

# Economic and Social Benefits of Literacy in Everyday Life

Stephen Reder  
Portland State University

This research was supported by a grant to the Auckland University of Technology  
from New Zealand's Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment

# Introduction

- The impact of literacy on adults' social and economic wellbeing provides a strong rationale for adult literacy programs
- Previous impact research has looked primarily at *literacy skills* (e.g., test scores)
- Today we'll look at some new research that considers both literacy skills and the *use* of those skills in and out of the workplace
- Even after taking assessed literacy skills, education and other individual characteristics into account, we'll see that adults' *reading engagement* is associated with improved outcomes on a wide range of social and economic measures
- These findings suggest the importance of experimenting with new kinds of adult literacy programs designed to increase adults' engagement with reading in the workplace and outside of the workplace

# Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC)

- Nationally representative surveys of the adult population (age 16-65) in 39 countries
- Included standardized assessments of literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills and interviews about individuals' education and work histories, their use of skills in everyday life, and a range of economic and social indicators
- Analyze PIAAC data from the United States collected in 2017, focusing on assessed literacy skills and uses of reading in everyday life, both in the workplace and outside of the workplace

# Literacy Proficiency

- OECD's literacy assessment based on a framework and methodology developed over a 30+ year series of national and international surveys
- Literacy defined as “Understanding, evaluating, using and engaging with written text to participate in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential”
- The literacy proficiency assessment involves performance of numerous everyday reading tasks, measured on a 0-500 point proficiency scale

# Reading Engagement

- Created 3 scales of reading engagement from respondents' self-reported frequencies of performing eight reading tasks in work and non-work settings:
  - Reading engagement outside of work
  - Reading engagement at work (if currently employed)
  - Overall reading engagement – combines work and outside of work settings
- Scales represent both the breadth and frequency of reading activities

# Reading Engagement Tasks

*How often do you read...*

- directions or instructions
- letters, memos or e-mails
- articles in newspapers or magazines
- articles in professional journals or publications
- books
- manuals or reference materials
- bills, invoices, bank statements or other financial statements
- diagrams, maps or schematics

*Never*

*Less than once a month*

*At least once per month but less than once a week*

*At least once a week*

*Every day*

# Economic Outcomes

**Earnings** – Respondent’s gross monthly earnings, if employed (US \$ 2017)

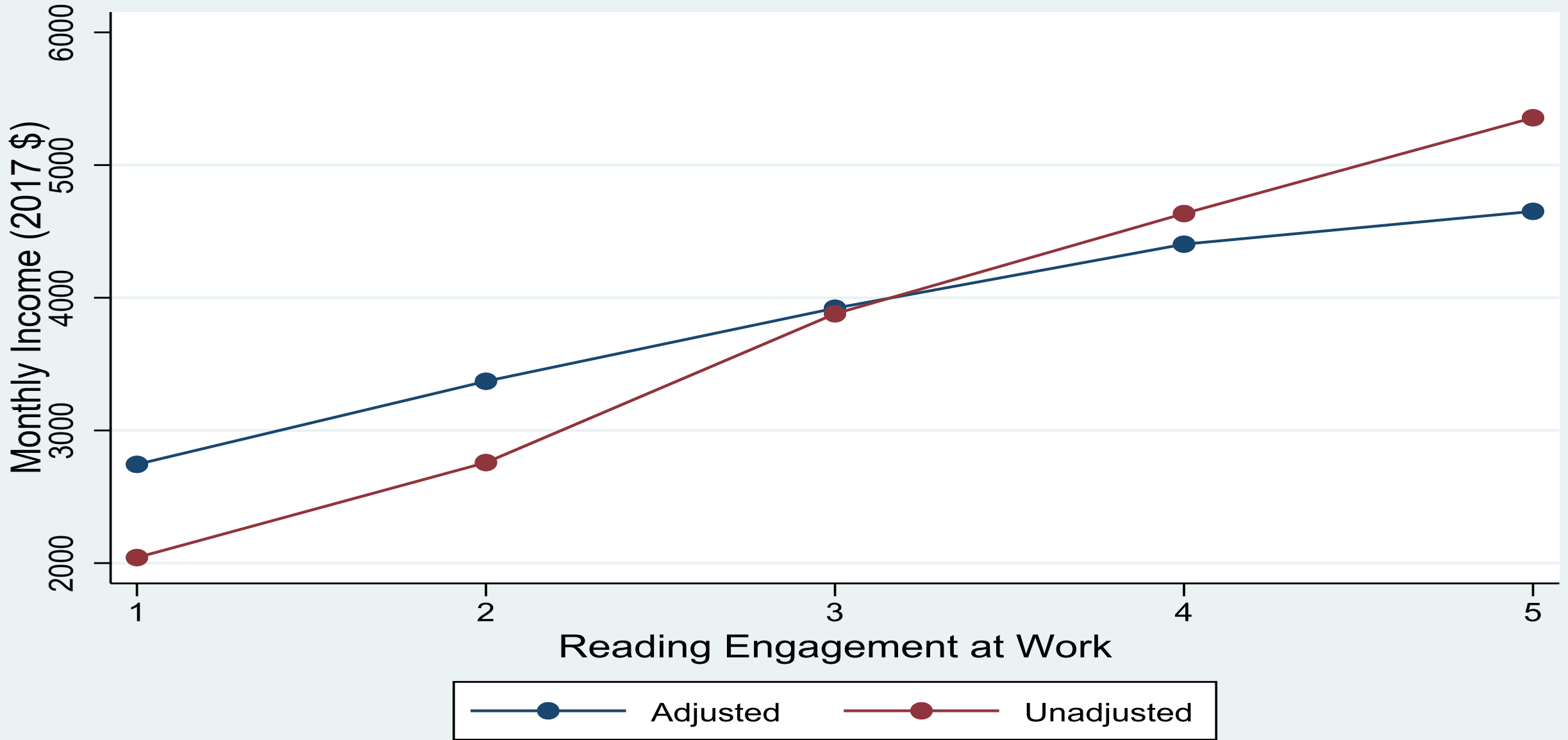
**Employment** – Respondent’s current employment status

**Poverty** - Poverty status based on household income and household size

-----

**Health** – *“In general, would you say your health is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?”*

# Earnings

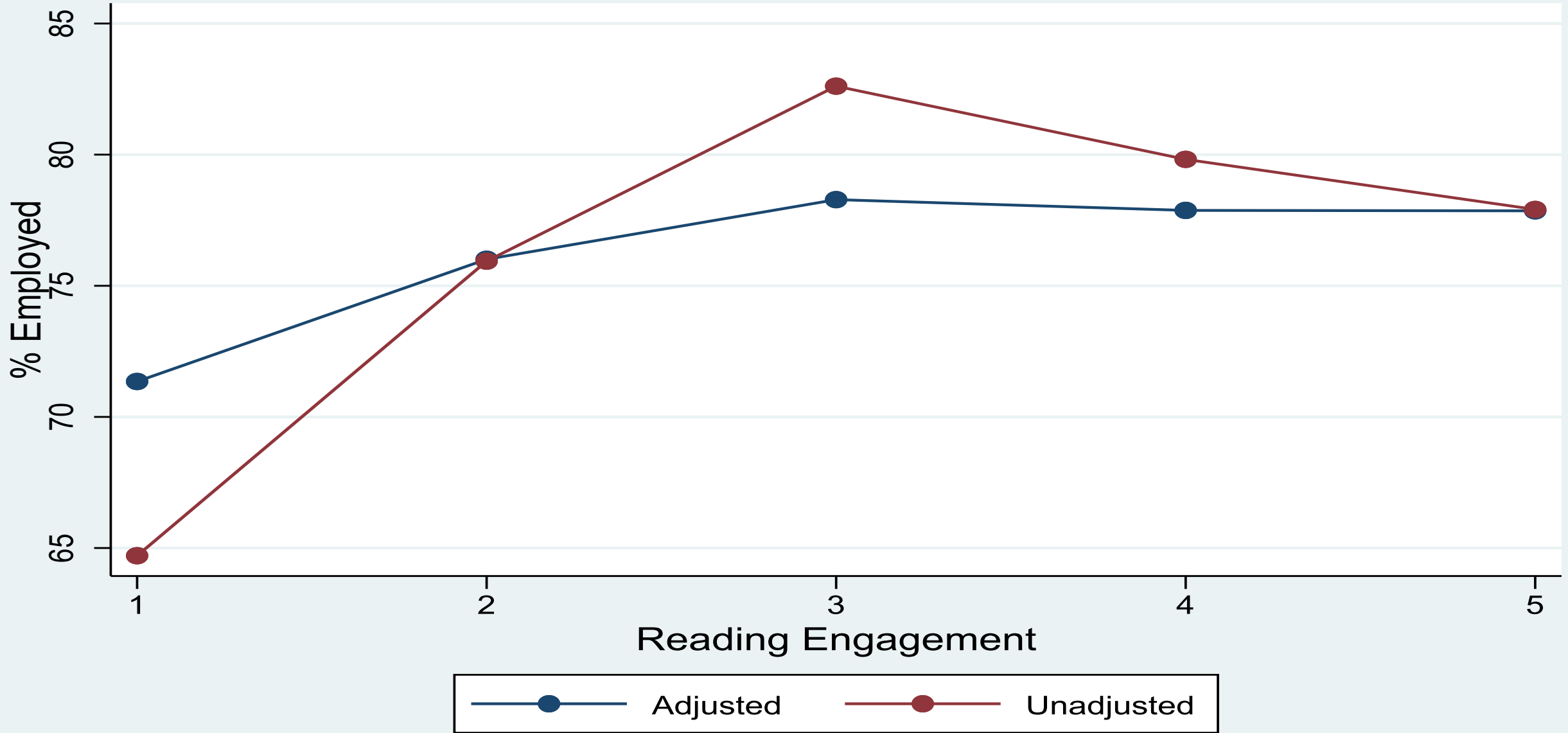


US PIAAC 2017, ages 25-54

Adjusted by education, literacy, work experience, gender, race, ethnicity and native language



