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Is First in Family a Superior Measure of Socioeconomic Disadvantage in Higher Education?

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Acknowledgement of Country



Low Socioeconomic Status

Students whose address is an **area** of the lowest quartile in the Socio-Economic Indices for Areas (SEIFA) Index of Employment and Occupation (IEO)¹.

Captured from address reported at admission to university.

First in Family

University students who do not have a parent with a university-level qualification.

Indicator of parental social and cultural resources².

Captured at admission to university.

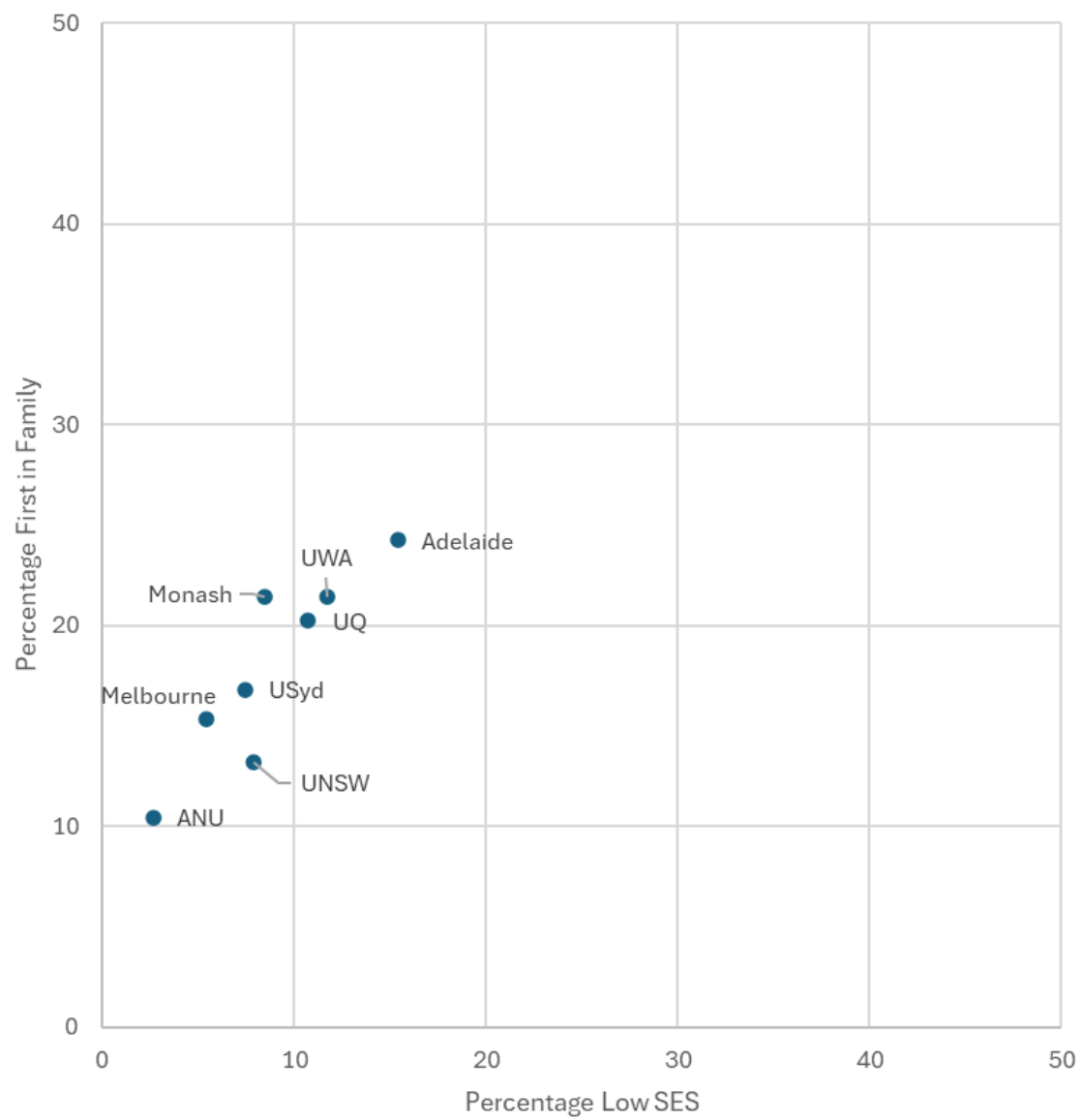
[1] Australian Bureau of Statistics (2021) *Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA): Technical Paper*. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/detailed-methodology-information/concepts-sources-methods/socio-economic-indexes-areas-seifa-technical-paper/2021>

