



Homeschooled adolescents in the United States: Developmental outcomes



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ABSTRACT

The mission of schools has broadened beyond academics to address risk behaviors such as substance use, delinquency, and socialization problems. With an estimated 3.4% of all U.S. youth being homeschooled, this study examines how U.S. homeschoolers fare on these outcomes given their lack of access to these school services. Adolescents (ages 12–17) from the 2002 through 2011 National Surveys of Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) were divided based on school status (home vs. traditional schooling) and religious affiliation (stronger vs. weaker). Controlling for demographic differences, homeschoolers with weaker religious ties were three times more likely to report being behind their expected grade level and two and a half times more likely to report no extracurricular activities in the prior year than their traditionally schooled counterparts. This group was also more likely to report lax parental attitudes toward substance use. Findings suggest homeschoolers with weaker religious ties represent an at-risk group.

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In 2012, 1.77 million U.S. youth were home-schooled, double the amount in 1999 (Bielick, Chandler, & Broughman, 2001; Noel, Stark, & Redford, 2013). Current estimates are 3.4% of 5- to 17-year-olds in the United States are homeschooled, with 53% being middle or high school age (Kunzman & Gaither, 2013; Noel et al., 2013). In addition to academics, schools have been increasingly tasked with addressing public health concerns, such as social isolation, antisocial behaviors, and substance misuse (Botvin, Griffin, & Nichols, 2006; Ryan & Warner, 2012; Seitz, Wyrick, Orsini, Milroy, & Fearnow-Kenney, 2013). What then happens to homeschoolers reared without access to these prevention and intervention services? How do they fare?

It has been difficult to answer such questions as the homeschooling literature tends to be advocacy-based, is often characterized by small or unrepresentative samples, and lacks appropriate comparison groups (Barwegen, Falciani, Putman, Reamer, & Stair, 2004; Cordner, 2012; Kunzman & Gaither, 2013; Lopez Haugen, 2006; Martin-Chang, Gould, & Meuse, 2011). Even obtaining an accurate count of the number of children being homeschooled is challenging, as not all states require homeschooling parents to register with local educational authorities (Isenberg, 2007).

Although subject to the aforementioned methodological flaws, the homeschooling literature has attempted to address some of these outcome questions. Structured homeschooling has been found to be associated with positive academic outcomes, primarily in verbal skills (Belfield, 2004; Cogan, 2010; Martin-Chang et al., 2011), although the degree to which this simply reflects greater parental involvement is unclear (Barwegen et al., 2004; Kunzman & Gaither, 2013). In contrast, socialization concerns have been harder to dispel and studies on problem behaviors are limited. Although self-report data from small, convenience samples have found no differences in interpersonal problems or peer victimization between home and

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traditionally schooled youth (Lopez Haugen, 2006; Reavis & Zakriski, 2005), research on social/extracurricular involvement has not been uniformly positive. While several authors assert that homeschoolers have as high levels of activity involvement as traditionally schooled youth (Dumas, Gates, & Schwarzer, 2010; Kunzman & Gaither, 2013; Ray, 2003), Chatham-Carpenter (1992), using a diary methodology with a small sample, found homeschoolers had fewer peer contacts and rated their friendships as less supportive. Lopez Haugen (2006), employing a convenience sample, found that while homeschooling parents rated their teens as engaging in more social activities than traditional schooling parents, these findings were reversed when the adolescents themselves were asked about their social activity involvement. Medlin's (2013) summary of the homeschooling socialization literature echoes this finding. Lastly, Hill and den Dulk (2013), using a nationally representative sample and controlling for potential confounding variables, found homeschoolers less likely to engage in volunteer and community service than traditionally schooled youth, both during adolescence and in young adulthood.