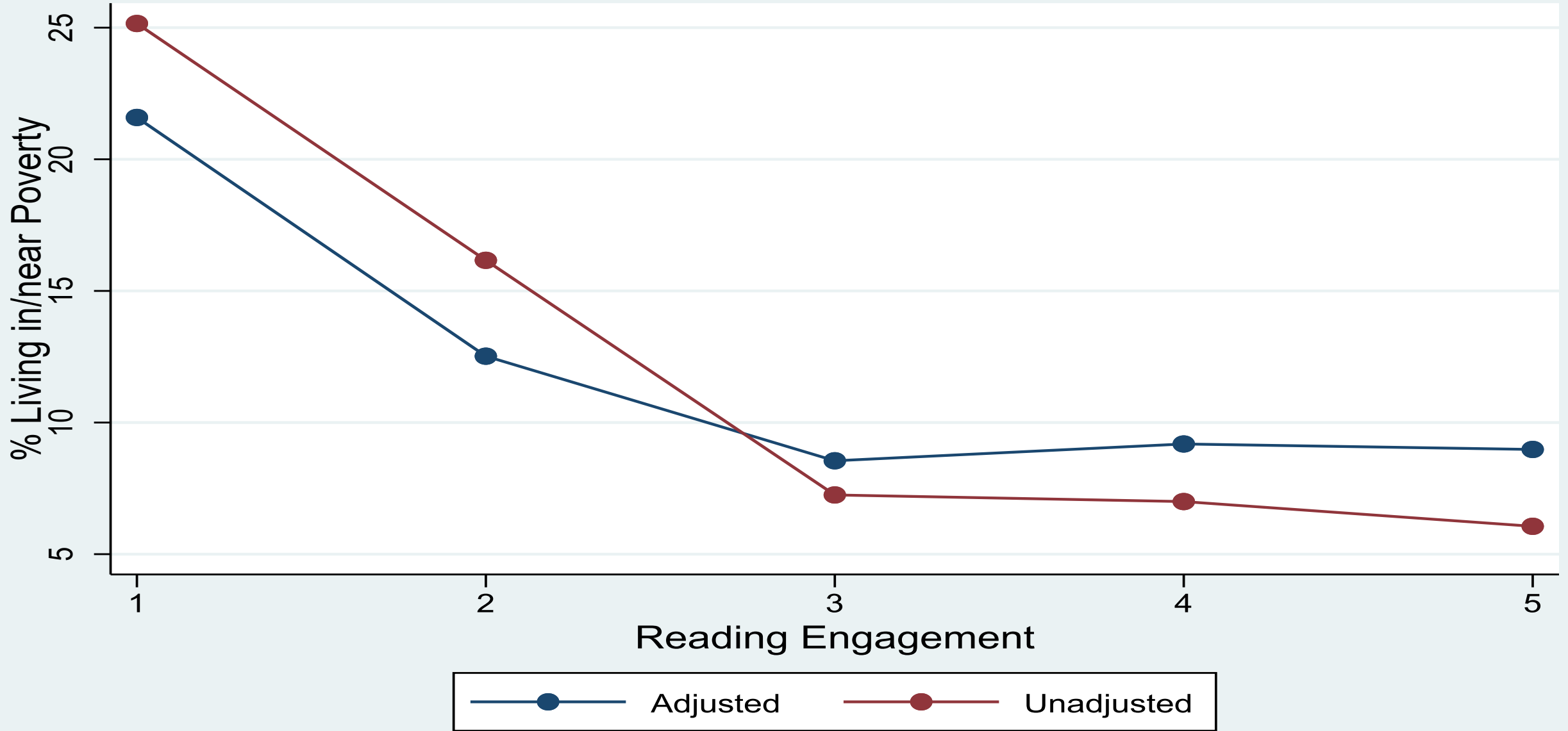
# Employment



US PIAAC 2017, ages 25-54

Adjusted by education, literacy, age, gender, race, ethnicity and native language

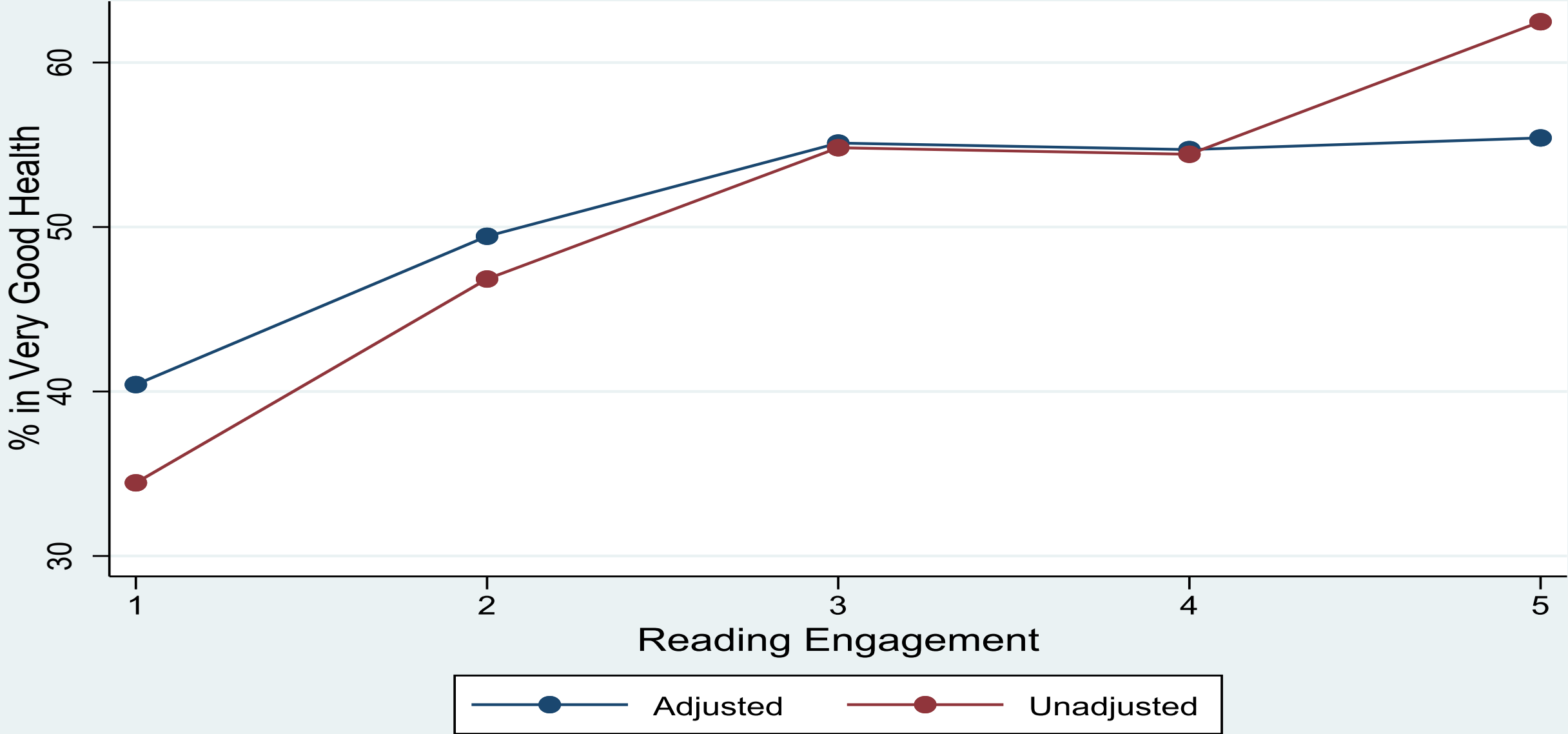
# Poverty



US PIAAC 2017, ages 25-65

Adjusted by education, literacy, age, gender, race, ethnicity and native language

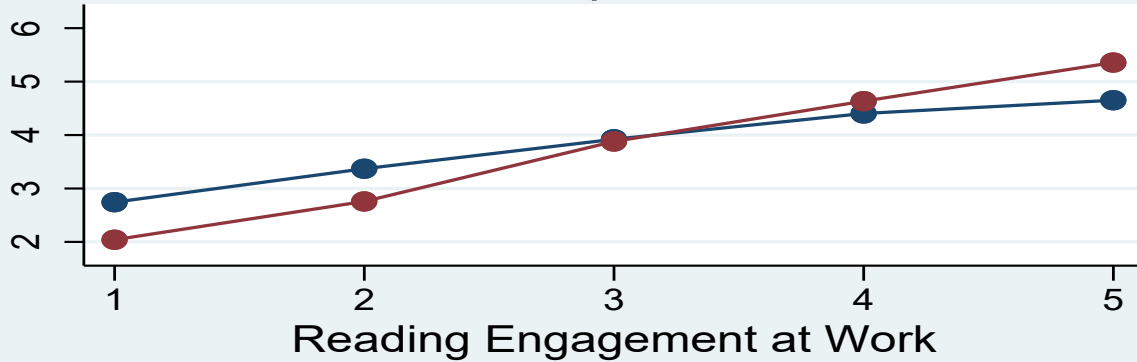
# Health



US PIAAC 2017, ages 25-65  
Adjusted by education, literacy, age, gender, race, ethnicity and native language

