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The Changing Face of American Homeschool: A 25-Year Comparison of Race and Ethnicity

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ABSTRACT

We use nationally representative data to explore the racial composition of modern homeschoolers. Analysis of the National Household Education Survey suggests that the proportion of students of color homeschooling has increased modestly, from 25% in 1998–99 to 29% in 2022–23, suggesting less diversity than public school students but similar to the private school population. However, the Household Pulse Survey suggests more racial diversity in modern homeschooling, with 40% of homeschoolers being students of color. Regardless, both surveys show hundreds of thousands of homeschoolers of color across the U.S., and homeschooling narratives should be updated to reflect these students.

KEYWORDS

Changing trends; homeschool; school sector comparisons; student demographic characteristics

American families have more educational options than ever (Durrani, 2023; Maranto, 2024), and homeschooling is an educational choice that families are increasingly turning to. While homeschooling has risen over the past 40 years (Jolly & Matthews, 2020), only a small percentage of American students were homeschooled before COVID-19. However, since COVID-19, homeschooling has become the fastest-growing educational sector (Jamison et al., 2023b). Indeed, data show that homeschooling grew during COVID-19, from 4.8% of families pre-pandemic to 8.7% in the fall of 2020 (Duvall, 2021). Since the 2019–2020 school year, school-district data shows that homeschooling has decreased in some districts but remained well above pre-pandemic levels in most states (Jamison et al., 2023a). Given these rapid increases in the homeschooling population, who are modern homeschoolers?

This paper uses publicly available nationally representative longitudinal data to systematically look at the race and ethnicity of homeschooling students. Importantly, we incorporate newly released 2022–23 estimates from the National Household Education Survey (NHES), enabling us to compare the homeschooling population before and after the pandemic. Specifically, we compare size estimates of the homeschooling population over the last 25 years, from the 1998–99 school year to 2022–23. Next, we compare the race and ethnicity of

students homeschooling to those enrolled in public and private schools using nationally representative surveys from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) over the same period. These comparisons suggest a far more nuanced picture of the homeschooling community than typical narratives suggest.

Our analysis shows that while the proportion of students homeschooling has risen over the past 25 years, the number of school-aged (i.e., ages 5–17) students homeschooled is roughly the same in the 2022–23 school year as in 2011–12. Investigating the racial composition of the homeschooling population over time shows that the proportion of students of color has increased, but modestly, from 25% in 1998–99 to 29% in 2022–23. These data suggest that homeschooling is less diverse than the current school-aged and public-school population but similar to the private school population.

However, we also show that comparisons from two nationally representative surveys, the NHES and Household Pulse Survey (Pulse), present two different pictures of the demographic composition of homeschooling students. The Pulse is a nationally representative survey conducted in a period similar to the NHES, but the Pulse defines homeschooling more broadly. Estimates from the Pulse suggest that 40% of the homeschooling population in the 2022–23 school year were students of color, compared to 29% in the NHES. While this is still less than the 51% of school-aged children of color in the general population in the same year, the Pulse estimates suggest far more diversity amongst students homeschooling.

Thus, our comparisons show changes in the homeschooling population, but it is unclear how diverse homeschooling has become. In both samples, white students and students of two or more races comprise a greater percentage of the homeschooling population than the general school-age population or the public school population. While Asian, Black, and Hispanic students have less representation in both nationally representative surveys than the general population. Nonetheless, these student groups combined comprise hundreds of thousands of homeschooled students across the U.S. Thus, the stereotypical narratives around homeschooling as a predominantly white population must be updated to represent the modern group of homeschoolers, reflecting the nuance of the students and families that engage in this educational practice. At the same time, our analysis highlights the need for an updated definition of homeschooling that reflects the modern realities of increased schooling options.

In the following, we first highlight recent changes in homeschooling, describe our data sources and methodology, and then note the limitations of our methods. Next, we share our findings and discussion. Finally, we consider the broader policy implications of our results and provide recommendations for future work.

