Understanding the Pandemic Exodus from Public Schools

THOMAS S. DEE, BARNETT FAMILY PROFESSOR

National Press Foundation, The Future of the American Child
May 8, 2023
March 11, 2020
“This is not just a public health crisis, it is a crisis that will touch every sector”
—Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO director-general

May 5, 2023
“COVID-19 is…no longer constitutes a public health emergency of international concern”
—Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO director-general
The COVID-19 Pandemic and U.S. Education

Two broad questions

(1) What do we know about the impact of the pandemic on students’ learning opportunities and development?

(2) Are our academic-recovery efforts adequately meeting the challenge?

My contribution? Insights into both questions from the early collection and analysis of enrollment data
Evidence of a youth mental-health crisis

Amid a national crisis in youth mental health, surgeon general says kids need to be part of the solution

U.S. Surgeon General hosts youth mental health summit.
Evidence of a youth mental-health crisis

- Indicators of youth mental health deteriorated during the pandemic, particularly among girls.
  - Also reflected prior trends possibly related to the growth of social media and other factors.

- Nearly 3 in 5 (57%) teen girls felt persistently sad or hopeless in 2021—double that of boys & a 10 pp. increase relative to 2019.

Stanford University
Increase in students seeking school mental health services

Results from the April 2022 School Pulse Panel

In April 2022, school administrators reported on the mental health and well-being of students and the mental health services schools provided during the 2021–22 school year.

More than two-thirds of public schools reported an increase in the percentage of students seeking mental health services from school since the start of the pandemic.
Increased ER visits for suspected adolescent suicide attempts

FIGURE 1. Numbers of weekly emergency department visits* for suspected suicide attempts† among adolescents aged 12–17 years, by sex — National Syndromic Surveillance Program, United States, January 1, 2019–May 15, 2021

A. Girls

Stanford University
A failure to re-engage in-person instruction?

- Chronic absenteeism is a common SEL measure
- Early evidence of sharp increases in chronic absenteeism
- Variation appears related to the return to in-person instruction
- A serious barrier to academic recovery

Source: NAEP Mathematics
Setbacks in student learning

- A troubling portrait with implications for well-being, economic growth, & inequality

- NAEP 2022: historic declines in US math and reading achievement (& now history/civics)

- Grade-8 math decline ≈ 0.7 years of school → 5.6% ↓ in lifetime earnings (Hanushek, 2023)

- K-shaped trajectories? Bigger losses among low-income, Black & Hispanic students

- State/local comparisons possibly confounded by enrollment changes
Public-school enrollment as a valuable, leading indicator

- Public-school enrollment is an objective, universal, quickly available measure
  - e.g., testing & mental-health data tell us little about youngest learners

- The educational disruptions implied by public-school enrollment changes…
  - “Reactive” switches to private and home-schooling options
  - Truancy and dropping out
  - Skipping or delaying kindergarten
  - Longer-term fiscal threat to public school districts

- What are the major patterns in public-school disenrollment?
Early national evidence on enrollment declines

- Our collaboration with data journalists (New York Times, Big Local News & other outlets)
- Collection of all available fall 2020 enrollment data from states in advance of lagging federal reporting
- At the K-12 level, public schools lost 1.1M students, a decline of 2.2 percent
Year-to-year % change—K-12 public-school enrollment
Loss of 1.1M students

Year-to-year % change—K-12 public-school enrollment
Year-to-year % change—K-12 public-school enrollment

Loss of 1.1M students

The students didn’t return
An exodus from kindergarten & elementary schools

- The declines were particularly big in kindergarten (9%) and, to a lesser extent, early grades (3% to 4%)

- Kindergarten reductions were larger in poorer & urban communities

- Also much larger in districts that offered remote-only schooling

- Did choosing remote-only instruction really contribute to this disenrollment?

Source: New York Times
The debate over pandemic school closures

- In fall 2020, most public-school students (57%) experienced remote-only instruction while 24% were in-person.

- Continued debate about the wisdom of school closures—a debate that could have relevance in future crises.

- Understanding the effects of closures on students & schools begins with its effect on enrollment.

