

Journal of School Choice International Research and Reform

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/wjsc20

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To cite this article: Genevieve Smith & Angela R. Watson (2024) Estimating Homeschool Participation in the U.S. - What We Can Learn from the Household Pulse Survey, Journal of School Choice, 18:4, 501-517, DOI: 10.1080/15582159.2024.2422239

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/15582159.2024.2422239

Published online: 12 Nov 2024.



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Estimating Homeschool Participation in the U.S. – What We Can Learn from the Household Pulse Survey

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ABSTRACT

We used data from the U.S. Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey to examine homeschool participation at the national and state levels and compare it to participation estimates from other surveys. The Household Pulse Survey also provides demographic information about the survey respondents. Specifically, we examined respondent characteristics of age, race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, education level, and household income. We find that respondents with homeschooled students were largely similar to those with public and private school students. These findings can promote a better understanding of the homeschool population in the U.S. and help inform evidence-driven policies.

KEYWORDS

Household Pulse Survey; U.S. Census Bureau; homeschool participation; demographic characteristics

Introduction

The Household Pulse Survey, conducted by the United States Census Bureau, is an online survey that measures the impact of social and economic factors on U.S. households since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. While data of homeschooled students is limited, this survey includes one question about K-12 enrollment by school type. The data collected from this question can help fill gaps in what we know about homeschoolers today.

In this article, we examine data from the Household Pulse Survey to estimate the share of K-12 homeschooled students, both nationally and by state. We chose the Household Pulse Survey because it is one of the only nationally representative surveys that has information about homeschool participation in recent years.

First, we briefly discuss several different surveys that examine homeschool participation and how it is defined. Then, we describe what the Household Pulse Survey is and how it is administered to respondents, note the distinction between survey phases, and highlight our survey question of interest. Next, we outline our methods for collecting the data and mention possible limitations of this survey. We then describe our findings from this data – specifically, the share of K-12 students that were homeschooled during the 2022–2023

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school year, nationally and by state, as well as the demographic characteristics of respondents with homeschooled students in their households. Finally, we discuss future directions of the Household Pulse Survey and make recommendations for how we can use this survey data to improve our understanding of the U.S. education system and make more informed policy decisions.

Literature review

According to the National Household Education Surveys Program (NHES), administered by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in 2019 about 3.7% of all K-12 aged students in the U.S. were instructed at home, either through homeschooling or full-time virtual education (Hudson et al., 2023). In terms of student demographics, the NCES found that white students were more likely to be homeschooled than black or Hispanic students, and students in rural areas were more often homeschooled than students in other areas. That said, existing research on homeschool families is lacking due to small sample sizes, low regulation in many states regarding intent to homeschool notification or similar requirements, and hesitation from homeschool families to participate in studies and report on their personal data (Cheng & Hamlin, 2023).

Because the most recent NHES was administered in 2019, the NCES references the Household Pulse Survey to provide homeschool estimates during the pandemic.¹ These estimates put national homeschooling at 5.4% for the 2020–2021 school year (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2022). In fact, early Household Pulse Survey estimates put homeschooling as high as 11.1% for the fall of 2020 alone, a large increase that was likely due in part to pandemic-related school closures (Eggleston & Fields, 2021).

Defining homeschool

One issue with making comparisons between nationally representative surveys that seek to estimate homeschooling numbers is that homeschooling is defined differently across surveys. This discrepancy is because there are many different types of non-traditional schooling that may be classified as homeschooling (Watson, 2023). Other alternative schooling models include virtual schools, microschools, and hybrid schools, just to name a few. For example, according to their most recent report, the NCES defines homeschooling as "students who are homeschooled for all or some classes, excluding those enrolled in school for more than 24 h per week or who are homeschooled only because of a temporary illness" (Hudson et al., 2023). They explicitly distinguish homeschooling from full-time virtual education, which is defined as "students for whom all courses are taken virtually, excluding those who are taking virtual courses only because of a temporary illness, regardless of whether the parent considers the child to be

homeschooled or not." Other surveys, such as the Household Pulse Survey, do not distinguish between different models of alternative schooling, and thus these different models may be lumped together into a single category (Smith & Watson, 2024).