Modern homeschooling

In the spring of 2020, homeschooling became a constant mainstream topic, as many families across the U.S. were faced with the challenge of how to support their child's learning from home due to the pandemic (e.g., Kim, 2022; McDonald, 2020; McKeough, 2020; Samuels & Prothero, 2020). As many discovered, supporting learning at home often looked different, depending on the age and needs of the children and the demands and capacity of adults. Many families turned to homeschooling during this period (Jamison et al., 2023a).

In addition, the options for supporting learning outside of a traditional classroom expanded to include learning pods, micro-schools, and increased online learning opportunities (Jamison et al., 2023b; Meckler & Jamison, 2023). Homeschooling is no longer comprised of children learning at home primarily from their mothers, as in the past (Lines, 2000). For example, Cheng and Hamlin (2023) note that technology allows for a range of homeschooling experiences, from private tutors or cooperative teachers to online schools and even attendance in physical schools. Similarly, Meckler et al. (2023) report that almost 60% of the homeschooled children in their poll take live online classes; roughly 20% participate in homeschool co-ops; and about 10% of homeschooling families use micro-schools. Thus, while a family may consider their children homeschooled, part or all of the child's schooling might occur outside the home. In addition, the parent may not be the primary educator in a homeschooling environment. Thus, the exact definition of homeschooling is less clear than it might have been in the past. These challenges complicate the nationally representative surveys described below, as both have different definitions of homeschooling, which likely affects how parents respond.

Data and methodology

Our core estimates of the current and historic homeschooling population were estimated from the NHES. The NHES is a nationally representative survey of 5- to 17-year-olds in kindergarten through 12th grade students in the U.S. in a physical school, virtual school, or home school. The NHES was developed by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in 1991 as a household survey to provide information about learning that takes place outside of formal education and to provide a family-based perspective of education. For example, the NHES has surveyed families on various topics, including school safety, civic involvement, and before- and after-school activities (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.-a).

NHES is conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau and uses a nationally representative address-based sample. The NHES uses a two-stage process to

sample households, where households first provide information about their characteristics on a screener. Then, their responses are used to determine which household members receive a topical survey. NHES targets populations of interest through its screening process and offers surveys in English and Spanish. Survey responses are weighted to be nationally representative. NHES usually fields 2–3 topical surveys at a time, and many of these topical surveys are repeated to estimate trends over time (National Center for Education Statistics, [n.d.-a](#)). While this allows researchers to compare responses to topics over time, such as homeschool participation, caution is required, as aspects of the survey methodology and question wording have changed over time (Sempeles & Cui, 2024).

Since the 1998–99 school year, the NHES has included questions about homeschooling. These questions were included in the 2002–03, 2006–07, 2011–12, 2015–16, 2018–19, and 2022–23 surveys. The NHES survey defines homeschooling in the following way: “Homeschooled students are children ages 5 through 17 who receive instruction at home instead of at a public or private school either all or most of the time; excludes students who were enrolled in public or private school more than 25 hours per week and students who were homeschooled only because of temporary illness” (National Center for Education Statistics, [n.d.-a](#)). Note that this definition has changed slightly over time, as students in 2018–19 were not considered homeschooling if they were enrolled in a public or private school for more than 24 hours a week.

We also use data from another nationally representative survey, the Pulse, which provides a different view of current homeschool participation. The Pulse survey was developed in response to COVID-19 to measure the effects of the pandemic on the U.S. household population and is conducted in collaboration with the U.S. Census Bureau and other federal agencies, including the National Center for Education Statistics (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). The survey has been given across four phases, and modifications were made within each phase. For example, while all phases included questions about homeschooling, earlier versions of this question could be seen as confusing due to the wording of the question. Thus, estimates in this research are from Phase 3.1 and later, when families were asked: “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?” Families were given the following response options: “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” (Smith & Watson, 2024a).

In addition, we include three main comparisons of homeschooled students: the general student population, and public and private school students. First, we compare the racial composition of homeschooled students to the population of school-aged children (i.e., 5 through 17) in the U.S. during the 2022–23

school year. These comparison estimates of school-aged children in the U.S. come from the U.S. Census Bureau (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). Next, comparisons of students' racial composition in public schools come from the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data (CCD). The CCD is the U.S. Department of Education's primary database of public K-12 education. It provides annual comprehensive data from all elementary and secondary public schools and districts (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.-b). Comparisons of racial enrollment in private school data come from the National Center for Education Statistics' Private School Universe Survey (PPS). The PPS is collected every two years via survey and is sent to all private schools that meet the NCES definition as a school that "is not supported primarily by public funds, provides classroom instruction for one or more of grades K-12 or comparable ungraded levels, and has one or more teachers. Organizations or institutions that provide support for home schooling without offering classroom instruction for students are not included" (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.-c).

