

# **It's All a Matter of Degrees: Comparing Survey and Administrative Educational Attainment Data**

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# Motivation

- The returns to education literature is large and extensive
- Many of these papers are based on survey data, and there have been limited efforts to measure how accurate the responses are to education questions.
- Plenty of work by done on other survey responses has found misreporting:
  - Meyer et al. (2015) shows that it is very prevalent in income assistance programs
  - Hokayem et al (2015) and Bollinger et al (2019) show how income misreporting affects earnings distributions.
- Since the ACS added the field of study question, several papers have attempted to estimate returns by field of study, with no sense of accuracy of reporting.

# Contributions

- First paper to assess quality of field of study responses
- First paper to assess quality of education level responses at a large scale
- Ability to measure how these errors change over time, and how they differ by race/ethnicity and gender

# Data

## **Degree Data**

- Data are from Texas; Pennsylvania State University System; Ohio; SUNY; CUNY; Colorado
- Data report degree earned, degree field, date of graduation, institution
- Restrict to bachelor's degrees (future work is going to look at other degree levels)
- Degrees earned from 2001-2015.

## **American Community Survey**

- Data from 2009-2016
- Focusing on the questions of highest educational attainment and field of study for bachelor's recipients.

We merge these two data sets for a 10% sample, and focus only on responses in the ACS that are taken in years after the graduation year (to ensure the respondent has received a degree)

# Measuring Survey Misreporting

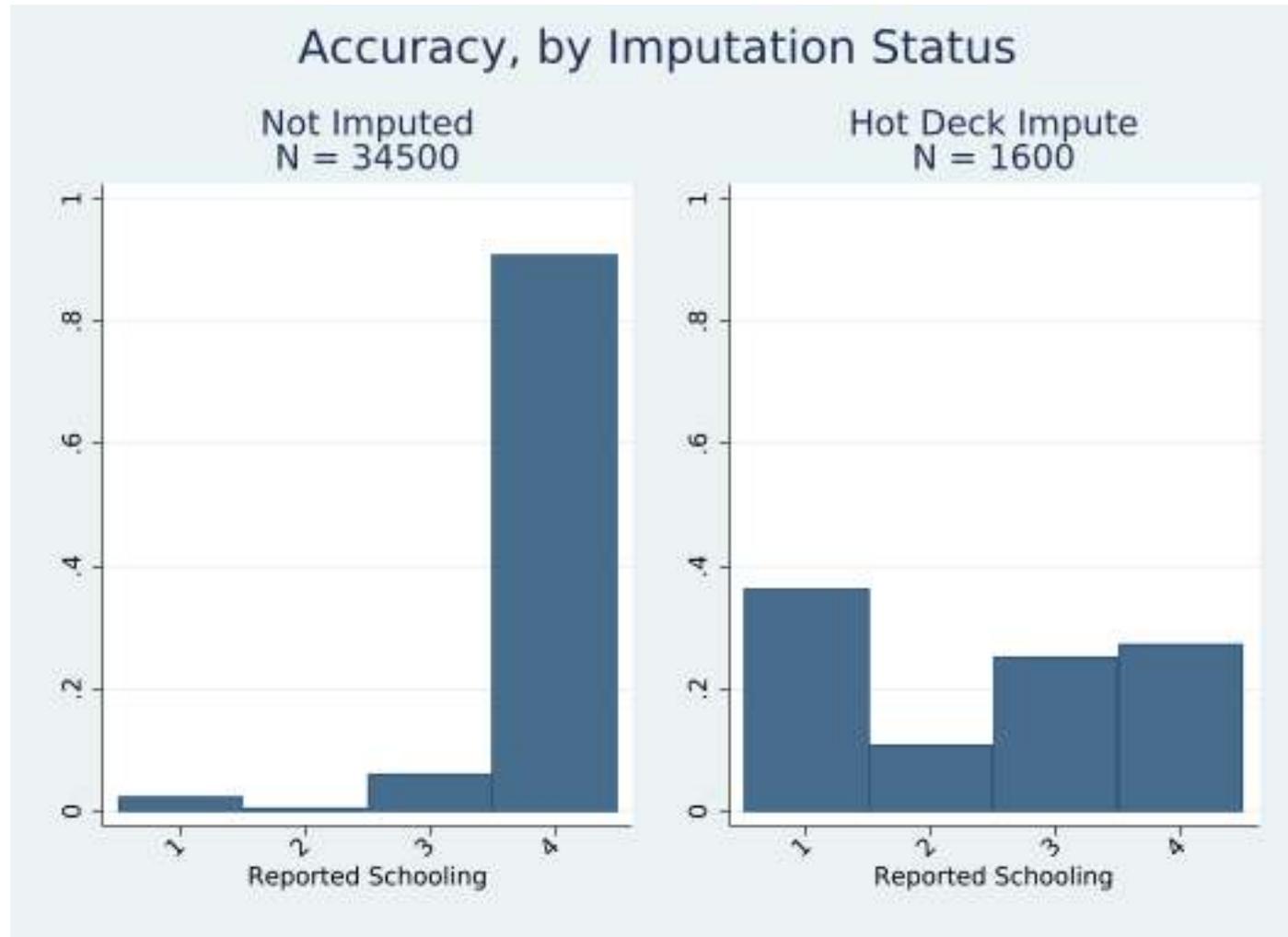
ACS Respondents are asked: What is the highest degree or level of school you have COMPLETED?

