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Staying Home

Definitions and Estimates

*There is no single, accepted definition of homeschooling.
(Wenger & Hodari, 2004, p. 4)*



Although estimates vary widely and the question has been debated by many, the number of children being home educated in the United States has clearly risen over the past 30 years. (Ray, 2011, p. 1)



❖ **WHY A BOOK ON HOMESCHOOLING?**

Throughout this volume we compile considerable information on the homeschooling movement in the United States. We begin with a rationale, statements about the wisdom of studying homeschooling. In the beginning of the book, we review the tremendous expansion in the number of homeschooled children, growth that clearly justifies an investigation of homeschooling. We also examine the data on family demographics, issues such as the income, education, and occupation of homeschooling parents. These data and those on the children being homeschooled merit attention for what they convey about the social fabric of the nation.

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In later chapters we argue that homeschooling warrants our interest because of its unique place in the cascading privatization movement in the United States in general and the rapidly expanding school choice movement in education specifically. We also maintain that a study of homeschooling provides important insights on the conservative mosaic that has been formed in the United States over the last 30 years. It reveals a good deal about the tensions between individualism and community as well as new ways to think about these social constructs. It allows us to peer more thoroughly into the place of religion in the United States at the turn of the 21st century. Even more important, an examination of homeschooling provides significant insights into the nature of American families. Perhaps most centrally, we can discover the possibilities of movements that attempt to reverse the segmentation of life in America, of how homeschooling is both an animating force for and an exemplar of efforts to provide an integrated frame for life in the postmodern world.

As with most social movements of significance, analysis of homeschooling reveals much about the battle for the moral high ground in the country. While we attend to the history and development of homeschooling itself, we learn as much about the ebb and flow of waves of influence and the shifting pendulum in the area of social ideas and tastes in general. In a similar vein, homeschooling reveals how history is both a product of as well as a platform for powerful figures to push and pull ideas onto society's central stage. In the process of analysis, considerable insights about the legal workings of the nation are exposed. So too dynamics about social organizing become visible, especially in getting society to embrace ideas that once seemed anathema. By studying homeschooling we accumulate a good deal of knowledge about the evolving role of government in the affairs of its owners. We track an evolution from government as the unquestioned mechanism to produce a better society to government as a self-forged and confining manacle that also has the potential to hinder improvement. In short, a study of homeschooling permits us to peer deeply into social dynamics that transcend the content of the topic at hand.

At the same time, homeschooling merits examination for what it reveals about education and schooling in America. Ongoing and dilemma-based questions about governance and control play out across its pages in new ways. There is much to be learned here about possible forms of schooling in the 21st century, new conceptions and models that were unimaginable to the previous generation. Issues of funding and costs lurk in the background of the homeschooling play but nonetheless offer important insights into financing the nation's most costly and critical state and local service—and other services as well. Labor issues are prevalent in the homeschooling literature but usually cast obliquely. Even at this, it is difficult to overlook the implications for the traditional and deeply rooted notions of civil service in the nation, especially in light of the prevalence of parallel trends in education (e.g., vouchers, tax credits, privately managed

charter schools) and the larger society. Although rarely underscored in homeschool analyses, a careful study of homeschooling produces considerable wisdom on the role of markets and profits in the education sector. Much can also be gleaned about the linkages between schooling and social justice by examining homeschooling, about how we frame this essential construct and how we actualize efforts to achieve progress in this domain through our educational system.

We are also well advised to study homeschooling because of the potential costs and benefits to the 2 million youngsters who are educated at home—and to the 96%–97% of their peers who continue to be educated in public and private schools. We need to know if the goals of homeschool families (e.g., healthier, more cohesive families) are being met. We also need to explore whether progress on goals set by society for its children is being made (e.g., appropriate socialization).

