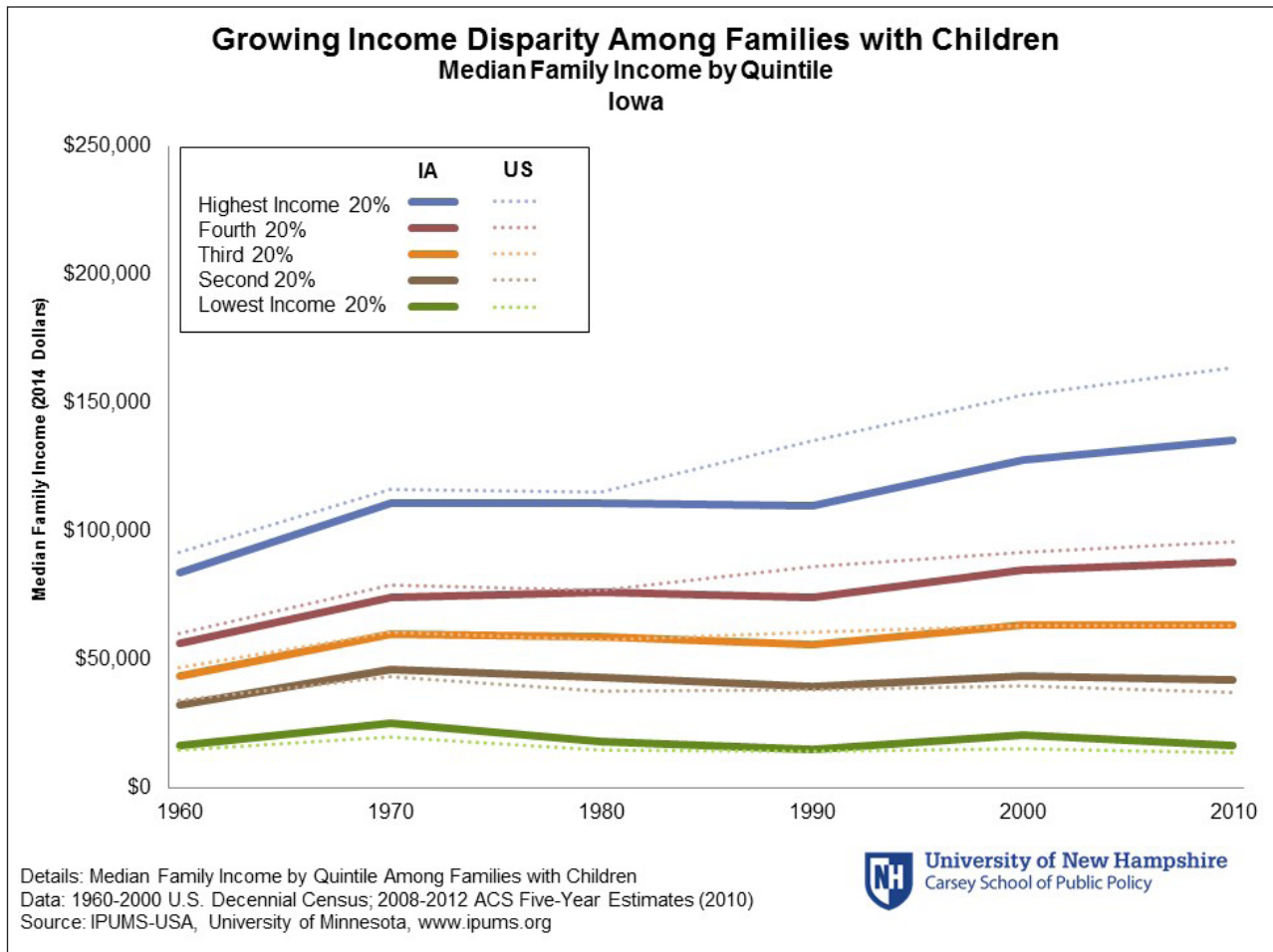
Public discourse on economics in the United States, and around the world, often focuses on rising income and wealth inequality. The “Occupy” movement drew great attention to the rising fortunes of the top one percent while middle- and lower-income Americans lost ground. Vast scholarly, political, and media attention is focused on issues of growing inequality and implications for broader societal cultural shifts as well as economic growth. Less attention has been paid to the changing landscape of opportunities enabling youth to get ahead, to improve their living situation over that of their parents through hard work and determination. Such social mobility has remained fairly stable for generations, but recent evidence across a range of indicia suggests growing gaps in the opportunities available to children in lower socioeconomic status families versus those in families of higher socioeconomic strata. This pushes the American Dream—or the idea that anyone who works hard, and plays by the rules, can get ahead—further out of reach. Such inequality is a potential threat to our social structure as well as our economic well-being.

In his new book, [Our Kids](#), [Robert Putnam](#) argues that there are growing social class disparities in the opportunities available to children across the nation using a series of narrative examples and data documenting gaps for the country. Circumstances, however, vary across the country and with them the most appropriate localized policy responses. At the Carsey School, we examine the data further by offering a set of graphs that address the extent to which such opportunity gaps exist in each state and, in selected examples, whether they have increased over the past fifty or so years. We look across several domains including income inequality and poverty, family structure, and educational access and achievement.

