# The Impact of Socioeconomic Class on Law Firm Summer Associateship Interview Invitations

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Socioeconomic class is a potentially hidden characteristic that factors into whether an applicant receives an interview invitation and subsequent job offer. This study uses the resume audit method to send resumes to law firms across 14 cities with slight randomized changes in class signifiers. Testing revealed that higher-class applicants received significantly more interview offers than lower-class resumes and that application outcome was dependent on the class signifiers in the resume. These findings indicate inherent bias in the hiring process and highlight the issues with selecting for cultural fit when searching through applications. Consequently, lower-class applicants are at a disadvantage that they may not even consciously account for when applying to these positions. Further investigation and analysis could prove to be critical in achieving an equitable hiring landscape, regardless of someone's identity.

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## Background

There is a common adage that purports that *anyone* can be *anything* if they work hard enough, regardless of their background. However, we are slowly uncovering what many disadvantaged people have been saying for ages: who you are directly impacts your opportunities. Law firms are an especially poignant example of this phenomenon, as they heavily select employees for cultural "fit" which often translates to well-positioned people only hiring those they perceive as in their class bracket (Rivera, Tilcsik 2016). Summer associateships almost always lead to offers of full-time employment, so the outcome of the application can determine one's career (Rivera, Tilcsik 2017). By controlling the rest of the resume, having identical educational and vocational accomplishments, the resume audit method can expose inherent bias (Maurer 2020). The analysis of this resume data will demonstrate that there is a clear bias towards summer associateship candidates who are considered higher-class. Law firms offer interviews and subsequently associateship and employment offers to candidates who they perceive as being higher class, although the academic and extracurricular activities of the resumes were identical.

## Methods

### Data Collection

The data was collected by creating and sending out 316 resumes to law firms across the US. The study used the resume audit method, a powerful tool for unveiling bias in the hiring process. Identical resumes were slightly altered along the axis of socioeconomic class and then sent to real employers to examine how these characteristics affect hiring. All of the applicants were from second-tier law schools, though in the top 1% of their class because applicants from the most elite law schools are recruited on campus, introducing some bias in the application process. Socioeconomic class was signalled by a constellation of small changes which may also introduce bias. Non-response rates were a feature of the study, as no response was recorded as no interview invite (Rivera, Tilcsik 2017).

### Variable Creation

The two variables of interest from this dataset are outcome and class. Outcome refers to the status of whether the resume caused the fake person to be called for an interview or not. It can take on one of two values: "interview" or "no interview". This is a categorical variable. The second variable is class, representing the resume's socioeconomic class. It is classified as "low" or "high"[1]. This is a categorical variable.

### Analytic Methods

This analysis compares two categorical variables. For the univariate analysis, relative frequency tables were created for each variable. In the bivariate analysis, a contingency table was constructed and conditional distributions for the total percentage and for interview outcome by class were made. A stacked box plot demonstrates the numbers calculated in the conditional distribution of class given outcome.

For inferential statistics, two hypothesis tests were used. Firstly, a hypothesis test of two proportions to determine whether there is significant evidence to support the claim that the proportion of high-class resumes being given interviews was greater than the proportion of low-class resumes. Secondly, a test of independence using the chi-square test statistic to determine the association between the class and outcome variables.

[1] As a note, I refer to these resumes as high and low class only because they are the classifications used by the original dataset and I don't mean to impart any of my own judgement on the resumes beyond that.

# Results

## Descriptive Statistics

### Socioeconomic Class

There are 316 randomized resumes in this dataset. Of those, 159 were classified as "high" and 157 were classified as "low"-- 50.32% and 49.68% of the data respectively. This is expected because the researchers split the resumes evenly between high and low class indicators.

### Application Outcome

Of the 316 fake resumes that were sent out to law firms, only 22 (6.96%) resulted in the candidate receiving an interview invite. Conversely, 294 (93.04%) of the applications did not receive an interview request, whether that meant the application was not responded to or they were rejected was based on the individual firm.

### Bivariate Analysis

The contingency table for the data is shown in *Table 1*. This table is used for all of the subsequent conditional distribution construction and hypothesis testing.

| | **Interview** | **No Interview** | **Total** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **High Class** | 16 | 143 | 159 |
| **Low Class** | 6 | 51 | 157 |
| **Total** | 22 | 194 | 316 |

**Table 1.** Counts for each contingency in the law resume dataset

Constructing a conditional distribution for the total percentage shows that 47.78% of the resumes were marked low and did not receive an interview invite and 45.25% of the resumes were marked high and did not receive an interview invite. However, 5.06% of the resumes were marked high and did receive an invite, whereas 1.89% of them were low and did not get an invitation.