❖ AN OVERVIEW

The balance of this volume explores all the issues surfaced above in the rationale section. In accomplishing this, we follow the logic of the homeschool movement itself as well as the hallmark research questions that have been engaged over the last three decades to develop a portrait of homeschooling in America. Since this is a review of all the work available to date, we rely heavily on the studies and theoretical analyses of those who have helped demarcate homeschooling. In this chapter, we look at definitions and estimates of the scope of homeschooling. We also provide a note on the state of knowledge in the homeschooling arena. In Chapter 2, we investigate the demographics of homeschooling, looking at families and homeschool settings. In Chapter 3, we examine the history and development of homeschooling, with special emphasis on the contemporary homeschooling movement. In Chapter 4, we explore the reasons for the rapid growth of homeschooling at this particular time in history. There we attend to both the favorability of the larger context in which schooling is nested (e.g., the pushback against government in general) and the motivations of homeschooling families (e.g., a desire to use religion as the curriculum architecture for learning). In Chapter 6, we unpack the homeschooling experience, looking at home education in action. In Chapter 7, we examine what is known in terms of the impact of homeschooling, mostly on homeschooled youngsters but on schooling in general as well.

Before we proceed, however, a word or two explaining what this volume is not about is in order. As we document later in this chapter and in Chapter 7, there is not an overabundance of solid empirical work on homeschooling. Much of the literature in this area comprises testimonials and pieces that explain how to successfully start and conduct a homeschool.

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This is important material. But it is not the focus of this volume. Nor is this book a resource guide in which readers can locate support organizations and vendors who can assist them in their quest to homeschool (Leppert & Leppert, 2001, and Ray, 2008, are excellent sources in this area). We also know that homeschooling is found in many other nations (Basham, Merrifield, & Hepburn, 2007; Ray, 1997b; Wright, 1988). But the international landscape is not the focus of this volume; our attention is directed exclusively to homeschooling in the United States. Finally, a body of knowledge is developing around homeschooling for specific types of children, especially youngsters who would traditionally be in special education programs in public and private schools (see, for example, Dowity & Cowlshaw, 2002; Hartnett, 2005; Holland, 2005; Pyles, 2004). While we include information on children in special populations in our analysis, no specific groups are highlighted herein.

❖ DEFINITION

Homeschooling is not easy to describe. (Belfield, 2005, p. 168)



There are many variations in the definitions of what constitutes "homeschooling." (Mirochnik & McIntire, 1991, p. 8)



Homeschooling is an umbrella term that is used to describe the choice and the activities of thousands of families. (Sheffer, 1995, p. 8)



A comprehensive analysis of the homeschooling literature leads us to conclude that the concept is not quite as simple as it appears on the surface. Indeed, if anything, the concept has become fuzzier over recent years as hybrid models of homeschooling and public schools have emerged. Below, we present core definitions provided by scholars over the last quarter century. Homeschooling is:

- The administration of an education program of instruction offered in the home setting in lieu of attendance in the public or private school. (Schemmer, 1985, p. 7)
- A teaching situation wherein children learn in the home in lieu of a conventional school. The parents, tutors, or guardians assume the direct responsibility for the education of their children. (J. Taylor, 1986a, p. 14)
- A school conducted in the home by a parent primarily for the education of the children in that home. (Gladin, 1987, p. 12)

- Instruction and learning, at least some of which is through planned activity, taking place *primarily* at home in a family setting with a parent acting as teacher or supervisor of the activity, and with one or more pupils who are members of the same family and who are doing grade K–12 work. (Lines, 1991, p. 10)
- The education of school-aged children under their parents' general monitoring, and it replaces full-time attendance at a campus school. (Lines, 1999, p. 1)
- The education of school-aged children at home rather than at a school. (Lyman, 2000, p. 18)
- Education received in the home, usually administered by the parent. (Perry & Perry, 2000, p. 7)
- The practice of educating children and youth during what most people call the elementary and secondary school years, in a learning environment that is home-based and parent-led (or, at least, clearly under the authority of the parent rather than under the authority of a state-run public school system or a private school). (Ray, 2004a, p. 3)
- An alternative form of education in which children are instructed at home rather than at a traditional public or private school. Children who are homeschooled are instructed by parents, guardians, or other tutors. (Lips & Feinberg, 2008, p. 2)

Evident in these definitions are two linked components, the “decision by parents not to educate their children in an institutionalized setting and the decision by parents to educate their children in a home setting” (Hadeed, 1991, p. 1).