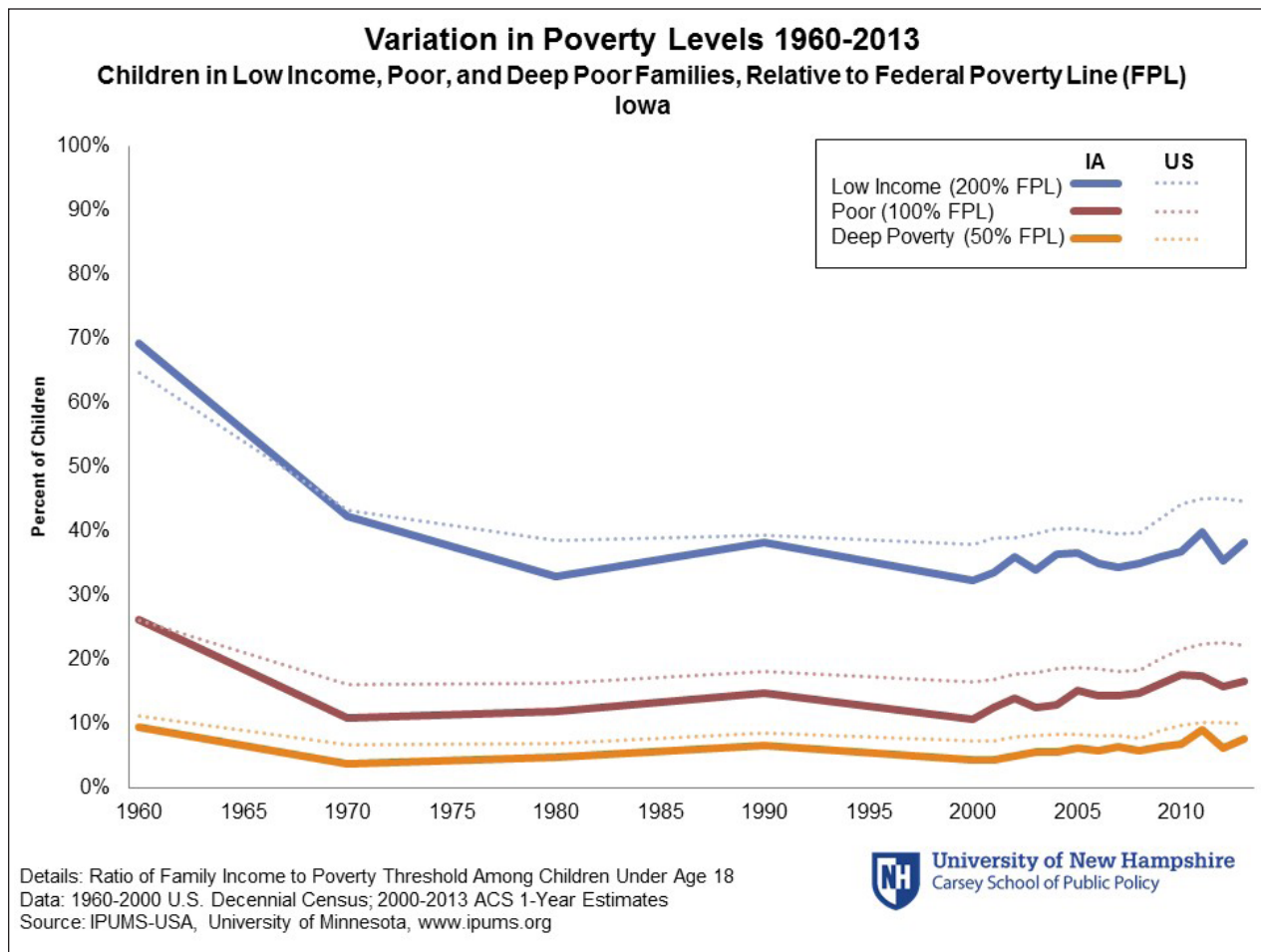
This project, [Gaps in Youth Opportunity by State](#), offers a series of fifty-two downloadable slide shows—one slide show for each state and Washington, D.C., and one for the nation as a whole. We compare indicia of opportunity between those with high and low socioeconomic status. Worth noting is that we use parental or family income, or parental education, as measures of socioeconomic status. Of course, a whole host of demographic variables interact to stratify youth opportunities. Documenting the impact of such critical characteristics as race/ethnicity, nativity, citizenship, age, gender, and place type is beyond the scope of the current analyses.

For each state chart, we show the national data in the background for comparison so that viewers can see how their state compares to the country’s average. This project is one that we anticipate will be augmented and enhanced over time, but to begin, we show nine graphs examining differences in youth opportunity. In each graph, we use the most recent data available and, when possible, track trends back to the 1960s.