In addition to differences in how surveys define homeschooling, survey respondents may also be confused by the lack of consistency in these definitions. For example, full-time public virtual education families may consider their students homeschoolers because the students are learning in their homes (Hudson et al., 2023). However, people in the traditional homeschool community might not agree with this definition. In addition, families of students in alternative models such as microschools and hybrid schools may also be confused as to how to categorize their children's schooling, particularly when the students receive at least some instruction outside of the home.

Regardless of these issues surrounding the definition of homeschooling and the categorization of homeschooled students, we chose to examine the data from the Household Pulse Survey due to its more open definition as a possible upper-bound estimate² of homeschool participation. Surveys using more restrictive definitions of homeschooling, such as the NHES, may find a lower bound estimate of homeschool participation.

Research questions

For the purposes of this article, we consider three main research questions.

- (1) What proportion of all children in K-12 schooling, according to respondents, are enrolled in public schools, private schools, and homeschools?
- (2) How does homeschool participation vary by state?
- (3) How do the demographics of respondents with homeschooled children in their households compare to those of respondents with public and private school children?

Data and methodology

The U.S. Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey is a multi-phase, nationally representative online survey that was first administered in April of 2020 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024c). A link to complete the survey is administered via e-mail or text to randomly selected households, rather than individual respondents, across the country. Data tables from the Household Pulse Survey are publicly available for download on the U.S. Census Bureau's website.

In particular, data from the survey provide information on homeschool participation, its growth during the pandemic, and current homeschool estimates nationally and by state. As such, it offers new insight on educational trends across the country.

Survey phases

Since April of 2020, the Household Pulse Survey has undergone four phases, which are shown below in Figure 1. The distinction of these phases is important because the collection periods and survey questions are subject to change. For example, the first phase was collected and disseminated weekly, but all following phases have 2-week collection and dissemination periods.

During Phases 1 through 3, prior to Phase 3.1, the survey asked respondents about whether children in their households were enrolled in "public/private" or "homeschool." However, U.S. Census Bureau researchers hypothesized that respondents may have misunderstood homeschool to mean virtual schooling through a public or private institution, as these questionnaires took place during the beginning of the pandemic when many schools were closed (Eggleston & Fields, 2021). Thus, the wording of this question was later updated in Phase 3.1 to clarify homeschooling as "not enrolled in public or private school" (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024a).

For the purposes of our research, we use data from Phases 3.6 through 3.9, which includes weeks 49 through 60. That is because these phases of the survey asked respondents about schooling during the 2022–2023 school year.

In terms of demographic information, the researchers did not analyze the enrollment by school-type data by respondents' demographics until week 52, the first week of Phase 3.7. Thus, demographic data for these respondents is only available from week 52 through week 60.

Phase	Weeks	Regarding	Survey Dates
1	1-12	February 2020	04/2020 - 07/2020
2	13-17	SY 2020-2021	08/2020 - 10/2020
3	18-27	SY 2020-2021	10/2020 - 03/2021
3.1	28-33	Fall 2020	04/2021 - 07/2021
3.2	34-39	Spring 2021	07/2021 - 10/2021
3.3	40-42	Spring 2021	12/2021 - 02/2022
3.4	43-45	Sum/Fall 2021	03/2022 - 05/2022
3.5	46-48	Sum/Fall 2021	06/2022 - 08/2022
3.6	49-51	Sum/Fall 2022	09/2022 - 11/2022
3.7	52-54	Sum/Fall 2022	12/2022 - 02/2023
3.8	55-57	Sum/Fall 2022	03/2023 - 05/2023
3.9	58-60	Sum/Fall 2022	06/2023 - 08/2023
3.10	61-63	Sum/Fall 2023	08/2023 - 10/2023
4	Cycles 01-03	Sum/Fall 2023	01/2024 - 04/2024
4.1	Cycles 04-07	Sum/Fall 2023	04/2024 - 07/2024

Figure 1. Phases of the Household Pulse Survey.