From these five data sources, we collected and constructed aggregated estimates, estimates of each racial subgroup, and then calculated the proportion of the racial subgroup available for each year. Data is collected at different times of the year by the data sources. Therefore, we categorize the data source by school year. For example, data from the fall of 2002, collected by the CCD, and the spring of 2003, collected by the NHES, are categorized in the 2002–03 school year. In addition, data has been available from different sources over different years. When possible, we compare estimates from the same school year, such as the 2022–23 NHES estimates, to Pulse and Census general population estimates from the same year. However, as noted above, the NHES has been collected seven times over the past 25 years, and the PPS is collected every other year. To construct comparisons from those two data sources, we estimated a linear trend between data collection years for ease of comparison. However, we refrain from claiming too precise a historical comparison across these various data sources and years.

These differences in data collection years are but one of several limitations with our data and methods, which limit our findings. As highlighted above, there is scarce data on homeschooling. We argue that the NHES provides the best historical estimates, enabling us to make comparisons across years. However, we must be cautious in our comparisons because of changes to the survey methodology and perhaps the meaning of homeschooling over the last 25 years. This leads us not to make statistical comparisons across time, as that level of precision might imply more rigor than the data allows. In addition, the most recent NHES data was just released, and these estimates are still preliminary; thus, we treated them cautiously and did not use them for current statistical comparisons.

In addition, we view this paper as a first step toward a deeper investigation of modern homeschooling. Far more is required to better understand modern homeschoolers and how that group has changed from a quantitative and qualitative lens. We see fruitful future work in identifying and understanding the various groups within homeschooling, especially looking beneath the aggregated and subgroup analyses, to understand the differences in various homeschooling groups and communities.

Results

Estimates of the exact number of homeschooling students vary, depending on the data source and definition of homeschooling. For example, data from the 2022–23 NHES estimates suggest that close to 1.8 million school-aged children are currently homeschooling, or about 3% of the student population in the U.S. However, the definition of homeschooling is important to these estimates. When parents are asked on the NHES if their children receive instruction from home, approximately 2.8 million children, or 5% of the student population, receive instruction from home. This group includes parents who state that their children are homeschooling as well as students enrolled full-time in a virtual school, regardless of whether the parent considers virtual school to be homeschooling (Sempeles & Cui, 2024). Thus, the NHES “homeschooling” estimates highlight that this data can be viewed as a more restrictive definition of homeschooling, providing a more conservative estimate of this population. In contrast, the Pulse survey, which (as described above) provides a less specific and restrictive definition of homeschooling than the NHES, estimates that almost 6% of school-aged children were homeschooled in the 2022–23 school year (Smith & Watson, 2024b). Thus, combined estimates can be interpreted as providing a range of estimates for the homeschooling population.

Regardless of the conservative estimates by the NHES, these data provide the best estimates of the changes to homeschooling over time. Figure 1 shows NHES estimates of how many school-aged children were homeschooled from 1998–99 to the 2022–23 school year. The figure suggests that homeschooling increased rapidly from 1998–99 until 2011–12, growing from roughly 850,000 to almost 1.8 million students in 2011–12. Figure 1 indicates that the homeschooling population dipped in 2015–16 and 2018–19 and recovered to 1.8 million in 2022–23.