Figure 1. Annual District K-12 Enrollment (Fall 2015 = 100)
Figure 1. Annual District K-12 Enrollment (Fall 2015 = 100)
Figure 1. Annual District K-12 Enrollment (Fall 2015 = 100)
Figure 1. Annual District K-12 Enrollment (Fall 2015 = 100)
Figure 1. Annual District K-12 Enrollment (Fall 2015 = 100)

- Remote Only
- Hybrid
- In Person

0.5pp per year
Figure 1. Annual District K-12 Enrollment (Fall 2015 = 100)
Figure 1. Annual District K-12 Enrollment (Fall 2015 = 100)

- Remote Only
- Hybrid
- In Person

- 2.0pp ↓
- 1.3pp gap
- 3.3pp ↓
Figure 1. Annual District K-12 Enrollment (Fall 2015 = 100)

- Remote Only
- Hybrid
- In Person

- 0.5pp per year
- 2.0pp ↓
- 1.3pp gap
- 3.3pp ↓
School closures & public-school disenrollment

- Remote-only instruction caused a 42% increase in fall 2020 disenrollment
  - A ~1 pp decline equivalent to ~300,000 K-12 public school students

- The negative effects of remote-only instruction were particularly large for kindergarten (and, to a lesser extent, elementary-school) enrollment

- No consistent evidence of effects on middle or high-school enrollment

- The revealed preferences of parents with young kids? For many, concern about remote instruction > concern about health risks
Where did the kids go? And what does it mean?

- Limited and enigmatic evidence on where the kids of the public-school exodus went?
  - No rebound in Grade 1 & K enrollment. Catholic-school enrollment also fell? Some *early* survey evidence of increased homeschooling?

- My recent collaboration with the Associated Press and Big Local News engaged this issue

- Years ahead of federal reporting, we gathered state-year data through SY 2021-22:
  - Private-school enrollment
  - Homeschool enrollment
  - School-age population
Key results

- We were able to collect complete data from 21 states and DC, covering just over half the school-age population in the U.S.

- Declines in the school-age population explained 26% of public-school enrollment loss.

- Domestic migration during the pandemic (e.g., the rise of work-from-home, housing costs,…) → demographic change explains local variation in public-school enrollment loss…
Key results—private schools and homeschool

- Private-school enrollment grew by 4% between the 2019-20 and 2021-22 school years

- The growth in private-school enrollment explains 14% of the public-school enrollment decline

- Surprisingly large & sustained growth in homeschool enrollment—30%—into the 2021-22 school year when public schools were largely in person

- Nearly 2 additional kids in homeschool for every 1 in private school

- Homeschool growth explains 26% of public-school enrollment loss
Unexplained public-school enrollment loss
Where are the “missing” kids?

- There are at least 3 possible explanations for unexplained public-school enrollment declines
  - Truancy
  - Unregistered homeschooling
  - Skipping kindergarten

- Each has implications for student well-being and educational policy

- I find indirect support for the third hypothesis: unexplained losses are concentrated in states where kindergarten is *not* required
Academic-recovery efforts in the U.S.

- The federal “Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief” (ESSER) program has allocated $190B to U.S. schools
  - A “fiscal cliff”: All ESSER funds are to be obligated by September 2024
  - Concern districts with declining enrollment “are propping up their budgets” with federal aid (e.g., retaining/recruiting staff); limited transparency

- Most popular spending targeted to “learning loss”?
  - Summer learning & tutoring; specialist student-support staff
  - Mixed early evidence on the implementation & impact of these efforts

- Least popular spending to address “learning loss”?
  - Early childhood programs & community outreach to assess family needs
Academic recovery & the bias of a “Streetlight Effect”?

- Enrollment data indicate the biggest disruptions to learning environments are at the pre-K & kindergarten levels.

- Also, among truant, chronically absent, & homeschooled children.

- Do our academic-recovery efforts pay attention to the kids we don’t “see” in readily available data?
Looking ahead

- The need for a sustained sense of urgency in academic recovery & realizing the potential of children harmed by the pandemic

- Are our educational institutions prepared to support academic recovery after the 2024 “fiscal cliff”? Are school closures & layoffs imminent?

- A critical need for better data to understand the multi-faceted challenges all kids face and how those challenges are evolving

- An obligation to be prepared for the possibility of future public-health challenges that threaten our children’s development
Thank you!

Email: tdee@stanford.edu

More information: https://dee.stanford.edu