Enrollment by school type

In week 49 of the Household Pulse Survey, the first week of Phase 3.6, the question regarding school-type enrollment of school-aged children in participating households was updated to reflect student enrollment during the 2022–2023 school year. This question specifically stated, "During the school year that began in the Summer/Fall of 2022, how many children in this household were enrolled in Kindergarten through 12th grade or grade equivalent?" The response options that respondents were given were as follows: "number enrolled in a public school," "number enrolled in a private school," "number homeschooled, that is not enrolled in public or private school," and "none." The respondents also had the option to not answer this question, which was marked as "did not report" in the data file.

Data collection

For this article, we used publicly available data tables that are accessible on the U.S. Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey webpage. The data tables are first organized by survey phase, and then by the category of the individual questions. For our research, we used the data tables under the category "education tables."

Because the Household Pulse Survey is a nationally representative sample, and the methodology has remained stable across the survey, we were able to take averages across the surveys. Specifically, we calculated the percentages of students in each school enrollment type for each week, and then took the averages of those percentages to find the averages over all weeks.

After consulting with researchers from the U.S. Census Bureau, we removed respondents that chose "none" or that did not respond to the question. We did this because we were specifically interested in comparing enrollment percentages among public, private, and homeschooled students. While the "none" category may have included students in alternative education models, it also likely included households with children below kindergarten age, or respondents that did have students enrolled in school but that misunderstood the question. Researchers at the U.S. Census Bureau also advised us to exclude the "did not report" responses to ensure accurate calculations.

We used the data from the Household Pulse Survey throughout this article, but in the "state trends," section we also referenced data from two other sources – NCES and state education departments – as a means of comparison.

We compared homeschool estimates from the Household Pulse Survey to those of NCES and state education departments to see whether these estimates were similar, and thus how reliable these surveys may be at measuring homeschool estimates. It is important to describe how we estimated the share of homeschooled students using data from NCES and the state departments of education. Because the most recent participation estimates from NCES for homeschooled students by state are from the year 2019 (NCES, 2022), we used their more recent estimates for the number of public and private school students combined with estimates for the number of homeschooled students collected by state departments of education. Currently, only 35 states and the District of Columbia collect and report these numbers for registered homeschool students.

Limitations

While the Household Pulse Survey can help us better understand a population of students that we know so little about, there are several limitations to this method. One limitation is that the early administrations of the Household Pulse Survey had low response rates overall, which raises concerns about nonresponse bias (Peterson et al., 2021). That said, the survey was weighted to address nonresponse bias and maintain national representation.

In addition to the low response rate for the survey itself, the Household Pulse Survey may be less reliable compared to other estimates of homeschooled students because the survey relies on self-reporting. Self-report bias can occur when participants provide inaccurate or biased information in surveys and can affect the validity of the survey results. Data collected by state departments of education is based on enrollment data for registered homeschool students and families, and thus may more accurately capture participation numbers.

The lack of a consistent, clear-cut definition of homeschooling is another potential limitation. Regarding the school enrolment question, a considerable proportion of respondents answered "none" (22.10% of all respondents) or did not answer the question at all (12.14% of all respondents). This begs the question as to why such a high share of respondents reported this way – meaning that they reported having children in their household, but they did not report any school-type option for those children. In addition, the phrasing of the school enrollment question changed many times throughout the collection phases, which calls into question the accuracy of responses, particularly during the earlier collection periods. That said, the current phrasing of this question, as described above, is likely more accurate than earlier versions due to potential confusion about homeschooling versus virtual learning through a public or private school during the pandemic. It is also worth noting that the question about school-type enrollment did not change during the time period under review in this study.