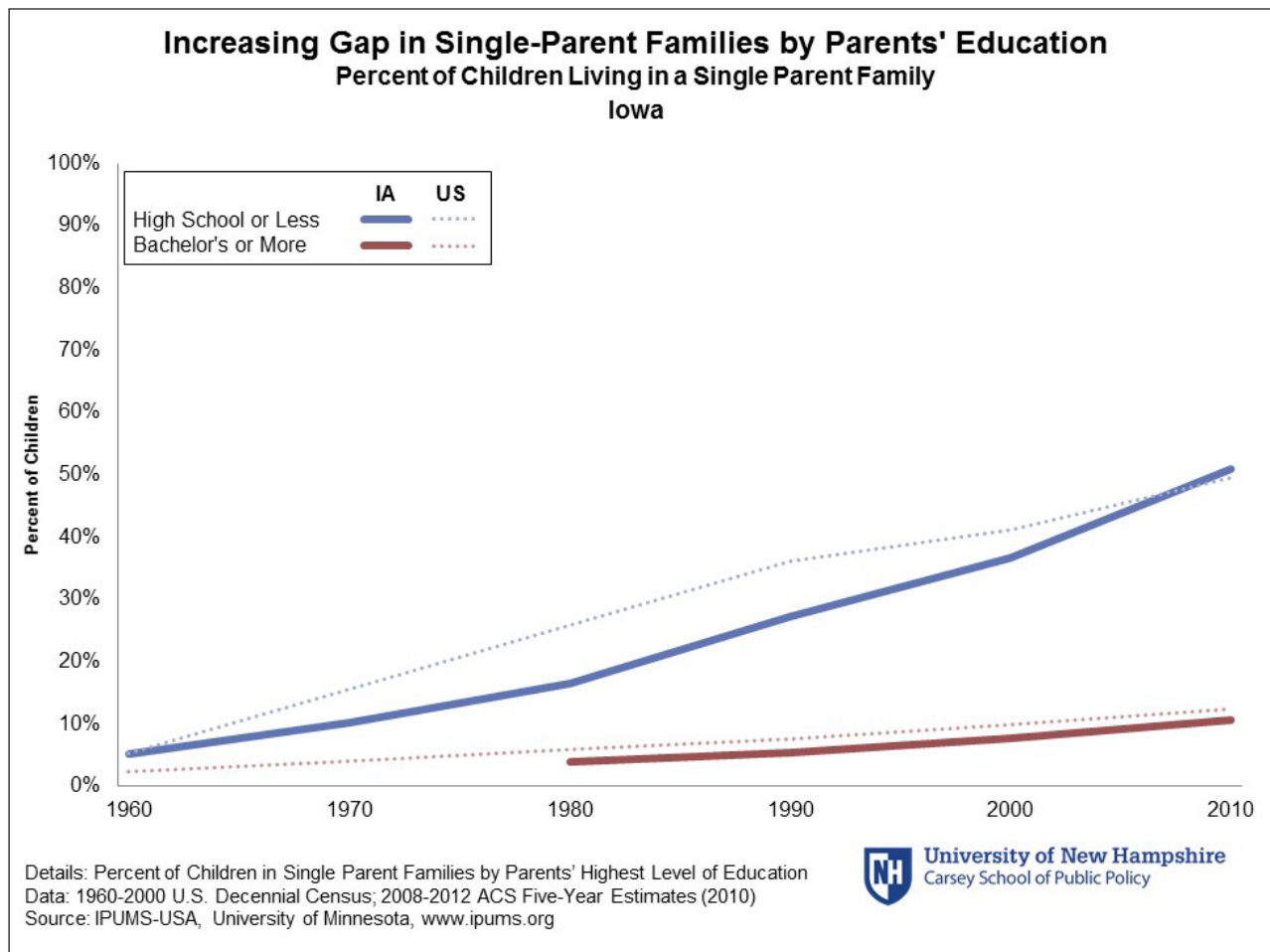
Note that there are many other efforts to chronicle opportunity variation across the states, although to our knowledge, none focus explicitly on gaps within states by socioeconomic status. Both the Opportunity Nation’s [Opportunity Index](#) and the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s [KIDS COUNT data center](#) provide excellent interactive sites with detailed information for each state across several domains including income and poverty, employment and labor markets, health, and education. The [Assets & Opportunity Scorecard](#), as well as Spotlight on Poverty and Opportunity’s [Spotlight on the States](#) project, also have information on state economic and family indicators with an emphasis on policy and program implementation.



