

What research actually tells us about homeschooling

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The question of academic outcomes for homeschooled students has always garnered intense interest in the homeschooling community and significantly shapes policy discussions. However, as noted in our [previous report](#), widely cited research that claims that homeschooled students unilaterally outperform peers in school has been repeatedly discredited.

Credible research paints a far less sensational picture. This brief surveys the current state of evidence concerning homeschooling outcomes. We find that, while homeschooling can lead to great success, research shows that homeschooling can hamper performance in mathematics, is associated with students falling behind grade level, depresses college attendance, and may hinder the identification of child abuse.

KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

The Math Gap: Homeschooled children, on average, perform worse in math than their peers in school.

Current evidence suggests that homeschooled students perform on par with, or slightly better than, traditionally schooled counterparts in some areas, such as verbal assessment. However, when family background is controlled for, [studies](#) have consistently shown that homeschooled children, on average, perform worse in math than their traditionally schooled peers. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as the “math gap.”

Structure Matters: Homeschooled students whose parents follow a structured educational plan may have better academic outcomes than less structured approaches like unschooling.

Homeschooling parents' pedagogical choices and approaches to teaching are consequential for their children since they alone are responsible for overseeing their children's education. When parents exhibit high investment in their children's education, homeschooling can lead to positive academic outcomes. However, when homeschooling parents are less engaged in their children's education, educational neglect can occur. The "math gap" likely [arises](#) because homeschool pedagogy is usually reading-intensive, and homeschooling parents tend to be less confident teaching math than other subjects. Research supports this pattern: one [study](#) found that homeschooled students whose parents follow structured pedagogies fared better than traditionally schooled counterparts, but those who were unschooled fared worse.

Falling Behind: Homeschooled children have reported being behind expected grade level compared to their peers.

A [study](#) of national data found that homeschooled children were two to three times more likely to report being behind grade level than their traditionally schooled peers. The author notes that this does not necessarily mean that homeschooling itself led to poor outcomes in every case, as students might have fallen behind before homeschooling occurred. However, state-level data suggest that homeschooling can sometimes perpetuate existing problems. [Data](#) from the West Virginia Department of Education found that 71% of

students withdrawing from school to be homeschooled were chronically absent prior to withdrawal, suggesting that homeschooling could function as a “truancy loophole.” This aligns with the aforementioned study’s finding that students from families without strong moral or religious motivations to homeschool were the most likely group to report falling behind.

Poorer Outcomes After Homeschool: Individuals homeschooled for more than three years may (1) attend college at far lower rates, (2) have higher rates of unemployment, and (3) have a lower household income than their traditionally schooled peers.

The Cardus Education Surveys (CES), conducted by a Christian think tank, give insight into life outcomes after homeschool. Their representative, randomized [data](#) (from 2011 and 2014) indicate that homeschooled students finish fewer years of postsecondary education, attend four-year universities at far lower rates, and work for less pay than their peers.

A [recent iteration](#) (using data from 2023) of the CES shows similar patterns. The 2023 CES data show that short-term homeschoolers (1-2 years) had similar bachelor’s degree attainment rates to traditionally schooled peers, whereas medium and long-term homeschoolers were the least likely groups to obtain bachelor’s degrees. Full-time employment rates for homeschool graduates fall behind those of traditionally schooled peers. Homeschooled alumni are also less likely to earn above the median household income than their counterparts. Taken together, the CES findings show that postsecondary education attainment for homeschooled alumni is consistently lower than that of their peers, even when analyzing cohorts a decade apart.

The authors suggest that personal values, such as prioritizing hard work over money, may explain the differences between the homeschooled and the traditionally schooled samples. However, this explanation warrants closer scrutiny. If long-term homeschoolers truly place a higher value on hard work, it is unclear why this does not translate into equal (or greater) economic and educational outcomes. Framing the results as a matter of personal values minimizes the real disadvantages that homeschoolers experience.

Child Safety and Welfare: Homeschooling can prevent abuse from being detected.

Although research on abuse and neglect within homeschooling is minimal, the Homeschooling's Invisible Children (HIC) [database](#) has identified over 500 cases of severe, often fatal, abuse involving homeschooled children. These cases only reflect incidents that received media attention and are likely unrepresentative of the spectrum of abuse that may occur more broadly. While these extreme cases do not represent the average homeschooling family, many abuse cases might not have reached the severity they did if the children had attended schools, which provide regular access to mandated reporters. Within the United States, homeschooling policy loopholes, such as the failure to disqualify registered sex offenders or caregivers under current CPS investigation from homeschooling, continue to fail children.

Key Takeaway

Research demonstrates that homeschooling can facilitate exceptionally high academic outcomes in some contexts. In others, however, it may lead to falling behind academically, and can even allow abuse to go unnoticed. Claims that homeschooled students have unilaterally positive outcomes, despite being discredited, continue to shape important policy discussions. It is vital to recognize contextual nuance and accept a wide range of homeschooling experiences to ensure that homeschooling is safe and beneficial for all children.

At CRHE, we are committed to advancing rigorous research to inform evidence-based policies that aim to protect homeschooled children.