We combine these responses into four categories of responses for simplicity:

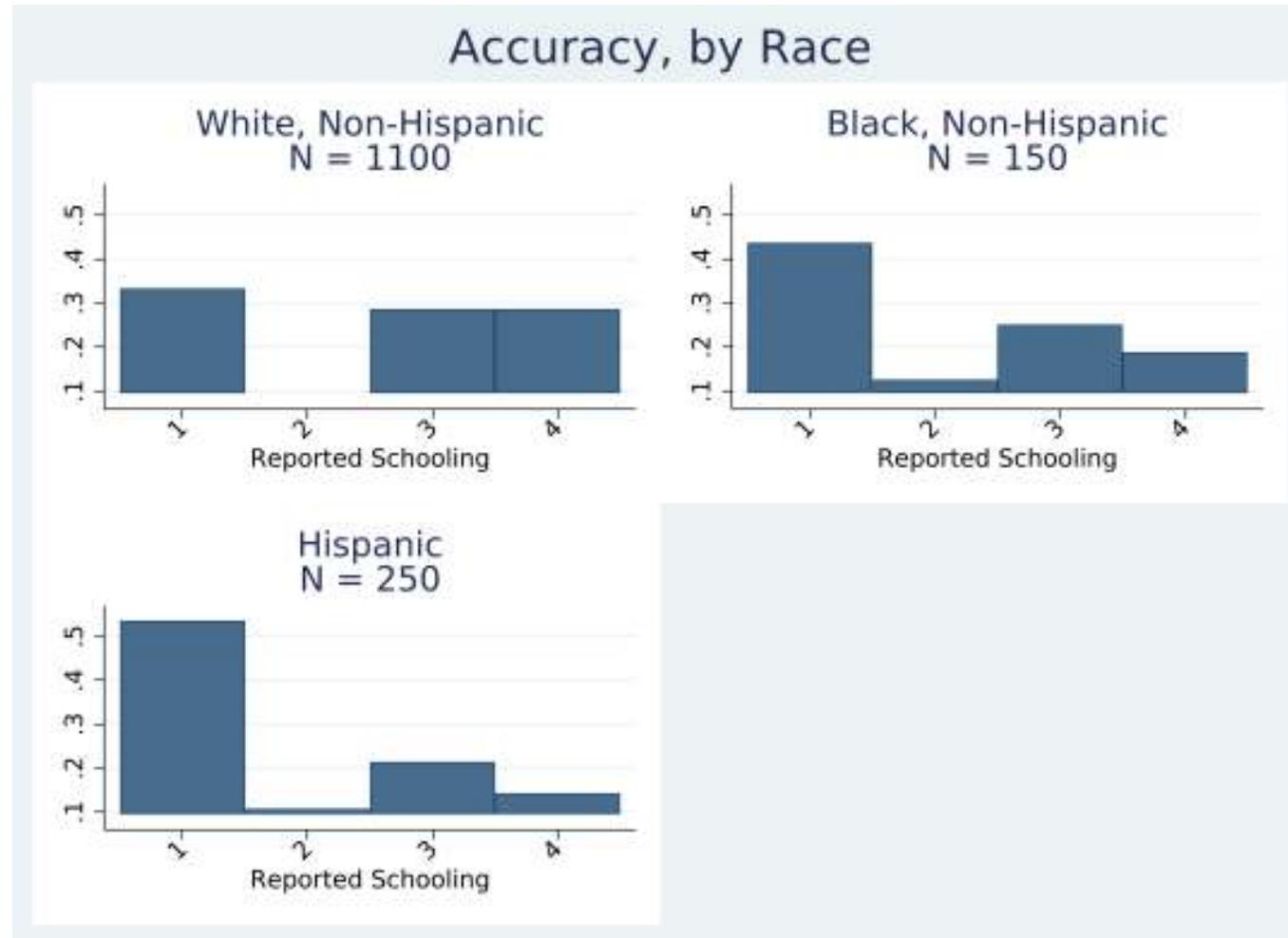
- High school dropout or below
- High school graduate
- Some college
- Bachelors or above