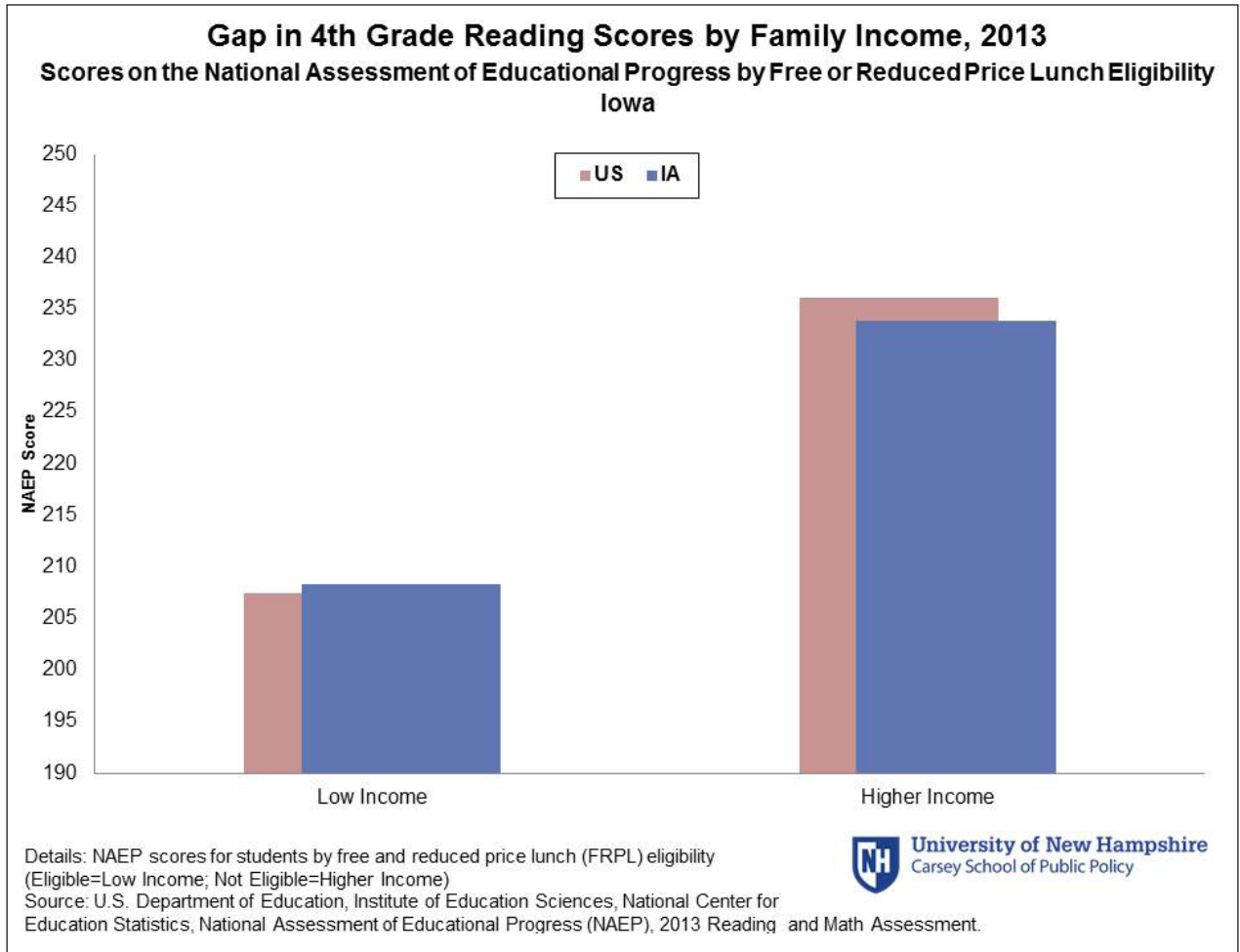
Income Inequality: This graph, **Growing Income Disparity Among Families with Children**, illustrates growing disparities in total income among families with children between 1960 and 2010. We feature income inequality in this slide deck as many lower and moderate income families are left behind in recent economic growth. In addition, in many places, the presence of a middle class—so essential for a vibrant civic infrastructure—is deteriorating (Kalleberg 2013). Each state’s family income distribution is divided into five categories, and the median value at each quintile is plotted over the past fifty years with the national distribution shown as reference. Illustrated in these figures is economic stagnation among the lower income quintiles with the most dramatic growth among those with highest incomes.



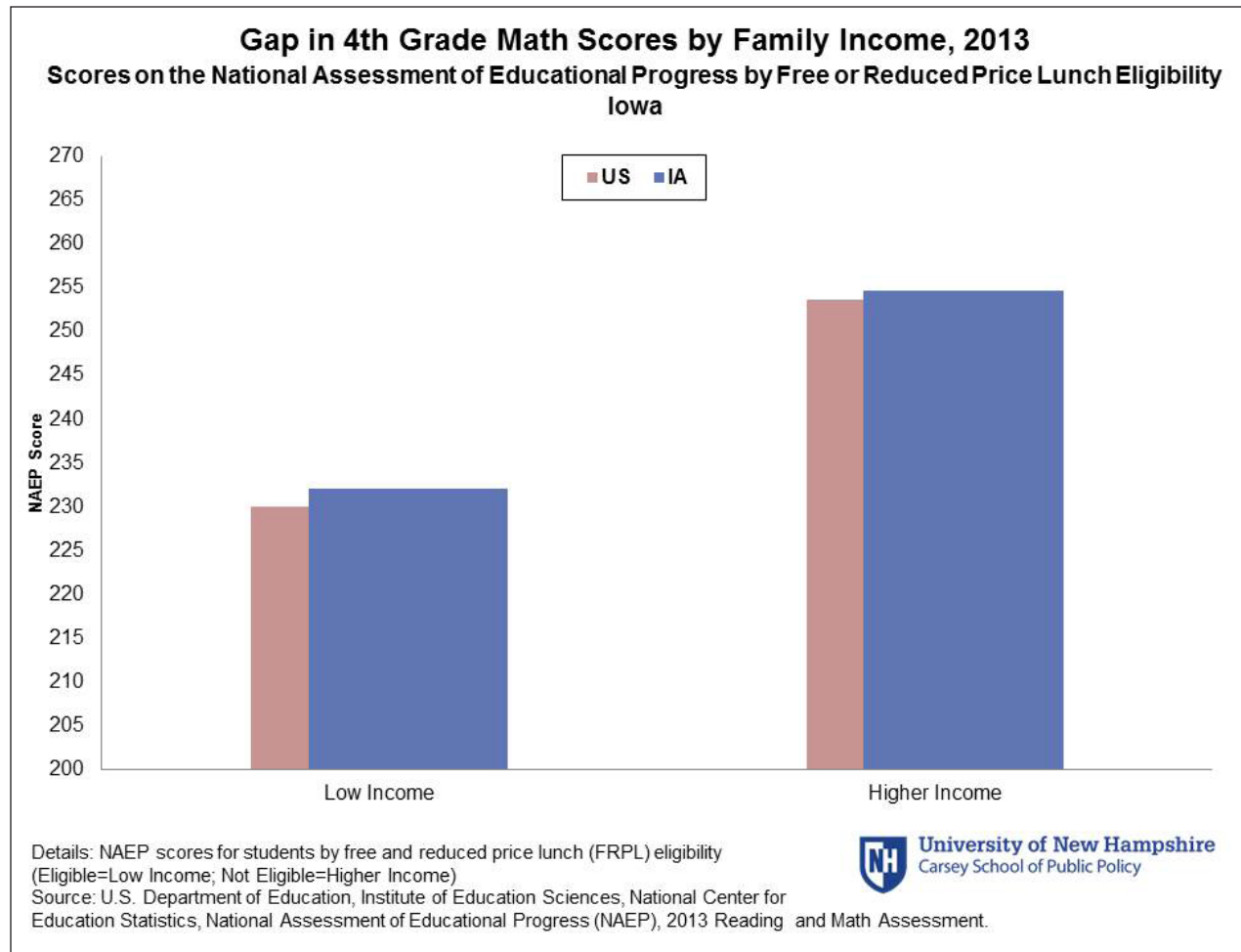
Child Poverty: These graphs, titled **Variation in Poverty Levels 1960–2013**, show trends in child poverty (below 100 percent of the federal poverty level [FPL], see: www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/data/threshld/); deep poverty (below 50 percent of FPL); and low-income status (below 200 percent of the FPL) between 1960 and 2013, the most recent year for which data are available. Given the long-term consequences associated with growing up poor, including reduced educational attainment, lower labor force attachment, and worse health (for example, Duncan and Brooks-Gunn 1999; Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, and Maritato 1997), poverty is a critical indicator of how youth are faring over time. We include deep poverty given the even more dramatic life consequences of being far below the poverty threshold (Duncan and Brooks-Gunn 1999). Further, since it typically takes between 2.5 to 3.5 (Dinan 2009) times the official poverty threshold to achieve even a basic quality of life, we include a conservative estimate of low-income status, 200 percent of federal poverty. Overall, across the past fifty years, the nation witnessed rapid declines in poverty during the 1960s, then a period of relative stability. An increase in poverty that started early in the 2000s was accelerated by the onset of the Great Recession; however, there is a lot of state variability both in the level of poverty and in this patterning.