It is “a deliberate rejection of and alternative to government schooling” (Gaither, 2008, p. 219). Thus, in one sense, a homeschooler is “best defined by what he does not do as opposed to what he does” (Guterson, 1992, p. 5); “these children and youth do not spend the societally conventional school days and hours in institutional classroom schools with specialized or state-certified teachers” (Ray, 2004a, p. 3).

Homeschooling is also known by a variety of synonyms such as *home-based education*, *home education*, *unschooling*, *home-centered learning*, *home instruction*, and *deschooling* (Luebke, 1999; J. Taylor, 1986b), with a growing sense that *home-based education* may be a particularly appropriate term for this phenomenon (Ray, 2000a).

It is also helpful to consider what does not fit into the homeschooling portfolio besides traditional public and private school education, especially situations that may resemble homeschooling but are not. As the definitions above reveal, homeschooling implies both a voluntariness and a rejection of conventional schooling (Allie-Carson, 1990; Lubienski, 2000). Therefore, actions that are not voluntary do not count as homeschooling in our definition. Teaching at home because a youngster is unable to go to school is not considered to be homeschooling (Aurini & Davies, 2005).

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Children who are being educated at home because of a medical condition, for example, do not show up in the homeschooling ledger (Belfield, 2004a; Princiotta, Bielick, & Chapman, 2004). Nor would we count children who have no real option to attend public school—for example, those in remote places with no access to school. Likewise, children who are not in regular schools because of their parents' itinerant lifestyles would not be defined as homeschooled students (Knowles & Muchmore, 1995).

Also, as Roach (1988) reminds us, instruction by a parent of other children for compensation would be defined as an example of a private school operated in a home, not homeschooling. Children who are taught at home before the option of formal schooling is available (i.e., prekindergarten children) are not considered homeschoolers, either.

For the first 15 to 20 years or so of the modern homeschooling movement, youngsters were educated almost exclusively in either one setting (the home) or another (public or private school). With the advent of more mixed models of schooling, with students spending some portion of the day or week at home and some portion in a formal school environment, the variable of time has been added to the definition of homeschooling. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) sets a fairly low bar to claim homeschooling status (Belfield, 2004a; Bielick, Chandler, & Broughman, 2001; Princiotta et al., 2004). According to NCES, if regular school enrollment of a student learning at home does not exceed 25 hours per week, the student is still considered to be homeschooled. Since the average K–12 student is at school about 30 to 35 hours a week, under this definition a student can be at home for as little as 17%–30% of the week and still count as homeschooled. According to Kunzman (2009b), the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) uses a higher bar, holding that for students to be considered homeschooled parents must direct at least 51% of the education of those youngsters (see also Boyer, 2002). In an early seminal study, Wartes (1990) suggested a still higher standard, holding that 75% of a child's education needed to be provided in the home to be considered a case of homeschooling. While there is no universally accepted answer on the time issue, it does seem reasonable to assume that for counting purposes, homeschooled children should spend the majority of time outside the traditional school.

It is also instructive to tease out the core elements of homeschooling, what makes homeschooling homeschooling. We have already presented a framework with two ingredients: the rejection of public (and private) schooling and the use of the home as the center of educational gravity. A second framework that is also rooted in the privatization literature underscores criteria in the three dimensions of funding, provision, and regulation (Duvall, 2005; Murphy, 1996; Murphy, Gilmer, Weise, & Page, 1998). Using this framework, a student is homeschooled when (1) funding for the student's education comes from the family, not the government; (2) the service is provided by the parents, not state-funded (or privately financed)

employees; and (3) regulation of the enterprise is internal to the family, not the responsibility of the government (or another entity such as a religious body). The closer one is to the family/parent end of the continuum on each of these three dimensions, the more robust is homeschooling (Guterson, 1992; Reich, 2005).