Another limitation is our comparison of data collected from different sources. We compared estimates from the Household Pulse Survey to estimates from NCES and state departments of education. One issue with comparing data from these different sources is the difference in school year. The most recent available data from NCES and the state education departments reflect student enrollment in the Fall of 2021, while the Household Pulse Survey data capture student enrollment "the school year that began in the Summer/Fall of 2022." Another issue is that we had to combine data from NCES and the state departments of education to estimate the proportion of homeschooled students. This is problematic because these sources utilize different methods of collecting said data. Still, because the data on homeschooled students in the U.S. is so limited, this was the best option to gauge estimates of homeschool participation in recent years.

Findings

Homeschool participation

We examined data from weeks 49 through 60 of the Household Pulse Survey, which was collected between September of 2022 through August of 2023. The survey specifically asked respondents about enrollment by school type during the 2022–2023 school year. The percentage of school-aged children reported as homeschooled during this time was 5.82% nationally.

It is important to note that this percentage is not the actual enrollment number. Instead, it reflects the responses of household members that chose to participate in the survey and reported having school-aged children living in their households.

National trends

Considering data from weeks 49 through 60, we were able to make approximate national and statewide estimates on the share of students that were homeschooled during the 2022–2023 school year compared to other schooling options. During these weeks, the percentages of school-aged children in households that were reported as homeschooled ranged from 5.14% to 6.66% at the national level. When taking the average of all these weeks together, the share of school-aged children reported as homeschooled was 5.82%. This compares to 10.06% of students in private schools, and 84.12% in public schools, as depicted in the pie chart in Figure 2. As mentioned above, it is important to recall that these percentages reflect household member responses and are not actual state enrollment numbers.

State trends

We found considerable variation in homeschool participation across states. Alaska led with 12.6% of children homeschooled, followed by Tennessee (9%) and West Virginia (8.9%). Conversely, Rhode Island (2.9%), Massachusetts

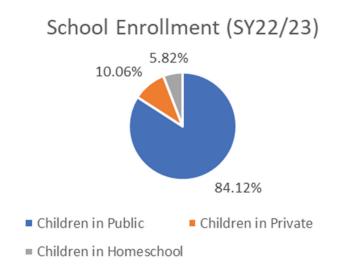


Figure 2. National estimates of enrollment by school type during the 2022-2023 school year from the Household Pulse Survey.

(3.1%), and New York (3.2%) reported the lowest homeschooling rates in the country. These differences in homeschool participation may reflect differences in region, legislation on homeschooling, and local decisions about schooling both before and during the pandemic (Eggleston & Fields, 2021).

Enrollment estimates from the Household Pulse Survey of the share of students enrolled in public and private schools were generally comparable to those that we estimated using data from NCES and state education departments (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2024a, 2024b). Among the 35 states and the District of Columbia that currently report data on homeschooling families, however, the data from the Household Pulse Survey does reveal some differences. The regions with the greatest discrepancies in homeschool participation estimates were Tennessee, Washington, D.C., and Kansas. In Tennessee, the Household Pulse Survey estimates were 7.6% points higher than those we estimated from NCES and Tennessee Department of Education data. In Washington, D.C., the Household Pulse Survey estimates were 7.5% points higher. In Kansas, the Household Pulse Survey estimates were 5.1% points higher. The states with the lowest discrepancies were Maine (0.8% points), Kentucky (0.7% points), and Nebraska (0.4% points). These comparisons are shown in Figure 3.

Respondent demographics

The Household Pulse Survey not only helps us understand the share of homeschooled students in K-12 education but also provides demographic information about the survey respondents. Examining data from weeks 52–60, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the demographics of households with students that homeschool. It is important to note that we can only consider weeks 52 through 60, excluding weeks 49 through 51, because the cleaned data tables from these weeks were not organized by respondents' demographic characteristics.

We look specifically at respondent characteristics of age, race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, education level, and household income. This information is particularly important because the vast majority of states do not ask homeschooling families to report demographic information, and thus, very little is known about the characteristics of homeschooling families.