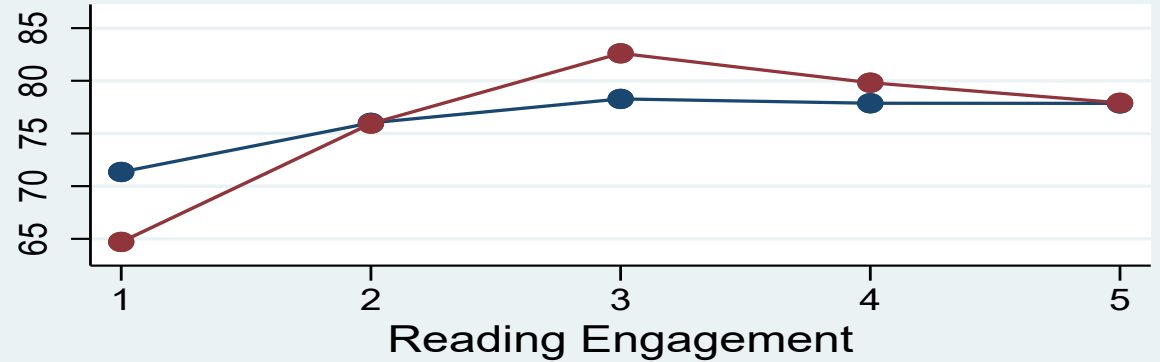
## Earnings

\$1000s per Month



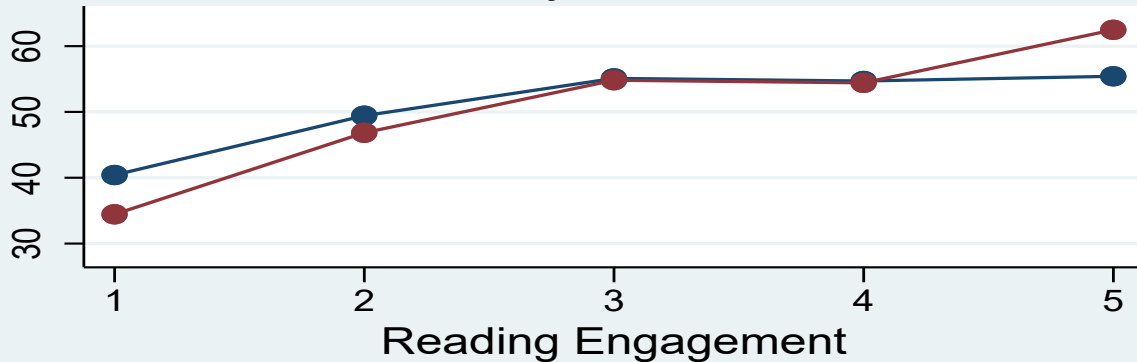
## Employment

% Employed



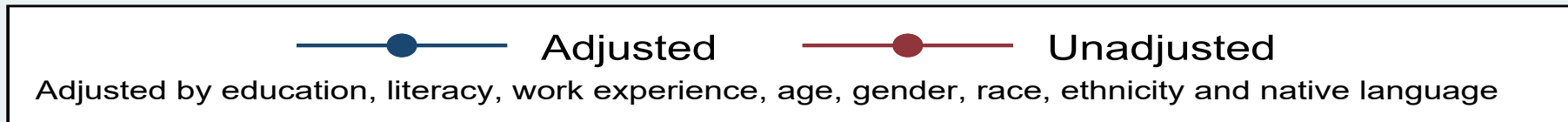
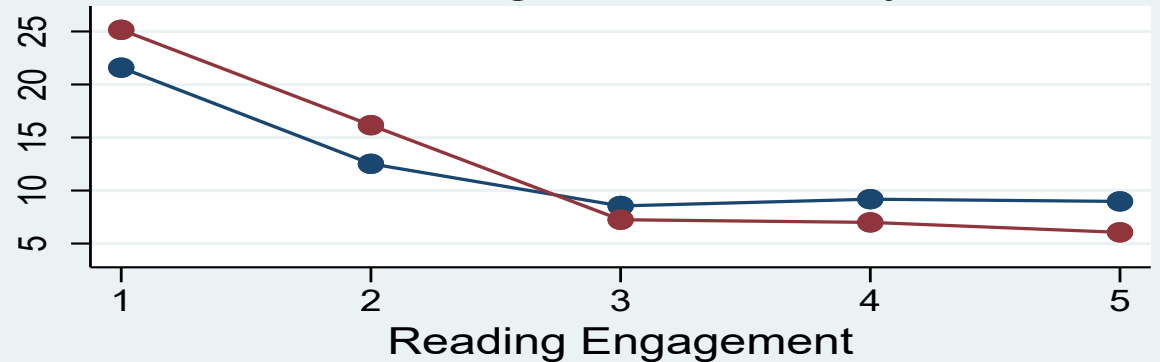
## Health