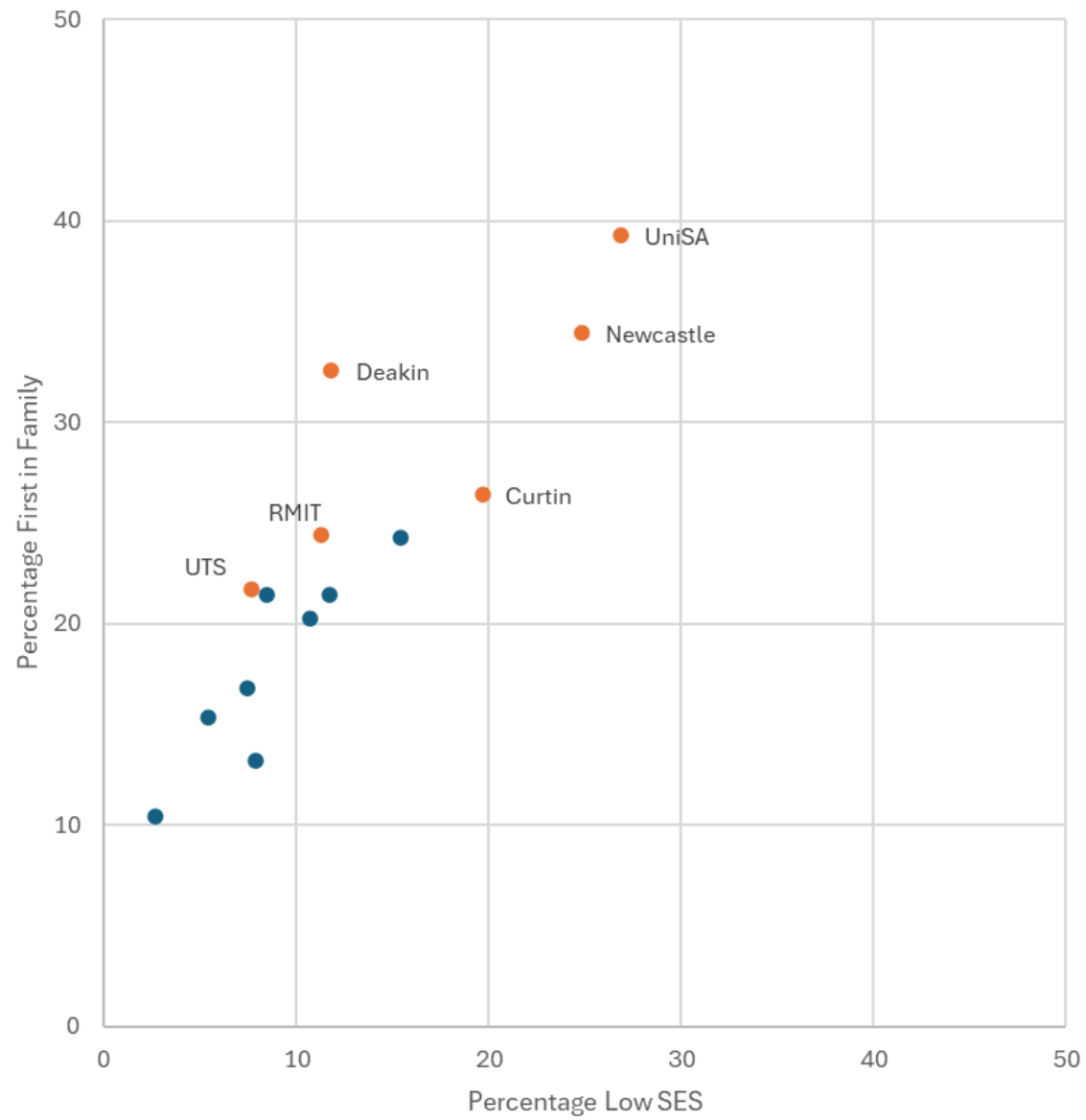
[2] Tomaszewski, W., Xiang, N., & Kubler, M. (2025). Socio-economic status, school performance, and university participation: evidence from linked administrative and survey data from Australia. *Higher Education*, 89(3), 753-774. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-024-01245-7>