❖ PREVALENCE OF HOMESCHOOLING

Home schooling has been observed to be a rapidly growing movement.
(J. Taylor, 1986a, p. 23)



Homeschooling is one of the fastest growing initiatives in America's educational options. (Pearson, 1996, p. 1)



The homeschool population has grown remarkably for 30 years, and most indications are that it will continue to grow into at least the near future.
(Ray, 2009a, p. 7)



Expanding Number of Students

Home schooling has been built almost entirely since the end of the era called the Sixties. (M. L. Stevens, 2001, p. 16)



1970s

Before 1980, very few children were homeschooled (Ray & Weller, 2003). Ray (2000a, p. 274) argues, in fact, that homeschooling had “waned to near extinction by the late 1970s.” Analysts estimate the total number of children being homeschooled in the 1970s in the 10,000–15,000 range: 10,000 (Divoky, 1983; Glanzer, 2008); 10,000–12,000 (Houston, 1999); 10,000–15,000 (Holt, 1983; Lines, 1991); 13,000 (Cogan, 2010; Ray & Eagleson, 2008). (See Table 1.1)

1980s

By the mid-1980s, the number of homeschooled children had jumped considerably, while because of the weak methodologies available at the time the estimates had become even less reliable (Knowles, Marlow, & Muchmore, 1992). On the high end, some homeschool advocates suggested enrollments as high as 1 million youngsters. More scientifically

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anchored estimates reported something in the neighborhood of an eighth to a quarter of that projection (Lines, 1999, 2000b; Reich, 2002): 60,000–125,000 in 1983; 122,000–244,000 in 1985; and 150,000–300,000 in 1988 (Lines, 1991). (See also Houston, 1999; Knowles et al., 1992.) (See Table 1.1)

Table 1.1 Enrollment Growth in Homeschooling

	<i>Current Population Survey and National Home Education Survey (Princiotta & Bielick, 2006)</i>		<i>U.S. Department of Education (Lines, all publications)</i>	<i>National Home Education Research Institute (Ray, all publications)</i>	<i>Other</i>
1970			10,000–15,000		
1980					
1981					
1982					
1983			60,000–125,000		
1984					
1985			122,000–244,000		50,000 ^a
1986					
1987					
1988			147,000–294,000		
1989					
1990			250,000–355,000		300,000 ^b
1991					
1992			375,000		
1993				450,000–800,000	
1994	356,000 (0.8%)		450,000–800,000 (1.09%)		400,000 ^c
1995			700,000–750,000		
1996	636,000 (1.4%)			1,230,000	
1997					
1998					
1999	850,000 (1.7%)		850,000		1,200,000 ^c
2000					
2001					2,000,000 ^d
2002					

Table 1.1 (Continued)

	<i>Current Population Survey and National Home Education Survey (Princiotta & Bielick, 2006)</i>	<i>U.S. Department of Education (Lines, all publications)</i>	<i>National Home Education Research Institute (Ray, all publications)</i>	<i>Other</i>
2003	1,096,000 (2.2%)		2,000,000	
2004				
2005				
2006			1,900,000– 2,400,000	
2007	1,508,000 (2.9%)			
2008			2,000,000	
2009				
2010			2,040,000 (3.8%)	

^aAurini & Davies (2005).

^bCollom (2005).

^cNemer (2002).

^dReich (2002).

1990s

During the 1990s, the number of homeschooled children continued its rapid ascent. In 1990, the U.S. Department of Education put the number between 248,500 and 353,500 (Houston, 1999). The HSLDA produced a higher estimate of 474,165 (Houston, 1999). Lines's (1999) studies suggested that in 1991 between 250,000 and 350,000 youngsters were being homeschooled. The next year 300,000 children were on the homeschool rolls according to Basham and colleagues (2007). Two years later, in 1994, the Current Population Survey documented 356,000 homeschoolers (K. Bauman, 2002). In 1995, the National Home Education Research Institute (NHERI) produced an estimate of nearly half a million (Houston, 1999; Pearson, 1996)—about 1% of the U.S. school-age population. In 1996, the National Household Education Survey (NHES) provided an estimate of 636,000 (K. Bauman, 2002), while Lines (1999) pegged the number at 750,000, or about 1.4% of the total school-age population. The HSLDA suggested an enrollment of around 1.23 million homeschooled students (Ray 1997b). Similar numbers have been offered for 1997 enrollments. By 1998, almost everyone was in agreement that there were in the neighborhood of 1 million youngsters being educated at home (M. L. Stevens, 2001), although considerable variation remained in the estimates.