In our setting, since our sample only includes Bachelors recipients, the only “correct” answer is the fourth category, and we can only measure underreporting.

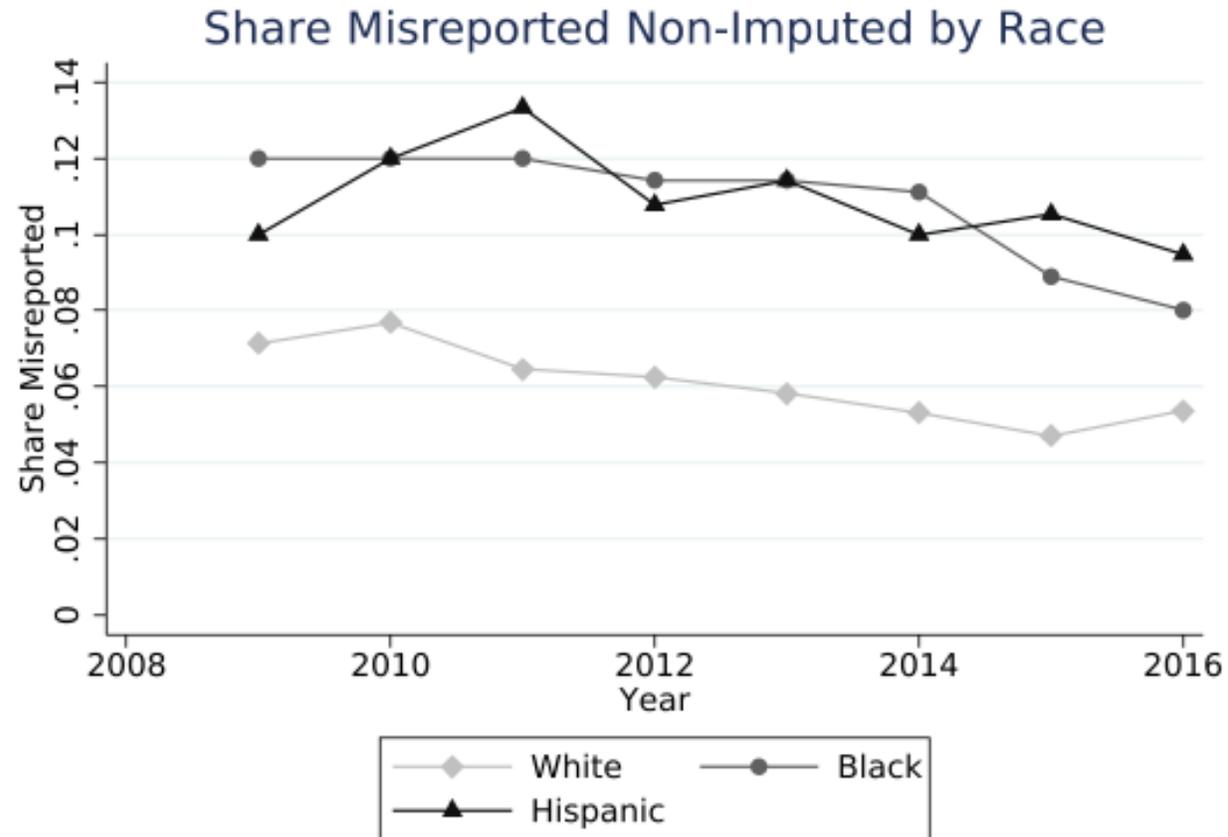
# First Finding: If Response Given, High Quality