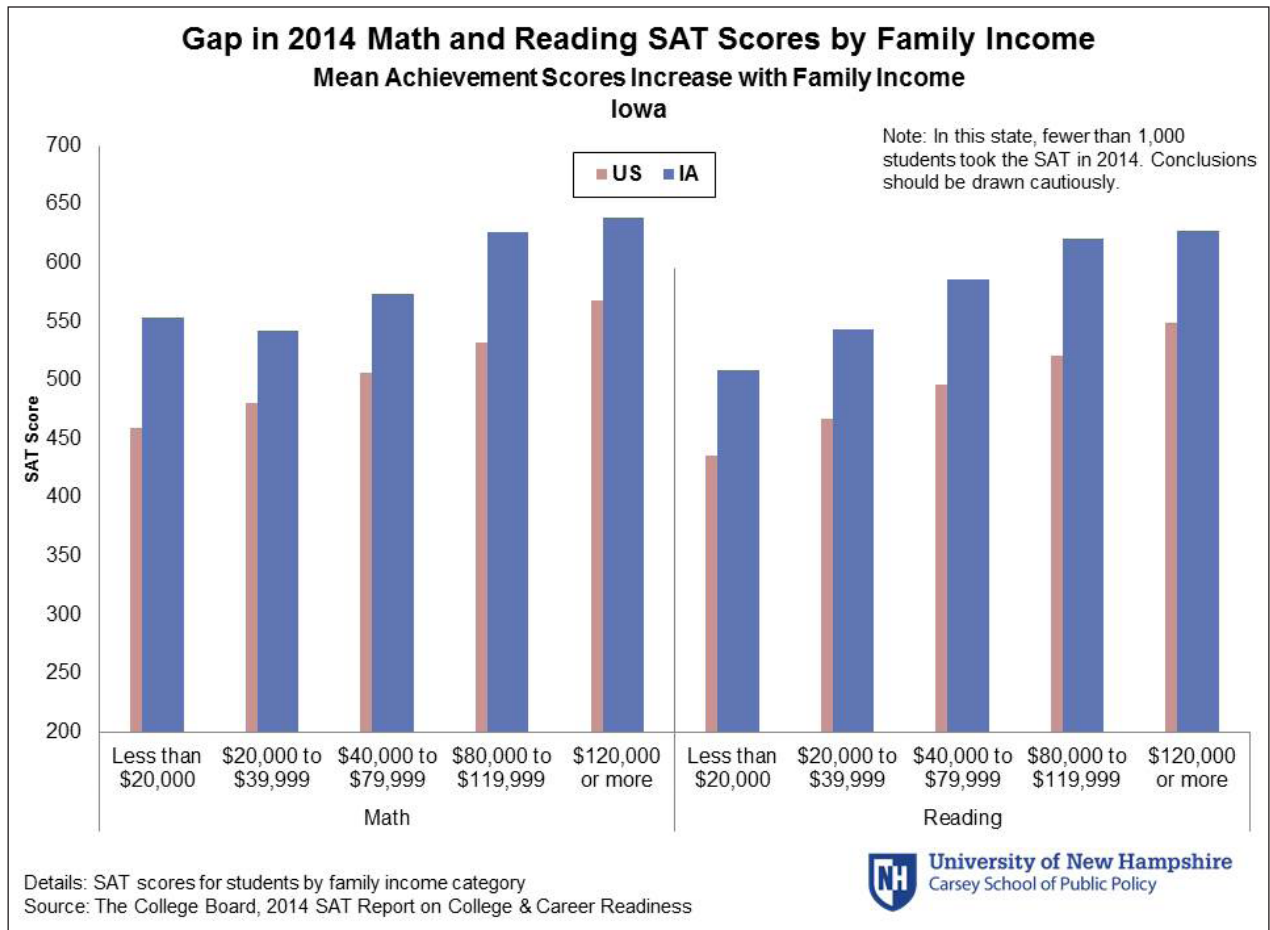
Disparity in Single-Parent Families: These charts, titled **Increasing Gap in Single-Parent Families by Parents' Education**, document changes over time, between 1960 and 2010, in the rate of children growing up with an unmarried parent by their parents' educational attainment. Note that because there are so few college-educated, single-parent families in many states prior to 1980, the state line for children growing up with a well-educated single parent begins in 1980. The literature documents the disadvantages confronted by children growing up in single-parent families (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). Worth noting, however, is that the challenges faced by children growing up with a single parent are complicated by several factors, many of which boil down to a household's lack of resources. Thus, although there is a rising gap in the living situation of America's children by parental education, the implications of living with an unmarried parent are likely very different for those whose parents lack a high school degree and for those whose parent has attained a four-year college degree.



