

## **How Many Home-Schoolers Are There?\***

Home-schooling is often perceived as the ultimate privatization of education, because parents must secure funding, choose curriculum content and determine how to grade and promote their child. Further, home-schooling is (almost fully) privately regulated. The result is an educational practice that gives primacy to private interests at the expense of public goals, such as civic participation. Given the growth of broad-based support for home-schooling—according to Gallup polls from 1985 to 2001 families who thought home-schooling to be a “good thing” rose from 16% to 41%—it has become increasingly important for researchers to provide evidence to inform these views.

To determine whether home-schooling is a “good thing”, one must secure basic data, including how many home-schoolers exist, who they are, and what are the educational consequences. Studies driven by ideology and built from weak evidence will do little to improve our knowledge of the impact of home-schooling. Unfortunately, reliable data on the number of children who are home-schooled does not exist and a tight definition of what it means to be home-schooled has not been established. Many references to home-schooled students imply that all of their education is home-based from elementary years through high school. But, some children are home-schooled for only a short period of time (two years or less) and are enrolled in formal public or private schools for most of their career as a student. Others spend a substantial part of the day in regular schools and are home schooled for only part of the day. In short, different data sources give quite different numbers of home schooled students based upon different definitions, and each data source has its own flaws.

### **National Survey Data**

Most research relies on the series of National Household Education Surveys (NHES) conducted in 1999 and 2003 (and earlier in 1996). These two surveys were not designed specifically to measure the population of home schoolers. Rather, they surveyed a relatively small population of U.S. households and determined participation in various educational activities by extrapolating the results found in the sample population. Since home-schoolers comprise a very small percentage of the population, the overall sample contains a very small number of home-schooled students. For the NHES 1999, the actual count was 270-285 individuals out of a relevant population of 17,640. This figure was then extrapolated by the size of the overall student population to give a national estimate within the range of 800,000 to 1 million home-schoolers.

The problem is more acute in the NHES 2003, because the sample size was reduced by approximately 30% to 12,430, resulting in an even smaller count of actual home-schoolers, at 250.

Data from the NHES may be problematic for a number of important reasons. First, the very small sample sizes mean that statistical aggregation, (i.e. the prediction for the total population), may be subject to such large errors that the national estimate must be expressed as a range rather than a specific number. Second, it also means that measured variation across important characteristics such as family-size or income is limited and does not necessarily provide an accurate picture of the home-schooled population. Too few observations are found in particular demographic or geographic subgroups to provide reliable statistical analysis for such subgroups as minority populations or special education students. Indeed, in subsequent investigations, research has found that the actual numbers of home-schoolers should be revised upward by 100,000 because of how the NHES data categorizes siblings. Third, a more general concern over categorization is that the NHES definition of home-schooling leaves open the possibility that most of the education experienced by a “home-schooled” student may actual take place within a school! (The survey identifies a child as being home-schooled provided the child is being schooled at home at the time of the survey and that any public schooling does not exceed 25 hours per week. Thus, a child who would normally attend public school or who goes to school as often as four full days per week would be classified as home-schooled). Finally, the NHES data are collected through a postal questionnaire; yet, there is little information on how response rates vary between home-school families and those families with children in public and private school. Information on whether only certain types of home-school families would respond is also difficult to obtain (as is information about whether home school families were more or less likely to have a valid postal address). It is well-known that a portion of home-schooling families do not wish to cooperate with government agencies.

In general, all survey data—such as Gallup poll data which finds that 3% of families report that their eldest child is home-schooled—must face each of the challenges of the NHES datasets. Especially challenging are issues of definition and of willingness to participate in surveys. However, despite the concerns cited above, the NHES remains the best source of information on the present number of home-schoolers. Although other sources for home-school numbers are available, there are even greater concerns about their validity.

## **State/District Data**

Unfortunately, state and district information on home-schooling is also poor. An NCSPE investigation across websites of all state education departments, as well as direct email communication, located data from only 24 states on the numbers of home-schoolers. Combining data across states confronts the familiar challenge of how home-schooling is defined. For example, in California the official term is ‘independent study (not adults)’, a term which may include many children besides home-schoolers. In some states, families that exempt their children from school as a religious preference face different requirements than families who do not cite religious preference as the motivation to home-school.

State level data also differs according to how it is collected. In many cases, states rely on a voluntary declaration by parents that their child is being home-schooled. The proportion of parents who comply with this voluntary requirement is unknown, bearing in mind the wariness that some home-schooling parents have for government agencies. Finally, states are at different stages in their implementation of data collection processes, (some states have been collecting data for over a decade), and this difference may mean some states identify home-schoolers with relative accuracy, whereas others only partially count the total number of home-schoolers. Yet, as familiarity with home-schooling continues to develop, state-level data may be the best source for tracking trends in home-schooling over time.

Using data from state records gives a considerably lower figure for the national population of home-schoolers. Data from 24 states generate a count of 335,465 home-schoolers, which predicts a national total, using population weights, of 729,272 home-schoolers. This number approximates to 1.7% of all students nationally being home-schooled. Taking the average across the 24 states, the home-school sector is about one-fifth the size of the private school sector (but in states such as Arkansas and Montana, it is almost half the size).