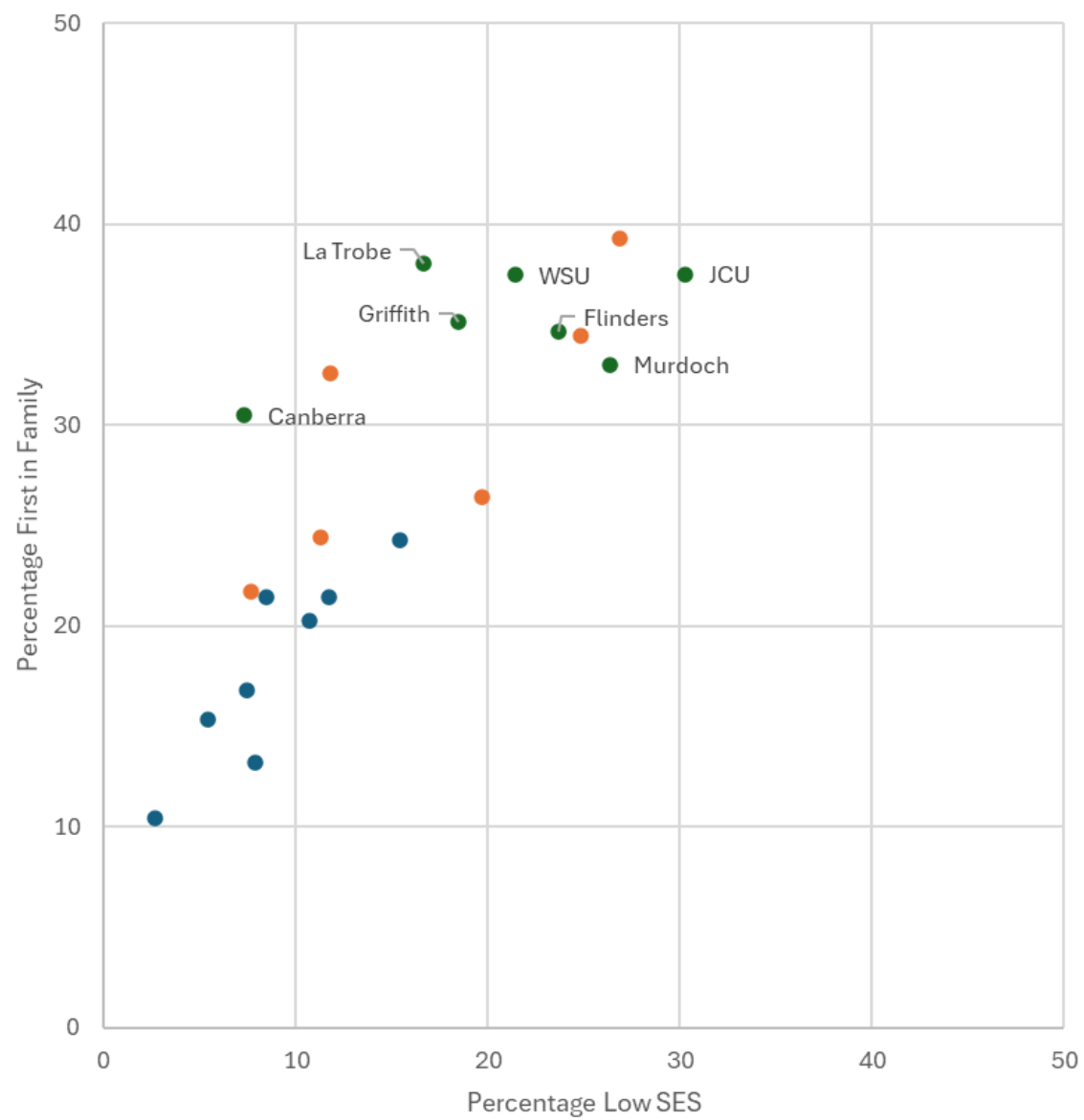


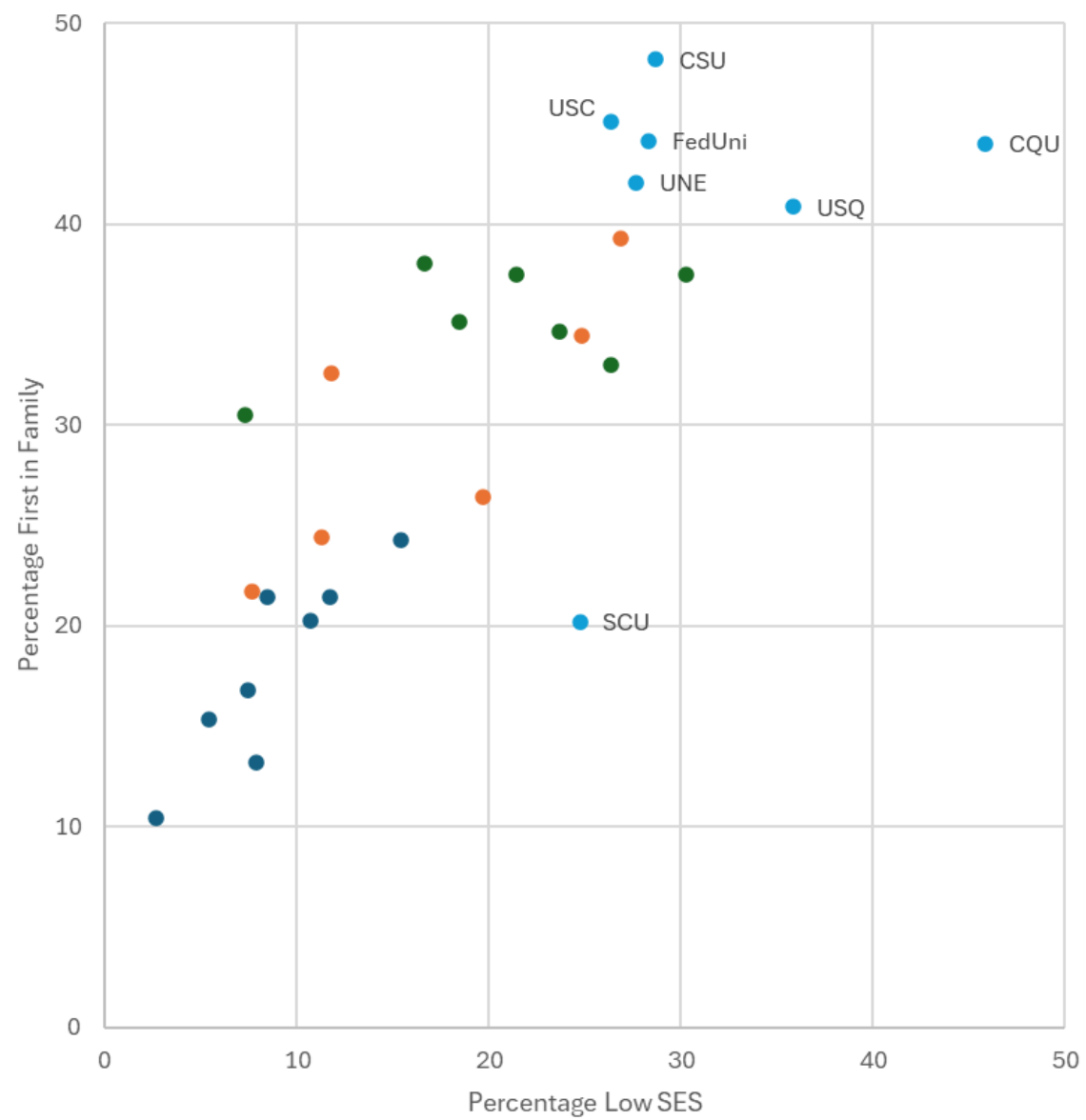
What percentage of your domestic undergraduate students are Low Socioeconomic? First in Family?