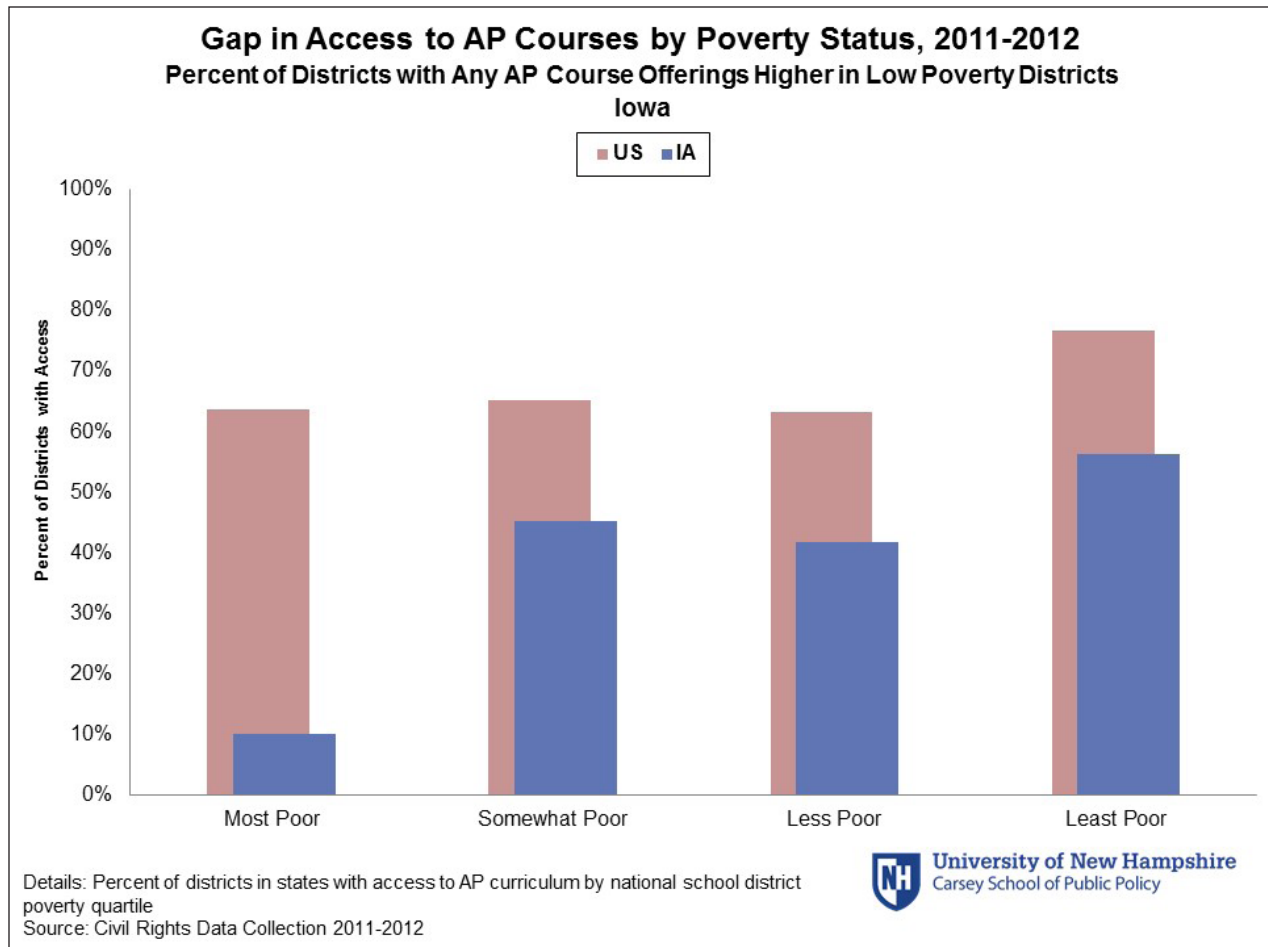
Disparity in Academic Achievement: Using the 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), we chart differences in educational achievement in Grade 4 for those who are eligible for free and reduced price lunch (FRPL) and those who are not in two charts: one focused on reading (**Gap in 4th Grade Reading Scores by Family Income, 2013**) and one on mathematics achievement (**Gap in 4th Grade Math Scores by Family Income, 2013**).