Figure 2 presents changing homeschool participation over time as the percentage of U.S. school-aged children. Like Figures 1, 2 shows an expansion of homeschooling from 1998–99 to 2011–12, moving from 1.7% of the population to 3.4% in 2011–12. Similarly, while the intervening years saw the percentage of homeschooling students decrease nationwide in 2015–16 and

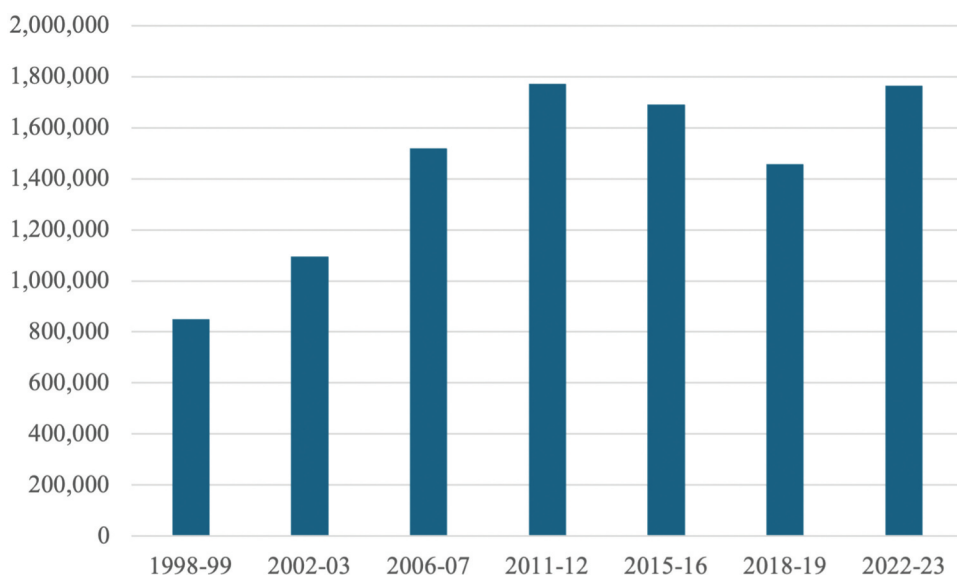


Figure 1. The number of students homeschooling: 1999 to 2023. Note: The data from 1998-99 is from the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics (1999, 2003, 2007, 2012, 2019, 2023); the data from 2022-23 is from Sempeles and Cui (2024).

2018–19, the 2022–23 estimates show homeschooling back to 3.4%. Both figures suggest an increase in homeschooling over the past 25 years.

We next look at the racial characteristics of homeschooling families from the 2022–23 school year. Figure 3 compares the racial composition of homeschooling families and all U.S. school-aged children. Comparing the two estimates of homeschooling children from NHES in the bottom bar in each category and Pulse in the middle bar again highlights the limitations in our understanding of the homeschooled population. The Pulse data suggest a more racially diverse picture of homeschooling children than the NHES. Namely, the Pulse data indicate that 40% of the homeschooling population comprises students of color, compared with 29%, as suggested by the NHES. The larger estimates of the Black and Hispanic homeschooling populations shown in the Pulse data are especially striking.

With this range of homeschooling demographic characteristics in mind, the data on the top bar in each category comes from the U.S. Census Bureau and shows the demographic characteristics of all school-aged children in the United States in the fall of 2022. The Census data show that 51% of all school-aged children in the U.S. are students of color. Thus, the Pulse estimates present a homeschooling population that more closely resembles the racial composition of all children in the U.S., with 40% homeschooled students of color. However, it still suggests an over-representation of white students and students of two or more races compared to the national population. In