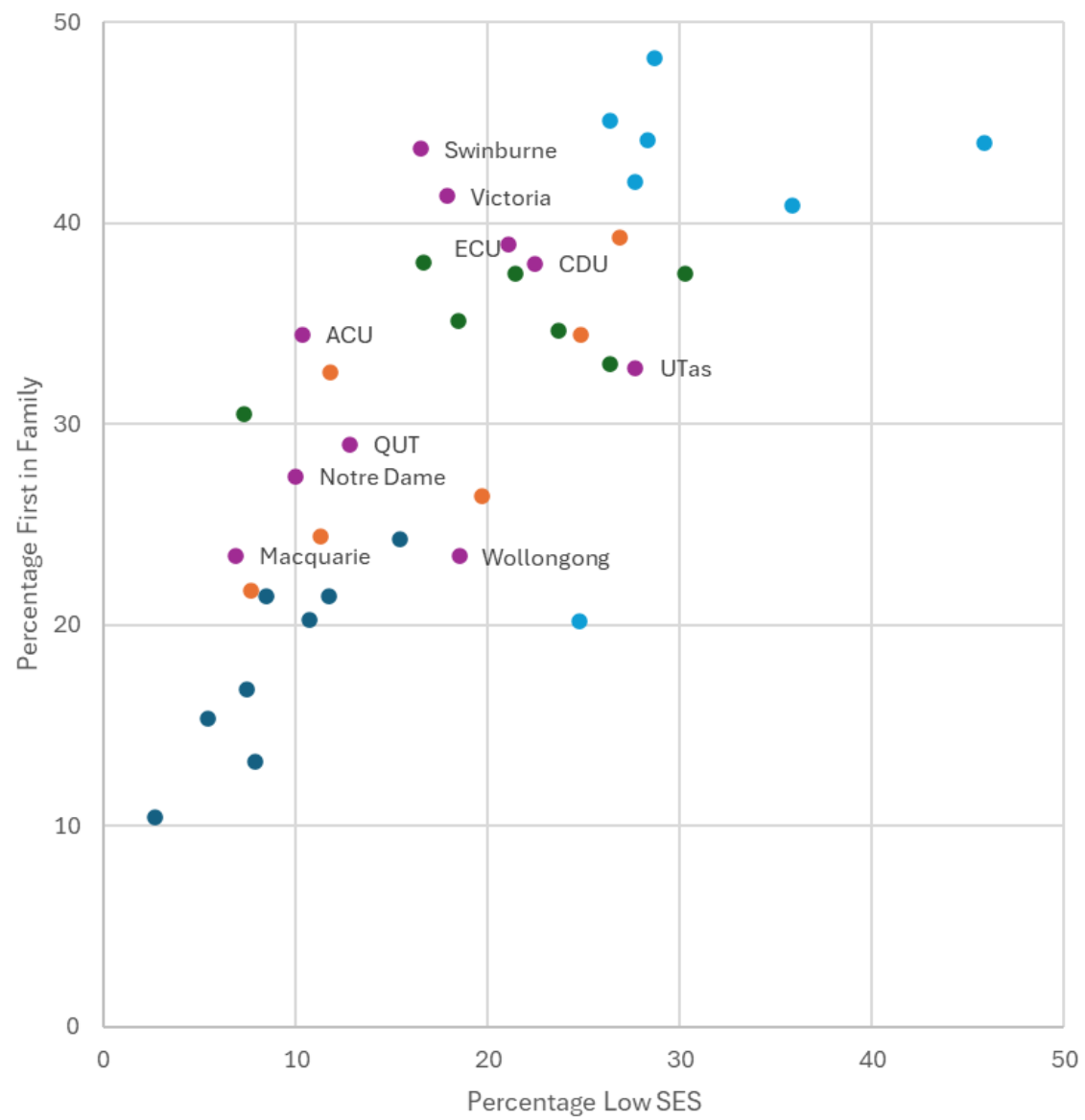












Identified issues with current Low SES definition

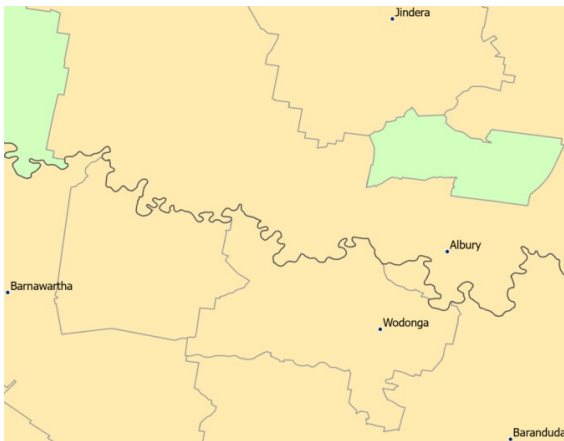
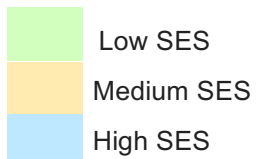
- Aggregation of an area, not individual-level
- Multiple approaches to defining lowest quartile
- Spatially and temporally unstable
- Student address unreliable as marker of socio-economic background
- IEO does not include indicators directly related to wealth (only education attainment, occupation and unemployment)