% in Very Good Health



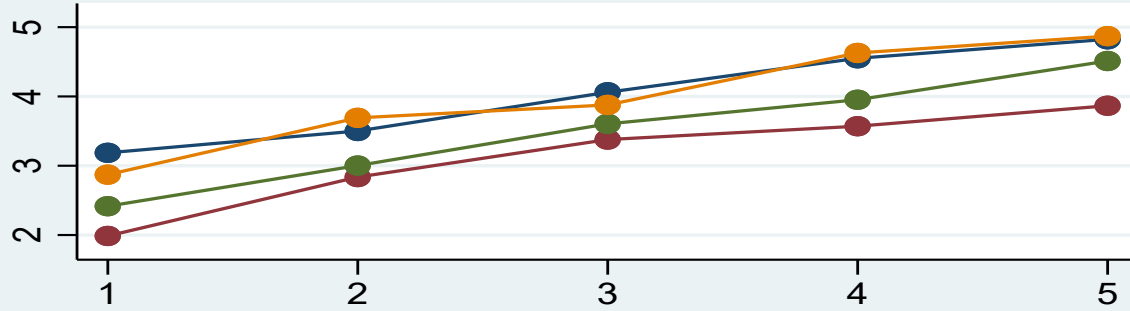
## Poverty

% Living in/near Poverty



## Earnings

\$1000s per Month

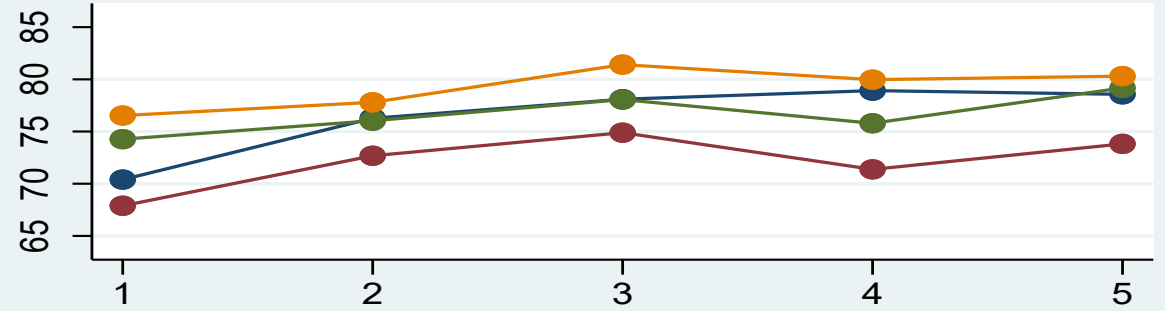


Reading Engagement at Work

US PIAAC 2017, fulltime workers, ages 25-54

## Employment

% Employed

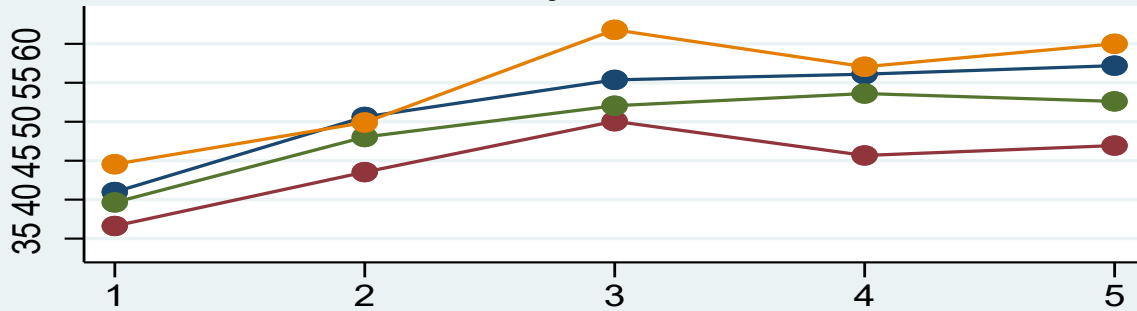


Reading Engagement

US PIAAC 2017, ages 25-54

## Health

% in Very Good Health

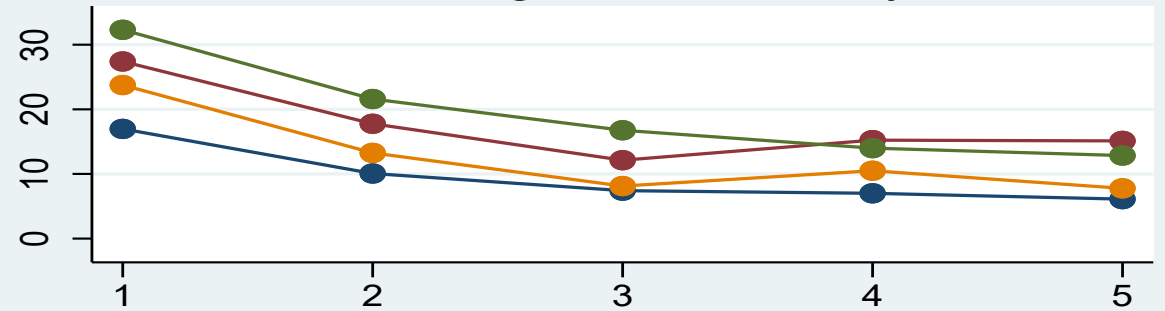


Reading Engagement

US PIAAC 2017, ages 25-65

## Poverty

% Living in/near Poverty



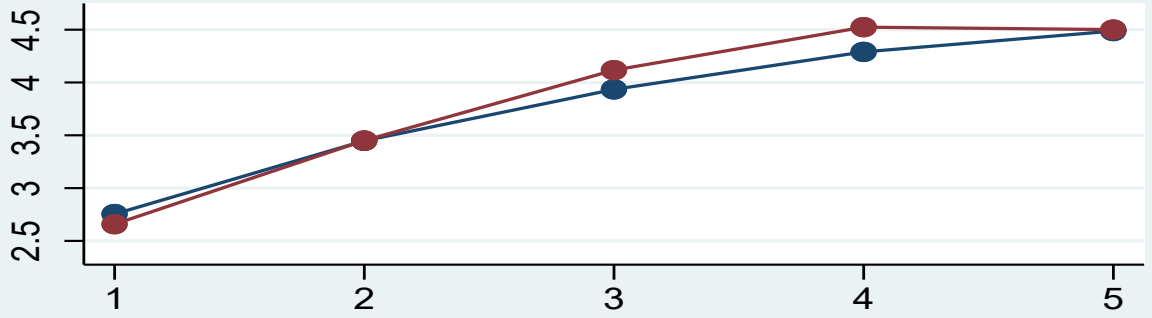
Reading Engagement

US PIAAC 2017, ages 25-65

—●— White    —●— Black    —●— Latinx    —●— Other  
Adjusted by education, literacy, age, gender and native language

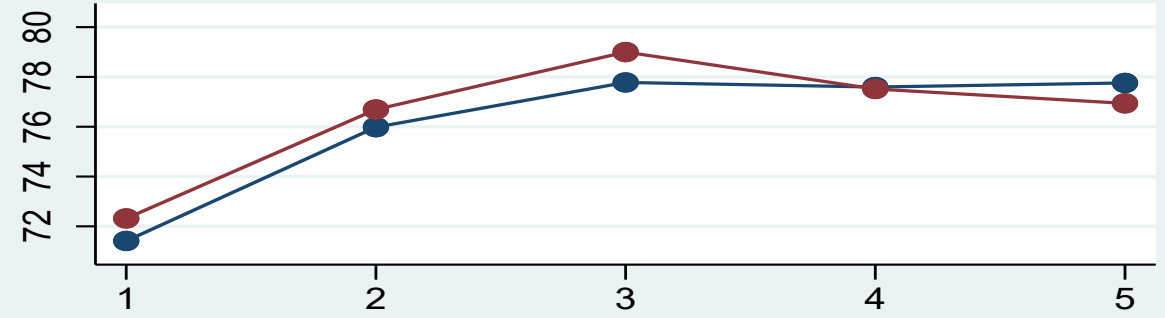
## Earnings

\$1000s/month



## Employment

% Employed



Reading Engagement at Work

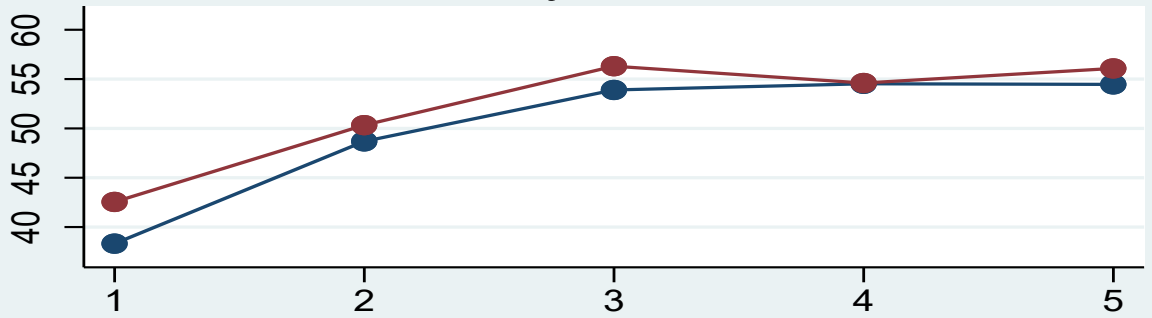
US PIAAC 2017, fulltime workers, ages 25-54

Reading Engagement

US PIAAC 2017, ages 25-54

## Health

% in Very Good Health

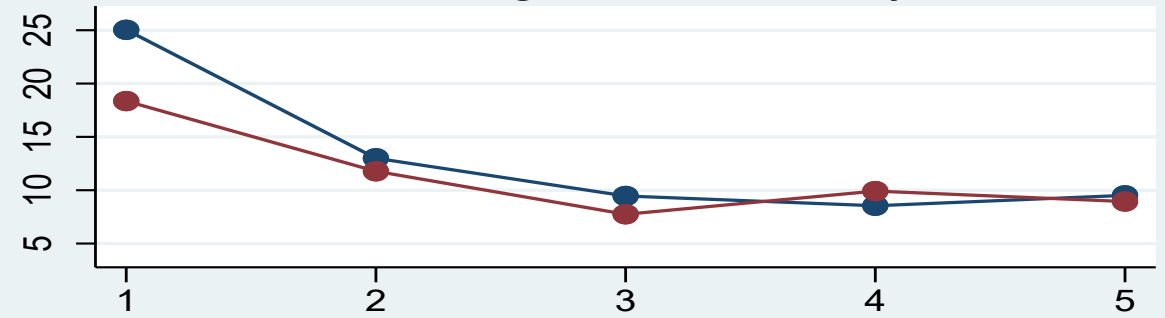


Reading Engagement

US PIAAC 2017, ages 25-65

## Poverty

% Living in/near Poverty



Reading Engagement

US PIAAC 2017, ages 25-65

—●—
Male

—●—
Female

Adjusted by education, literacy, age, race, ethnicity and native language

# Social Outcomes

**Health** – *“In general, would you say your health is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?”*

**Political Efficacy** – *“People like me don't have any say about what the government does”*

\*Strongly agree \*Agree \*Neither agree nor disagree \*Disagree \*Strongly disagree

**Volunteerism** – *“In the last 12 months, how often, if at all, did you do voluntary work, including unpaid work for a charity, political party, trade union or other non-profit organization?”*

\*Never \*Less than once a month \*Less than once a week but more than once a month

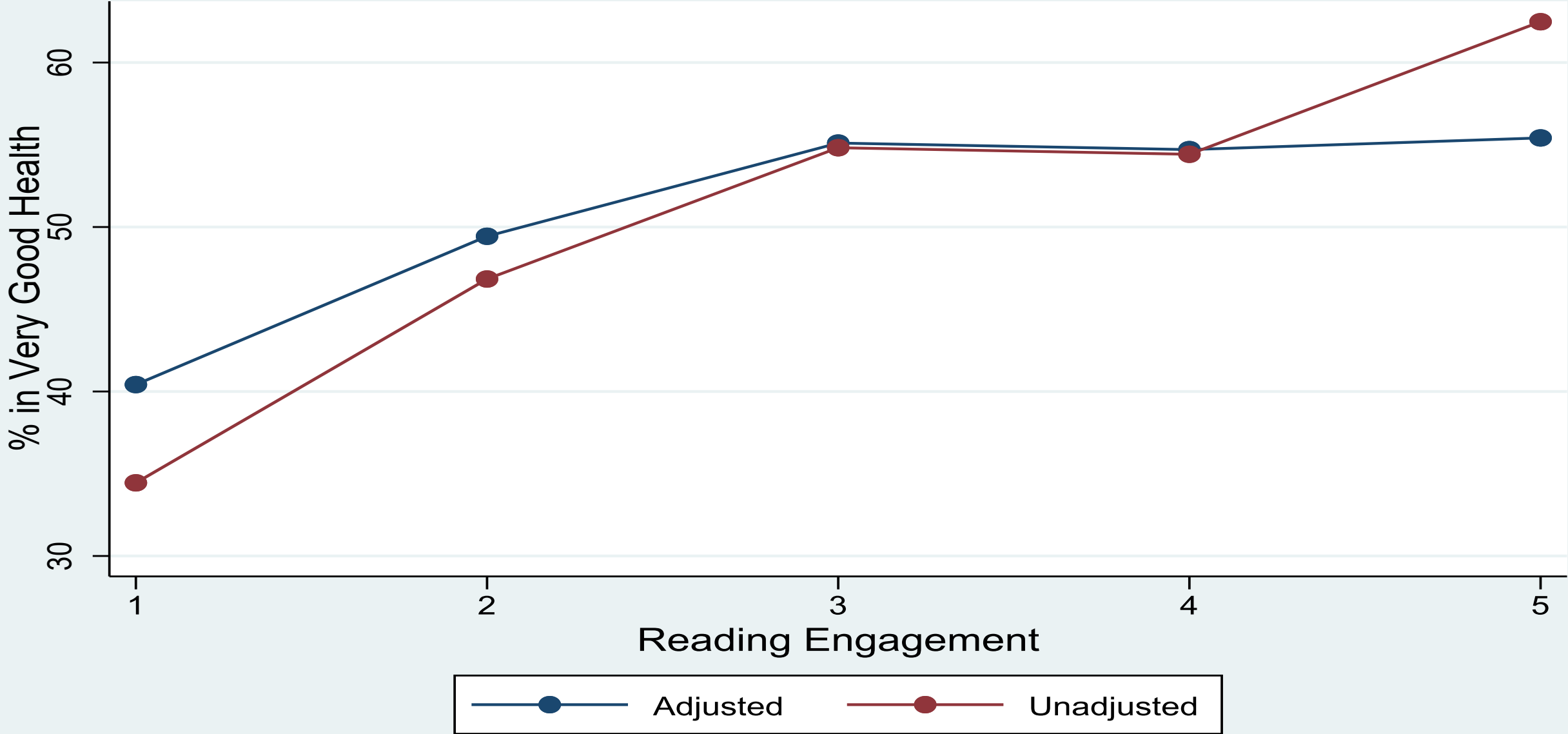
\*One or more times a week but not every day \*Every day