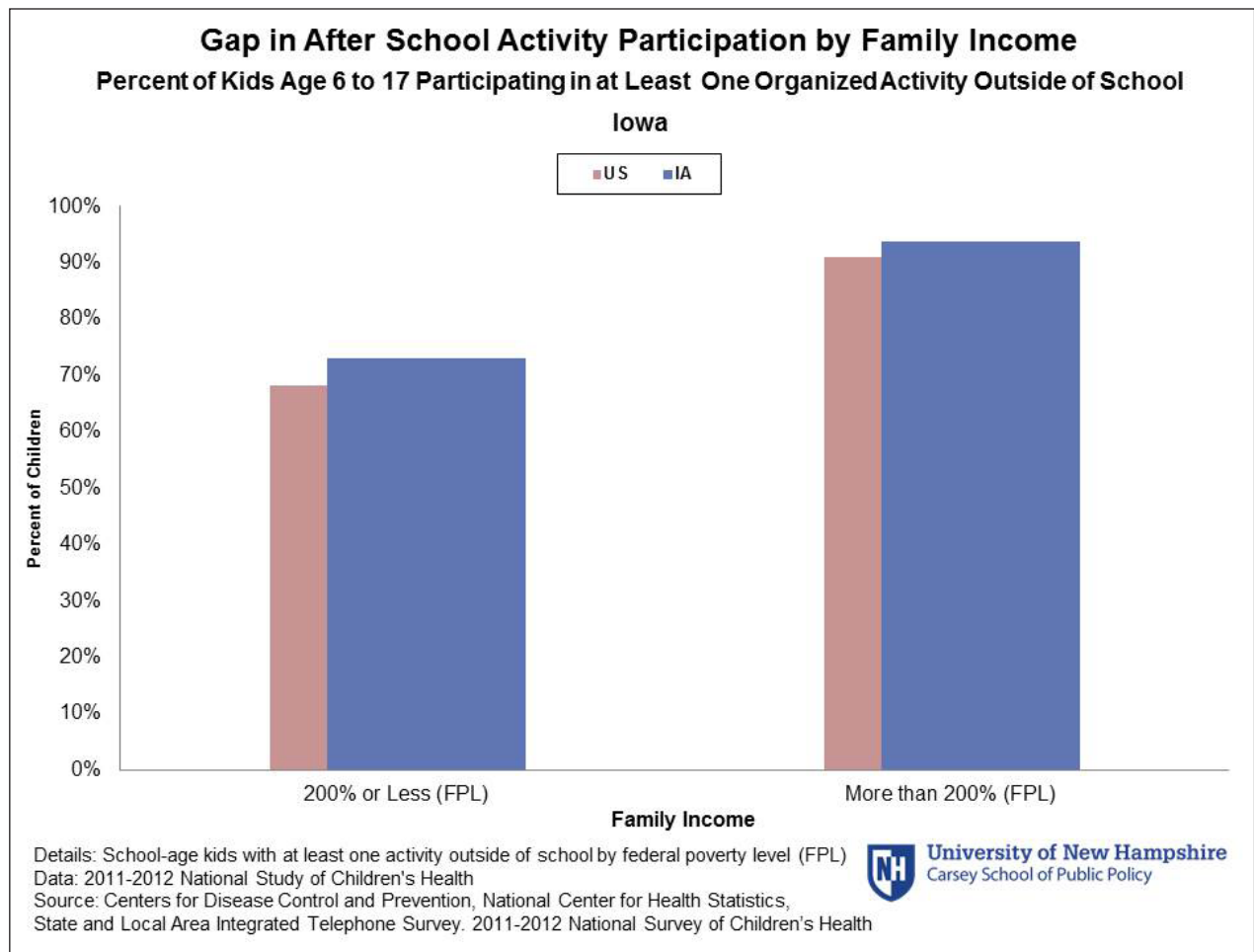
Income disparities in academic achievement are widely acknowledged and form the foundation for differences in later life achievement including higher educational attainment. In these analyses, we use eligibility for free and reduced price lunch as a proxy for low income (those eligible) and higher income (those ineligible) students. Note that this is an imperfect measure given the potential for differential errors across state reports and that it only represents a crude cut at income differences; however, it is the best indicator available with the NAEP data we accessed. We find a substantial disparity in NAEP math and reading scores among students eligible for FRPL, or those students worse off economically, and students not eligible for FRPL. Students from families that are better off financially have better math and reading scores than their counterparts from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.