By the end of the 1990s, with the advent of better data collection mechanisms and refinements to those already in use, the data on homeschooling began to firm up somewhat; it became more reliable. Data from the NHES revealed the presence of about 850,000 homeschoolers in the United States in 1999, about 1.7% of the total school-age population (Bielick et al., 2001; Princiotta et al., 2004). Numbers provided by homeschool advocates trended higher. For example, Perry and Perry (2000) noted an enrollment of 1.7 million. (See Table 1.1)

2000s

Wenger and Hodari (2004) provided these data for 2001: 1 million homeschooled students, representing 2% of the school-age population. Isenberg (2002) concurs, suggesting an enrollment of 1.04 million homeschooled children, representing 2.1% of their peer group. Again, estimates provided by advocacy groups tended to be higher: 2 million students according to the HSLDA, or roughly 3% of all school-age children (Wenger & Hodari, 2004). Data from a second NHES set enrollment at nearly 1.1 million homeschooled students in 2003 (Aurini & Davies, 2005; Princiotta et al., 2004), fully 2.2% of all youngsters of school age. The NHERI estimated that between 1.9 and 2.4 million students were homeschooled during the 2005–2006 school year (Ray, 2009b). Data from another NHES put enrollment at 1.5 million students in 2007, or 2.9% of the school-age population (Bielick, 2008). Ray (2011) pegged enrollment at 2.04 million in 2010, or 3.8% of the school-age population. (See Table 1.1)

Growth Rates

More children are homeschooled than attend charter schools. More children are homeschooled than attend conservative Christian academies.
(Reich, 2002, p. 56)



The growth of homeschooling in the United States has been nothing short of remarkable, even using the most conservative estimates available. Remember that only 10,000–15,000 children were being homeschooled in the 1970s. By 2010, somewhere in the neighborhood of 2 million students were part of this group. Growth rates have been calculated on the low end of the scale as in the range of 7%–12% per annum (Basham et al., 2007; Ray, 2005, 2011). Less conservatively, they have been measured at 15% over that time period (K. Bauman, 2002; Houston & Toma, 2003; McKeon, 2007; Nemer, 2002). We also learn that among education alternatives, homeschooling has the steepest line of ascent (K. Bauman, 2002). Since 2000, a time by which the movement was fairly well established, the number of homeschoolers has increased at a rate 10 times that of public school students (Kunzman, 2005).

There is also evidence that the startling rate of homeschool growth, especially between 1980 and 2000, may be slowing down (Bielick, 2008; Gaither, 2008; Isenberg, 2007; Ray, 2011). Analysts explore the reason for this slowing pattern and examine forces that could help cap homeschool enrollment in the years ahead. They note, for example, that while homeschool opponents and skeptics have been largely pushed to the sidelines in recent years, they have the potential to reassert themselves if the country's political and social climate changes (Kunzman, 2009a). These reviewers remind us that the pool of parents with the commitment to educate their children at home is hardly limitless (Gorder, 1990; Lines, 1987). Neither is the pool with the resources to do so completely elastic (Hill, 2000; Muntès, 2006), although scholars argue that there is still considerable room below the resource cap (K. Bauman, 2002; Houston & Toma, 2003). Finally, analysts suggest that the recent economic downturn might put pressure on parents to select employment over homeschooling (Ray, 2011). Analysts also remind us that the "publication" of the private endeavor of homeschooling could occur through the growth of public charter schools that cater to traditional homeschool parents (Gaither, 2008; Murphy, 1996).

Comparisons with other forms of schooling help put the enrollment and growth figures in perspective. We have already seen that homeschooling enrollment as a percentage of total school-age children jumped from almost nothing to around 3% in the span of 40 years. Scholars confirm that homeschool enrollment is now about one-fifth the size of private school enrollment, up from zero 40 years ago (Belfield, 2004b; Isenberg, 2007). We find that almost twice as many youngsters are schooled at home as are educated in conservative Christian schools (Glanzer, 2008). In addition, more children are taught at home (2 million) than attend charter schools (1.5 million) and receive vouchers combined (Apple, 2007; Belfield, 2004b; Hill, 2000). Remember also that percentage enrollment figures are for any given year—that is, they are point-in-time estimates. When life cycle numbers are compiled, we discover that fully 6%–12% of all students will have been educated at home at some time in their K–12 educational careers (Houston, 1999; Isenberg, 2007; Lines, 1999).