## Social Trust

*“There are only a few people you can trust completely”*

\*Strongly agree \*Agree \*Neither agree nor disagree \*Disagree \*Strongly disagree

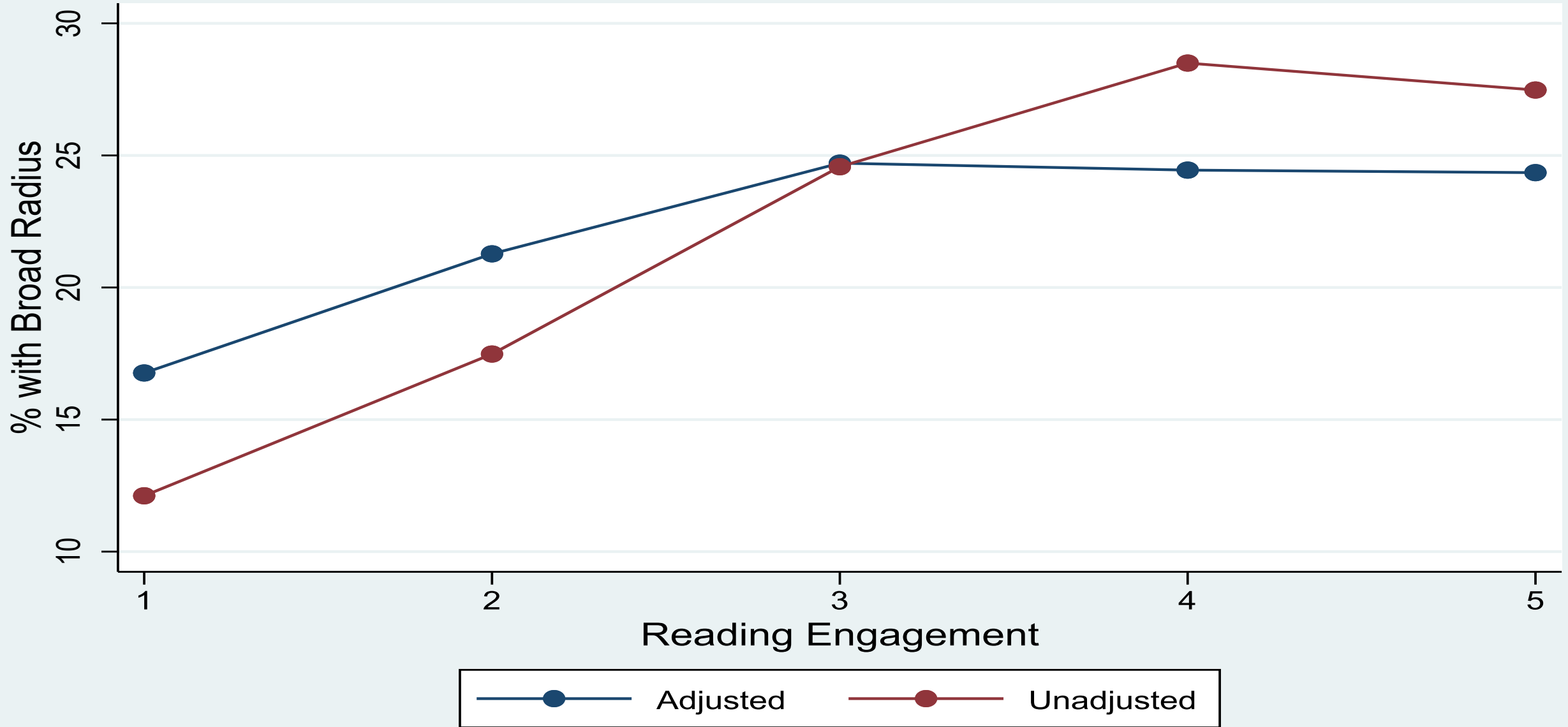
# Health



US PIAAC 2017, ages 25-65  
Adjusted by education, literacy, age, gender, race, ethnicity and native language



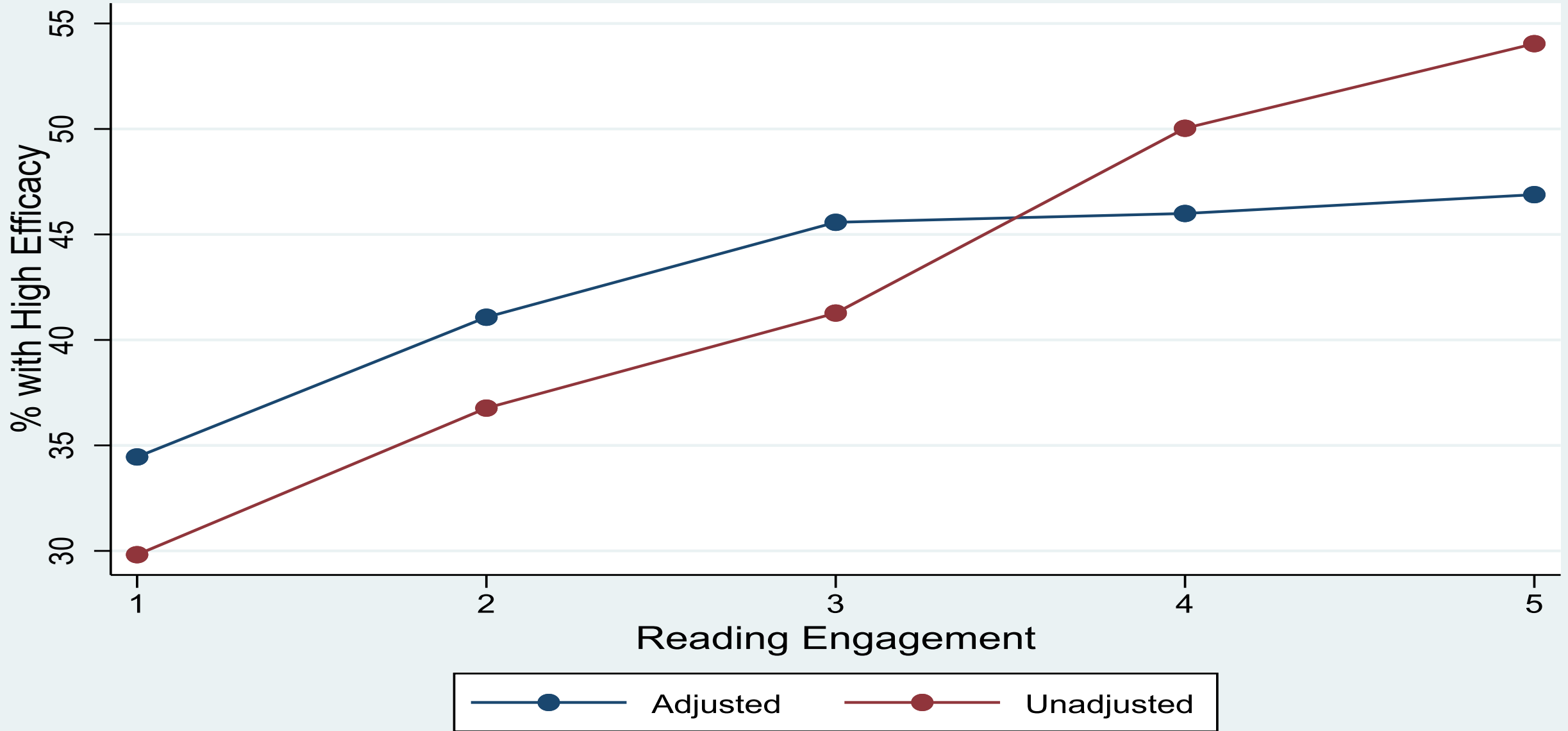
# Social Trust



US PIAAC 2017, ages 25-65

Adjusted by education, literacy, age, gender, race, ethnicity and native language