- Statistically bound to 25 per cent of the population
- Recommendation to develop an **individual-level** socio-economic disadvantage measure³.

[3] Tomaszewski, W., Kubler, M., Perales, F., Western, M., Rampino, T., & Xiang, N. (2018). Review of identified equity groups.
<https://espace.library.uq.edu.au/view/UQ:bd8a044>



Variability of SES classification

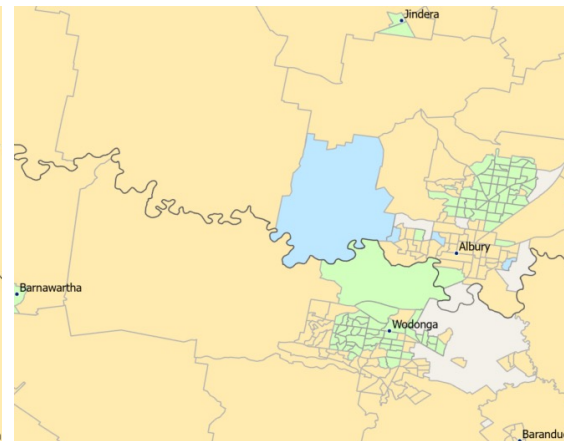
Depends on method used and can produce different results
Particularly problematic in regional areas