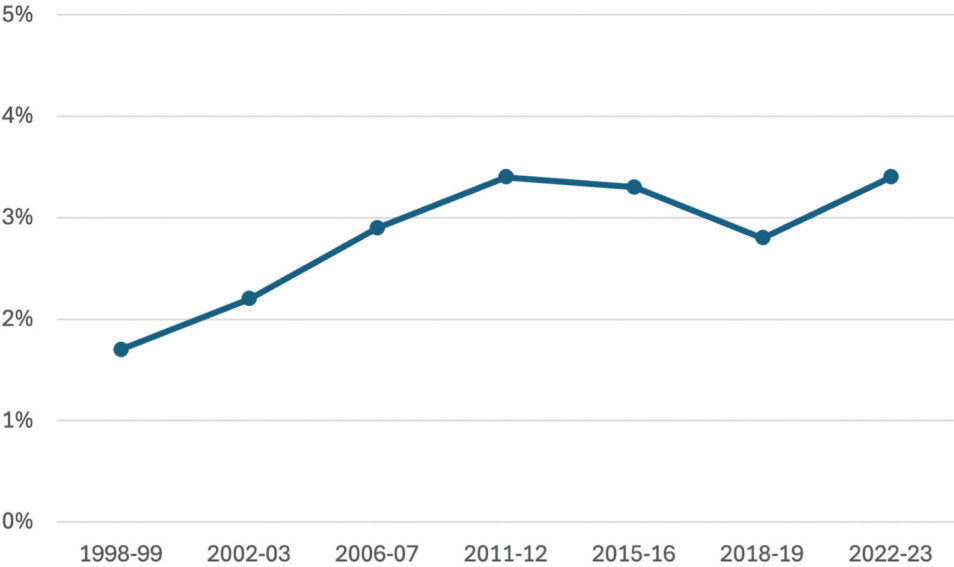


Figure 2. Percentage of school-aged children homeschooling: spring of 1999–2023. Note: The data from 1998–99 is from the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics (1999, 2003), U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, (2012, 2016), U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, (2019, 2023); the data from 2022–23 is from Sempeles and Cui (2024).

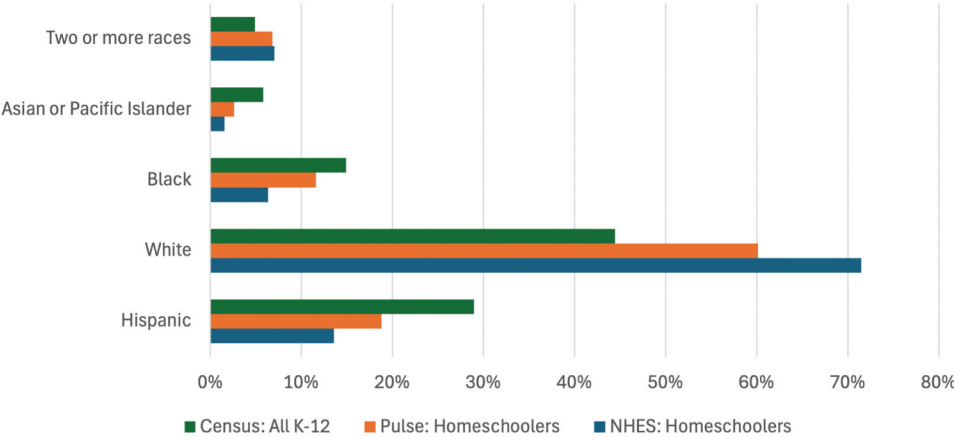


Figure 3. Race composition of school-aged children and homeschooling students: 2022–23. Note: Racial categories are defined as Hispanic; White, non-Hispanic; Black, non-Hispanic; Asian or Pacific Islander, non-Hispanic; and Two or more races, non-Hispanic. However, the census does not provide estimates of “Two or more races;” this category is calculated as “other” (i.e., not Hispanic, white, black, Asian, or Pacific Islander). The data from NHES is from Sempeles and Cui (2024); the Pulse data is from Smith and Watson (2024a); and the data displayed in the right panel is from the U.S. Census Bureau (2023, October 23).

addition, these comparisons show that Hispanic, Black, and Asian students are under-represented in the homeschooling population.

Figure 4 provides a historical picture of the racial composition of homeschooling students using NHES estimates from 1998–99 to 2022–23. These data show that the proportion of homeschooling students by race varies over time. However, the share of white homeschoolers decreased by four percentage points across the period, mirrored by an increase in the share of homeschoolers of color by four percentage points. In addition, while the data suggest that the percentage of Black homeschoolers varies across the period, overall, there has been a decrease in this group in recent years. Specifically, the proportion of black homeschoolers decreased from around 10% of the homeschooling population in 1998–99 to 4% by 2006–07, increasing to 8% in 2011–12 (and 2015–16) and landing at 6% in 2018–19 and 2022–23. In contrast, the proportion of Hispanic homeschoolers also varies over time, but there is an overall increase from 1998–99 to 2022–23. Specifically, the proportion of Hispanic homeschoolers dropped from 9% in 1998–99 to 5% in 2002–03 and steadily increased to 26% by 2015–16, declining to 17% in 2018–19 and 14% by 2022–23. The proportion of homeschoolers identified as two or more races also increases over time, starting at 2% of the homeschooling population in 1998–99 and increasing to 7% by 2022–23.