Data from the Schools and Staffing Survey (2000), a nationally representative questionnaire given to district officials, public school principals, and teachers, shows the limited connection between district-level agencies and home-school families. The 2000 survey includes some questions on home-schooling. Responses shed light on why administrative records may currently be inadequate for research on home-schooling.

## Home-Schooling and District Reporting

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	%
District monitors the progress of home-schooled students	38%
Home-schooled students are required to:	
Perform at the same level as public school students on state or district achievement tests	20%
Meet state/district accountability standards	32%
Submit evidence of grade-level performance other than achievement testing	14%

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*Source:* Schools and Staffing Survey, 2000.

In response to the question ‘Does this district monitor the progress of home-schooled students?’, only 38% of respondents answered affirmatively. Thus, only one-third of districts have any information on the academic standing of home-schoolers undermining the possibility for comparing academic progress of home-schoolers with other groups. For more intensive requirements, the frequencies are even lower. For example:

- only 20% of respondents stated that ‘home-schooled students are required to perform at or above the same specific level as public school students on state or district achievement tests’
- only 32% affirmed that ‘home-schooled students in this district are required to meet state or district accountability standards’, and
- only 14% reported that ‘home-schooled students are required to submit evidence of grade level performance other than achievement testing’.

In addition, these questions do not indicate: (a) the proportions of home-schoolers meeting the requirements, even within record-keeping districts or (b) the consequences (penalties or supports) for home-school families that do not ensure satisfactory academic progress. Thus, even where information on the numbers of home-schoolers is available, their academic placement and progress is not easily determinable.

## **Other Data Sources**

Lists of members of home-schooling groups or networks are used for research by advocates. For 2002, the Home School League Defense Association (an advocacy agency) estimates around 1.7-2.0 million home-schoolers, based on its data collection system. Such membership lists may yield samples of sufficient size, but they are only informative for exploring differences among home-schoolers and not differences between home-schoolers and public schoolers. Also, considering that respondents are members of a selective group, it is unlikely that their assertions can be compared with responses of families drawn representatively from the national population. Members will understandably tend to respond positively about their home-schooling experiences and may provide 'socially desirable' responses to questions about the merits of home-schooling.

Data on test score performances are not systematically available. Where data exist, they must be analyzed with caution. Data from the entire list of SAT test-takers in 2001 shows that only 0.5% of the test-taking sample indicated that they were home-schoolers. Although this yields a dataset of 6,033 observations (large enough for sub-sample analyses), it is difficult to know how representative these individuals are of the larger home-school population. We already know that taking the SAT weeds-out less accomplished students, and we would expect this norm to hold for home-schoolers. Further, most families are unable to provide science, mathematics, and foreign language requirements for college entrance, so only a very select sample of those receiving all of their schooling at home would be likely to take the SAT. Finally, establishing a sample representative of the entire home-school population is a particular difficult using the SAT because home-schooling is more likely to be undertaken at the elementary level. Thus, the SAT numbers may misrepresent the demographic characteristics of home-schoolers of high school age and the number of students with special needs, as well as understate the count of home-schoolers who are more heavily clustered in the pre-teen years.

As with the SAT, test score data at earlier levels also must be properly assessed. Even with norm-referenced tests, such as the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, there are concerns over the comparability of public school and home-school children. That is, if home schoolers can take the test voluntarily while public school students are required to take the test, comparisons of results are inappropriate. It is clear that the selective sample of home-schoolers who elect to take the tests are likely to be more motivated than the average public school student. Second, to the degree that home school students are tested, it is often the parents who set the testing conditions creating deviation from the more rigid and standardized testing conditions exercised in public

schools. If home-schooled students take standardized tests at home, rather than under school-based conditions, they may experience differences in time allotted and assistance provided. Finally, there is a legitimate question as to whether home-school children should be assessed on the same criteria as public school students, since they are being privately educated and families may place a premium on skills and capacities that are not captured in standardized tests.

## **Conclusions**

This short note reviews the sources for empirical research on the total number of home-schoolers, as well as the other available data that exists to describe student characteristics and academic achievement. Each of these sources is clearly limited for answering such questions. Perhaps of particular concern is the low quality and sparseness of administrative data, at either the state or district level. Public officials may be expected to collect such data for two reasons. First, educational reforms at the federal and state level emphasize increased accountability; yet home-schooling is neglected in these reforms. For example, the No Child Left Behind legislation mandates testing of children in public schools, but not those in private or home-schooling situations. Second, all children are entitled to an array of educational and child-welfare services; public agencies need to have accurate information on who is eligible and whether the children—in any educational setting—that merit social services are in fact receiving them. This process is likely to be idiosyncratic when students are not enrolled in school.

In general, government attempts to survey home-schoolers must address two questions: Is the sample of sufficient size? Is the sample representative of the home-schooling population? Researchers need to be confident that both questions can be answered positively. Until they can, large-scale empirical analyzes will have to be especially cautious in their conclusions about the size of the home-school population and its academic outcomes.

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\*This note is based on 'Home-Schooling: A Review of The Evidence'. Occasional Paper, [www.ncspe.org](http://www.ncspe.org). Information on citations is available in that paper.

**Clive R. Belfield**  
Associate Director  
National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education  
[www.ncspe.org](http://www.ncspe.org)