

What happened to students who left public schools during the pandemic?

February 9 2023, by Carrie Spector



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The number of students enrolled in the U.S. public school system has

plummeted since 2020, with roughly 1.2 million K-12 students leaving its rolls. Where did they go?

Pundits have speculated that the drop could be attributed to families switching to [private schools](#) or homeschooling, and to population changes occurring since the start of the pandemic. New data, gathered through a collaboration between Stanford researchers and the Associated Press, finds that these explanations only account for about two-thirds of students who have left public schools since the fall of 2019.

Despite a significant and sustained rise in homeschooling and private school [enrollment](#)—especially in kindergarten and early [elementary grades](#)—more than a third of the enrollment drop remains unexplained.

"We saw a historically unprecedented exodus from public schools during the pandemic, especially among students at the kindergarten and early grade levels," said Thomas S. Dee, an economist and professor at Stanford Graduate School of Education (GSE).

"We've begun to see the financial pressure this is putting on many districts, with discussions about closing under-enrolled schools and possibly laying off teachers. But there hasn't been much focus on where these students went and what kind of learning environments they were experiencing."

Dee partnered with Big Local News, a project of the Stanford Computational Journalism Lab, and journalists at the Associated Press to collect and analyze data about the paths students took out of public schools during the pandemic. "Education reporting is a high priority for local news organizations, and understanding enrollment data is key," said Justin Mayo, a senior data journalist with Big Local News, which works with reporters to gather and [process data](#) on a range of issues.

The findings, published on Feb. 8, are summarized in a policy brief for the nonprofit Urban Institute and available, aggregated by state along with more detailed breakdowns, through Big Local News.

"Before this research, we knew virtually nothing about where these kids went," said Dee, who is the Barnett Family Professor of Education at Stanford and a senior fellow at the Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research. "Now we have some really important evidence to explain a portion of that exodus. But the fact that so much of the loss cannot be explained raises new questions about what will help students get their education back on track."

Where the kids went

For their analysis, the researchers gathered state-level data on school enrollment—public, private, and registered homeschooling—for three [school years](#), from fall 2019 through spring 2022. They also used U.S. Census Bureau estimates to identify the school-age population in each state over the same time period.

Only 22 U.S. jurisdictions—21 states and Washington, D.C.—were able to provide adequate data on non-public schooling options such as private school and registered homeschools, the researchers said. The data they were able to assemble includes more than half of the school-age population in the United States at the onset of the pandemic.

Data from the available jurisdictions are representative of the nation, Dee said, in that their public-school enrollment declines mirrored the changes observed nationally.

Using the available data, the researchers found that 14% of students who disenrolled from public school over the three-year period went to private schools, while 26% switched to homeschooling. Another 26% of the loss

could simply be attributed to a declining school-age population.

Given that the data tracked students into the 2021–22 school year, the finding on homeschooling was particularly striking, said Dee. For every newly enrolled private school [student](#), two additional students remained enrolled in homeschooling for the 2021–22 school year, when most traditional public schools had returned to in-person instruction.

"We saw a run-up in homeschooling in the fall of 2020, which wasn't surprising when you think about where we were then, when a lot of schooling was remote," said Dee. "But I was surprised by both the magnitude and how enduring that initial run-up was."

[Population estimates](#) indicate that the United States experienced historically slow growth during the pandemic due to COVID mortality, low birth rates, and a decline in international migration. This period also saw families increasingly relocating to other states due to rising housing costs and the persistence of remote work arrangements, which in some cases contributed to the public school enrollment decline.

"The states with the largest declines in public school enrollment—California, New York, Illinois—also saw the largest exodus of school-age children," said Dee. "So at some level the reduction in public school enrollment wasn't just a flight from public schools, it was a flight from communities."

The researchers said they were unable to include an analysis of the racial and ethnic breakdown of the enrollment decline because of a lack of data from states addressing these demographics in non-public schools.

Expanding recovery efforts

To account for the remaining 34% of unexplained enrollment losses,

Dee suggested several explanations: an increase in truancy, growth in the prevalence of unregistered homeschooling, and an increase in the number of families skipping kindergarten. The researchers found the unexplained declines were concentrated in states that do not require kindergarten attendance.

With much of the national conversation about pandemic learning loss focused on [test scores](#) for students in fourth and eighth grade, the findings indicate the need to expand recovery efforts for younger students, Dee said.

"The federal testing data that came out last fall showed the largest declines ever observed in math and, to a lesser extent, reading, and that has rightly motivated attention to serving older kids in public [school](#) to try to remediate that learning loss," said Dee. "But the enrollment data are telling us that kids who are experiencing the most dramatic learning disruptions are too young to be in those testing windows yet."

Efforts touted to support academic recovery from the pandemic, such as extended classroom time and high-dose tutoring, are largely targeted toward students in [public schools](#), especially in older grades where testing typically occurs. Dee said the findings suggest the broader need for early screening tools that can identify learning setbacks years before students reach the age for large-scale assessments, as well as increased oversight of truancy and homeschooled children's learning experiences.

More information: Where the Kids Went: Nonpublic Schooling and Demographic Change during the Pandemic Exodus from Public Schools. www.urban.org/research/publications/where-the-kids-went-nonpublic-schooling-and-demographic-change-during-pandemic-exodus-from-public-schools

Provided by Stanford University

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