The middle panels show the proportion of students of two or more races on the left and Asian or Pacific Islanders on the right, in public, private, and homeschool. Both graphs have incomplete information, as there were several years with too few survey responses for reliable estimates. The graph showing the proportion of participation of students of two or more races suggests that this population is overly represented in homeschool and private schools compared to public schools. However, it is important to note that the NHES calculated students with two or more races *and* respondents who did not record their ethnicity before 2022–23, meaning that this number could have been inflated during that time. The graph of Asian students suggests that a greater percentage attend private schools than public. In addition, the graph indicates that very few Asian students participate in homeschooling; their numbers were so low before 2010 that they did not meet reporting standards, and the most recent estimates place Asian students at less than 2% of the homeschool population.

The bottom panel compares white students. This graph shows similar participation proportions of white students in private and homeschool, ranging between 60–80% of these school types throughout time and a smaller proportion at the end of the period. In contrast, the proportion of white students in public schools has steadily declined and is consistently lower than the other two schooling types throughout.

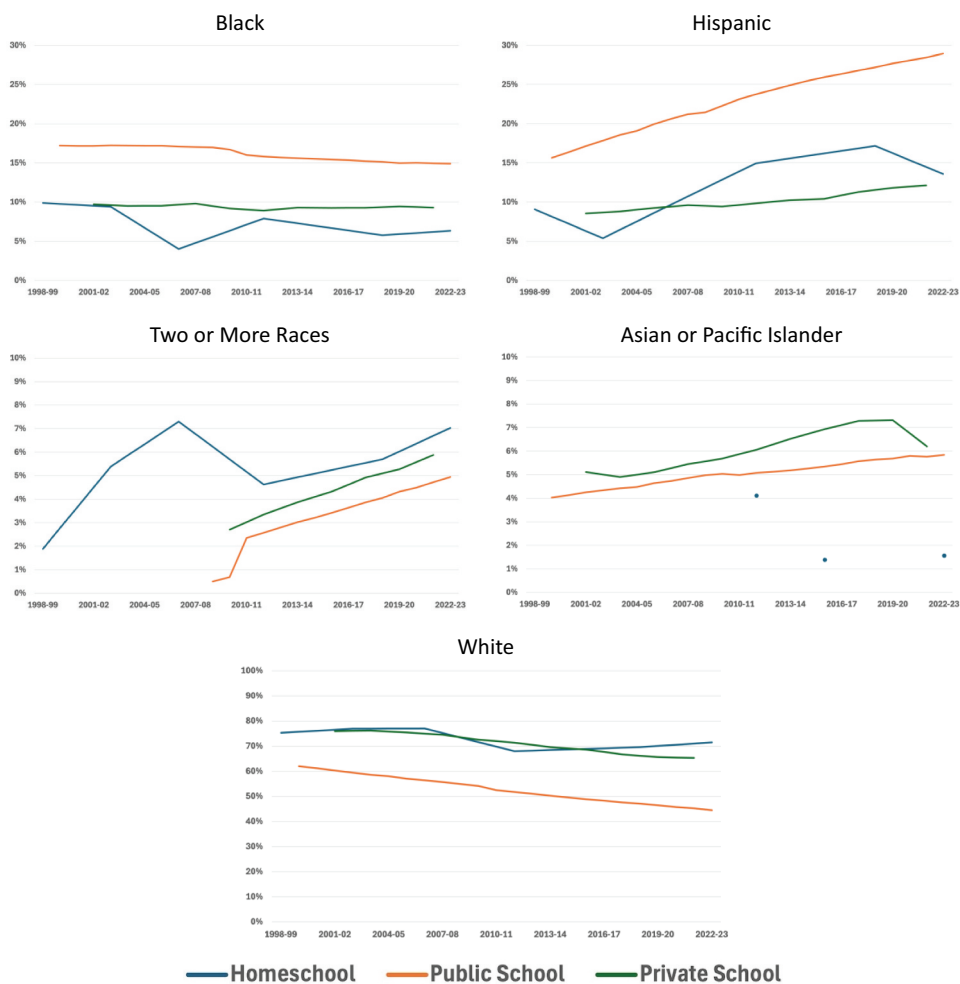


Figure 4. Racial comparisons of students in public, private, and homeschooled: 1998 to 2023. Note: The racial categories are defined as Hispanic; White, non-Hispanic; Black, non-Hispanic; Asian or Pacific Islander, non-Hispanic; and Two or more races, non-Hispanic. For the homeschool data, two or more races also included unreported race/ethnicity before 2022-23. Before 2008, data on students of two or more races were not collected for the public- and private school data. For the public school data, before 2008, separate data on Asian students and Pacific Islander students was not collected. The homeschool data from 1998-99 is from the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics (1999, 2003, 2007, 2012), U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, (2019, 2023); the homeschool data from 2022-23 is from Sempeles and Cui (2024). The public school data is from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), (2023). The private-school data is from the U.S. Census Bureau (2023).

Discussion

The results highlight several features of the demographic characteristics of homeschool students in the present and across the past 25 years. The data above provide evidence that current homeschool students are more

racially diverse than they were 25 years ago. However, comparisons of the over-representation of white students in homeschooling show that a decrease of roughly four percentage points from 1998–99 to 2022–23 was not large. In addition, the proportion of white students homeschooling is consistently higher than the proportion of those attending public schools over the past 25 years. Further, comparisons of the most recent homeschooling estimates show that the proportion of white homeschooling students is 11 to 22% points higher than that of white U.S. school-aged children during the same year. This evidence contradicts the current narrative that homeschooling is far more diverse, and other survey results suggesting that homeschooling students of color comprise over half of the current homeschooling population and a “jump” in the number of homeschooling Hispanic families (Meckler et al., 2023).