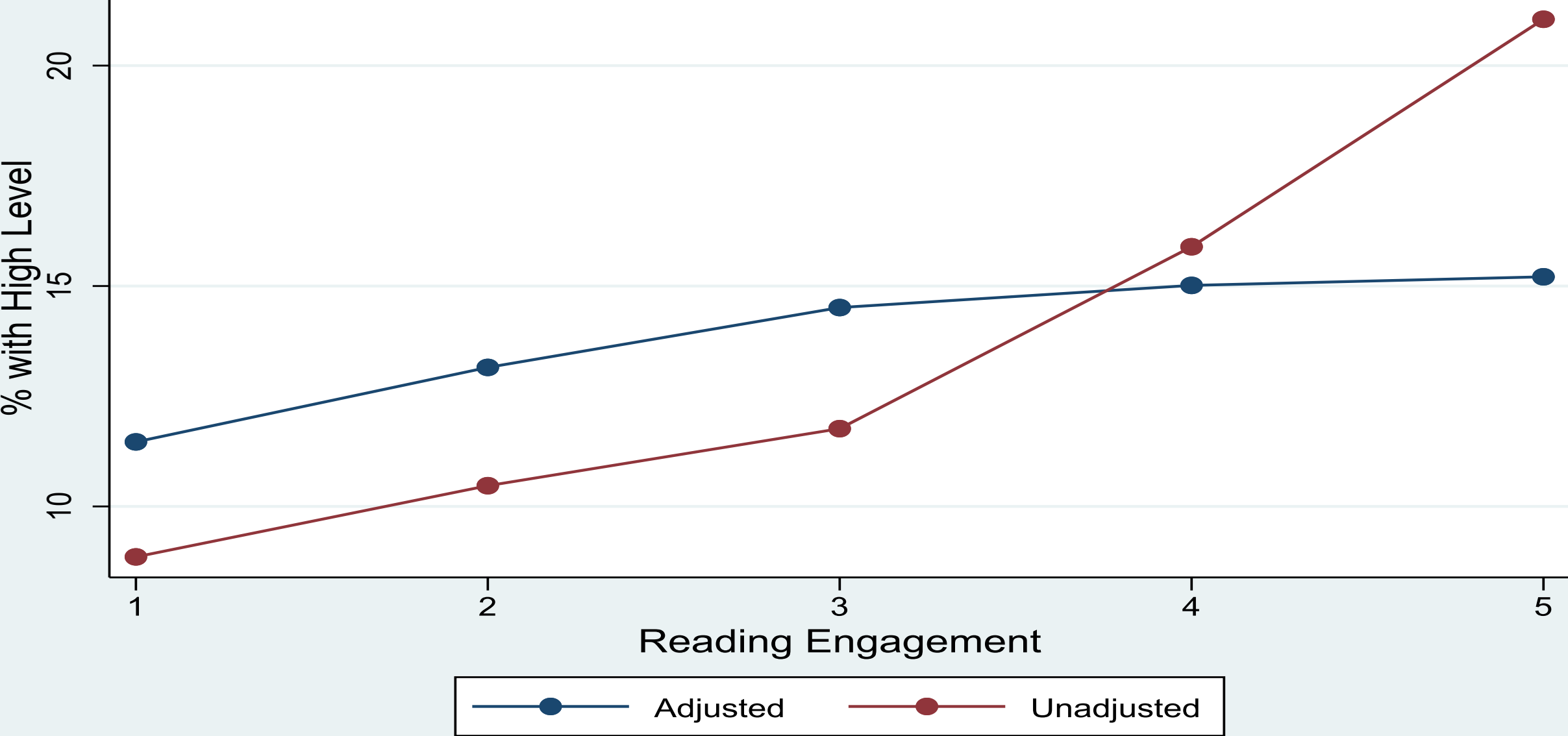
# Political Efficacy



US PIAAC 2017, ages 25-65

Adjusted by education, literacy, age, gender, race, ethnicity and native language

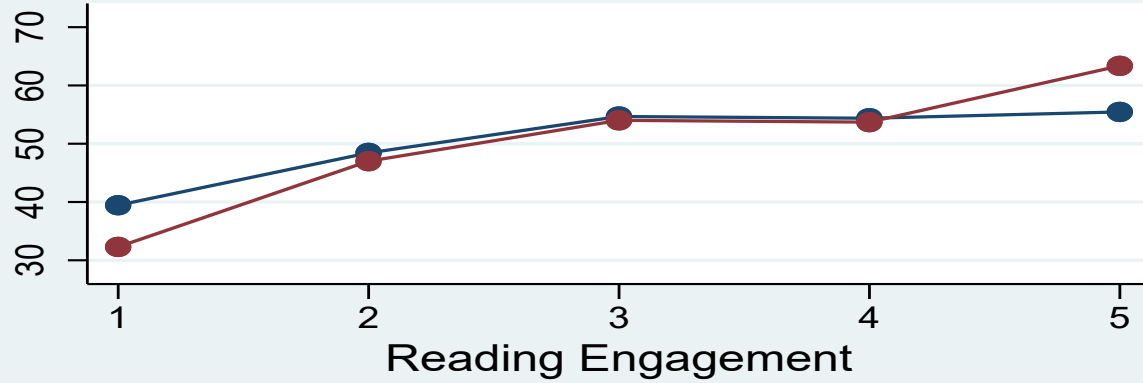
# Volunteering



US PIAAC 2017, ages 25-65  
Adjusted by education, literacy, age, gender, race, ethnicity and native language

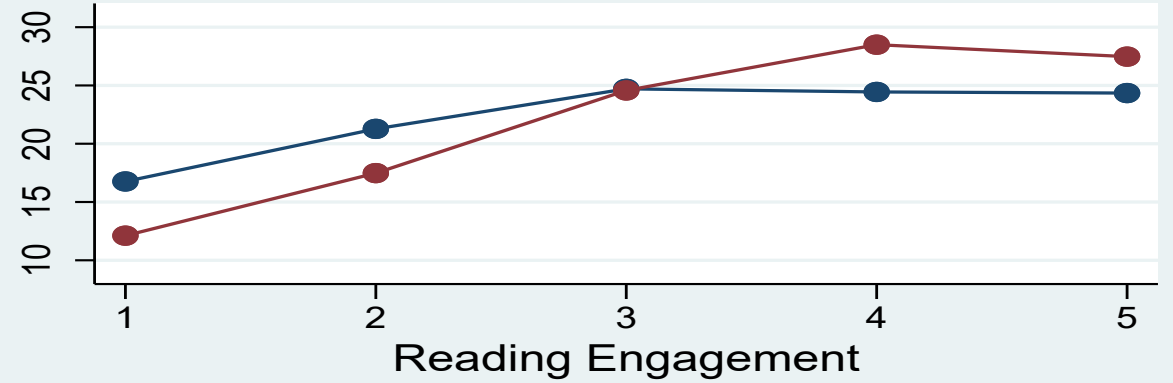
## Health

% in Very Good Health



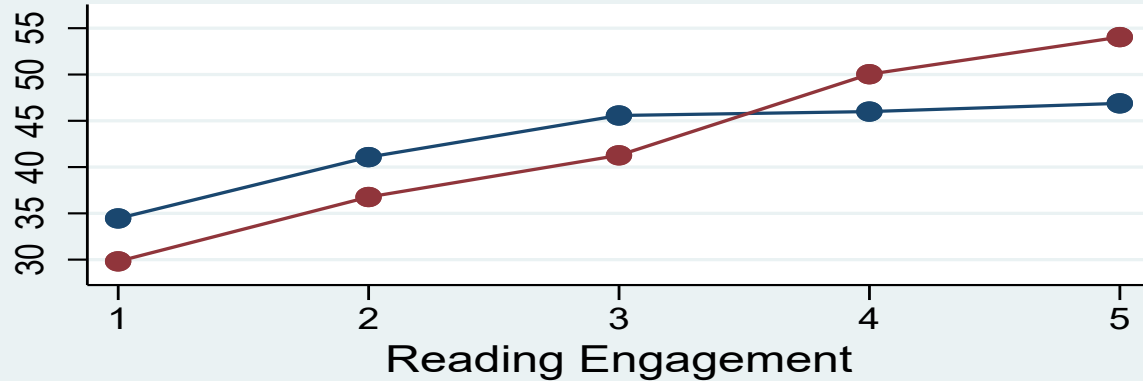
## Social Trust

% with Broad Radius



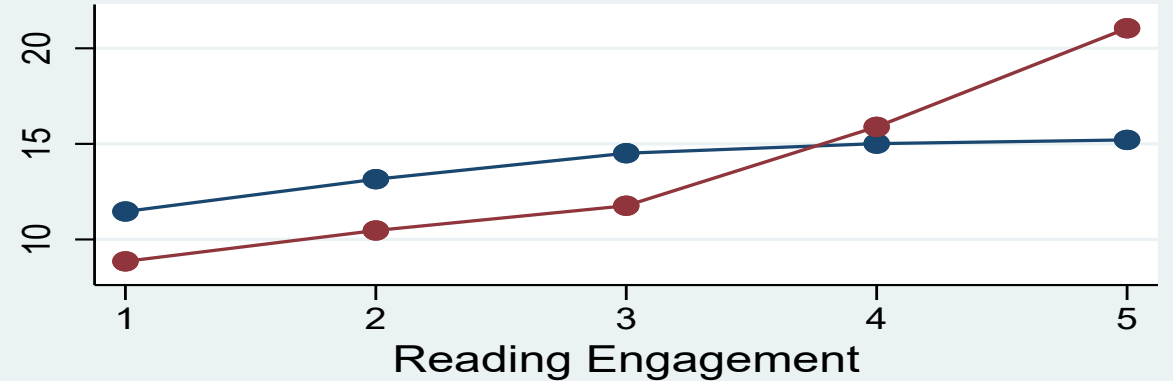
## Political Efficacy

% with High Efficacy



## Volunteering

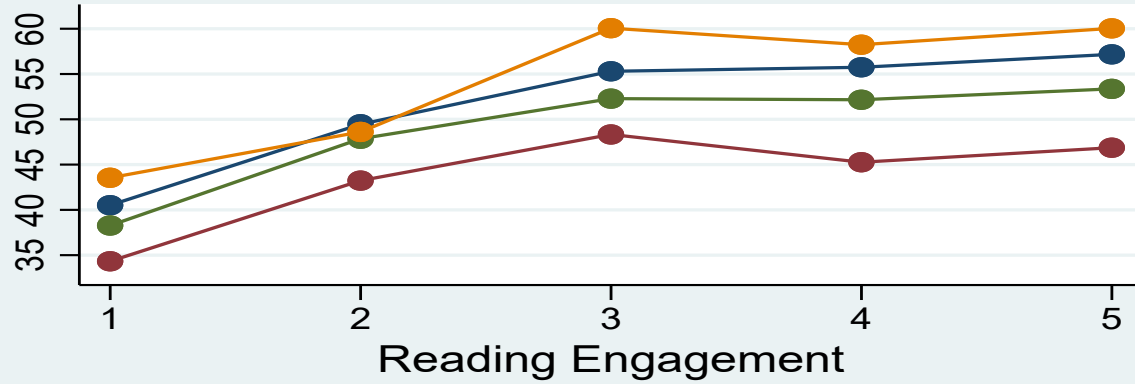
% with High Level



Adjusted Unadjusted  
Adjusted for education, literacy, age, gender, race, ethnicity and native language