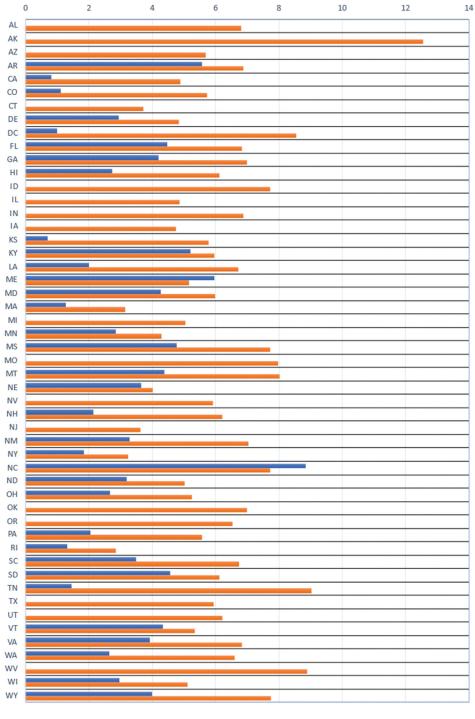
Age

The survey asked respondents, "What year were you born?" and respondents were asked to fill in their birth year. This data was then organized into five categories: "18–24," "25–39," "40–54," "55–64," and "65 and above." Considering only respondents that reported having homeschooled students in their household, 5% of respondents were between ages 18–24, 38% were between ages 25–39, 42% were between ages 40–54, 7% were between ages 55–64, and 8% were 65 and above. These responses are depicted in the bar chart in Figure 4, alongside corresponding public and private percentages.

Among respondents at the extreme ends of the age spectrum, younger than 25 and older than 54, the share of respondents with homeschooled students was comparable to that of respondents with public and private school students. Examining data of respondents between the ages of 25 and 54, a slightly greater share of respondents with homeschooled students were younger than those with public and private school students, and a slightly greater share of respondents. Since age is positively associated with educational attainment and income, it is understandable that age would also be correlated with having students that attend private schools (Gowder, 2023). This is because private school tuition costs can exclude low- and middle-income families from this schooling option (Murnane & Reardon, 2018).

Race and ethnicity

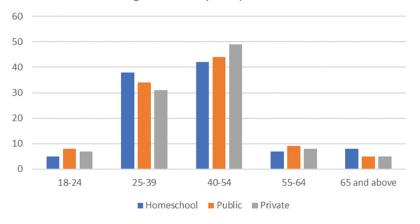
Respondents were asked to report their race and ethnicity on two survey questions. The first question asked, "Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?" The second question asked, "What is your race? Please select all that apply." The response options for race included 14 distinct options, but researchers later organized them into five categories. Considering only respondents that reported having homeschooled students in their household, 19% of respondents were Hispanic or Latinx



Share of Homeschooled Students by State: DOE data vs Pulse data

% Homeschool DOE % Homeschool Pulse

Figure 3. The share of homeschooled students by state, comparing estimates from the Household Pulse Survey and state education departments.



Age of Survey Respondents

Figure 4. Respondent demographics by school type: age.

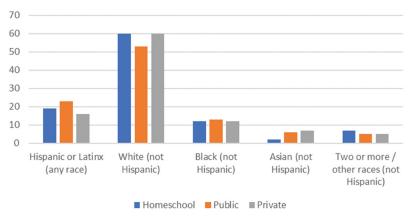
(of any race), 60% were white (not Hispanic), 12% were Black (not Hispanic), 2% were Asian (not Hispanic), and 7% were two or more or other races (not Hispanic). These responses are depicted in the bar chart in Figure 5.

The racial makeup of respondents with homeschooled students was largely similar to the U.S. Census Bureau's estimates of race and ethnicity of the general population, indicating that the homeschooling population is racially diverse (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). Overall, respondents with homeschooled students and respondents with private school students appeared to be very similar in terms of race and ethnicity. There were slightly higher shares of white respondents with homeschooled and private school students compared to those with students in public schools. There was also a slightly higher share of Hispanic or Latinx respondents with public school students compared to those with homeschooled and private school students. Asian respondents were less likely to have homeschooled students, and more likely to have students in public or private schools. This is consistent with other research on school enrollment data, which has found substantial racial heterogeneity in homeschooling since the onset of the pandemic (Musaddiq et al., 2022).