Compiling the Data

As with many social movements, counting members is difficult.
(Bates, 1991, p. 6)



Pinpointing the number of homeschoolers in the United States is a difficult task. (Guterson, 1992, p. 227)



Homeschoolers have been a difficult population to identify.
(Collom, 2005, p. 315)



As we have seen, there is some variability in estimates of the number of homeschooled children in the United States (Mayberry, 1992). Some of this can be attributed to the phenomenon described by Lotto (1983) as “believing is seeing.” That is, there is likely an upward bias on the part of some homeschooling advocates. Some can also be linked to practical and methodological difficulties in counting these children (Belfield, 2004a; Lines, 1991). To begin with, as Reich (2005) reports, in many places (e.g., 10 states) registration of homeschooled children, a prerequisite to being counted, is not required. In other places, homeschool families simply neglect to register when they are required to do so (Bates, 1991; Kleist-Tesch, 1998; Lines, 1999). In still other cases, parents are so opposed to governmental oversight of their families, they refuse to participate in data collection activities, both census and research efforts (Bates, 1991; Collom, 2005; Kunzman, 2005). Others fail to register because they lack trust in government agencies (Wartes, 1988). Still others fall under provisions that do not require religious-based homeschoolers to register (Lines, 1999). Some families operate as “private schools,” thus again eliminating the registration requirement (Aurini & Davies, 2005; Lines, 1999). Finally, problems stemming from the nature of the intervention itself—a small population, definitional issues, geographical dispersion, and decentralization to hundreds of thousands of sites (homes)—make counting (and studying) homeschoolers a difficult task (Belfield, 2004a; Collom & Mitchell, 2005). All of these conditions lead to production of less-than-satisfying estimates, ones that are biased downward.

Counting problems also arise from the methods used to arrive at estimates (Mirochnik & McIntire, 1991). For example, researchers often turn to lists of families who have joined homeschool associations to draw estimates. At other times, they rely on lists of those who purchase materials from homeschool curriculum providers. However, since some families do not join support groups and/or purchase from homeschool providers, these sources are likely to undercount homeschoolers (Lines, 1999). It is also important to remember that there is a lack of uniformity among states in how and when they collect data on this population (Lines, 1999).

More recently, researchers have employed household surveys to arrive at the number of homeschoolers in the United States. While this approach overcomes many of the problems inherent in the previously discussed methods, it is not free of problems (Bielick, Chandler, & Broughman, 2001). In particular, because they are often such a small percentage of school-age children, very few of them are likely to be included in national household surveys (Wenger & Hodari, 2004).

❖ THE STATE OF KNOWLEDGE

Homeschoolers are a difficult population to study and much of the existing research is limited. (Collom, 2005, p. 307)



*More than anything else, more—and better—research is needed.
(Medlin, 2000, p. 118)*



One of the most stark conclusions one draws when reviewing the scholarly literature on homeschooling is just how thin the empirical knowledge base is on this social phenomenon and educational movement. To be sure, there is a good deal of ideological bantering as well as some solid conceptual modeling. There is also a trace of good reports on how to engage the work of educating a child at home and fine collections of resources to assist in those efforts. But the research cupboard is not well stocked. This assessment first surfaced as the homeschool movement reached early adolescence. It was revealed that the entire domain was largely uncharted in a scientific sense (see Delahooke, 1986; Gladin, 1987; Groover & Endsley, 1988; Knowles, 1989; Mayberry, 1989a; Schemmer, 1985; J. Taylor, 1986a; Wartes, 1987; Williams, Arnoldson, & Reynolds, 1984; Wright, 1988). More troubling, this same conclusion was consistently reached by scholars, analysts, and policymakers throughout the 1990s as well (see Dalaimo, 1996; Duvall, Ward, Delquadri, & Greenwood, 1997; Hertzell, 1997; Houston, 1999; Kelley, 1991; Knowles et al., 1992; Luebke, 1999; Mirochnik & McIntire, 1991; Rudner, 1999; Van Galen, 1991). Even more disheartening is that the next generation of reviewers has uncovered little evidence that the limited empirical evidence deficiency was addressed with much sense of robustness during the first half (see K. Bauman, 2002; Houston & Toma, 2003; Isenberg, 2002; Kunzman, 2005; Nemer, 2002; M. L. Stevens, 2003) or the second half of the first decade of the 21st century (see Cogan, 2010; Green & Hoover-Dempsey, 2007; Ice & Hoover-Dempsey, 2011; Isenberg, 2007; Kunzman, 2009a; Muntès, 2006; Taylor-Hough, 2010).

