



Skin Tone and Racial Inequality in the US: Evidence from the 20th Century

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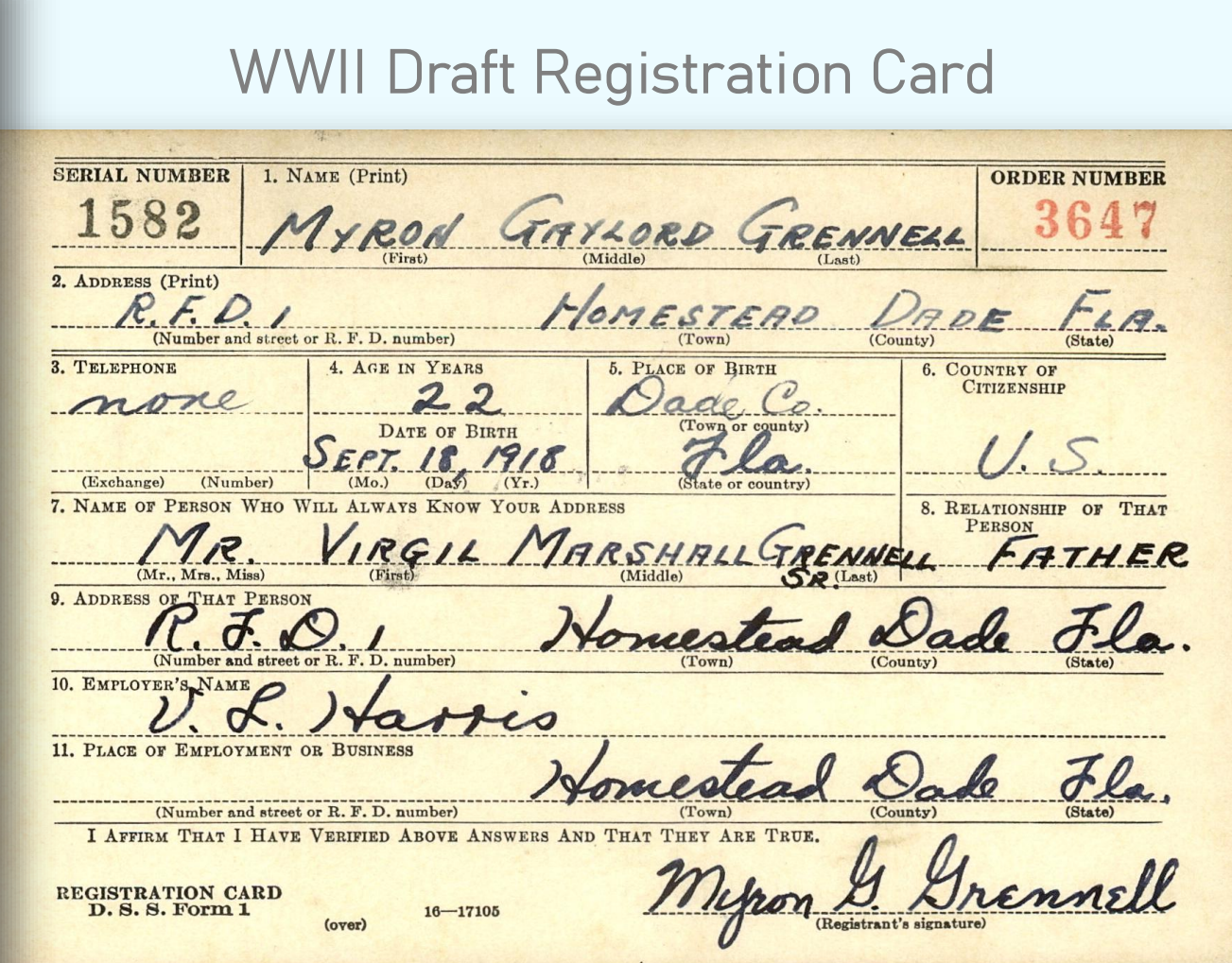
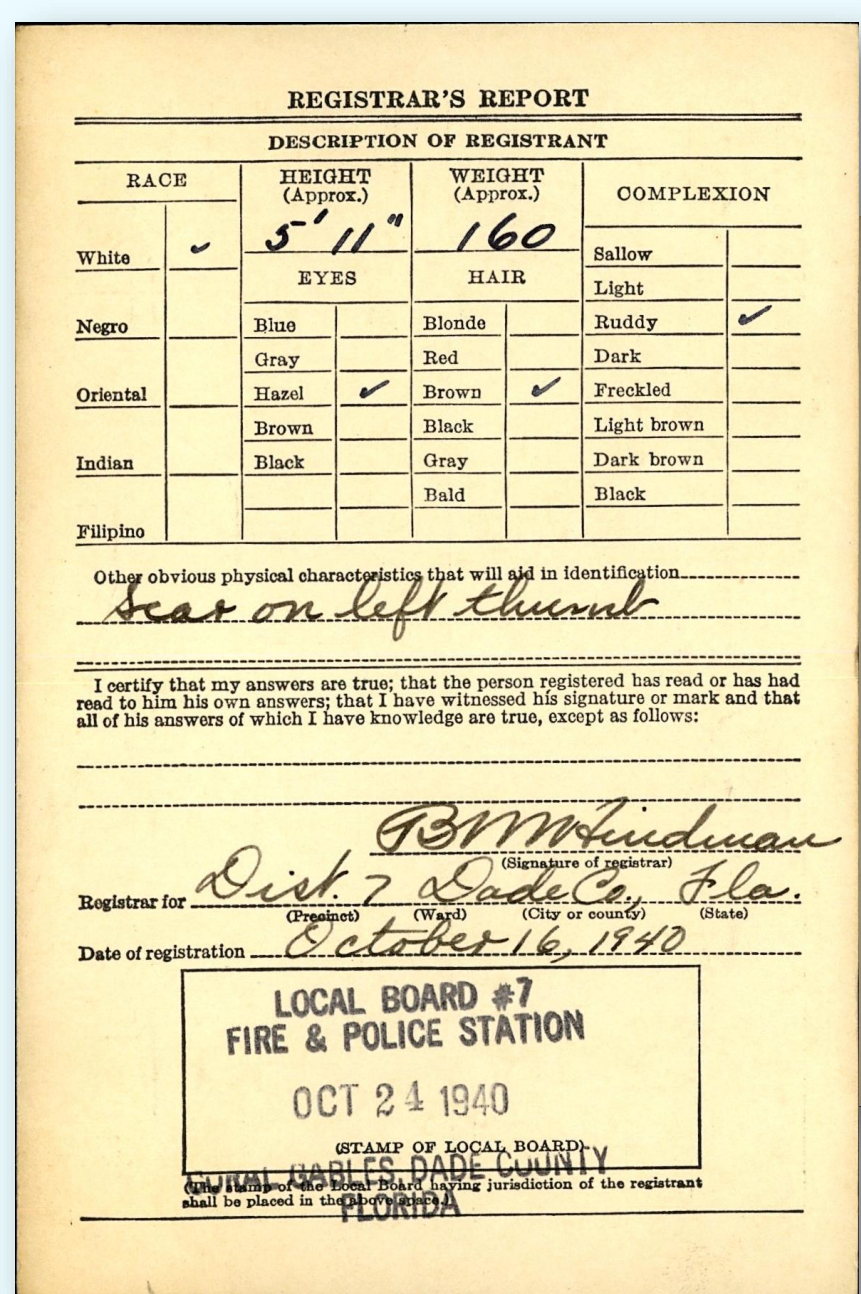
SUMMARY