Gender and sexuality

Several questions on the survey asked respondents information about their gender and sexuality. Respondents were asked to report their sex assigned at birth, their gender, and their sexuality. Gender was limited to "Male," "Female," "Transgender," and "None of these." Sexuality was categorized as "Gay or lesbian," "Straight, that is not gay or lesbian," "Bisexual," "Something

512 🕒 G. SMITH AND A. R. WATSON



Race/Ethnicity of Survey Respondents

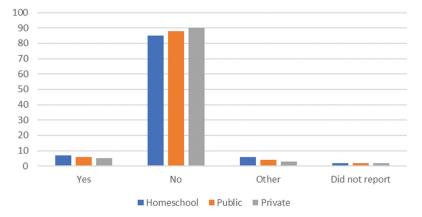
Figure 5. Respondent demographics by school type: race and ethnicity.

else," and "I don't know." The researchers at the U.S. Census Bureau simplified this data into a single category labeled "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender" and the response options were "Yes," "No," "Other," and "Did not report." Considering only respondents that reported having home-schooled students in their household, 7% of respondents reported "Yes," 85% reported "No," 6% reported "Other," and 2% did not report. These responses are depicted in the bar chart in Figure 6.

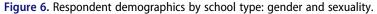
Gender and sexuality were comparable amongst all three categories of respondents, and in fact, a slightly larger share of respondents with homeschooled students reported being LGBTQ+. Thirteen percent of respondents with homeschooled students were classified as "LGBT" or "other," compared to 10% of respondents with public school students and 8% with private school students. While we do not have information regarding respondents' reasons to homeschool, one potential explanation as to why there is a greater share of LGBTQ+ respondents with homeschoolers might be the recent increase in "parental rights" bills and laws that discriminate against LGBTQ+ students and families (Goldberg, 2023).

Education level

Regarding education attainment, respondents were asked, "What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed?" Respondents could select one of seven options, but the researchers later combined this data into just four categories: "less than high school," "high school or GED," "some college/ associate's degree," and "bachelor's degree or higher." Considering only respondents that reported having homeschooled students in their household, 11% of respondents had less than high school, 29% had a high school diploma or GED, 33% had some college or an associate's degree, and 27% had

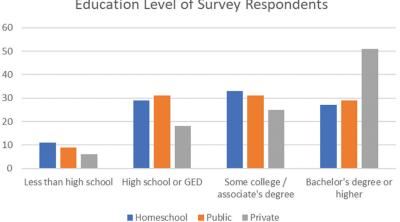


LGBT Classification of Survey Respondents



a bachelor's degree or higher. These responses are depicted in the bar chart in Figure 7.

The educational profile of respondents with homeschooled students is similar to that of public-school parents, among whom 9% had less than high school and 29% reported holding a bachelor's degree or higher. Considering private school enrollment, education level is positively associated with the share of respondents with private school students. Amongst these respondents, just 6% reported having less than high school while 51% held at least a bachelor's degree or higher. Because education level is highly correlated with household income, it is perhaps unsurprising that respondents with higher education levels would be more likely to afford the costs of private school tuition (Research Department, 2024).



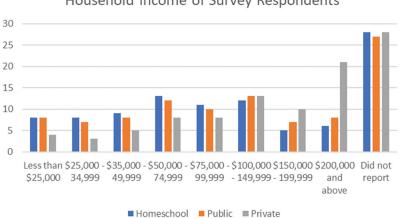
Education Level of Survey Respondents

Figure 7. Respondent demographics by school type: education level.