Not surprisingly, then, there is a nearly universal call for more research on homeschooling in the scholarly community, and increasingly for more sophisticated and stronger research designs (Basham et al., 2007)—with the occasional reminder of progress to date (McKeon, 2007; Ray, 2004b). To some extent, this can be traced to the newness of the field of homeschooling (Medlin, 2000; Ray & Eagleson, 2008). Nearly every domain of social science has experienced the same problem during its formative era. But deeper analysis reveals that the problem is more pronounced here, a condition that will become clearer as we explore the research issue in more depth in Chapter 7.

The logical question is, of course, why has so little scientific evidence been generated on the contemporary homeschooling movement? Newness of the field cannot explain everything. After all, it is more prevalent than charter schools and roughly 15 years longer in its development (1975 versus 1990); yet the research on homeschooling can only be characterized as immature and poorly formed in comparison to the large-scale, sophisticated work on charter schools. We need to expand the quest for answers. Certainly there are many difficulties in conducting studies of homeschooling, and many unique ones at that (Knowles & Muchmore, 1995). All of the problems we detailed earlier in

the discussion of counting homeschoolers come into play here, too, thus making research problematic as well (Hill, 2000). Even when they agree to be counted, resistance on the part of some of the homeschool community to engage with researchers is legendary (Kunzman, 2009b; Ray, 2011).

The well-developed practice of concentrating research on public schools probably explains some of the dearth of research. In addition, funding streams are not routinely devoted to the study of white, middle-class youngsters, which as we will see in Chapter 2 comprise the overwhelming bulk of homeschool students. Resources are devoted much more aggressively to understanding and ameliorating the plight of students placed at risk of school failure. The unregulated nature of homeschooling comes into play here as well. The decentralized nature of homeschooling, the fact that it unfolds in hundreds of thousands of “mini schools” with only a few “students,” also causes considerable problems for researchers (Lips & Feinberg, 2008).

All of this is complicated by the limited availability of data sets on homeschooling. For example, unlike in public schools there are few representative databases on the academic performance of homeschooled children (Isenberg, 2007). State and district databases leave much to be desired (Houston, 1999). Records from individual families are even less valuable. At the national level, homeschooled youngsters are often not included in many important databases (e.g., NAEP; Nemer, 2002). The end game is that the study of homeschooling is made problematic by less-than-ideal data (Isenberg, 2007; Lines, 2000a).

❖ CONCLUSION

In this first chapter, we laid the groundwork for the balance of the volume. We began with a point often overlooked in the general literature on privatization, the mid-level research on choice, and the specific research on homeschooling. That is, homeschooling provides a window into understanding a great deal about how the political, cultural, and social fabric of the nation is being rewoven—probably more than any other educational intervention since the creation of the modern school system a century ago. We noted that homeschooling is both a powerful social and educational phenomenon. We also tracked the prevalence of home education in America since the beginning of the modern homeschooling movement around 1975, documenting rather startling growth from around 10,000–15,000 to roughly 2,000,000 children, something between 3% and 4% of the school-age population. At the same time, we reviewed problems that have confronted analysts in their efforts to count the number of homeschooled students. We examined the definition of homeschooling, culling critical criteria to be used to place the divide between homeschooling and regular public education. We closed the chapter with a brief advance organizer on the state of empirical knowledge in the area of homeschooling. In Chapter 2, we turn the analytic lens on the demographics of homeschooling.