Empirical work on racial inequality typically relies on binary Black-white comparisons potentially masking meaningful inequities within these categories as discussed in a growing sociological literature. Using newly compiled and digitized WWII draft registration records containing information on skin tone for the universe of men born between 1898-1928, we document intra-racial education and earning disparities by skin color within Black men. These disparities are large and economically significant, equivalent to roughly half of the Black-white gap for earnings. The earning difference persists among children from the same family, despite finding no differences in educational attainment within families — suggesting a role for differential treatment in the labor market. Strikingly, skin tone disparities are just as large in weak as in intense Jim Crow regimes.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- (1) How large are skin tone gaps in economic outcomes in the 1940s?
- (2) What mechanisms generate and sustain intra-racial inequality?

DATA



- During WWII, all eligible men had to register themselves for the draft

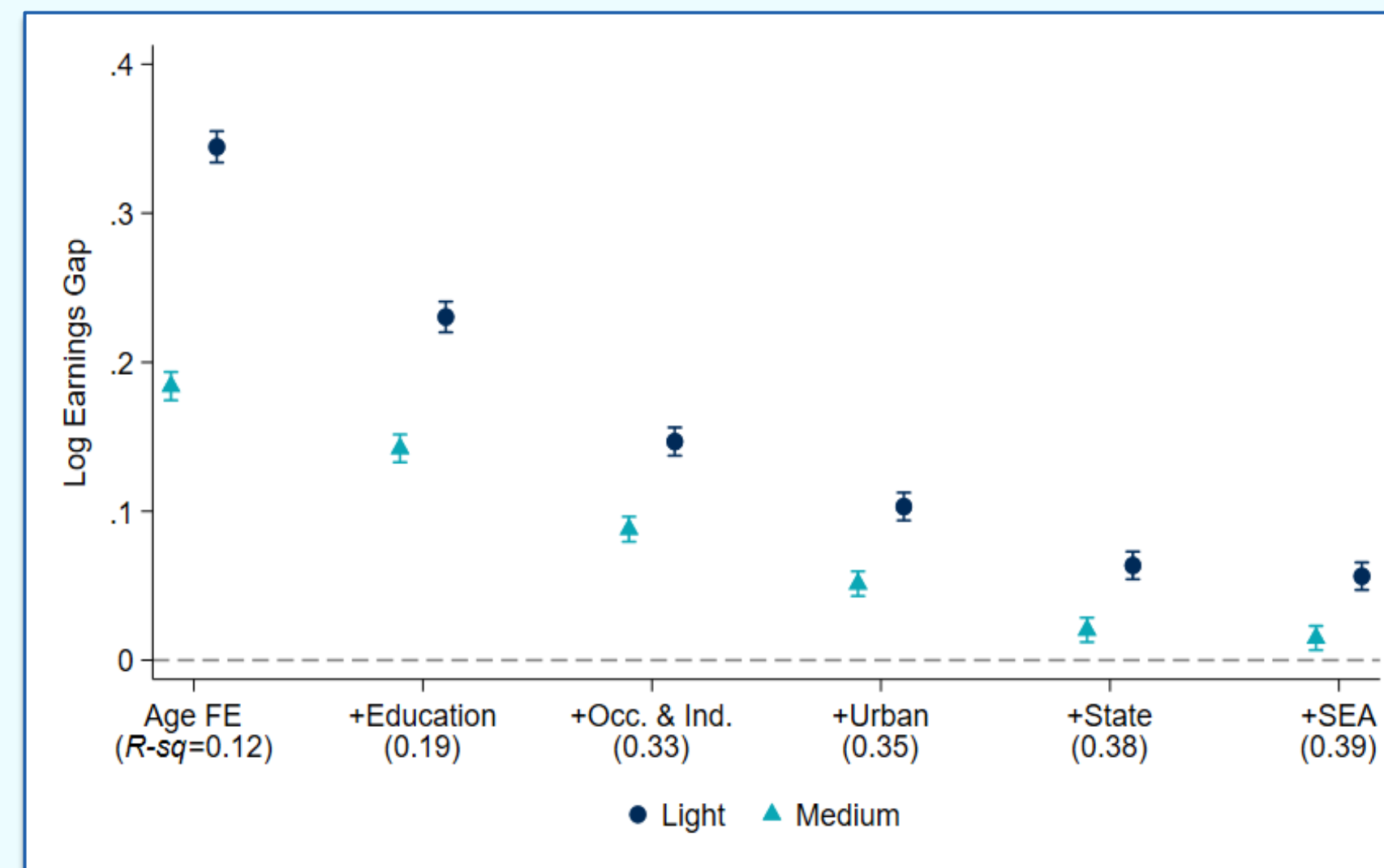


Illustration from Morning Pioneer Newspaper

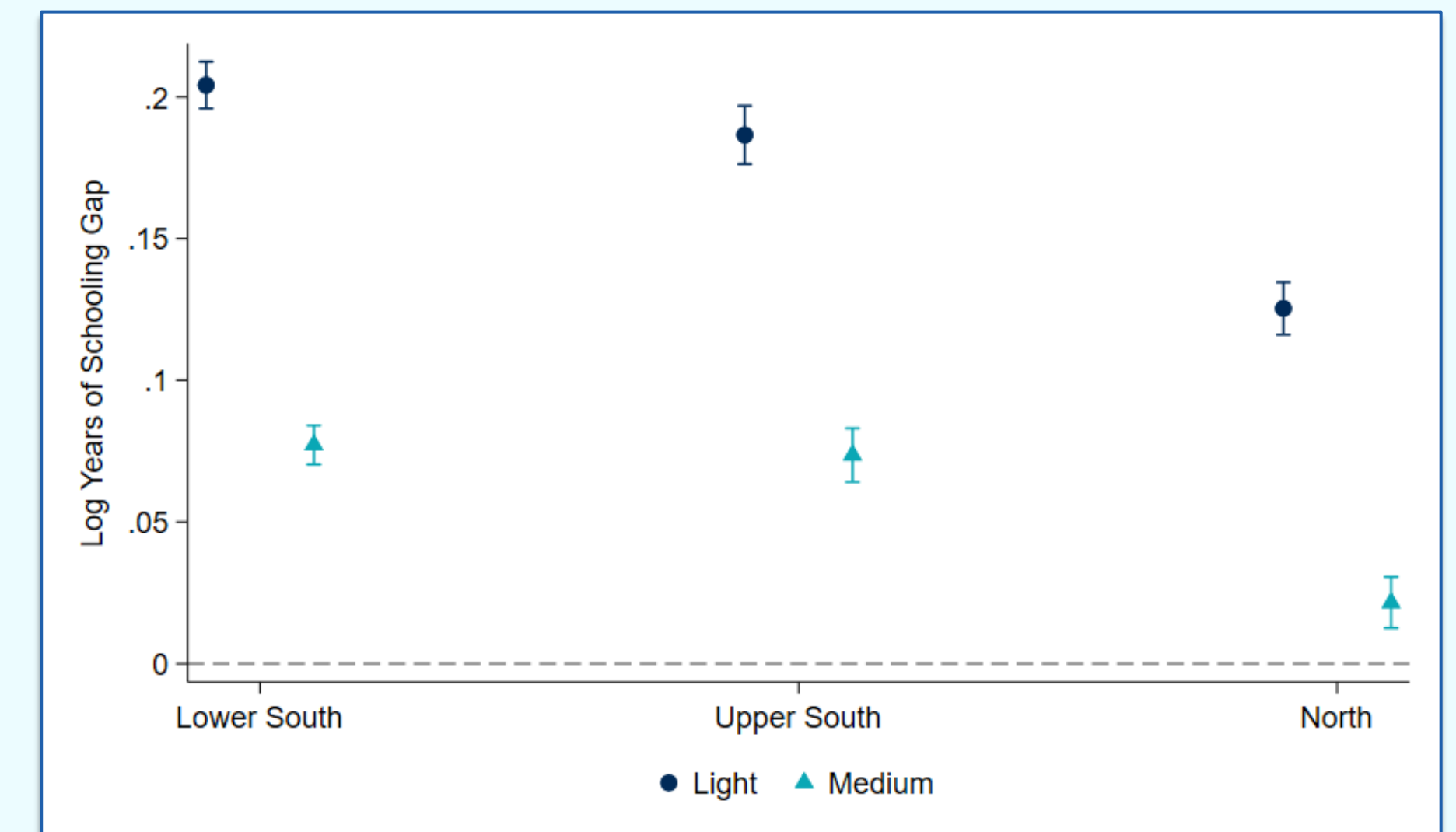
- Draft boards collected identifying information (front) and physical descriptions (back) – including complexion – for all men born between 1898-1928.
- We construct a novel dataset by compiling and digitizing these records for 30m men and linking them to the 1940 Census to study their outcomes.