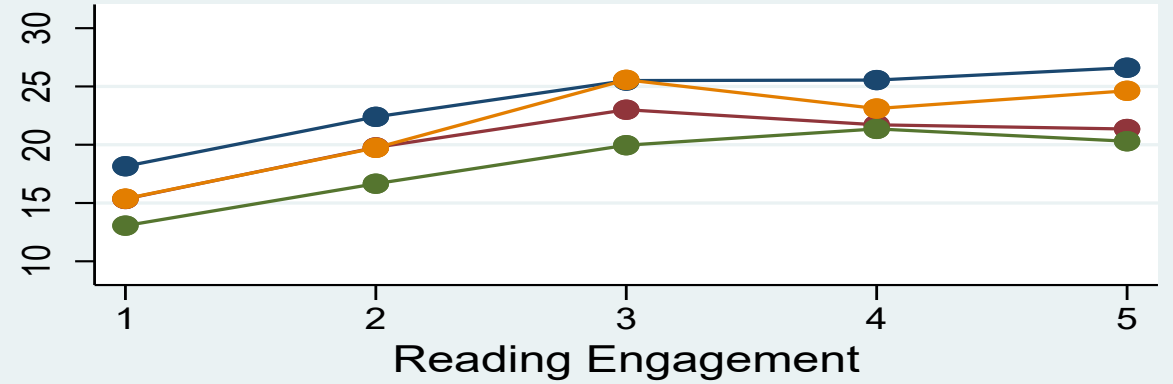
## Health

% in Very Good Health



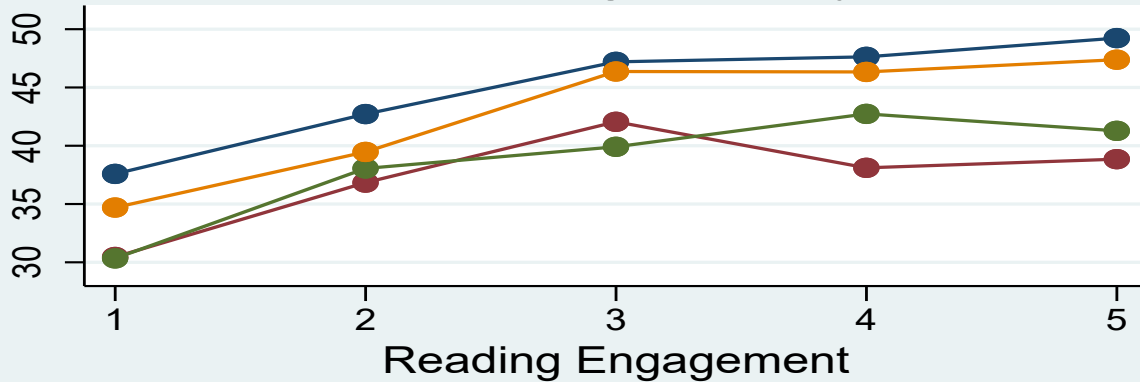
## Social Trust

% with Broad Radius



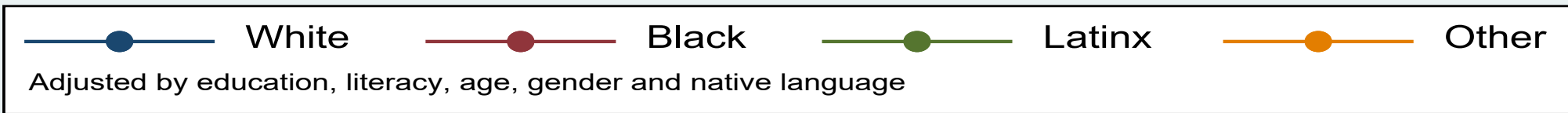
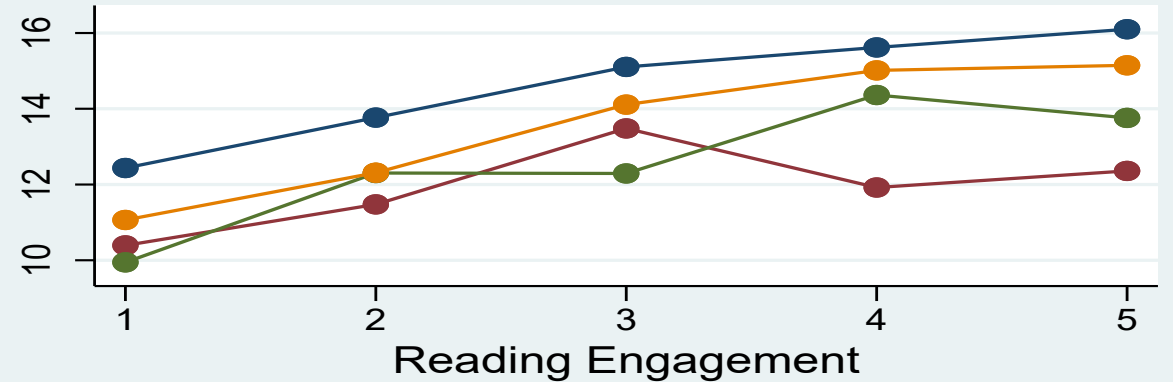
## Political Efficacy