However, there is also nuance to the data. For example, the comparisons of the racial characteristics of students by school type over the past 25 years show similar representation of Black, Hispanic, and white students in homeschool and private schools. This suggests that the racial narrative of homeschooling should be more like that of private schools.

In addition, while white students are over-represented in homeschooling, so are students of two or more races. This might be attributed to the technicalities of how NHES estimated students of two or more races before 2022–23, when respondents who did not report their race were also counted in this group. However, the most recent estimates are more precise and show a higher representation of this racial group than the other school sectors. Similarly, the comparisons to the national sample of U.S. school-aged children show that students with two or more races are higher in the homeschooled population. This suggests more racial diversity in the homeschooling population than solely looking at white participation might suggest.

The differences between the NHES and Pulse data highlight the limitations in our understanding of the homeschooling population. While white students are over-represented in homeschooling in the Pulse, the difference between the Pulse and the general student-aged population is smaller than the NHES data suggests. One noticeable difference between the NHES and Pulse data is their definition of homeschooling. While the NHES provides a narrow definition, Pulse requires that students not be enrolled in a public or private school. In the age of online schools, school co-ops, micro-schools, and many other out-of-home schooling opportunities, the exact definition of homeschooling is not apparent. Thus, the more expansive definition of the Pulse might more accurately capture families’ beliefs about their children’s participation in homeschooling.

In addition, other homeschool research has noted the reluctance of homeschooling families to provide information about their educational

practices. Researchers have argued that homeschooled students might be undercounted because they might not want to share, especially in federal surveys (Belfield, 2004; Lines, 2000). Kunzman and Gaither (2020) note increasing acceptance of homeschooling may have decreased this effect, citing quantitative analysis suggesting similar response rates from the homeschooling and general population. However, growing acceptance of homeschooling and willingness to answer federal surveys might differ across racial groups. For example, homeschooling families of color may be more reluctant to answer federal surveys than white homeschooled families, which may result in undercounting or discrepancies, depending on who is conducting the survey.

Ascertaining an accurate accounting of current homeschooling is an important step toward understanding this changing population of students. In addition, homeschoolers of color must be recognized as part of the homeschooling community and have their voices heard broadly. The narrative that all homeschoolers are white is untrue, and representation matters. In addition, these groups' ways of homeschooling, reasons for homeschooling, and supports may look very different.

Disclosure statement

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

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