DESCRIPTIVES – What do we see?

Earnings Gap



Educational Attainment



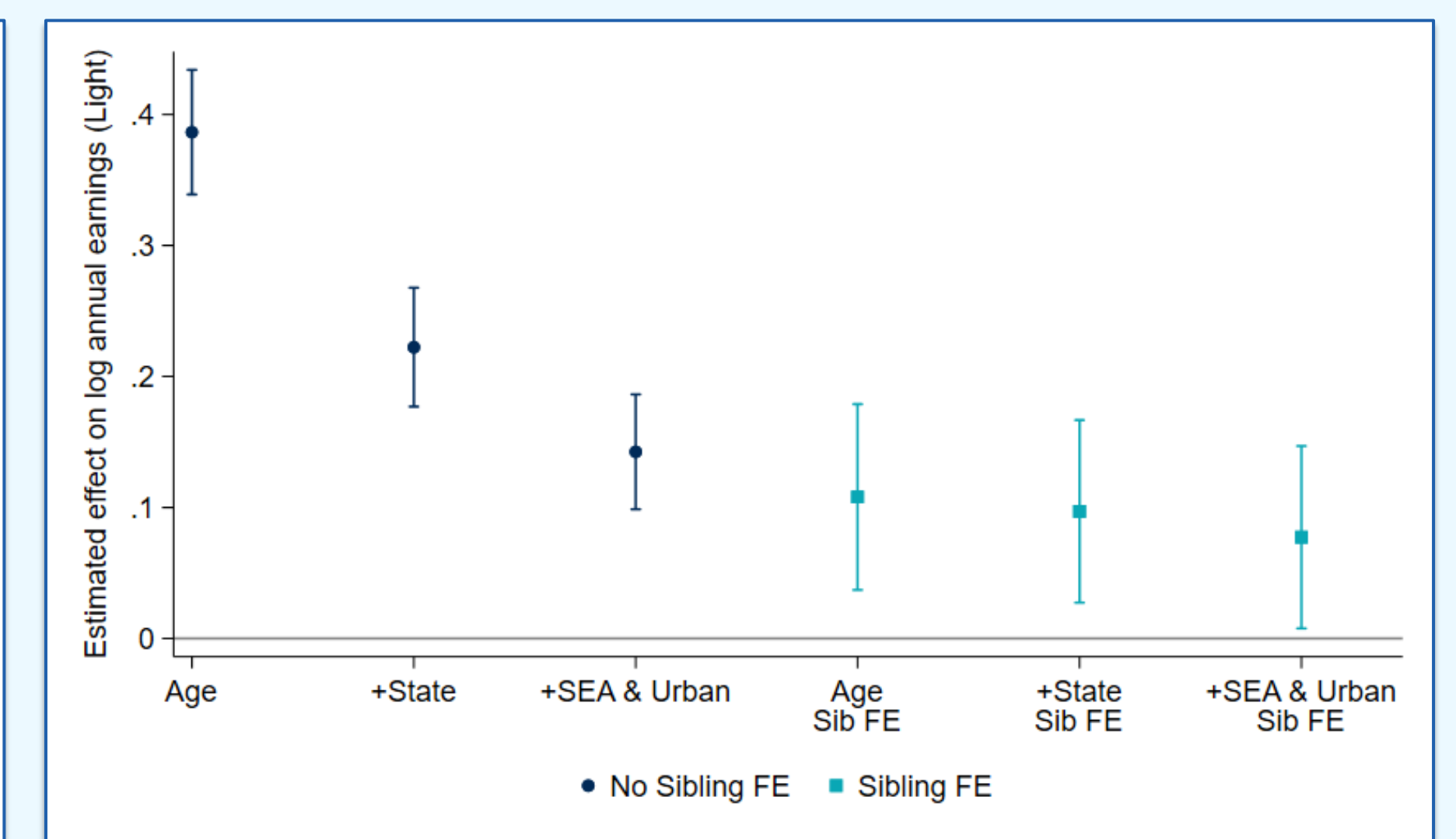
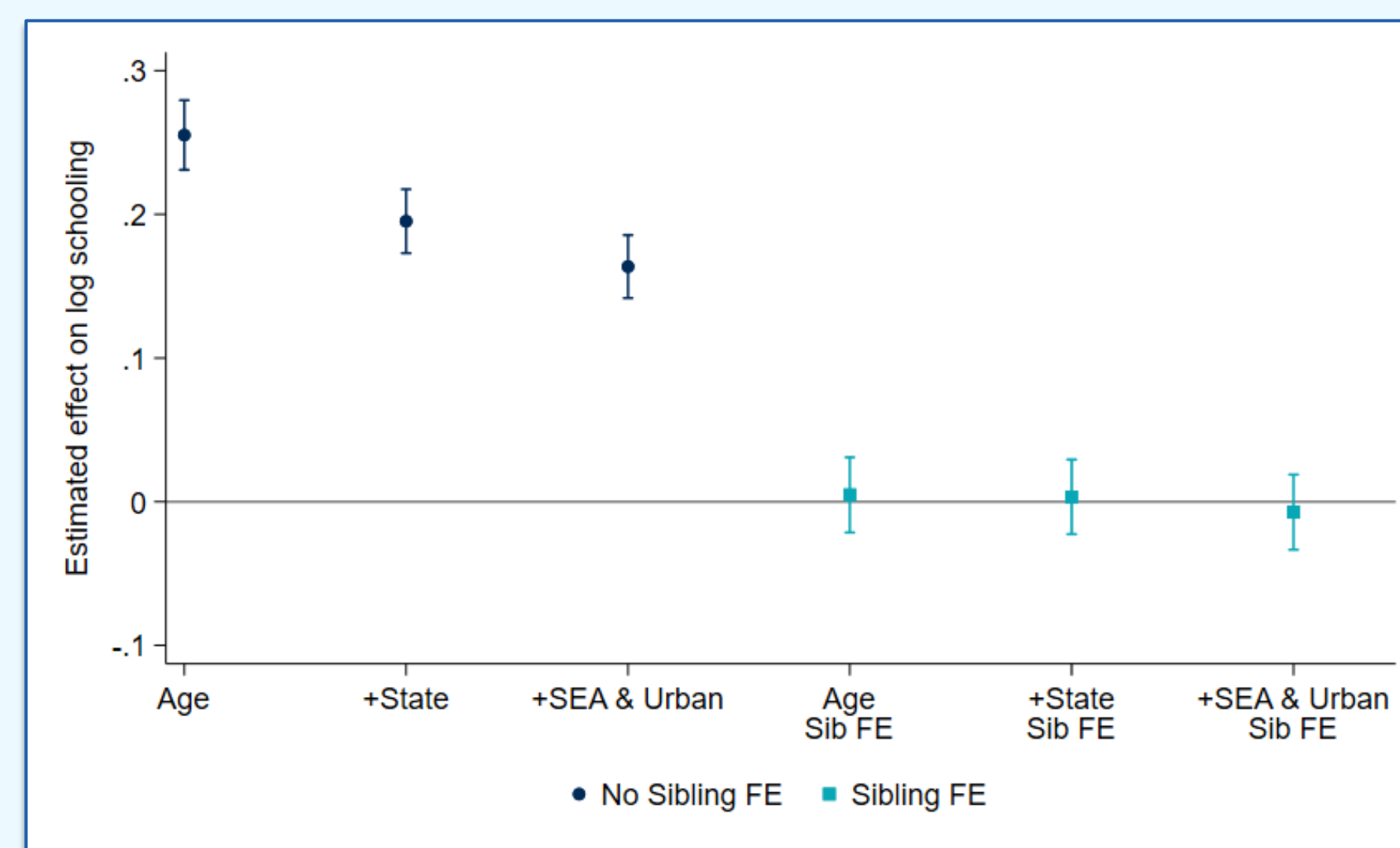
- Black men with lighter skin earn ~40% more than their darker-skinned peers (unconditionally)
- This gap is large, equivalent to roughly half the White-Black earnings gap
- 16% of the gap remains unexplained even after controlling for a rich set of wage determinants
- Education gap btw Black men with lighter v. darker skin is ~20%

MECHANISMS – What explains these gaps?