Postcodes – quartiles of count by postcode



Postcodes – quartiles of population aged 15-64

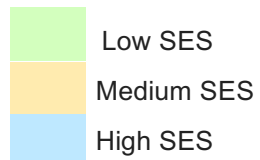


SA1 – quartiles of population aged 15-64



Variability of SES classification`

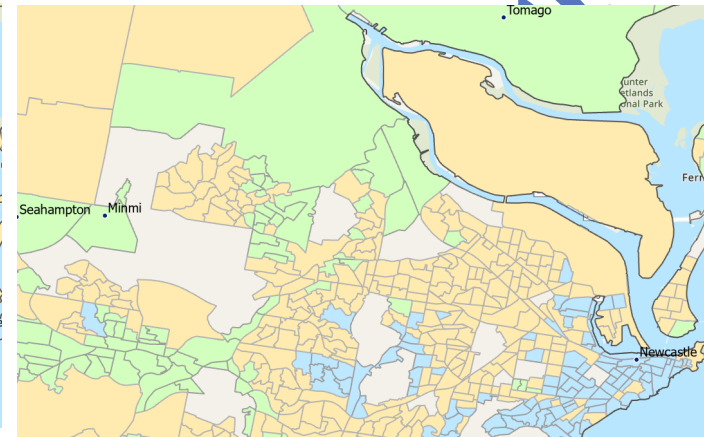
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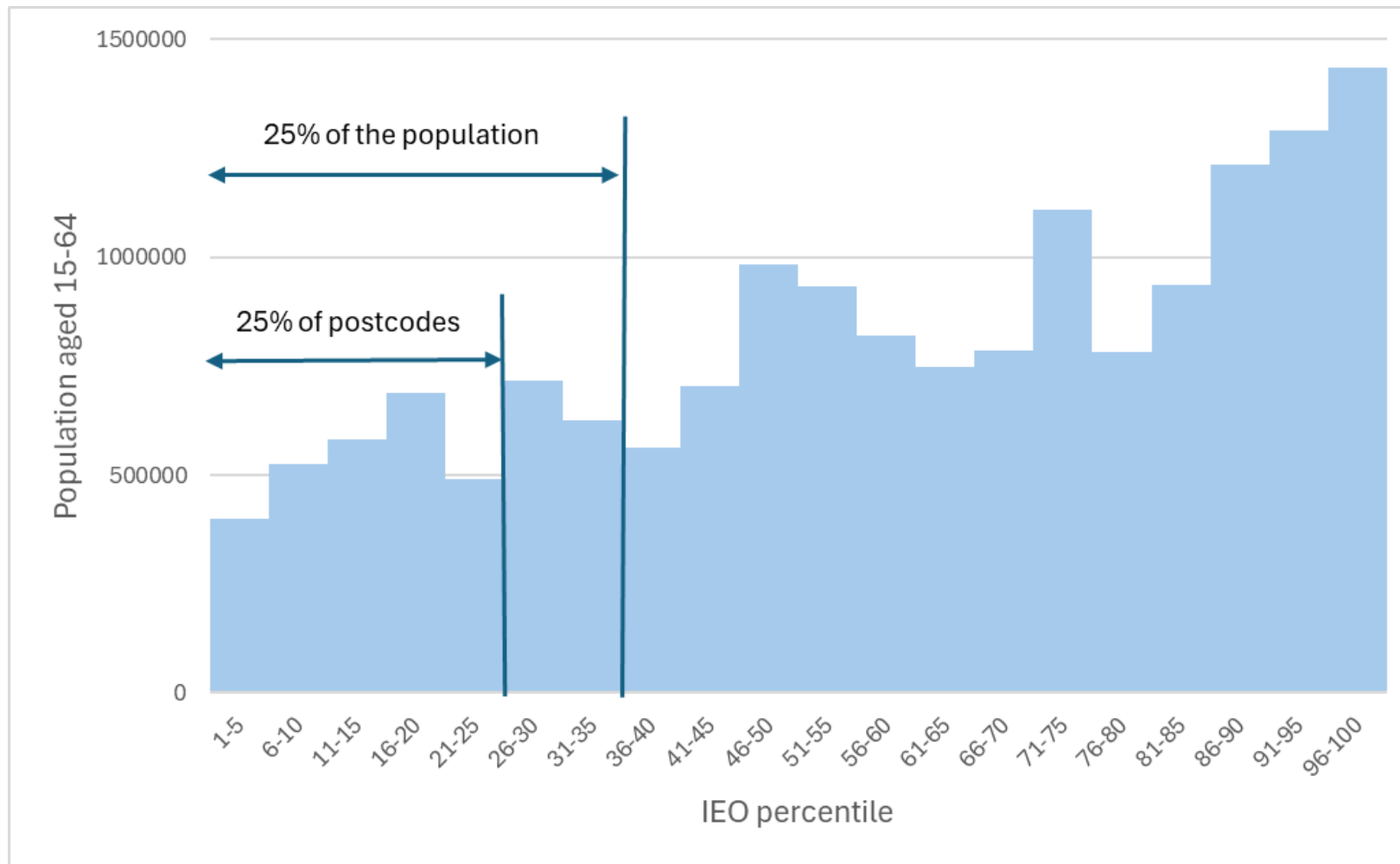
Postcodes – quartiles of count by postcode



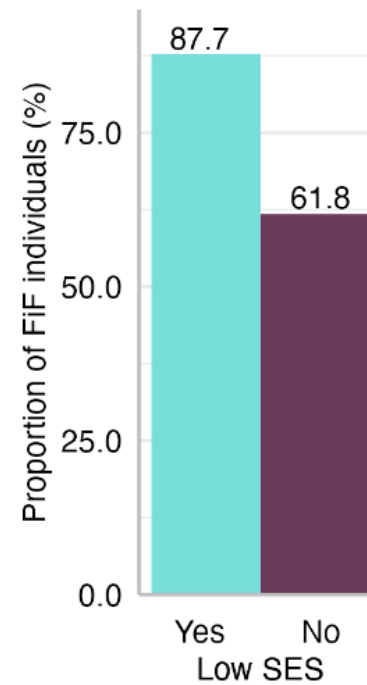
Postcodes – quartiles of population aged 15-64