Household income

The survey asked respondents, "In 2022 what was your total household income before taxes? Select only one answer." The survey offered eight distinct salary ranges, starting at "less than \$25,000" and ending with "\$200,000 and above." Researchers added an additional category for respondents that did not respond to the question. Considering only respondents that reported having homeschooled students in their household, 8% made less than \$25,000, 8% made between \$25,000 and \$34,999, 9% made between \$35,000 and \$49,999, 13% made between \$50,000 and \$74,999, 11% made between \$75,000 and \$99,999, 12% made between \$100,000 and \$149,999, 5% made between \$150,000 and \$199,999, 6% made \$200,000 and above, and 28% did not report. These responses are depicted in the bar chart in Figure 8.

Although 28% of respondents did not report their income, 49% of homeschooling families who did reported earning less than \$100,000 annually, while 23% said they earn more than \$100,000. For comparison, the median household income in 2022 was \$77,540 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024d). This counters the stereotype that homeschooling is predominantly a luxury for wealthier families. In fact, the reported income levels for respondents with homeschooled children are modestly lower, on average, than those of respondents with children in public schools. Conversely, 44% of respondents with private school students reported earning more than \$100,000. As mentioned above, respondents with greater household income are likely able to afford the high tuition costs of private schools, unlike many low- or medium-income families, so it is unsurprising that a greater share of respondents with private school students have higher income levels.



Household Income of Survey Respondents

Figure 8. Respondent demographics by school type: household income.

Discussion

Considering that the NCES estimated that homeschooled students account for 3.7% of all K-12 students in 2019, and 5.4% in 2020 – utilizing data from the Household Pulse Survey for the latter estimate – it appears that homeschooling has not only remained steady during the following school years but has even increased slightly, at 5.82% for the 2022–2023 school year. This counters the prediction of education experts that the homeschool population would decline as schools began to re-open after school closures during the height of the pandemic.

As described in the literature review, because the research on the demographic characteristics of homeschoolers is limited, it is challenging to compare our findings from the Household Pulse Survey with those of previous surveys. Still, the demographic information of Household Pulse Survey respondents can help shed new light on the characteristics of modern homeschoolers. In terms of age, respondents with homeschooled students were similar to those with public and private school students, but with slightly more between ages 25-39 and fewer between ages 40-54. For race, there was a greater share of respondents with homeschooled and private school students that were white, and a lower share that were Hispanic or Latinx, as well as a lower share of respondents with homeschooled students that were Asian. Gender and sexuality were similar among all respondents, though a slightly greater share of respondents with homeschooled students were LGBTQ+. The educational attainment of respondents with homeschooled and public school students were similar, while those with private school students had higher education levels. Income levels for respondents with homeschooled students were modestly lower than those with public school students, and respondents with private school students had higher incomes than both other categories.

Future work

Findings from the Household Pulse Survey highlight the increasingly diverse nature of U.S. education. Increased participation in homeschooling appears to be part of a broader trend toward embracing non-traditional models of education, as families seek solutions that best fit their children's needs. Because there are some discrepancies between estimates from the Household Pulse Survey and estimates based on data from the NCES and state education departments, further analyses of these surveys and their accuracy are needed.

These findings can also help education research and policy experts make more informed decisions about how best to serve students and their families. Future research should consider more closely analyzing this data at the state level, particularly that of respondent demographic information, which may 516 🕒 G. SMITH AND A. R. WATSON

reveal important differences in homeschool populations by state. The data from the Household Pulse Survey could also be used to examine students in other K-12 schooling options, not only those that are homeschooled.

Despite some limitations, the Household Pulse Survey clearly offers the most detailed and up-to-date depiction of homeschooling across the country. As we navigate a changing educational landscape, understanding and supporting diverse educational choices with accurate data is crucial in fostering an inclusive and effective education system for all students. The U.S. Census Bureau has already begun releasing data from the most recent phase of the survey, which explores school enrolment for the 2023–2024 school year (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024b). We plan to examine the data tables from that year once all weeks have been released.

Notes

- 1. At the time of writing this article, data from the 2023 NHES had not yet been released.
- That said, the Household Pulse Survey also offers a "none" category, so respondents with children in other alternative schooling models may have selected this option instead of the "homeschool" option.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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