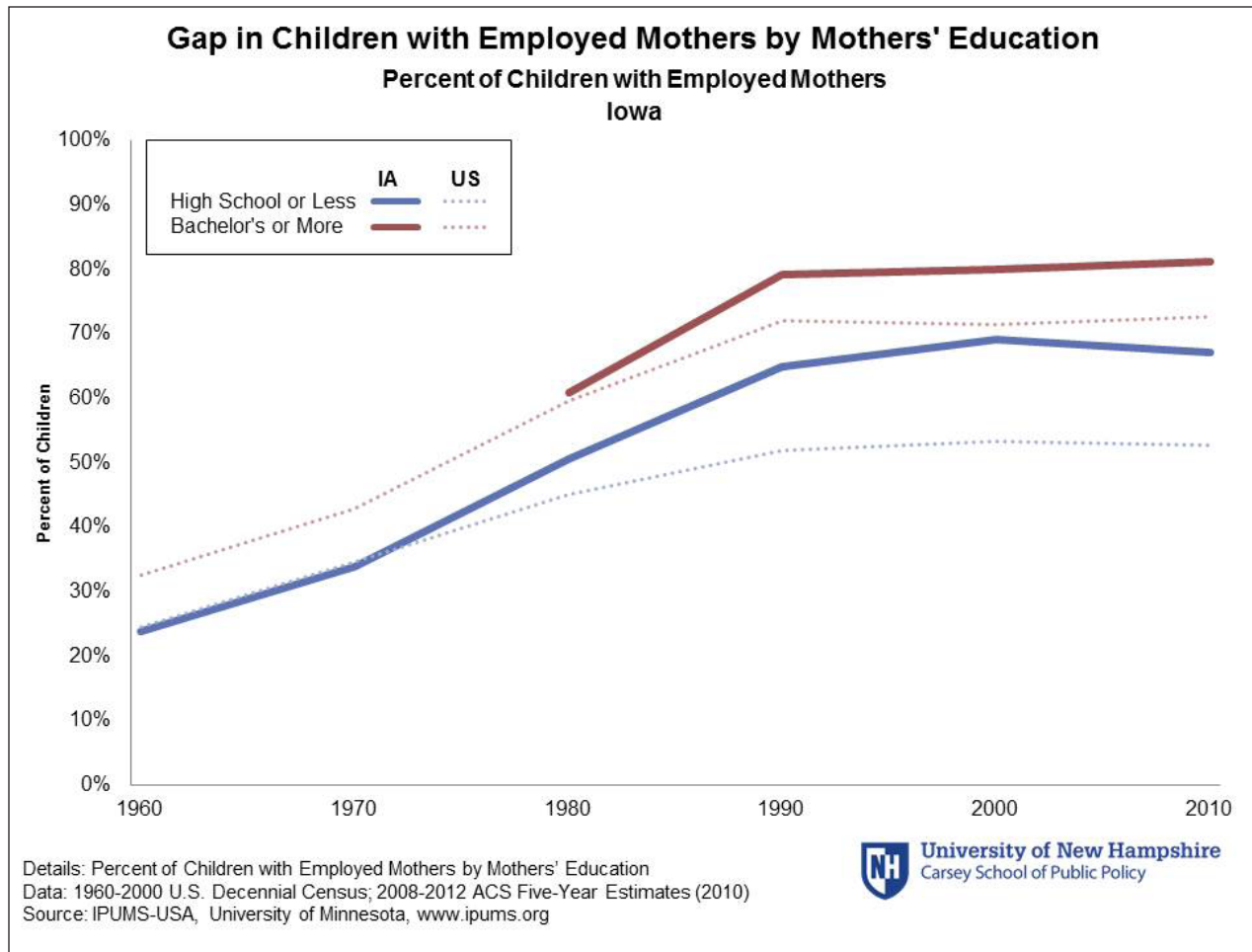
Disparity in College Readiness: We examine 2014 SAT score differentials by family income to show which students are best prepared for college (**Gap in 2014 Math and Reading SAT Scores by Family Income**). Note, however, that this may be a conservative estimate of difference given selection effects: many more of those planning to apply to college typically take the SAT than those who do not aspire to higher education. Additionally, the ACT is another test that is commonly used for college admissions. In some states, such as North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming (The Washington Post 2014), the ACT is more often taken than the SAT, thus, caution should be used in interpreting these findings or making comparisons across states. States with fewer than 1,000 SAT test takers in 2014—the most recent year for which data are available—are noted on the graphs. We find, generally, that students coming from families with higher incomes do better on both the reading and the math portion of the SAT compared to their lower income peers.



Access to Advanced Placement Courses: In the graphs titled **Gap in Access to AP Courses by Poverty Status, 2011–2012**, we show the percent of districts in a state that offered at least one AP class in 2011–2012 by the national distribution of poverty (quartile distribution of all school district poverty rates) to document variation in access according to school district socioeconomic status. AP courses enable students both to develop higher level critical thinking skills and to earn college credits while still in high school. As such, they provide a value opportunity to be better prepared for college attendance. State-by-state patterns in access to AP courses by district poverty status are not as clear as patterns delineated by other indicators. Nonetheless, for many states, whether or not schools in a district offer AP coursework falls across poverty lines, with schools in higher poverty districts reporting lower access to AP coursework, on average.



Enrichment Activities: In the graphs titled **Gap in After School Activity Participation by Family Income**, we document the disparity between children growing up in low income and better off families in activity participation outside of the school day. Such a gap is a direct indication of differential opportunities for skill development and social capital formation.



Differences in Maternal Employment: Finally, in our last set of graphs, **Gap in Children with Employed Mothers by Mother's Education**, we document the gaps in maternal employment across the nation by mother's educational attainment. Maternal employment is a key indicator both of resources available to the household and opportunities for social and human capital development. Note that data limitations preclude us from presenting trends in maternal employment among the college educated prior to 1980.

Citations

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