SA1 – quartiles of population aged 15-64

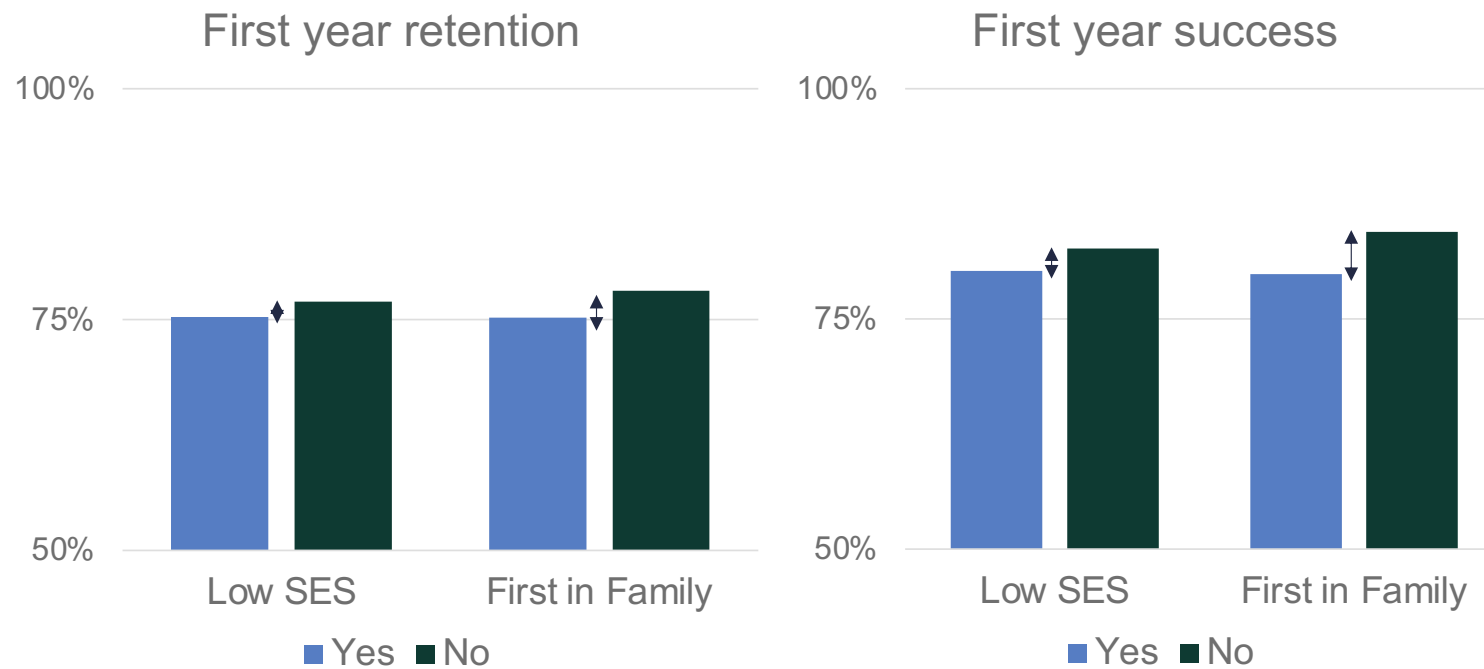


First in Family overlaps substantially with Low SES



Zajac, T., Stahl, G., Tomaszewski, W., & Xiang, N. (2025). *Investigating the relationships between First-in-Family status, equity groups, and university access* (Small Grants Research Program Final Report. <https://s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/assets.acses.edu.au/app/uploads/2025/10/Zajac-et-al-2025-FiF-status-equity-groups-and-university-access.pdf>

First in Family status meets criteria for equity group



Benefits of First in Family over Low SES

- Spatially and temporally stable
- Applied directly to individual without additional assumptions
- Potentially more meaningful as an indicator of socio-economic disadvantage



Policy implications

Needs Based Funding Equity Grant

- Must be spent on activities that support students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and Indigenous persons to access, participate in, succeed in, and complete higher education
- The Equity Grant can be used to fund indirect supports that benefit a wider cohort of students as long as they are delivered for the primary purpose of supporting eligible students



Discussion

- How does your institution calculate Low SES?
- How confident can we be that a student tagged as Low SES really is socioeconomically disadvantaged?
- How confident can we be that a First in Family student really is socioeconomically disadvantaged?
- How will your institution allocate NBF Equity funds?
- How can we demonstrate that an activity is for the primary purpose of supporting Low SES students?