While avoiding early substance misuse and delinquency are widely acknowledged as important developmental outcomes, activity participation's value has more recently been established through studies linking it with a variety of positive academic and social outcomes, including friendship formation (Farb & Matjasko, 2012; Kort-Butler & Hagemen, 2011; Schaefer, Simpkins, Vest, & Price, 2011). As there is some indication that homeschoolers feel isolated (Jolly, Matthews, & Nester, 2013; Kunzman, 2009) and are more dependent on close, quality friendships for their emotional well-being than traditionally schooled youth (Medlin, 2013; Reavis & Zakriski, 2005), activity participation may be key in providing homeschooled adolescents opportunities to form quality peer relationships.

The mixed results regarding homeschoolers' socialization may reflect unacknowledged heterogeneity among homeschoolers. Van Galen (1988) advocated dividing homeschoolers into "ideologues" and "pedagogues". Ideologues object to the secular content of traditional education, so while maintaining its structure, they seek to modify the schooling content to reflect their beliefs. Pedagogues homeschool in order to shed the structure of formal schooling (Cai, Reeve, & Robinson, 2002; Kunzman & Gaither, 2013). Sometimes referred to as "unschooling" (Martin-Chang et al., 2011), this child-directed perspective prioritizes intrinsic motivation (Kunzman & Gaither, 2013; Parsons & Lewis, 2010). Such curricular flexibility might be attractive for parents whose children have special educational needs, either from giftedness or disability (Jolly et al., 2013; Parsons & Lewis, 2010).

This study divides homeschoolers into two groups based on degree of religious affiliation; a measure of pedagogical philosophy was not available. Consistent with prior homeschooling studies (Isenberg, 2006) religious affiliation was operationalized as frequency of religious service attendance. Homeschoolers with stronger and weaker religious ties were compared to two analogous groups of traditionally schooled adolescents on delinquency, substance misuse, being behind expected grade level, and failing to engage in social or extracurricular activities. It was hypothesized that religious traditionally schooled youth would have the lowest level of delinquent and substance problems, while less religious homeschoolers the highest levels, given findings showing both religious ties and school connectedness associated with less delinquency and substance misuse (Li et al., 2011; Maddox & Prinz, 2003; Salas-Wright, Vaughn, Hodge, & Perron, 2012). It was also postulated that only less religious homeschoolers would show academic delays, given it is thought that this group is less likely to have the *structured* learning experience associated with positive academic outcomes in homeschoolers (Martin-Chang et al., 2011). Finally, as the school system is a source of social/extracurricular activities, it was hypothesized that both homeschooled groups would report less activity participation compared to their traditionally schooled peers.

Methods

Sample

The National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) is a yearly, nationally representative survey of U.S. household residents ages 12 and older (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration, 2012). Response rates for the 2002–2011 NSDUH ranged from 68.9% to 76.8% (Bowman et al., 2005; Butler et al., 2012; Caviness et al., 2009; Cirella et al., 2010).

The prior decade of available data (survey years 2002 through 2011) were combined and a subsample of 12- to 17-year-olds extracted ($n = 182,351$). This subsample was 51.1% male, with a mean age of 14.54 ($SD = 1.69$). The majority were White (61.1%), with 16.4% identified as Hispanic, 13.8% as African-American, and 8.7% as other. Yearly family income exceeded \$50,000 for 48.8% of the sample, although a sizeable minority (28.9%) earned less than \$30,000. Two parent families were the most common configuration (67.9%); 23.4% of families were headed by mothers only. Most families had two children under the age of 18 (37.6%); however, in 31.0% of the families the respondent was the only child.

Measures

Demographics

Adolescents were asked their sex, age, ethnicity, and what they perceived their current grade level to be. Family income, which parent(s) resided in the home, and number of children in the home under age 18 also were assessed.

Religion

Frequency of religious service attendance was measured by asking, "During the past 12 months, how many times did you attend religious services?" Responses were dichotomously divided into less than 25 times (weaker religious affiliation) or 25 times or more in the prior year (stronger religious affiliation). Participants also were asked to rate from *strongly agree* to

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