# Second Finding: Differences in Impute Quality by Race

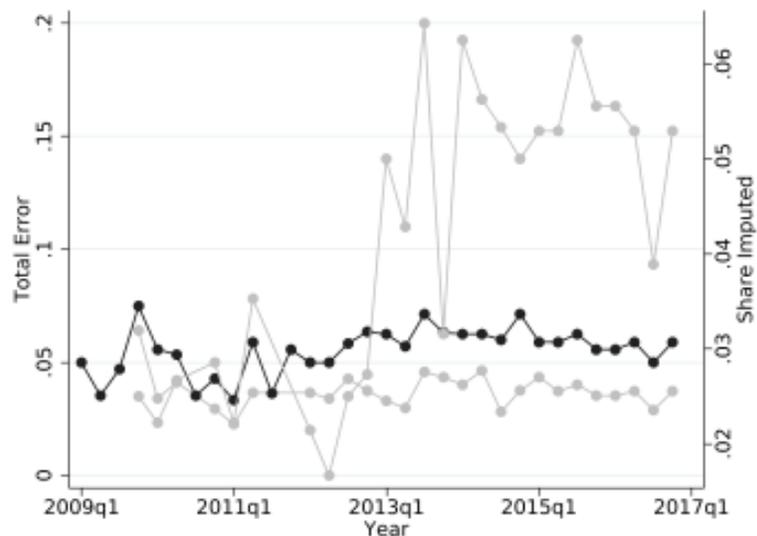


# Third Finding: Conditional on Reporting, Differences in Response Quality by Race

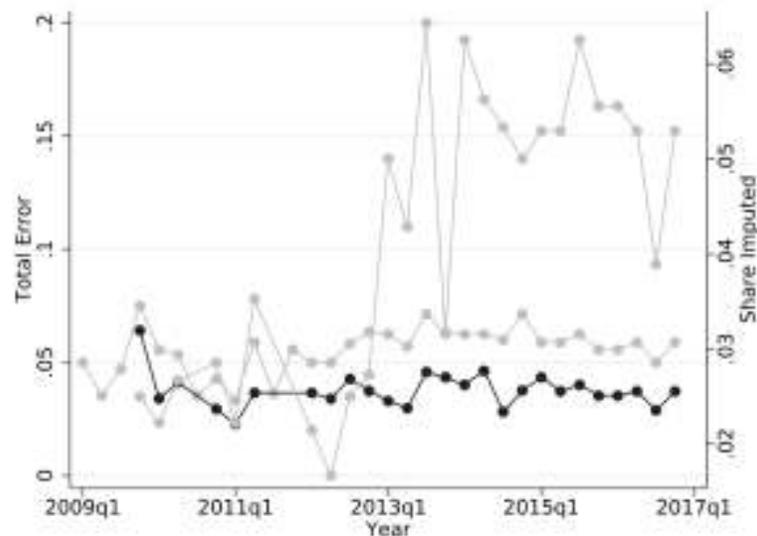


# Fourth Finding: Impute Rates increased a lot in 2013

## Total Error Rate

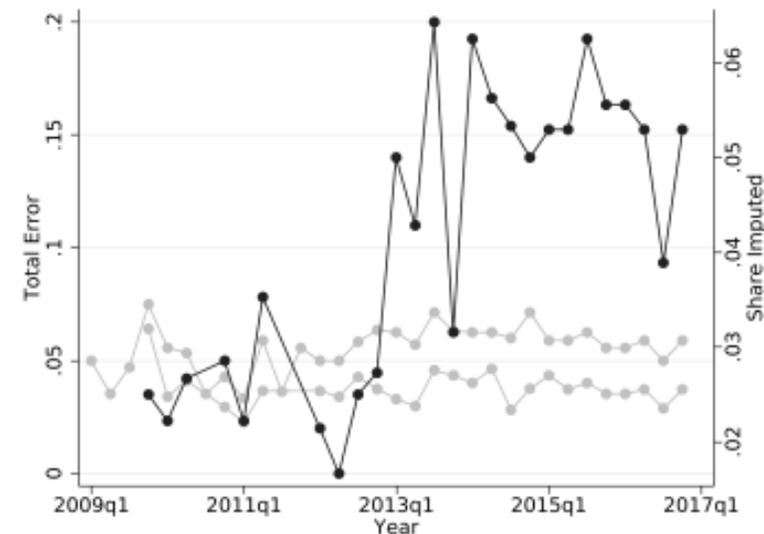


## Misreported Rate



## Hot Deck Rate

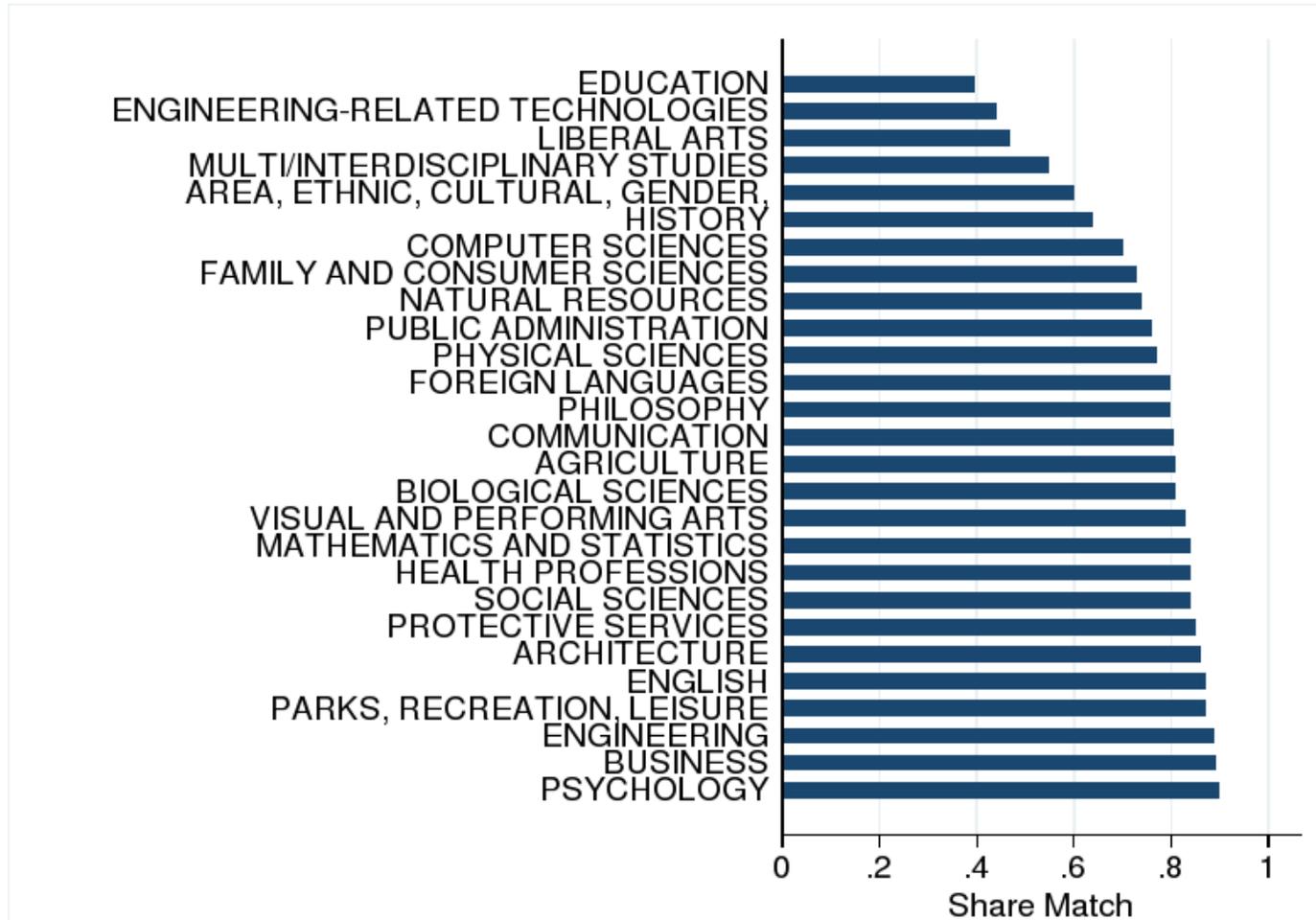
(Right Axis)



# Measuring Survey Misreporting II

- We also look at the question of field of study in the ACS, and compare it administrative records.

# Fifth Finding: Field of Study Mostly Reported Accurately



# Field of Study Reporting Accuracy Does Not Change over Time



# Conclusions

- 5-10% of ACS respondents under-report educational attainment, but about half of this error is driven by the imputation procedure.
- Misreporting and imputation rates differ significantly by race/ethnicity
- Imputation rates increase significantly in 2013, mostly due to internet and cuts to FEFU
- 20% of respondents incorrectly report field of study

# Future Work

- Particularly for field of study, we want to see how misreporting may affect empirical estimates in several recent papers
- We also want to look at over-reporting, which we see for some select group of respondents
- Measure misreporting in NSCG, which should provide more accurate responses since it is more intensive.