Analysing interview outcome by class shows that 10.06% of the high-class resumes received an interview invite while 89.94% did not. Of the low-class resumes, 3.82% got an interview and 96.18% did not.

Furthermore, the conditional distribution of socioeconomic class by interview outcome is as follows: 48.64% of the no interviews were high class and 51.36% were low-class. However, of the interview recipients, 72.73% were high-class resumes and 27.27% were low-class. *Figure 1* is a stacked boxplot that demonstrates this conditional distribution by outcome.

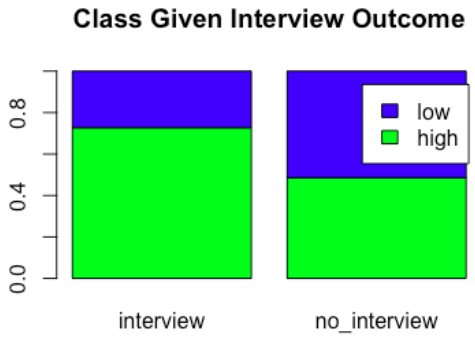


**Figure 1.** *Socioeconomic class given by interview outcome.*

## Inferential Statistics

### Hypothesis Testing for Positive Interview Outcome

The null hypothesis is that the population proportion (p1) of high-class resumes receiving interviews is equal to the proportion (p2) of low-class resumes receiving interviews. The alternative hypothesis is that the proportion of high-class resumes receiving interviews is greater than the proportion of low-class resumes receiving interviews. This test is performed at 95% significance. The test statistic is 2.72 and the p-value is 0.01. The p-value is less than alpha at $0.01 < 0.05$. We reject the null hypothesis. There is sufficient evidence to conclude that the proportion of high-class resumes receiving interview invitations is greater than the proportion of low-class resumes receiving interviews.

### Test of Independence

The null hypothesis is that socioeconomic class and interview outcome are independent variables. The alternative hypothesis is that socioeconomic class and interview outcome are dependent variables. The test statistic is 3.836 and the p-value is 0.05. At 95% confidence, we reject the null hypothesis because the alpha value is greater than or equal to the p-value. There is sufficient evidence to conclude that socioeconomic class and interview outcome are dependent.

## Discussion

The hypothesis testing and the conditional distribution of class given show a clear relationship between the two variables of interest. Specifically, the hypothesis test between two proportions showed that it is far more likely for high-class applicants to be offered an interview than low-class applicants. This supports the initial hypothesis that class was often a deciding factor for being offered interviews and thus associateship positions. Similarly, the test of independence showed that these variables are dependent, although with a less striking result than the other hypothesis test.

The conditional distribution showed that a striking 72% of interviews were offered to high-class resumes, although, critically, the resumes were identical in their achievements. This demonstrates again that there is a clear bias towards high-class applications. Unfortunately, there is bias inherent consistently in the hiring process of law firm associateships and likely elsewhere. The resume audit method allows for researchers to expose these discrepancies and hopefully move toward a more equitable process on every level. This study proves that there are implicit roadblocks facing anyone who does not fit the mold -- especially those at the intersection of many marginalized identities.

That said, there are some potential issues with this study. Firstly, as mentioned above, the applicants were all from excellent, but second-tier universities. So, for some of the law firms, it is possible that this was a compounding factor in their rejection. Also, the classification of “high” and “low” was intelligently and carefully done, but could be a source of subjectivity in the data. This is especially important considering the resumes were sent to firms across 14 cities, where different extracurricular activities and interests carry different cultural contexts that might shift their class-related standing, although there is reason to assume the researchers crafted their data in a way that honored this. Finally, socioeconomic class was not the only randomly assigned variable in this dataset. In the original data, gender was also manipulated by changing the name on the resume to “James” or “Julia”. This could potentially reflect rich findings about the difficulty facing intersectional identities and pose a compounding factor for analyzing this data strictly along the class axis.

Overall, these findings indicate clear bias in the hiring process. In the future, further study could potentially push legislation and company culture change that will positively impact that discrepancy.

## References

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