Within Family Differences

When comparing children from the same family with different skin tones

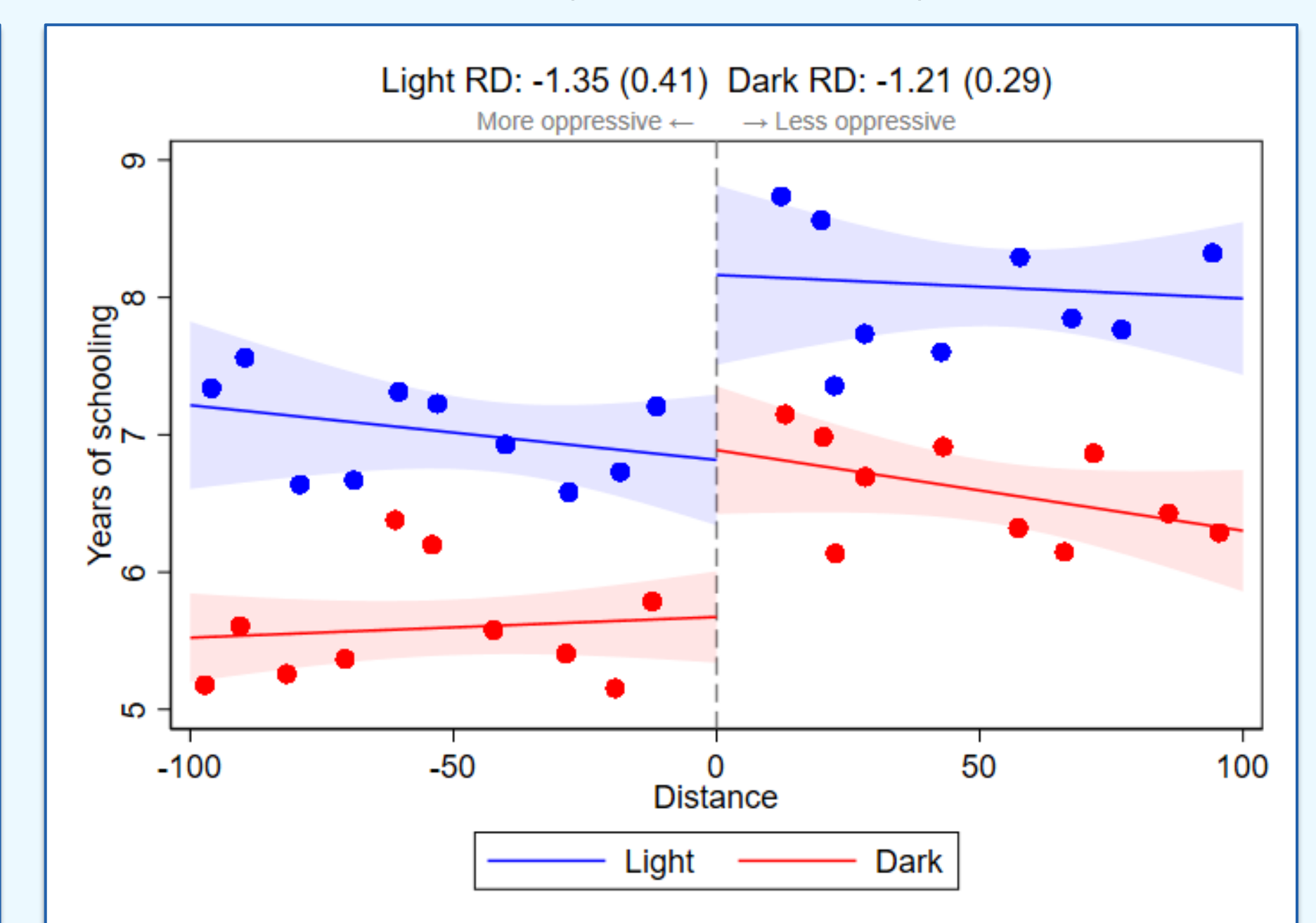
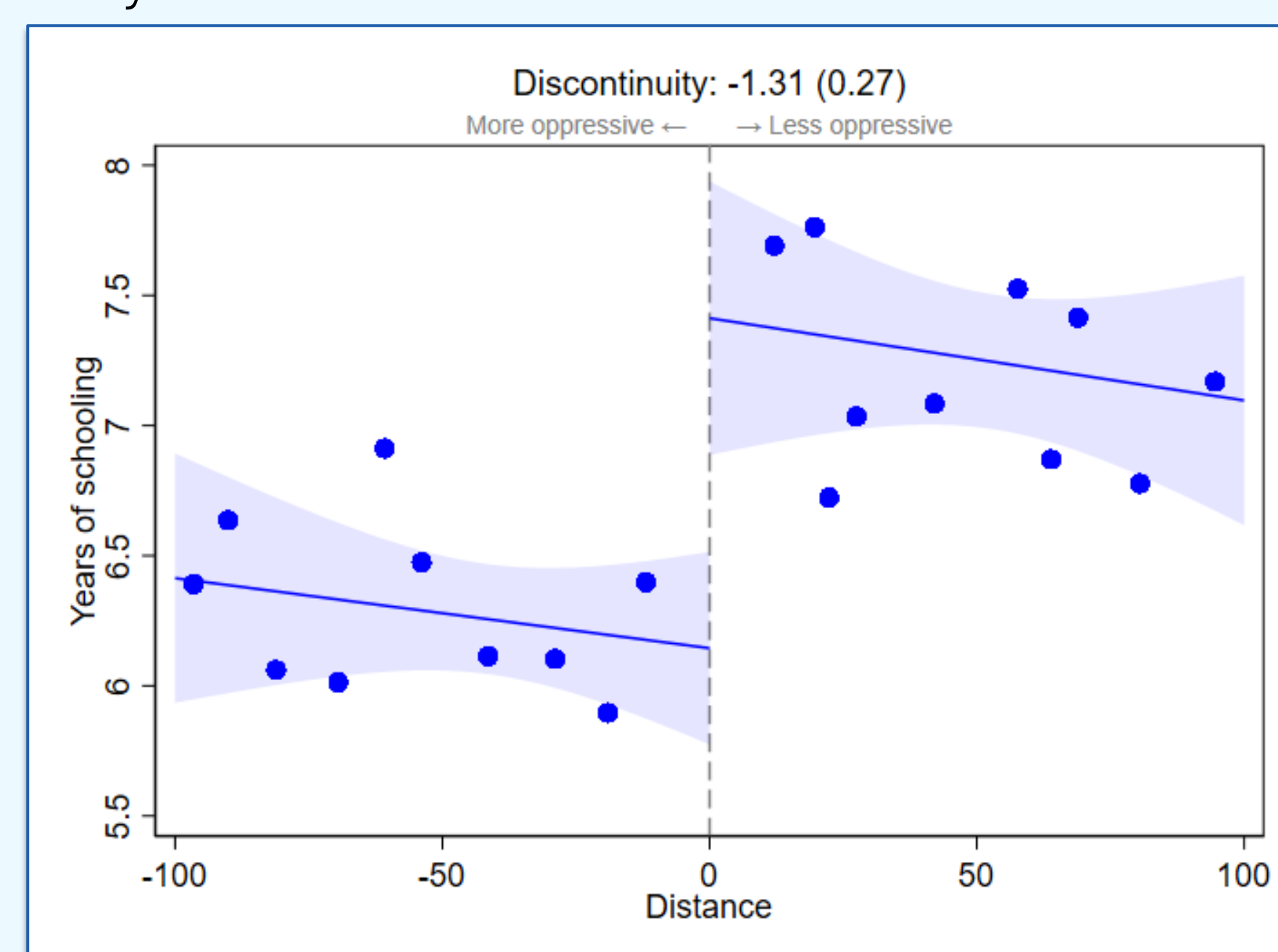
- No differences in educational attainment → No evidence of differential investment by parents
- A ~8% earnings gap remains, ~20% of the unconditional gap



Childhood Environment – The Role of Institutions

We examine the impact of racially discriminatory institutions such as Jim Crow

- ↓ Reduces educational attainment by 1.3 years for Black men overall
- No differential impact by skin tone → Local norms and preferences important



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