% with High Efficacy



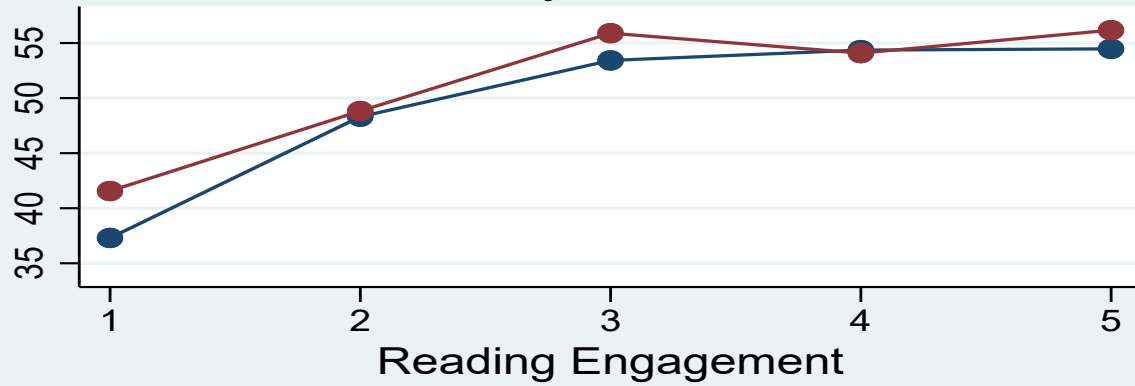
## Volunteering

% with High Level



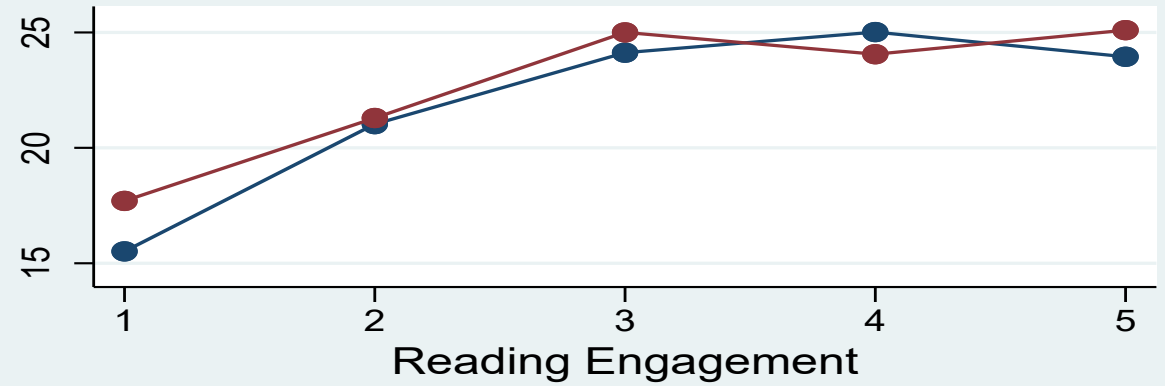
## Health

% in Very Good Health



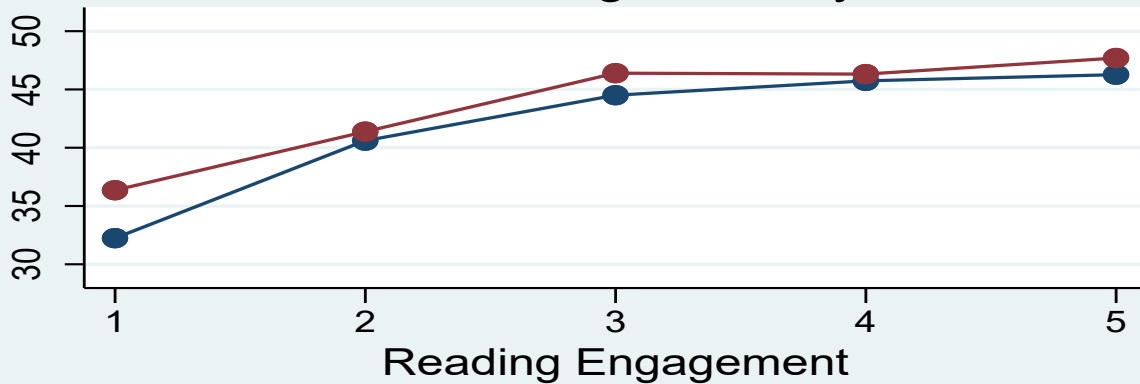
## Social Trust

% with Broad Radius



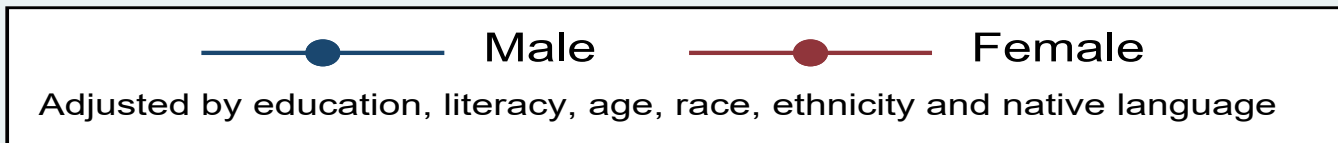
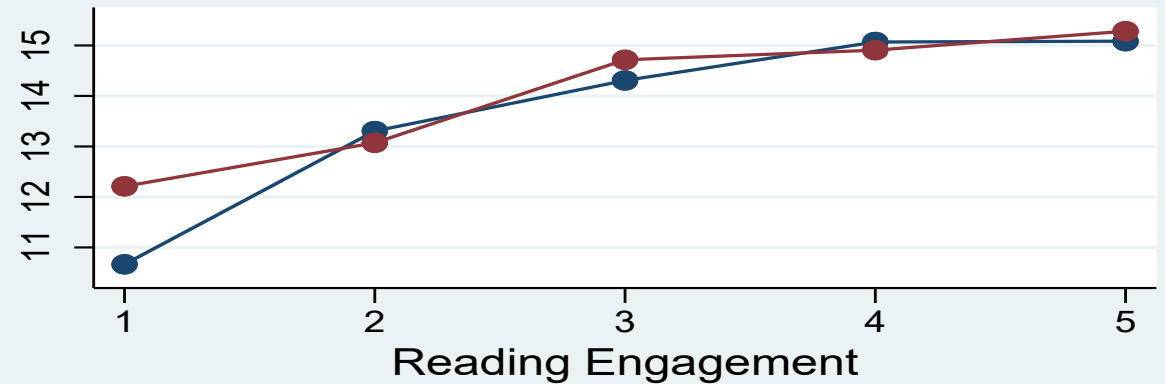
## Political Efficacy

% with High Efficacy



## Volunteering

% with High Level



# Job Satisfaction

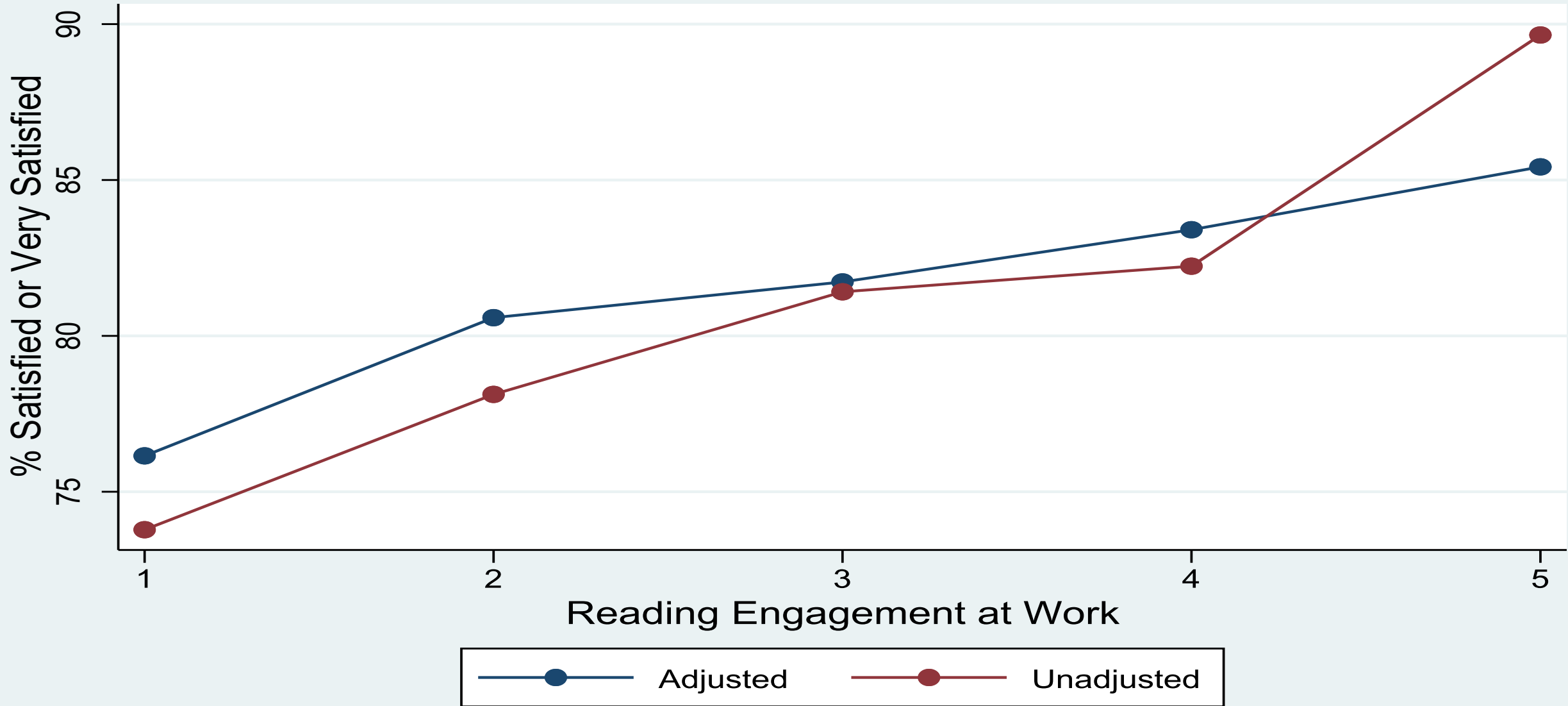
- Although job quality and job satisfaction have long been important aspects of employment, the recent pandemic has brought these issues into sharper focus.
- Job Satisfaction was measured in PIAAC with use of a frequently used research question:

*“All things considered, how satisfied are you with your current job?”*

\*Extremely satisfied \*Satisfied \*Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied \*Dissatisfied

\*Extremely dissatisfied

# Job Satisfaction



US PIAAC 2017, fulltime workers, age 25-54

Adjusted by education, literacy, work experience, gender, race, ethnicity, native language, income, firm size, freq of learning from others, time spent cooperating with others



# Summary

- Reading engagement is strongly associated with a wide range of economic and social outcomes even after taking assessed literacy skill, education and other individual characteristics into account.
- The findings do not imply causality. They do provide strong evidence that reading engagement is a major component of the wellbeing ecosystem of the United States.
- Both literacy skills AND reading engagement – the use of those literacy skills – are jointly associated with better life outcomes and wellbeing, with the net effects of reading engagement being greater than the net effects of literacy skills.
- For most of the outcomes examined, the effects of increased reading engagement are concentrated in the lower portion of the reading engagement scale.
- These findings are robust, appearing in all race, ethnicity and gender groups examined.

# Implications

- Broaden our programmatic framework for literacy to include the *use* of literacy skills in everyday life. Programs should be designed, evaluated and funded for increasing reading engagement as well as for increasing assessed literacy skills.
- Experiment with and evaluate new kinds of adult literacy programs designed to increase adults' engagement with reading, whether in the workplace or outside of the workplace.
- Conduct additional research on the relationship between reading engagement and various measures of wellbeing, and how the relationships may vary over different ethnic groups and social classes.
- Develop better measures of reading engagement.
- Advocate for programs focused on increasing reading engagement as well as with literacy skills.
- Work with employers to design work processes and organizations that increase reading engagement in the workplace, increase job satisfaction and address their hiring, retention and “quiet quitting” of employees.

# **Q & A and Discussion**

Please consider attending these sessions this afternoon in the Open Door Collective strand:

“Reinventing Adult Education for Social and Economic Justice”

- Tuesday at 2:15 in Salon D
- “Reducing Poverty, Improving Health, and Criminal Justice Reform”
  - Tuesday at 3:30 in Room 7

# Thank You!

To follow up:  
[reders@pdx.edu](mailto:reders@pdx.edu)